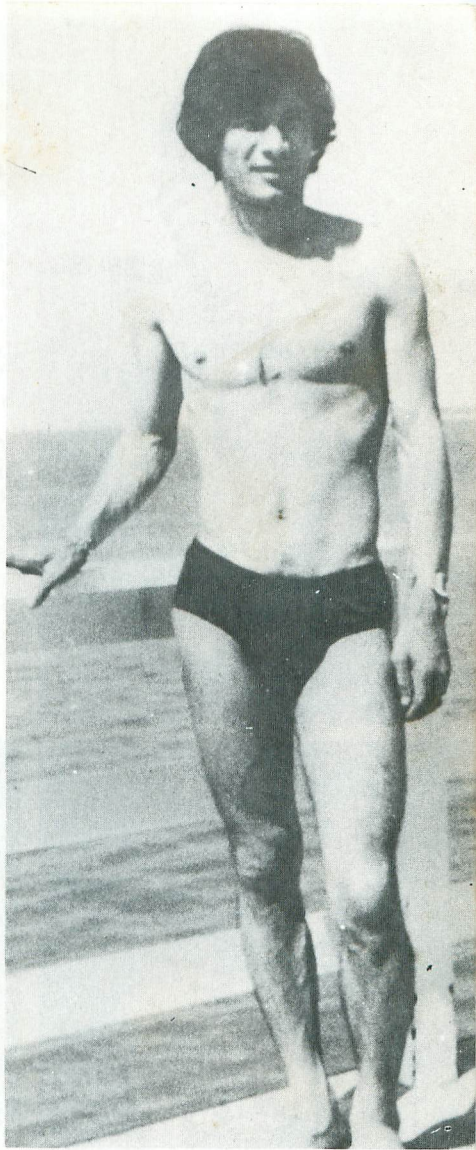
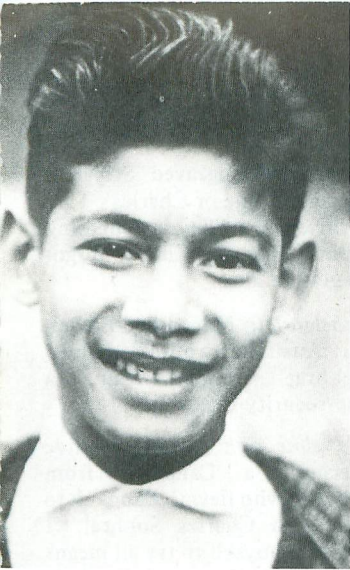


THE LIFE AND CRIMES OF Charles Sobhraj

Updated to include his sensational escape from Delhi



Richard Neville
and
Julie Clarke



1 (*top left*) Charles in France in 1956.

2 (*above left*) Charles Sobhraj, alias "Alain Gautier" when he was arrested in Delhi in July 1976.

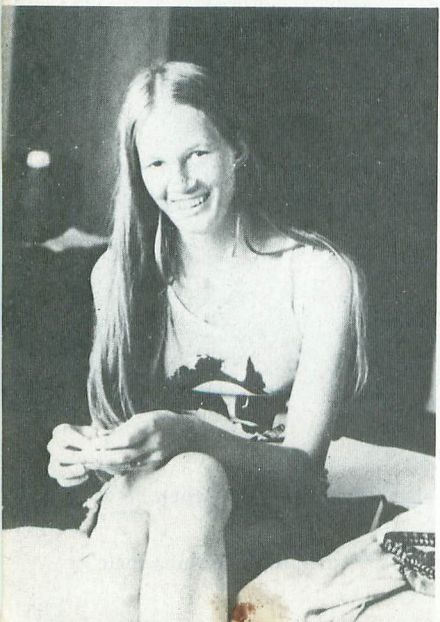
3 (*right*) Charles Sobhraj, 'a perfect specimen of the human male'.

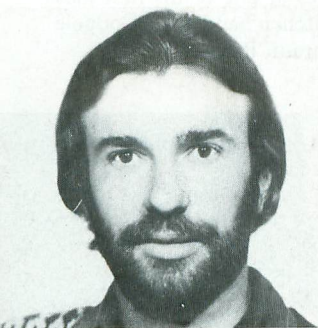


4 (left) Roongravee Sripai - "Roong". One of Charles's Thai girlfriends. She is holding Franky, the dog Charles forgot to give an alias.

5 (below left) Mary Ellen Eather, an Australian nurse, helped Sobhraj escape from a top-security Greek jail.

6 (below right) Marie Andrée Leclerc, a Canadian from Quebec who flew to Bangkok to live with Charles Sobhraj. 'I swore to myself to try all means to make him love me,' she wrote later, after changing her name to Monique, 'but little by little I became his slave.'



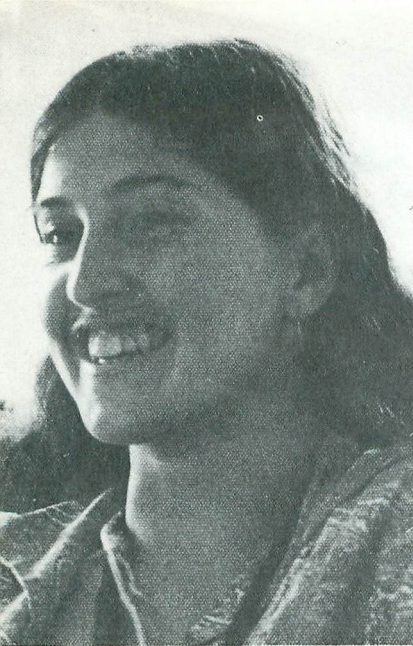


7 (top) Sobhraj's flat in Kanit House in Bangkok. 'It seemed a nice kind of life, with a lot of young people sitting around with plates on their knees...'

8 (above) Dominique Rennelleau. After two months at Kanit House, the sick traveller realized that his hosts were drugging him.

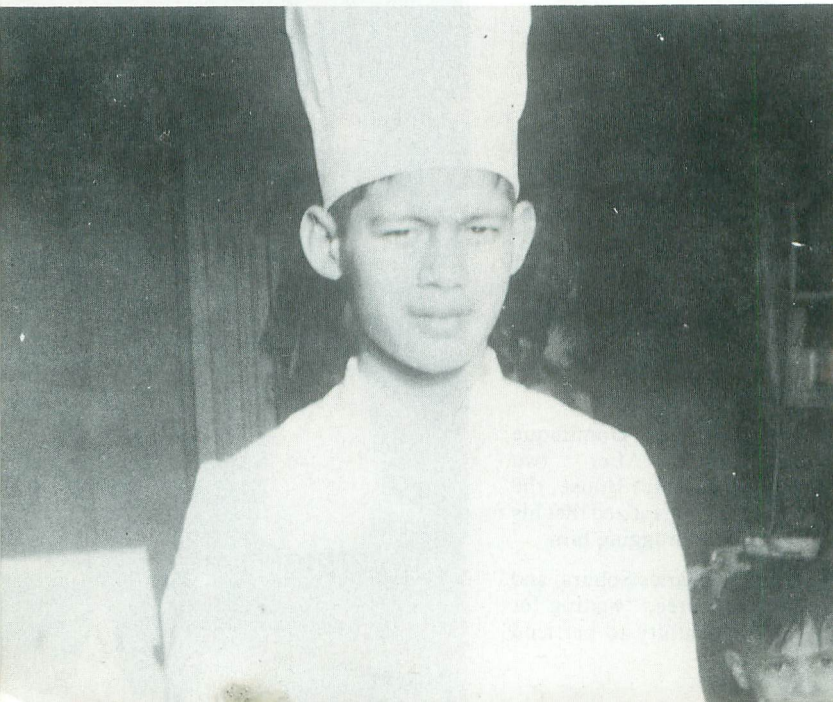
9 (right) Charles Sobhraj and Marie Andrée, "waiting for the opportunity to befriend tourists."

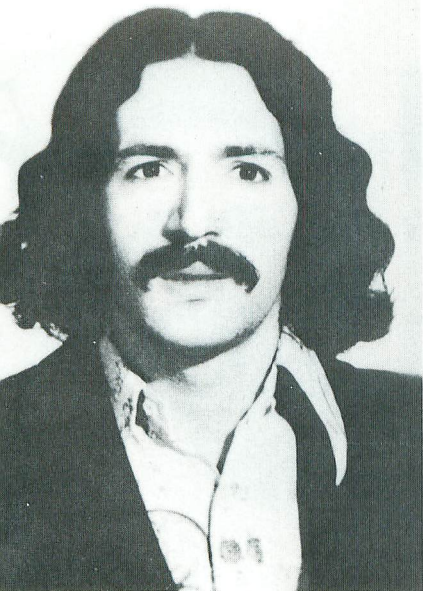




10 (*left*) Teresa Knowlton in Seattle before she left for a Tibetan monastery in Katmandu. On the way she stopped in Bangkok, where she met Ajay Chowdury at the Hotel Malaysia and was taken to Kanit House, and, later, to a sex club.

11 (*below*) The fifteen-year-old Charles at one of his first jobs as a kitchen hand at La Coupole restaurant, Paris.



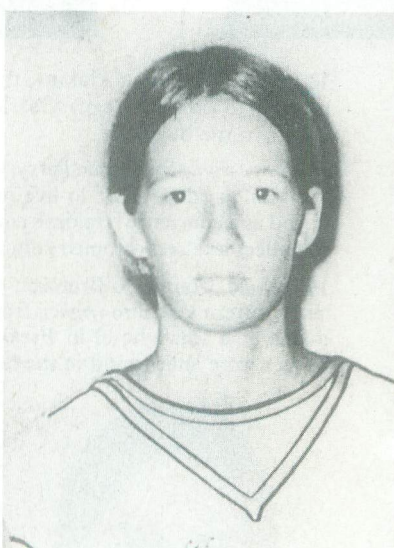
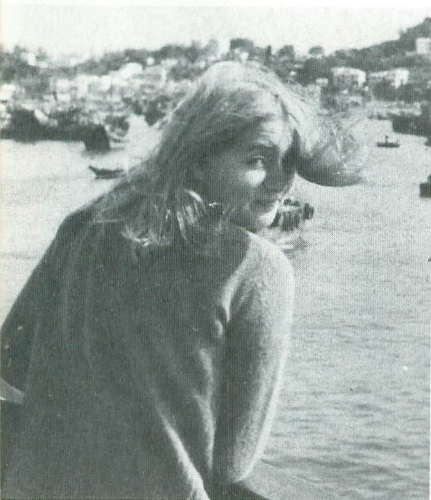


12 (*above left*) Vitali Hakim, the Turk from Ibiza. 'I wanted his murder to be a message,' Charles told the authors, 'a message to others in the business.'

13 (*above right*) Stephanie Parry, the French girl who dropped out of a career in advertising to live on Formantera and design dresses. Hired as a courier by Hakim's contact in Spain, she flew to Bangkok to collect a false-bottomed suitcase and take it to Europe.

14 (*below*) Connie Jo Bronzich (*left*) from Santa Cruz, California, and Laurent Carriere (*right*), from Manitoba, Canada, were roommates at a small hotel in Freak Street, Katmandu. Their burnt bodies were later found in the foothills of the Himalayas.





15 and 16 (*top left and right*) Cornelia Hemker and Henricus Bintanja – “Cocky and Henk” – the young couple from Amsterdam who had saved for five years for their “trip of a lifetime”.

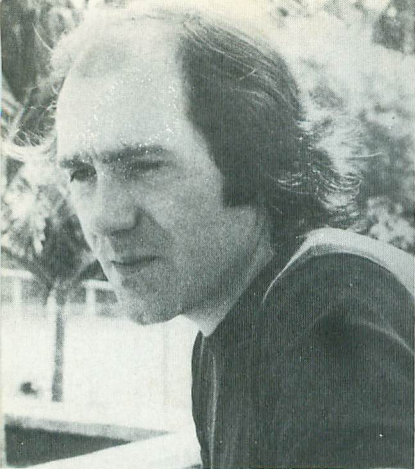
17 (*above*) Barbara Sheryl Smith (*left*) an English woman, was arrested with Sobhraj in Delhi; Mary Ellen Eather (*right*), the Australian nurse, held as one of Sobhraj’s accomplices.



18 (*above*) Charles (centre) with two unsuspecting victims. Charles gave his victims cocktails spiked with sleeping pills, injected them with Largactyl and robbed them of their valuables.

19 (*below*) Nadine and Remy Gires. It was not until they met Paul Siemons and the Knippenbergs that anyone listened to their story. (From left) Herman Knippenberg, Nadine Gires, Remy Gires.





20 (top left) Jean Dhuisme, arrested in Delhi. 21 (top right) Interpol photograph believed to be of Ajay Chowdury, the Indian who became Charles's accomplice in at least eight murders. He was last heard of in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1977 and is wanted by Interpol. 22 (above) Heavily guarded, Sobhraj, with Marie Andrée Leclerc and Jean Dhuisme, is led from the prison bus to the courtroom. 'I consider myself a businessman, not a criminal,' Sobhraj told Neville after recounting his life story, 'and I know I never killed good people.'

THE LIFE AND CRIMES OF **Charles Sobhraj**

RICHARD NEVILLE launched *Oz* as a satirical magazine in Australia in the 1960s and later took it to London where it broke new bounds, becoming a controversial forum for radical politics and culture. In 1971 he published *Play Power*, a tour of the international underground. He has since worked internationally as a journalist and television commentator.

JULIE CLARKE trained as a journalist on the *Sydney Telegraph* before joining ABC television. She later became a New York correspondent for Australian Consolidated Press and worked as a TV producer. She is now a newspaper columnist.

THE HISTORY OF THE CITY OF LONDON

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THE LIFE AND CRIMES OF
Charles Sobhraj

Richard Neville
and
Julie Clarke

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What is this man? A knot of savage serpents that are seldom at peace amongst themselves -- thus they go forth alone to seek prey in this world.

Frederick Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

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Preface

In June 1977 we were asked to interview Charles Sobhraj and write his life story. The interviews took place over the next four months in bizarre circumstances and Sobhraj himself provided us with wads of his autobiographical writings. He confessed to the ten murders for which he was wanted by police in four countries, although for nine of these killings he had still not been brought to trial. 'In the unlikely event I will ever appear in court in Thailand,' he told us, 'I will deny everything.'

As Charles became absorbed in recounting his past exploits, he began to tell us of murders which no one else knew about.

This book is a work of journalism which uses some of the techniques of the novel. The conversations between people are based on what they remembered they said at the time, or are derived from official reports, police statements or private letters. As for Charles, little reliance was placed on information he gave which could not be corroborated by historical records or reliable witnesses. These were in excessive supply.

The thoughts and feelings which Charles Sobhraj claimed to have experienced at certain times have been included in this account when they 'rang true' and seemed compatible with known facts. There were some episodes which, by their very nature, could not be checked against records and where the only participants, other than Charles, had died, were still at large, or could not be contacted. Such scenes have been attributed to Charles.

The people in this book are real and all the events are true to the best of our knowledge and belief. The identities of those who make a brief appearance in this story and are referred to only by their first names have been changed. To spare additional grief and embarrassment to members of Charles's family, their names have also been altered: as have those of his mentor Alain Benard, the Belgian diplomat Gilles de Giverny, the house guest in Bangkok, François Dubily, Marie

Andrée's friend Jules Dupont, Chantal's parents, the Lemaîtres, and Albert Goyot, the antiques dealer.

Mogadon, Mandrax and Largactyl are among the drugs most often used by Charles against his victims and not all readers will be familiar with their effects. Mogadon is a sedative widely prescribed for insomnia and contains nitrazepam. Mandrax is another sedative, often abused. Mixed with alcohol it can cause euphoria and hallucinations. Its chemical constituent is methylqualone, which in the United States is marketed as Quaalude. A widely prescribed major tranquillizer is Largactyl, used in cases of schizophrenia. It contains chlorpromazine and can be given in large doses with safety. Doctors often refer to Largactyl as the chemical equivalent of a straight-jacket. In the language of the drug culture, smack means heroin, acid means L.S.D., and hash refers to the resin of the plant cannabis.

In the 1960s and early 1970s there emerged many new areas of personal freedom. Among them was overland travel to far-away places. Both authors have wandered the same routes as did the victims in this book. Julie Clarke was travelling overland from Sydney to London at the same time as Charles was setting up home in Kanit House and she stayed at the Hotel Malaysia, his tourist trap.

But the true travellers are those who leave a port
Just to be leaving; hearts light as balloons, they cry,
'Come on! There's a ship sailing! Hurry! Time's getting short!'
And pack a bag and board her, — and could not tell you why.

From *Travel* by Charles Baudelaire

Charles exploited the international camaraderie of the road and preyed upon innocents abroad. To those fallen travellers and others who continue to wander the world on a song and a shoestring, this book is dedicated.

R.N. AND J.C.

Acknowledgments

From the time the WEB OF DEATH headlines appeared in the *Bangkok Post* in May 1976, a young American living in Thailand became obsessed with tracking down the real story of Charles Sobhraj. He hired a researcher and scoured Asia for clues and additional material. William Heinecke became convinced that the life of Sobhraj had relevance and interest beyond local sensationalism. He flew to India to see Sobhraj and secured from him the rights to his biography. Heinecke then approached an American publisher, David Obst Books, who asked us to write the story.

Bill Heinecke, his wife, Kathy, and the researcher, Lillias Woods, maintained a level of co-operation with us beyond that of a business relationship and we thank them. Without Heinecke's continuing efforts this book could not have been written.

To others in Thailand, particularly Colonel Somphol of Interpol, and the staffs of the Embassies of the Netherlands, Belgium, Turkey and the United States, we are also grateful.

In Delhi, the criminal lawyers and professional criminals gave us the benefit of their knowledge, and we especially thank Sobhraj's lawyers, Rupindah Singh, Mr Khaurana and Dr Ghatate, as well as ex cons Daniel Lytrung and Johann and Houria.

The staffs of several foreign embassies in Delhi were helpful; the Canadians and the Australians especially, and in their private capacity, Dr Justin and Mrs Barbara Tiernan. The family of Charles's accomplice, Ajay Chowdury were kind enough to grant us an interview.

In Nepal the Police Department graciously opened its doors and files to us.

Thanks for help in Holland go to the poet Simon Vinkenoog; to Amsterdam's Detective Commissioner, Gerard Toorenaar, Chief of the Serious Crimes Squad; and to old friends who searched for clues in the drug underground.

In Paris we were fortunate to have access to all the family and official papers relating to Charles and we are grateful to the hospitality and meticulous filing habits of the Sobhraj archivist and prison visitor who prefers not to have his real name published. Also in Paris we thank Martine Halperin for her translations, and Jim Haynes and Jack Henry Moore who helped, despite a lack of enthusiasm for the subject matter.

In London, Joelle Newman and Andrew Fisher tracked down the work of the French School of Characterologists and digested their theories and charts on our behalf, and David Cowell offered us the insights of a criminologist.

In the United States many people contributed to this project, especially David and Lynda Obst, Carol Realini, Claire Rosen, Phillip Frazer, Anna Wintour and Connie Bessie. The people of Shelter Island, N.Y. made us welcome, and heartfelt thanks are due to Joan Redmond and Karen Lomuscio.

We are indebted to all the people who appear in this story for their time and memories. Many of the members of Charles's own family, his former friends and lovers, jail-mates, surviving victims, enemies and pursuers had more to lose than to gain from their help to us and we thank them all for their generosity.

But it is to the families and friends of the young travellers murdered by Sobhraj to whom we owe the greatest debt. They revived painful memories for our benefit, and the only justification for this addition to their grief might be that the publicity generated by this book could contribute towards ending the inefficiency and apathy that Charles Sobhraj exploited in his career as a killer.

The authors and publishers would like to thank the following for permission to reproduce the photographs:

W. Heinecke for nos 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 9; the Thai police for nos 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17; the Indian police for nos 2 and 20; Interpol for no. 21; Dominique Rennelleau for no. 8; Kym Casper for no. 10; Nadine and Remy Gires for no. 19; Eric Damour for no. 18; Gus Singh, Gus Photo for no. 22.

**The Life and Crimes
of Charles Sobhraj**

Late on a hot afternoon in Paris in July 1976, a middle-aged man in a crumpled suit walked from his office and into the rush-hour crowds. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and a distracted air. His hair was tousled and he carried a battered briefcase. Alain Benard had been a corporate executive for fifteen years but looked more like a classics professor.

The posters advertised suntan lotions. Blow-ups of bronzed girls in bikinis beamed down on Benard as he jostled his way towards the Metro. It was nearing the time of year when millions of Parisians would leave the city for their annual summer holidays.

Benard sidestepped an old man bent over a pile of magazines; he was cutting the twine from the bundle and stacking the copies of *Paris Match* on the racks of the news-stand. Alain Benard's eyes followed the bright red cover and he froze. DEATH RIDES THE ROAD TO KATMANDU, it said, but it was the dark eyes glowering from the familiar face that stopped Benard in his tracks. A cold, arrogant face, but handsome. It was Charles Sobhraj. There was no mistake. Benard bought a copy of the magazine and sat down at a pavement café.

'All over the world police search for these brutal killers,' read the photo caption. 'They slay young hitchhikers on the holiday road, so far — a dozen victims!' Charles was pictured in a pose Benard knew well. One hand was on his hip and the other on a table scattered with dollars, his fingers curled backwards as though made of rubber. Next to Charles, in the picture, was a dark-haired young woman wearing sunglasses and leaning forward in a low-cut T-shirt. She looked more attractive than Benard remembered her. He opened the magazine and his eye was caught by a lurid comic strip. It showed his friend Charles enticing some holidaymakers to a palm-fringed beach. His girlfriend stands against the tropical moon, holding up a syringe. Next, two bodies are pictured lying on the sand as Charles bends over one of them, robbing it. His girlfriend kneels next to the body of a man in shorts.

This body is burning and the woman smiles as flames soar into the air. In the last frame, the young couple peer demoniacally from the page as smoke billows behind them.

Benard felt sick, and told himself it was impossible, absurd. He turned the page and found a photograph of a girl in a bikini, her arms outstretched and her eyes closed. 'An 18-year-old American found dead in Pattaya,' the caption read, 'probably a victim of the diabolic trio.' Almost against his will, his eyes skimmed the story: charred corpses in Katmandu covered with stab wounds, throats cut, necks broken, druggings and drownings, teenagers burned alive in Bangkok ... All the work of a mysterious 'Alain Gautier', now one of the most wanted men in the world.

Could Charles really have committed those crimes? Benard paid for his coffee and walked toward the Métro. He felt overcome by despair. Whatever Charles might have done, Benard was certain that his gifted young friend could not have *wanted* such things to happen. Charles had been born under a bad star, he believed.

Alain Benard accepted it as a mystery — how his own life, the life of an orderly and respectable businessman had become intertwined with that of an incorrigible criminal whose career was sending the world's press into paroxysms of grisly description. This friendship had begun in the normal course of events — perhaps it had begun because the events of Benard's life were all too normal.

Ten years earlier, Alain Benard was taking a Sunday afternoon stroll through the park near his home. He was 38 then, prosperous, unmarried, and bored. Primly dressed children were sailing their boats in the pond, sedate couples were playing tennis, and horses passed by at a leisurely trot down the leaf-covered path. The air was sweet with the smell of freshly cut grass and suddenly the ease of his cultivated life seemed sterile and cloying. The thought crossed his mind that everyone lived in their own ghetto and that he, Alain Benard, was a man trapped in a ghetto of privilege.

Above the swaying green of the poplars he noticed, not for the first time, the high grey watchtowers of Poissy Jail. Behind those walls, he realized, lived those for whom there could be no fastidious savouring of doubts in a Sunday stroll.

Many years ago Alain Benard's father, a commodities broker, had been a volunteer prison visitor in Marseilles. On that Sunday afternoon in July 1966 Benard decided to follow his father's example. It would be a fair exchange. He could use his legal training to help others and he would gain a passport to another milieu. The next day Benard applied to become an official prison visitor at Poissy Jail.

At first his part-time duties were simple: he advised Yugoslav construction workers who had overstayed their visas; he patched up domestic affairs for Corsican burglars; and on some weekends he would visit as many as fifteen inmates, who were happy just to have someone to talk to.

Then the prison priest approached him about a special case. 'I thought of you, Benard, because this case needs an intellectual with a lot of patience. It's a young boy, very bright, in fact exceptionally so, and a rebel. He seems to live in a world of his own and refuses to come to terms with reality. But if he had a friend to connect with him, and help him, I'm sure he could go a long way. Are you interested?'

He was. Now that he was used to visiting the jail, he welcomed a challenge. So on a wet October afternoon in 1966 the iron gates swung open and Benard looking, as usual, slightly dishevelled and distracted in spite of his soberly correct attire, waited for the guards to examine his pass and unlock the second set of doors. He stood patiently, his hands in his pockets, with no great expectations.

He followed a grey-haired social worker into the reception area. 'I suggest that if you agree to accept this case, Mr Benard,' she said, lowering her voice, 'you should do so only on one condition, a condition that we would ask you to regard as inviolable. But that can wait. Five months ago Charles broke out of Hagineau. Did you read about it?'

Benard nodded. Last May three prisoners from the psychiatric jail had jumped over the wall after knocking out a guard and tying him to a radiator with adhesive tape. 'They caught him and transferred him here,' she said, striding along the grey cement corridor. 'It was a self-destructive act. Another month in Hagineau and he probably would have got parole. Now he refuses to work and will have nothing to do with his cellmates. He wrote to the warden here accusing him of degrading the prisoners and then he went on a hunger

strike for forty-five days.'

She opened the door into the empty visitor's room. Benard was accustomed to the place now, with its ugly green linoleum. 'Don't let me give you the impression that it is a hopeless case,' she continued as they sat down. 'As you must have gathered by now, it is our belief that there is no such thing as a hopeless case. No case is lost! And the fact that Charles is so young and his crimes relatively trifling, well, this is reason to hope.'

'And his background? What do we know?'

'He was born in Saigon to a Vietnamese mother, but his father is Indian. His stepfather is French, an army man.' She paused. 'So Charles is not technically Eurasian although he has some of the same problems.'

Benard sat silently, polishing his glasses. She did not need to elaborate. The growing number of Eurasians in France had popularized certain beliefs: their pride quickly degenerated into arrogance; they disdained manual labour in case it betrayed peasant origins; they were simultaneously attracted to and repelled by things French; they nursed minor injuries and humiliations into a lethal hunger for revenge; they revered intrigue more than courage because they believed it was more effective; and, finally, that due to a neurotic focusing of their energies, the Eurasians' intellectual level was invariably high.

'One of the fruits of our war come back to haunt us,' the woman said suddenly, as if reading his mind.

Although it was twelve years since the French army had been routed by the Viet Minh at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, Benard was well aware of the consequences of his country's foreign policy in Indochina, where almost 80,000 French soldiers had died. The Vietnam war, some people believed, had begun in Paris in 1858 when the politicians first ordered gunboats to sail up the Saigon River and establish a garrison. For ninety-two years the French had profited from the country's raw materials -- raising revenue to administer the colony by monopolizing opium sales to the Vietnamese.

'You never told me that one inviolable condition,' Benard reminded the social worker.

'Well, it's this, Mr Benard: If you decide you want to help him, you would have to stay his friend throughout.'

'Throughout what?'

'Throughout his life. Up to now, from what we can discover, he's been shunted back and forth between parents and continents. It's made it hard for him to form attachments. On top of that, he had to live through the war. If you come into this boy's life as a friend and then disappear when it suits you, it would be much worse than doing nothing. He needs a strong father figure. Firm, not judgmental. Everyone else has judged him, this whole system,' she said, encompassing in a gesture of impatience the small barred windows, the fluorescent light, the ubiquitous ugliness. 'He needs just one person to stand by him.'

They heard the harsh voices of the guards herding prisoners along the corridor to the visiting rooms and the social worker got up to leave. 'It's better if he meets you alone,' she said, 'as an individual. We'll talk again later. Good luck.' The prisoners were locked into a long cell adjoining the visiting rooms. Benard passed the guard the slip of paper authorizing an interview with the prisoner, Charles Sobhraj.

The twenty-two-year-old who swaggered into the room was of medium height, slim but muscular, and strikingly handsome. He had high cheekbones and the black eyes in his sallow face seemed to notice and analyse Benard's every physical detail. He shook hands and sat down, facing Benard across the desk with a quizzical smile that made the older man feel that it was he who was being received. For a moment, Benard was disconcerted.

'So, Charles, you've had some bad luck in life?'

'I'd call it bad justice,' he said. His voice was intimate, rich, and low.

'It must always seem that way inside a place like this.'

'I've already learned to live above external circumstances in life,' the boy said, leaning back against the chair with his arms folded, staring.

'That's a stoical attitude,' said Benard, intrigued by the young man's intensity.

'Yes, the Stoics are my favourites, actually. Their ideas are much more useful in my situation than those of the priests.'

'From my understanding of the Stoics,' Benard replied, 'they teach the importance of mastering desires, but you're here because you succumbed to yours.'

'I stole out of necessity,' Charles said. 'The authorities had ordered me out of France, and I had no money. So, to drive across the border, I stole a car.' It was said with such self-assurance that the action sounded reasonable.

'But if you admit the crime, where's the injustice?' asked Benard.

'Copping four years for trying to obey an order to leave France.'

'You could have worked for the fare, perhaps?' suggested the older man with a smile.

'Without proper papers? I tried that. Peeling potatoes for four francs an hour.'

'What about your family?'

'I went to Marseilles to ask my mother for help. She just ignored me. She was too busy with her new boyfriend, a colonel. In the end she gave me forty francs. Forty francs to leave France!'

'So you don't get along with your mother?'

'For me, my mother is dead. I have cut her out of my life. I expect nothing from her.'

'In that case, where will you go when you leave here, Charles? What are your plans?'

'To get back to my country.'

'Vietnam?'

'Yes. My mother took me away when I was nine to this wonderful country where I'm treated like shit. You know, Mr Benard, last time I was in Saigon I was drafted. I'd still rather go back and fight than stay here.'

'So you're Vietnamese?'

'Officially, no, but Air Vice-Marshal Ky needs every man he can get, don't you think? I have no nationality. My father was born in Bombay, but the Indians refused to give me a passport. Anyway, as the Stoics say, it is better to be a citizen of the world than of Rome. And when I get out of jail I will be kicked out of France because I don't have a passport.'

'So it's because of all this indignation that you've got into trouble with the warden?'

'No. It's because they won't leave me alone to study. They stick me in this hole, so, at least, I should make the best of it. I try to deepen myself. Every day, you know, I exercise.— because however the circumstances change, my body is al-

ways with me. Sometimes they put me in solitary which, of course, I don't mind. They cut off tobacco. So what? I don't smoke. They ban me from the cinema. I haven't seen a film for nine months.' This list of adversities seemed rather to cheer him.

'Is such self-discipline a Vietnamese trait?' Benard asked, polishing his glasses.

'It's not French,' Charles said with a chilly smile.

There was an impatient rattle of keys.

'It's a very interesting problem, a man without a nationality. I might look into it.'

'You're under no obligation to do anything for me,' the boy said, 'and you know, Alain, maybe you're a prisoner too — of your own guilt. Why else would you hang around jails?'

Benard was amused by the boy's sophistry. 'Convicted prisoners are driven by unconscious forces, too, especially ones who keep coming back.'

'Yes. Clack! Clack! Clack! Since I was eighteen. This is my third French jail.'

The two men stood up as the guard opened the door.

Benard said, 'I'll see you again next week — we'll have more time to talk.'

'Please yourself, but remember that I'm used to being lonely, Mr Benard.' He lowered his voice dramatically, 'As lonely as the bears in the mountains, and that is how I shall always be.'

How unlikely, Benard thought, the boy has a talent for winning friendship. He had never come across such conspicuous personal magnetism. 'Is there anything I can bring you?'

'I need nothing,' the prisoner called over his shoulder as he was led away, 'except books.'

In the weeks that followed Benard visited Charles Sobhraj every Saturday afternoon and picked over his library to feed the prisoner's ravenous appetite for psychology, philosophy, law, and executive training manuals. Sometimes he boasted to Benard that he sat at his desk in the cell for nineteen hours a day, poring through books. He hardly noticed the other prisoners.

He sought not only self-improvement, but an intellectual armoury — he wanted the weapons, conventional and other-

wise, to cut through the jungle outside, to carve his path to the top. Socially Charles was on the bottom rung, without wealth, nationality or education, and jail had added a five-year handicap. But he had inherited one gift, the gift of charisma, of power over people. Charles decided to build on this and to learn all he could about clues to their character; the better, he thought, one day to mould them to his will. Palmistry, handwriting analysis and characterology would help him penetrate other minds and would offer short cuts in social relations.

As his friendship with Benard grew, so did Charles's requests. Benard was relieved when the boy who wanted only books also admitted to simpler human needs for chocolate toffees, stationery, and socks.

By the time summer was fading the young Vietnamese prisoner had become a permanent fixture in Benard's ordered life. Every Saturday afternoon Benard would visit Charles, just as every Sunday evening he would visit his own mother, and in his spare time during the week he began to investigate the peculiar problem of finding a nationality for Charles. Each Saturday he would explain how his research had gone during the preceding week. He wanted to show the boy, who was still cynical about his visitor's motives, that he was taking the case seriously.

'I found out about the Stateless Person's Passport from the U.N. You aren't eligible. There's a rule that you can't apply for one from the country in which you are convicted.'

'To be officially Stateless, you have first to be sinless?' Charles commented.

'Apparently, but then perhaps it's for the best. After all, you're entitled to a nationality, and I've written to the Indian Embassy.'

'They will say no, too,' Charles said. 'Each country will close its doors.'

'In that case I need to be armed for the fight. I must know more about your past: documents, dates, where you were brought up. Can I write to your family?'

Charles was silent for a minute, affecting the faintly melodramatic gesture of someone thinking deeply that Benard was becoming used to. 'I prefer not to look back,' he said, 'but you can write to my stepfather Roussel in Marseilles although

you won't get much sense out of him. He's doped up on tranquillizers.'

'Can I write to your mother then?'

'No. She no longer exists for me.'

Benard argued with him without result and then suggested he should write to Charles's father in Saigon. This triggered an impassioned diatribe:

'Before I met you, Alain, I must tell you that I was often close to suicide in my cell. I stopped eating. I couldn't sleep. I was always depressed. That's why they transferred me to Hagineau. After many nights without sleep, I asked myself, "Why die now? Go to the source of your misfortune and see who's responsible." I did, and it was my father, Sobhraj. And you know something, Alain? With this idea, I felt better. I swore to myself for the future to have a new life, a pure life, and overall, overall, to have revenge on my father. That's when I wrote to him this letter.'

It was Charles's habit to bring a sheaf of papers to the visitor's room, usually with lists of books or a scribbled page of introspection or poetry. He handed Benard the letter he had written.

It is really unfortunate that you are my father. Why so? Because a father has a duty to help his son build a future. You pray to God at the temple, but your conscience is heavy. You bore a son, but you ignore him. You abandon him worse than a dog, worse than for the lowest beast!!! From you I will carry only the name you gave me. The faithful love I had for you, I have still, unfortunately. But I will fight it. You are no more my father. I disown you. Live in your abundance, enjoy it as much as you can. For myself, I have as my only treasure, bread and water. But it's precious treasure because it fortifies me every day and gives me the strength and will to hold me on only one target.

I will consume you. I will make you suffer. I will make you regret that you have missed your father's duty. The fortune, I will get without you. And I will use it to crush you.

When Benard put the letter down Charles said, 'There's a poem I wrote with it. It's very short.' He recited it:

In the sunny country where you walk
My abandoned self could also go
If my body had wings to fly
Like my spirit has.

'That almost makes up for the letter,' Benard said. 'Don't you think a life based on revenge is self-defeating?' Benard's calm question did not betray how shocked he was by the attitude revealed in the letter.

'Maybe it's my Asian mind that makes it difficult to accept Christian forgiveness,' Charles said, 'for when a man has wronged you ...'

'And you become obsessed with revenge,' Benard said quickly, 'then you still let him get the upper hand. You allow him to deform your psychology.'

Charles paused and looked up. 'Okay, I agree. You can write to my father. Don't say anything about where I am now. He is very conventional, a rich businessman. And you should use the company's letterhead when you write, that will impress him.'

Benard left the room feeling that he had made a breakthrough.

In the courtyard of Poissy Jail three prisoners were decorating a Christmas tree with the help of the social worker when Benard made his next visit, carrying a present for Charles.

'So, you've taken the case to heart?' she called out, coming towards him.

'Even to my head,' he said, taking a worn sheet of paper from his wallet. 'Do you want to see the first letter I received from Charles?' Benard handed her the letter:

Dear Alain,

I am a being who has cried out, 'O Lord, my God, why have you made me what I am? You know, O Lord, that I only ask to love, to live. Why don't you grant this? In order to prepare me for my destiny? But what is my destiny, O my Lord? Tell me, give me a signal. Why was I born a being that the whole world despises, one who could die without anyone shedding a tear? O Lord, I

have had only misfortune. Send me some happiness. You, who know the secret of my soul, guide me, tell me what must be done. I don't know anymore what to do.' For a long time, nothing, there was no answer. Then I knew he had heard my cry, Alain, the scream of a drowning man. He sent you.

'You have got yourself in deep,' she said, returning the letter.

'Yes. I wasn't prepared for this. At least he's no longer bitter and suicidal. Who knows how it will end?' Benard turned and walked down the grey corridor.

In the visitors' room a few minutes later Charles unwrapped his presents — two drawings of Jesus and one of St John. 'Alain, I will have these framed,' he said. 'What can I give in return? All I can offer you is my brotherhood, but, I promise, that will be deep and eternal.'

Benard, who was embarrassed but touched by this declaration, told him that the Indian Embassy had turned down the request for nationality. 'They say you have not lived there long enough.'

'Who wants to be Indian?' Charles asked. 'Did you hear from my father?'

'Yes, he was glad to hear news of you.'

'Next time you write, Alain, could you ask him to send me some suits? You know, he's a tailor.'

'Yes, and his letter was very warm towards you.'

'Even if he hasn't given me the love of a father, I suppose I must try to give him the love of a son. I do believe in Providence, Alain. And one thing about prayer, it's great to have someone to talk to, especially the Creator.'

'You already seem to be on intimate terms with Him.'

'What a waste my years in jail have been,' he went on, not noticing Benard's remark, 'and if I hadn't met you I would have lost myself in action on the outside. To what good? Now I want to make up for those lost years. The warden has given me permission to study a course in law at the University of Paris. Can you get all the enrolment forms and textbooks for me?'

'Of course, Charles. It's good that you're looking ahead to

the day you come out, but we still have to sort out your nationality, and your mother has all the papers. You must let me see her.'

Charles looked away and said nothing. Benard kept pushing, tactfully and firmly. He could see there were tears in Charles's eyes when he finally answered, 'All right, Alain, if you think it is for the best. You have my permission.'

The tall masts of the yachts bobbed in the Old Port, and oil tankers on the horizon plodded towards Saudi Arabia. From the deck of the incoming ferry from Tunisia, passengers were waving handkerchiefs and shouting. It was a cold December afternoon as Benard drove his Triumph Herald up the wide, bustling Canabiere of Marseilles, the city where Benard himself had grown up.

He was curious to meet Noi Roussel, Charles's Vietnamese mother, who lived twenty minutes away in a seaside suburb. He wondered if Charles's animosity towards his mother was justified. He had prepared for his visit by arranging for a local social worker attached to the prison in Marseilles to visit Noi. Her report had painted Noi as an 'iron butterfly'. He parked at a crowded and respectable arrangement of modest villas lining the steep alleys that criss-crossed the Mediterranean hillside.

A high wooden fence surrounded Villa La Roche. He pressed the bell on the gate. Through a crack between the palings he watched a small boy who looked like Charles run down the garden path, chased by a large Labrador. A craggy headland blocked the view of the sea. With its steeply terraced yard and walled-in verandah, Villa La Roche suggested a suburban fortress. Opening the gate, the boy grinned self-consciously. His mother had told him to say: 'Good afternoon, sir. Monsieur Benard, I presume,' but the boy was unable to manage a word.

The smiling Vietnamese woman, Noi Roussel was standing on the top step of the porch. Her black Chinese trousers and turquoise high-necked silk jacket matched her beaded slippers. She was posed, aware of the impression she was making. She looked young enough to be Charles's sister. Her black hair was swept up from her face in a lacquered beehive, and she had fine skin and a trim sensual figure. 'It's so nice of you to come all this way, Mr Benard. Do excuse the garden. Without a man around the house, things run away with

themselves, don't they? This is Guy, my son.' She led Benard into a small neat room dominated by the television set and decorated with oriental bric-a-brac. On an upright piano stood one of the brass three-tiered family shrines Benard had seen before in Vietnamese homes.

'Guy, run off and play,' Noi called. The slight figure, followed by the dog, ran from the room. Noi Roussel placed a tray of tea on the table. 'I must say I'm relieved that Charles is locked up,' she said as she poured the green Chinese tea into a glass cup and offered Benard a plate of cakes. 'Last time he was here, he was so rough. He even threatened me. He wanted money.'

'Ah, yes, that must have been the last time you saw him. He told me about it. He said he needed the money to leave France.' Benard spoke casually. He looked around at the case of tiny glass animals in the corner, not a speck of dust anywhere.

'As I told him then, not that he ever listens, I needed the money to feed my family. I have to feed seven children on my husband's disability pension.' Noi nibbled on a biscuit. Her fingernails manicured to curving points were lacquered crimson.

'How is your husband, Mrs Roussel?'

'He's been in a psychiatric hospital for six years now, and I bring him food every day. Sometimes he's allowed to come home, but it's no good. Jacques hears strange voices, and they tell him to kill me. Last time he was here he attacked me with a kitchen knife, and I locked myself in the bedroom.'

'Sad,' Benard said, his eyes wandering to the mother-of-pearl flamingos on the wall. 'It must be difficult bringing up children without a father in the house.'

'Yes, with seven children there's never enough money. I had to get what I could, however I could,' she said, fixing him with a significantly coquettish look, the frankness of which alarmed the fastidious bachelor. 'She's more woman than mother,' he remembered Charles saying.

'I don't suppose Charles was much help?' he asked her.

'Ha! He helped my hair go grey,' she said. Benard, looking at the scrupulously coiffured black beehive thought that no, not even Charles could do that.

'He'll be coming out in six months,' he said, 'and, perhaps,

you and I should talk about what's to be done. He says he wants to go back to Vietnam.'

'Charles always wants to be where he isn't,' she sighed.

'Perhaps because he doesn't know where he belongs,' Benard said, taking off his glasses and polishing them. 'Perhaps the first thing to do is to give him a country.'

'Yes, I wanted to give him France, at least a good French education,' she said. 'That's why I brought him here.'

'And so why was he not formally adopted into the family and granted French citizenship?'

Sitting on the edge of the couch, her brow screwed up in concentration, Noi explained that her husband had made the necessary application to the Ministry of Adoption and had heard nothing more. 'It got lost in a file or something, and then my husband was posted to Dakar.'

'Mrs Roussel, if I'm to be of any help to Charles, I need to get a sense of the family history. I would like to examine any documents relating to your son — if you still have any.'

'Oh, Mr Benard,' she said, smiling her hard, glittering smile, 'I have every one of them, every scrap of official paper. Has he convinced you I don't love him? I love him best of all. When I had to leave him behind in Saigon to come here the first time, I used to walk up and down the Vieux Ports, always thinking of him.' She took a green photo album from a shelf under the TV set and showed him childhood snapshots of her children. 'See, he has the face of an angel,' she said, pointing to a photograph of Charles in a chef's hat, 'but somewhere I think a devil crept into his soul.'

She stood up and shuffled out of the room, returning a few seconds later with a white plastic shopping bag which she put on the floor and a tiny lambswool vest which she began stroking against her face. 'This was the first little jacket I ever bought him,' she said, her eyes filling with tears, 'and I sleep with it under my pillow.'

Benard concentrated his attention on a gold-rimmed plate commemorating the marriage of Farah Diba to the Shah of Iran. When Noi had calmed down and stopped crying, he took out a notebook and questioned her in great detail about the family background, pausing once for a few seconds when Guy rushed into the room to show off a frog he had caught in the garden.

As Benard was leaving, the light from the corrugated plastic that walled in the verandah bathed both their faces in a green light. 'You don't like the view?' Benard asked.

'All of us used to eat our meals out here,' she said, 'and we had the screens put up to stop the neighbours staring.' Noi said something quickly to Guy and she walked with Benard down the path to the gate. 'I can see you're really concerned for my son,' she said as Guy ran after them with the white plastic shopping bag.

'Oh, I just offer a helping hand,' he said.

'I think you can do more for him than I have been able to do, Mr Benard, and so this is for you,' she said, handing him the bag and announcing dramatically: 'I give to you my son, Charles.'

Back in his own sombre flat Benard began unscrambling the mass of papers which, in addition to official documents, included personal letters, newspaper clippings, fiercely worded bills from shipping companies, police charge sheets, school records, and, in answer to follow-up inquiries from a Paris hospital where he had been treated for bed-wetting, a weary biography of Charles by his stepfather, Jacques Roussel. Benard sorted these into neatly labelled manilla folders and stacked them into file boxes on his bookcase. He resumed his weekly visits to Charles, who in the months that followed finally broke down and spoke to him about his background. From these sources as well as his own understanding of France's involvement in Southeast Asia, Benard was able to form a picture of the past of the lonely man marooned without a land in Poissy Jail.

During the Second World War, when Charles's mother, Noi, was a beautiful teenager, her parents died and she left the rice paddies and rubber plantations of her village to come to Saigon, 'the Paris of the Orient'. The war had not dulled the city's renowned glamour, and the Japanese victory in Southeast Asia had demonstrated to its residents that white races were not invincible. From Saigon Cathedral, a replica of the Romanesque style, the bells rang out across the opium dens, dance halls, brothels and casinos of the former fishing village which buzzed with Renault taxis and the armoured cars of occupying troops. The women, in their white silk trousers and long, coloured tunics slit to the waist, cycled along the wide boulevards lined with cafés.

Noi got a job as a shopgirl in a smart men's outfitters off the Rue Catinat and was quickly promoted to cashier. One evening as she was leaving work she noticed her employer, a handsome, light-skinned Indian, standing in the doorway talking with a Japanese officer in his own language. He was stocky, and in his flashy Western clothes he exuded an attractive air of confidence and prosperity. Hotchand Sobhraj invited her to join him that evening at the casino.

Indians were unpopular in Saigon because so many of them had made fortunes as money-lenders to the Vietnamese, a race prone to gambling. Hotchand Sobhraj was a leader among the expatriate Indian community, and in the tradition of his forefathers, who came from the valley of Sindh, he too was a moneylender. Sobhraj also owned two tailor's shops in the prosperous quarter of Saigon and above one of these, at 80 Ngo Duc Ke, he lived in a large flat with four servants. Noi became his mistress and moved in with him. Soon she became pregnant.

It was on April 6 1944, that Noi went into labour, and as her contractions intensified so did the steady rumble of the bombs, shaking the hospital. The Viet Minh were re-launching their guerrilla campaign against the Japanese occu-

pation forces. Noi was growing accustomed to the sound, and it was an easy birth. She was twenty years old.

She gave her new son an Indian name, Gurmukh, and he took his father's surname -- Sobhraj, but in the years that followed he was to have countless names. As a young boy he was christened Charles after the hero of the times, French President de Gaulle.

One day when Charles was one year old, his mother was walking with her son in her arms past the food-stalls that lined the river. Suddenly, before she had time to scream, two men sprang from behind a rickshaw and threw mother and baby into a motorized sampan that disappeared into the maze of waterways. The crowds went on with their business -- such abductions were common. It was safer not to ask questions. Within hours Hotchand Sobhraj received the ransom demand. Noi and Charles had been spirited off to the Rung Sat Swamp, a time-honoured hide-out for pirates and bandits known locally as the Forest of the Assassins. One of these gangs, the Bin Xuyen, had temporarily allied itself with the Viet Minh and kidnapping was its standard method of fund raising. A shrewd merchant who spoke eight languages, Hotchand had been careful to make the right social connections. Now he sought help from the Japanese army. When the Bin Xuyen came to collect the ransom, they were ambushed by Japanese soldiers. Noi and the baby were rescued.

On August 15 1945, the Japanese surrendered to the Allies. Ten days later, to the sounds of carousing in the streets, fireworks and a nine-hour victory parade celebrating the end of colonization, the Viet Minh installed themselves as the government of Saigon. For the Sobhraj family and other residents there followed a short period of unaccustomed tranquillity until, three weeks later, the British arrived. Backed by Indian Gurkhas and Gaullist French, they cleared the city of Viet Minh, conducting a ruthless door-to-door search for its leaders. From Marseilles the troop ships steamed up the Saigon River, and soldiers reoccupied the city as the capital of Cochin China, a colony of France. After bloody street fighting the Viet Minh were smashed back into the Forest of the Assassins, and the French officers, whom Hotchand Sobhraj had already begun to cultivate, celebrated their victory at the House of Five Hundred Girls.

That same night the Sobhraj household was awakened by the sound of automatic rifle fire and grenade explosions. The Viet Minh had left assassination squads to carry on the resistance. Flames illuminated the night sky, bombs shook the house, and Charles woke up screaming. Noi wrapped him up in a blanket and slid the screaming bundle beneath a heavy wardrobe where he was left until dawn when the assassination squads' reign was over until the sun set again. Terror became part of the city's nightlife, and whenever the bombs came close the baby Charles was hidden away in the hot stuffy darkness under the wardrobe.

When Charles was three and Noi was pregnant again Hotchand returned from a visit to his home in Poona, India, and announced that he had married an Indian girl.

'It was all arranged by my family,' he explained to Noi. 'It makes no difference. You can still live here.' Noi shouted and wept and packed her bags, storming out of the flat with her little boy under her arm. Soon she was to meet Jacques Roussel, a shy, sensitive adjutant sergeant from Bordeaux, who fell in love with Noi and agreed to accept Charles as his son. They were married in September 1948, after the birth of Noi's second child by Hotchand. She was named Nicole, after Roussel's mother and was formally adopted at the wedding ceremony.

After being taken from his father, four-year-old Charles had become difficult. His new home, three rooms in the French barracks, seemed depressing and ugly after the luxury he had known at his father's. He refused to call Roussel 'Papa' and ran away whenever the young French soldier tried to take him in his arms. 'I want Hotchand,' he kept yelling at his mother who was only too well aware of the drop in material circumstances and understood the boy's feeling of loss. When Jacques was posted back to Marseilles, she decided to leave Charles with his natural father, since his future seemed secure in the prosperous household. She wept as she kissed him good-bye, expecting never to see her handsome little boy again.

In Paris, government geographers re-drew their maps of Southeast Asia, and the colony of Cochin China was added to the Protectorates of Annam and Tonkin to form the country of Vietnam. The French sank deeper into the morass of a colonial war and by 1951, when Jacques Roussel was sent back

again to the front, the government was spending a billion dollars a year with half their army committed to the battle. The French were losing more officers annually than graduated from St Cyr, France's top military academy. Noi was now pregnant with her fourth child and with three-year-old Nicole and two-year-old Jean-Daniel, who had been born in Marseilles, she sailed with Jacques Roussel back to her war-torn homeland.

Saigon now bristled with barbed wire and machine guns. Watchtowers stood at kilometre intervals along the main road, and police stopped cars, bicycles, and pedicabs (which had replaced the hand-drawn rickshaws) to search for bombs. After the cloistered domesticity of life in Marseilles, Noi was back in a land that lived its life on the pavements, where dentists extracted teeth under the tamarind trees, egged on by jostling passers-by. Noi's joy at being back home was mixed with a newly acquired aloofness towards the simplicity of her own people.

'So you are his mother?' the headmaster said. Noi had left her other children at the French barracks and rushed to the school. 'You will find your son in the yard looking after the pigs. He's being punished for unruliness and insolence and disrupting the lessons of the other children.' Clutching her handbag Noi picked her way through the muddy ground in her high heels, looking for the pig-sty, where she embraced the boy she had missed so much in the intervening years.

Hotchand had now installed his Indian wife, Geeta, in the flat above the shop and, perhaps not wishing to be reminded of her husband's former relations with Noi, Geeta had left Charles to look after himself. He had learnt to survive with the other street kids, absorbed in the back alley hustle of a booming war town. The children of Saigon were ingenious and versatile, grinding out sugar cane juice from portable hand mills to sell to patrons of battery-powered peep shows, taking bets from French soldiers on directions the crickets might jump, and running messages for the Viet Minh. While the seven-year-old seemed to have thrived on domestic anarchy, Noi was appalled and, with Hotchand's agreement, she registered her rights of maternity at Saigon Town Hall and took Charles back into the Roussel family.

If the city was Vietnam by day, by night it was Viet Minh. In the quarter which housed the families of French soldiers, the guerrillas stalked the rooftops, looking for ways to break into the bedrooms and cut the throats of their sleeping enemies. In the Roussel home the doors and windows were barricaded. The family went to bed frightened, their ears alert for suspicious sounds. When the alarm sounded, Noi roused her children and hurried them out under the floodlights in the compound with the other families to wait for the security police.

One afternoon Noi took the seven-year-old Charles to the cinema. The two were queuing on Rue Catinat when suddenly Charles changed his mind about the film he wanted to see and begged to be taken to another cinema across the street. To avoid one of his tantrums, his mother acquiesced. After the show they passed the first cinema and saw dozens of bodies being carried out on stretchers to ambulances, victims of a Viet Minh bomb attack.

'Charlie — look! You saved us!'

Noi hugged him tightly and saw in his black eyes an expression of pride. The ambulance sirens followed them as they walked home together holding hands, and Charles realized that he was someone special, immune to violence. He was protected. Others would suffer — he accepted that already — but his own fate was to be different.

As the months passed the violence escalated. When he had just turned eight Charles was walking home from school along the steamy streets where French priests in black cassocks jostled with Chinese merchants, French Legionnaires, and by now, the occasional American official. The explosion that blew the street apart did not touch him. It was a thundering crash, a sheet of white light, and then silence and dust.

Bodies lay scattered on the ground. The boy saw something moving where an old stone wall had been. The noodle stall proprietor lay crushed under his stand. His head had been blown off his shoulders. Charles saw the skull nearby. It had been split open by the blast. People screamed and bodies writhed in pools of blood. The sirens soared and Charles Sobhraj ran home to his mother.

Although he was indulged more than the younger children, Charles did not like the struggling atmosphere of the

Roussel's quarters where his mother was now nursing her fourth child, Guy. He did not respect his stepfather who seemed dull and subservient. Jacques had been trained for administrative duties and was overwhelmed by the everyday carnage of guerrilla warfare. Charles still missed Hotchand, and one night, when the Roussel family met for dinner, the boy had disappeared. Noi became hysterical, fearing another kidnapping. Later that night, servants from the house of Hotchand Sobhraj returned Charles to his mother. He had been found hiding under his father's bed. Next time he was left alone Charles ran away again, ducking through the police checkpoints and navigating the maze of back streets until he reached his father's home. Noi was mortified — her son's disobedience caused her to 'lose face' in the eyes of the Sobhraj household. From then on she locked him in the bathroom when she went out, to prevent him from escaping. No matter how tightly she secured the door and windows, he would invariably find a way out and back to his father's. Noi began tying her son to the bed, from which he also broke loose. When he was returned, she bound him more securely and, to teach him a lesson, left him tied to the bed for several days.

In 1953 Jacques Roussel was granted home leave. When Charles heard his mother discussing preparations for the voyage, he decided to run away from the house the night before departure and hide near the river until he saw their ship sail. Instead, on the crucial night, he fell asleep. In the morning Jacques Roussel carried the child aboard the troop ship where Charles woke up in time to watch Vietnam disappear into the haze above the South China Sea. He felt abducted from his homeland, and although he knew he would never forgive his mother, he was even angrier with himself for his own weakness.

Under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh the Viet Minh were gaining ground in the mountainous North, and the French amassed their forces for a decisive campaign upon which their future in Vietnam would depend. A few months after he had landed in France, Jacques was ordered back to the beleaguered colony. Noi, who would accompany Jacques back to Vietnam with her three youngest children, decided to leave Charles and the seven-year-old Nicole in boarding schools.

The nine-year-old boy found himself in a suburb of Paris

Why not something of that sort? He rushed back up to his room to be alone. No, I'll never do it, he said to himself, shivering.

With the last of his savings he went to the sports' counter of the Bazar de l'Hotel de Ville, a Parisian department store, and bought a gun. The clerk handed him the package and, running his hands over it in his pocket, he felt strong and exhilarated. Charles walked down the Rue de Rivoli towards the Métro, indifferent to the cold. When he got home he went to his bedroom, locked the door and stared at the grey pistol. Now I can do it, he thought. In the morning he took the local train to a suburb near Choisy-le-Roy and wandered towards the area of cheap, government-built blocks of flats. Choosing a building surrounded by a shabby lawn, he looked at the letterboxes and saw that most of the residents were couples. He felt nervous and had almost decided to forget the plan. But if I don't do it this time, I'll never do it. I'll never get to Saigon, he said to himself. He walked up the stairs and listened at the first door on the landing. He heard nothing. Feeling relieved, then angry at himself for this feeling, he listened at the next door, then another, and still he heard no sounds. He went up to the third floor. He reached the fourth door on the landing before he heard the sound of a woman's voice talking to a child.

Charles trembled and walked quickly back to the stairs. I can't do it, he thought and sat halfway down the steps, trying to overcome his fear by thinking of the wonderful life he would lead in his father's house in Saigon. No, I won't run away, he thought, turning round and going back up to the door where he had heard the woman's babytalk. He felt the gun in his pocket. What will I say? He wanted to leave again, and so, to stop himself, he pressed the buzzer.

'Yes,' the woman said, opening the door and putting her hand to the scarf on her head.

'Good morning, Madame,' he said, looking serious and respectable in his suit. 'Sorry to disturb you, but I must check the meter.'

'Come in,' she said and closed the door behind her. When she turned round, Charles was facing her with a gun.

'Don't move,' he said, 'and don't scream.'

The woman froze and she let out a terrified shriek.

walking with his mother through the austere lobby of a Catholic boarding school. He had never worn a tie before, or a jacket. The uniform didn't fit, and the grey flannel pricked his thin legs.

'But Mama, I hate this country,' he pleaded, clinging to her skirt. 'Take me back with you.'

'You'll soon get used to it, little one,' she said in her rapid high-pitched Vietnamese. 'Be brave. It won't be for long.'

'But why won't you take me?' His eyes were full of tears.

'We want the best for you. This is an expensive school. It's time for you to learn French and start your education. You're a big boy now, Charles, and you're very lucky to have this chance to grow up French,' she told the boy, enumerating all the advantages of a European culture. 'There's no future in Vietnam.'

Charles had not adapted to his new country. Far from forgetting about Vietnam and his father, he had built them up into a fantasy of material bliss and parental affection. For Noi the most annoying symptom of her son's discontent was his bedwetting. She had taken him to several doctors without success, and he had been admitted for exhaustive tests at the Henri Rousseau Hospital in Paris. The problem was not physiological, Dr Male explained, and it would disappear of its own accord when the boy had overcome his feelings of insecurity, surely understandable, given the sudden shifts between two parents and two countries. Disappointed in the failure of Western science, Noi resorted to a more practical remedy for her son's enuresis. When she put Charles to bed at night, she knotted a piece of string round his penis.

Watching his slim, beautiful mother waving goodbye from the taxi as it disappeared along the school's gravel driveway, Charles felt betrayed. He looked around at the priests and his grey-uniformed schoolmates saying their formal goodbyes in a language he did not understand. He was so overcome by feelings of abandonment and isolation that he ran to the dormitory, where the pictures of French saints stared down at him, threw himself on his bed and wept.

At first the other boys ignored him, but as the term went on, he became the outcast and the butt of their racist jokes. To catch up on his studies, he had been placed in a class of boys three years younger than himself. That was reason enough for

them to sneer at him even if he had been able to keep it secret that he was a member of the race against which France was at war and that he wet his bed.

Charles spent his recreation periods writing long desperate letters to his mother begging her to take him back home to Saigon. Noi had given birth to her sixth child, a boy she christened Jacques after her husband. Even if she could have found time to answer the pleas of her eldest son, she was not adept at correspondence. The letters her son waited for never came. Now he was sure his family had forgotten all about him. No one had thought to arrange for visits between him and his sister Nicole who was faring better in her girls' school because she had grown up speaking French.

He didn't care, he told himself. He had decided he would never forgive Nicole, the daughter of Hotchantl Sobhraj, for accepting the French soldier as her father. In his dreams his mother came to him, and swept him off back to Saigon and to the flat above the tailor's shop.

At the end of term holidays Charles had nowhere to go. He stayed on at school, the only boy in the deserted playgrounds, taking his meals with an elderly teacher and sleeping alone in the empty dormitory. When the other boys returned full of stories of their adventures, they laughed at the Vietnamese urchin who skulked alone in the quadrangle, abandoned, despised, and obviously loved by nobody.

After a year at school Charles was called out of class one day. His heart sank. Was he going to be punished for his failure in the examinations? No, the attendant told him there was someone to see him. In the lobby he saw a fashionably dressed young Vietnamese woman. It was his mother! He ran, almost slipping on the highly polished floor, and threw himself into her arms, his eyes filling with tears of happiness. But when she spoke, his face clouded over.

'Mama, I don't understand you,' he cried, 'speak in French.' With a cold, dislocating shock he realized that he had forgotten the language of his homeland. It was terrible, as though he had lost one of his senses. Now, how would he be able to talk to his friends in Saigon?

In her basic French, Noi told her son that the family had left Vietnam forever and that he could come home and live with her and his brothers and sisters.

'What about Papa?' he asked. 'Did he give you any message for me?'

'He's sick,' she said. 'The war was lost. Many soldiers died in the battle. Jacques was lucky, but now we must all be very kind to him.'

'No, not Jacques,' Charles said impatiently. 'My *real* Papa. I want to go back to him.'

'You can't go back to Hotchand any more, my darling,' she lied to him. 'He's dead.'

Battle weary after Vietnam, Jacques Roussel had been given an administrative posting in the sleepy French Protectorate of Senegal in Northwest Africa. In 1957, when Charles was thirteen, he sailed from Marseilles with the Roussel family to the capital city, Dakar. His mother was nursing her newborn daughter, Martine, her seventh child. The wide boulevards of the port, crowded with traffic and lined with pavement cafés and shiny new shops and hotels gave the town an unexpectedly cosmopolitan air. The family stayed temporarily in a hotel, and while Noi was caught up with her baby and arrangements for their new quarters, Charles was free to run off and explore the streets of a strange new city.

Following the back streets, he soon crossed into the African Medina where he heard the throb of drums and saw Senegalese in bright cotton robes living on the street while food was fried in truncated kerosene tins and witch doctors mixed mysterious potions. He saw snakemen, musicians, conjurors, and the ragged children, wild and friendly, so unlike his cruel, priggish schoolmates in France. At the end of the day Charles left the frenzy of the Medina and returned to the family's hotel suite with its trappings of luxury, reminiscent of the life he believed he had lost in Saigon.

The next day, the family piled into two taxis and were driven along a road lined with packing-case shanties and cement igloos to the military barracks in the Point E area, row after row of tin-roofed bungalows planted on the dry desert sand, shaded by date palms. Charles was disappointed. This was to be his home for the next two and a half years. It was dark inside the bungalow. The blinds kept the harsh sun from penetrating. The incense from Noi's brass altar infused the house with the musky smell that reminded Charles of life in

the house of Hotchand Sobhraj, who, he had begun to suspect, from his mother's evasive answers, was still alive.

The three-tiered altar with its pagoda roofs mystified the other children, but Charles understood its symbols. The photographs of ancestors were to be worshipped, the candlesticks shaped like storks symbolized longevity, and the brass turtles on which they stood embodied the virtue of hard work. A picture of the Buddha stood on top, and around the altar were bowls of sweets left as an offering. If the children touched them Noi would whip them savagely, sometimes ordering them to cut their own switches from the garden or steal them from next door.

The younger children sensed that there was something different in their parents' attitude toward Charles although they were not yet aware he was a half-brother. He was their hero. At night when Jacques blocked out his nightmares of Vietnam with sleeping pills and Noi disappeared to gambling soirées with her friends, Charles would lead his brothers and sisters in games of blind man's buff, turning out all the lights and terrifying them until they begged him to stop.

'Let's go and clean out old Mamoudia's shop,' he said to his oldest brother and sister after one of these games. What an adventure! They all liked Mamoudia, the gentle seven-foot Senegalese who sold them Carumbas, their favourite caramel sweets. In the darkness Jean-Daniel and Nicole watched as their big brother opened the wooden latch with his pocket knife and slipped inside. In the bright moonlight they could see him stuffing packets of Carumba into his satchel. Then they froze, hearing the crunching footsteps of the patrolling watchman. The man shone his flashlight across the bamboo porch. Through the crack in the door, still slightly ajar, they saw Charles in his grey school shorts stop so still that he seemed not to be there. A few seconds later the watchman continued his rounds. Charles had already realized that people only see what they expect to see. Back in their brother's bedroom the children gathered as he distributed Carumbas to each of them. 'Okay, now leave for a few minutes,' he said, 'while I hide the rest.'

The following night Jean-Daniel and Nicole raided Mamoudia's store on their own. At breakfast there was a knock on the door. Mamoudia himself appeared, looking sad,

and he showed Noi a trail of sweet wrappers that led from their door to his shop. In a rage, ignoring the visiting neighbours, Noi whipped Jean-Daniel and Nicole mercilessly, teaching them, unwittingly, that it was not safe to steal unless Charles was there to lead them.

Mamoudia's shop with its few jars of sweets, bolts of fabric, and groceries quickly became small time for Charles who had now mysteriously acquired a transistor radio. The children realized that if they pointed out a toy they liked in the supermarket of the Point E area, there was a good chance that Charles would present it to them a few days later. On their birthdays, previously threadbare occasions, he gave them expensive presents which they had to keep secret from their parents although they sensed that Noi, who sometimes shared their chocolates and pastries without asking where they came from, would not be as hostile as Jacques to their brother's acquisitiveness.

Charles had been enrolled in the Orientation College in Dakar which he attended as little as possible, often forging his father's signature on explanatory absence notes. His school report for 1959 when he was fifteen and still in the class with the twelve-year-olds was consistent: Geography, 2 (out of 20), 'No serious work'; Science, 1, 'Bad pupil'; Manual work, 1½, 'Undisciplined, lazy, unwilling'; and so on through all the subjects escalating to a massive 7½ in sport for which the teacher recorded, 'Not very courageous, must awake.'

Jacques decided to discontinue the farce of his stepson's education and found him a job as an apprentice mechanic in the garage of a friend. A few days later he was sent home.

'May I ask why you gave Charles the sack?' Jacques asked his friend.

'He reversed the wires on the electrical transformer and almost burned the building down,' said the astounded owner. 'Why would anyone want to do a thing like that? You understand that I can't keep him on.'

'Yes,' said Jacques, 'I understand.'

Jacques tried to be firm with the children, but already he was looking frail and stooped. He was losing grip of his sanity. At night the children heard him screaming as the grenades of the Viet Minh landed around him in his dreams. Charles

despised the Frenchman because he failed to maintain the family at the level of prosperity he had known in Saigon with Hotchand, and because he took Jacques's dignity and tolerance in the face of Noi's unfaithfulness for weakness.

In Dakar, Noi had developed a habit of going off on long walks on a path around the headland above the beach. One day Charles followed her on his bicycle. Waiting on a lonely bench he saw a French officer and watched as his mother embraced the man. He picked up a handful of gravel and tossed it at the couple. 'You dirty whore!' he screamed, as he pedalled off.

That night, when the rest of the family were asleep, Charles went to the refrigerator and emptied its contents into a knapsack. He tiptoed into his parents' bedroom, took money from his mother's purse, and left a note on the kitchen table. 'I cannot believe my father is really dead. I'm going to Vietnam.' For a few kilometres he walked along the moonlit road towards the town before curling up to sleep in a field. In the morning he was awakened by the blazing sun. After a few bites of cold chicken he continued his journey. Reaching the docks of the crowded port, he discovered that a ship was sailing for Marseilles the next day. From Marseilles, he knew, boats left every day for Saigon. Overjoyed, he stared for hours at the huge vessel which symbolized all his dreams of returning home. The next day he would slip on board with the rest of the passengers.

He spent the rest of the afternoon at his favourite beach where he made a fork from a stick and some rusty nails and caught crabs. That night under the stars, cooking the crabs over a fire in a tin can, he imagined he was already in Saigon with his father. He would have his own car. Hotchand would dress him in suits and take him to the casinos. His father would love him even more because he had refused, all these years, to believe he was dead.

In the morning after a swim, he went back to the dock. He walked towards the gateway and noticed two turbaned Senegalese policemen checking each young passenger against a photograph. Jacques had reported him missing. The police were after him. Hopelessly, he returned to his beach where he spent the next three days living off crabs and sea urchins. 'I'll build a raft,' he said to himself, 'and float back to Saigon.' He

began to collect driftwood but soon gave up. Depressed and rebellious, he walked back to town still determined not to go back to his parents. As he was sitting on the pavement in the twilight, he heard footsteps behind him.

'Come on, let's go home,' Jacques said, smiling and taking his stepson by the hand.

'No. I don't want to. My home is in Vietnam!'

'Come on, Charles. Do you think we don't love you? We love you like all the others.'

Ashamed, the fifteen-year-old returned to the barracks. A few days later Jacques found Charles a job as assistant chef in a restaurant. He was pleased, even though he knew the owner was one of his mother's lovers, because it meant he would be out of the house all day, earning money he could use to get back to Vietnam. A few weeks later he heard that his stepfather would soon be posted back to France. He walked out of his job the same day. How could he work when he was so happy? He passed the time at the beach spearfishing. When his parents packed, they were surprised to find Charles in a good mood, dutifully helping everyone lock up the trunks.

Back in France, Jacques Roussel tried again to further his stepson's education. Since he was worried by Charles's influence on the rest of the family, he decided to send Charles to boarding school. At fifteen, Charles was still wetting his bed and after several schools declined to enrol him, he was sent to an agricultural college at Miramars, 190 kilometres from Marseilles.

This time Charles made friends easily with his French schoolmates, who were awed by his worldliness and his tales of his adventures in Senegal. For a while he applied himself to his studies with the aid of a sympathetic teacher who was convinced, as he assured Noi, that his pupil had 'a unique form of intelligence'. The teacher was sympathetic to the boy's story of losing both his country and his father and wrote to Jacques Roussel requesting Hotchand Sobhraj's address so that Charles could begin a correspondence to 'heal the dislocations of his past'.

As Noi and Jacques continued to pretend to Charles, with an increasingly transparent lack of conviction, that his father was either dead or had disappeared, the well-meaning

teacher was requested not to intervene in family affairs.

On Charles's sixteenth birthday, Jacques received a letter from the headmaster informing him that his stepson had broken out in a wild burst of unruliness, disrupting classes and smashing school property. 'The most likely cause of this rash of pranks,' the headmaster wrote, 'is the arrival of puberty, always a difficult time.' A few weeks later the Roussels received a telegram saying that Charles had run away.

Jacques left his modest cubicle in Paris where he served as an administrator in the army and rushed to Marseilles. He found Charles in the back-yard of a former neighbour's house.

'Everyone has lied to me,' he scowled. 'You say Hotchand is dead, but I don't believe you. I want to go and find him.'

'It was for your own good, my son,' Jacques said quietly. He had never shouted at his children and he was saddened now, convinced that it had been a mistake to lie to the boy about Hotchand. 'Your mother didn't want you to depend on him. He has two families now, six children in Poona with Geeta and three more in Saigon with Chu. Remember your nurse? He married her. So you see, his time is taken up with them.'

'So now you tell me that instead of being dead he has nine children.' Charles smiled bitterly. 'Well, it makes no difference. I still want to go back to Saigon.'

Jacques found Charles a position as a kitchen hand at La Coupole, a restaurant in Paris. At first he was popular with the staff and reported punctually for work. In July 1960, as Jacques began gathering the rest of the family from their various schools for a holiday at their summer cottage in Marseilles, he was told that Charles had, once again, disappeared. Unable to find him anywhere in Paris, the Roussels proceeded to the Villa where neighbours told them that Charles had arrived a few days before and had borrowed thirty francs. He had asked for the key to the cottage, taken tinned food from the cupboard and vanished.

One of Charles's young friends, Michel, was also missing from home. The radio broadcast an emergency bulletin, and a local newspaper published a missing persons report. Jacques contacted the Messagerie Maritime shipping line and was told that no boats had recently sailed for Saigon. This made

Charles's disappearance even more mysterious. Noi, Jacques, and the six other children began their summer holiday at their Villa La Roche in a mood of nervous expectancy, waiting for news of Charles.

'Do you want to have an adventure?' he had asked his fourteen-year-old companion Michel, when he had met him in the local park after running away from La Coupole. Charles convinced him that an exciting time awaited them both in Saigon. They took a bus to the docks of Marseilles where they studied the departure lists of ships bound for Vietnam. In two days the *Labordonnais* was sailing to Djibouti, a port in Northeast Africa on the Red Sea, part of French Somaliland. Ten days later another ship would dock at Djibouti bound for Saigon. Charles and Michel climbed the tall wire fence surrounding the dock and dodged swiftly between the maze of crates until they saw the *Labordonnais* standing huge and splendid against the night sky.

'Oh, Michel, isn't she beautiful!?' cried Charles, putting his arm around the boy's shoulder. 'She's going to take us to another world.'

The boys clambered up a stay rope and hid in a lifeboat. The next day as sailors swabbed the decks, the boys delved into the emergency rations of milk and salt beef which they warmed over matches. At dawn the engines rumbled to life and Charles peered through the canvas to see the cliffs of Marseilles recede in the distance.

'Stay here,' he said to his shivering friend. 'I'll check things out.'

Charles slipped from the lifeboat, dusted his suit, straightened his tie, and, taking a comb from his back pocket, smoothed his short black hair. Sauntering to the bar, he ordered a Coke. He had soon made friends with a group of teenagers who, like himself, sat giggling at the sedate foxtrot in progress on the dance floor. 'Let's go and play shuffleboard in the gamesroom,' he suggested.

Charles spent the night in a deck chair. In the morning he found the first class dining room where he sat down at a table and nervously reached for a croissant. The tall African waiter leaned over his shoulder and said politely, 'Good morning, sir. Tea or coffee?'

'Coffee, thank you,' Charles said, scanning the breakfast menu ravenously and buttering his croissant while trying to appear at ease. The waiter filled the cup and asked for his order. When he had left, Charles leaned back, smiling. The tinkle of china and silver and the modulated conversation of the first class passengers pleased him. He was back in the world where he really belonged, Charles thought, and nobody guessed that he was a stowaway. If you sat at a first class table Charles deduced, you became a first class passenger. All that mattered was the appearance of things -- people were easy to fool. Charles straightened his tie and nodded graciously at the waiter who had arrived with his breakfast.

'Where in hell have you been?' Michel demanded from beneath the tarpaulin when he returned. 'I've been awake all night. I thought you'd been caught.'

Charles told him of his adventures, and Michel demanded to join him. 'No. You're not old enough to carry it off. Do as I say, and everything will be okay.'

He walked away and rejoined his companions of the night before. Over the next few days he maintained the masquerade, showering in economy class and sleeping on different decks every night so as not to be noticed, occasionally returning to the lifeboat with scraps of food for Michel.

When the ship docked at Djibouti, a French possession where no passports were required, the boys walked down the gangway, saluted by two Somali policemen. Charles discovered that there were many Vietnamese businesses in the small garrison town. At a photographic studio run by a family from Saigon, he poured out his story. The sympathetic owner drove Charles and Michel to the beach and promised to return that night with food. The boys swam in the Red Sea and dozed under coconut palms until the proprietor, laden with Vietnamese delicacies, arrived with his wife and four children, all of whom were eager to meet the brave runaways to Saigon.

Inspired by the example of his older companion, Michel wandered into town the next day and confided his story to the proprietor of a restaurant. The Frenchman promptly called the police.

'Where do you come from?' the gruff commissioner asked Charles at the police station.

'Saigon,' Charles said. He decided that if he stuck to his story, the police would believe him in the end.

'Liar!' The policeman slapped him hard across the face, and waved a piece of paper. It was a cable from Marseilles with details of the missing boys. 'That must be someone else,' Charles said, hoping that it was still possible to convince them. Another slap stung his face. He was told he would be sent back to France on the same ship that had brought him to Djibouti, and he realized that the game was up. But he had almost made it, and if it hadn't been for Michel, disobeying his orders, the plan would have worked.

His new Vietnamese friends stood sadly on the dock as Michel and Charles waved from the deck of the *Labordonnais*, now making the return journey to Marseilles. The liner heaved through the Red Sea past the Bab el Mandeb -- the Gate of Sorrow -- and Charles promised himself that next time he would make it to Vietnam.

When Charles saw Jacques and his mother on the dock at Marseilles, he did not return their friendly waves although he smiled at his favourite teacher, who had also come to welcome him home.

'You'll never stop me from running away to my father,' he told Jacques in the taxi to Villa La Roche -- and refused to answer Noi's questions about his recent adventures.

'Would you like me to write to Hotchand and see if he will agree to take you back?' Jacques asked, finally defeated, his haggard face looking older than his forty-two years.

'Of course,' Charles said. 'That's all I've ever wanted.'

'But if he refuses,' Jacques said, 'if he wants you to remain here, will you accept it? Will you go back to college and apply yourself?'

'It's a deal,' Charles said, still ignoring his mother, 'but I want to watch you write the letter, and when you post it, I'm going with you.'

At the end of the summer the family returned to Paris, and Charles found work at another restaurant while he waited for his father to reply. Finally it came, a short, friendly note on stationery emblazoned with the letterhead 'Hotchand Sobhraj -- Textiles. Imports and Exports' and the cable ad-

dress 'Activity Saigon'. His son's future was too complicated a question to be decided by post, Hotchand wrote, but as it happened he would be coming to Paris in January. He would settle the matter when he arrived.

On January 6, the day Hotchand Sobhraj was to arrive in Paris, Charles woke his stepfather at dawn and by 6 a.m., hours early, they were waiting at Orly Airport. It had been seven years since Charles had seen his father, and when the stocky, impeccably dressed Indian walked through the Immigration barrier wheeling a cart loaded with expensive luggage he was almost knocked over by his son's embrace. Charles took charge of the bags with a proprietorial air, and in the taxi on the way back to the Roussel's small flat on the outskirts of the city, Charles besieged his father with questions about Vietnam.

'Can I go back and live with you, Papa? Can I please? I could help you in your business. I learn very fast.'

'What are you doing with yourself here? I must say I've heard some bad reports from your mother,' Hotchand said indulgently, resembling Georges Pompidou as he leaned back smiling expansively and lighting a cigarette.

'I'm the chief under-assistant to the chef at La Saladière. That means I peel potatoes, chop onions... that sort of thing.' The smile left the Indian's face.

'A son of mine? In the kitchen? That's no good.'

'He's lucky to have a job,' Jacques said mildly. 'His school record is not the best.'

'It's not appropriate for the son of a Sindhi to work in such a capacity. It is not done.'

'It's not, I know, Papa. I hate it. But what can I do? Unless you take me back to the country that I love, where I belong.'

'Maybe it could be arranged, but I expect hard work and obedience. You'd start at the bottom of the ladder ...'

'And very soon I'll get to the top. Just give me one chance, and I'll prove myself.'

Jacques Roussel kept a distance during the reunion of Charles's parents. Noi agreed that Charles should go back to Saigon with his father and learn the family business.

'What good can I do for him, with six others to raise and no money?' she asked her former lover. 'It's about time you did something, with all your shops and your servants and your

cars. We had a car once, a new Renault Dauphine, but we had to sell it to pay for some naughtiness of Charles's.'

'I'll go to the ministry to make arrangements to get him a passport,' Jacques said, heading off the impending argument.

'Okay, Jacques, it's agreed. You fix up his passport, and I'll take him back when I leave at the end of the month,' said the elder Sobhraj.

Hotchand Sobhraj booked into the luxurious Georges V Hotel, and Charles, who had stopped going to work at the restaurant in accordance with Hotchand's wishes, spent all his time with him, happily discussing the journey he had been dreaming of making since, at the age of nine, he had been taken from Vietnam. But by the time Hotchand's visit had come to an end, the passport had not been issued. The morning Hotchand was to catch his plane they had breakfast together in the cedar and gilt dining room of the Georges V Hotel. Charles was morose.

'Come on, it makes no difference. I'll send you a ticket and you can come as soon as the documents are ready.'

'How do I know you will really send the ticket?' Charles said darkly.

'Don't talk with your mouth full. The way your mother has raised you is shocking.'

Charles swallowed and said angrily, 'I'm used to these promises. When Noi left me in boarding school she said, "Just for a little while, I'll soon be back to get you." She took a year to come back. Always people promise they will do this or that. Nothing ever happens. No one cares about me. You won't send the ticket.'

'Your mother is a very flighty woman. More a woman than a mother. I am a businessman. And how does business work? On trust. My word is law. You will learn that, Charles.' Hotchand glanced at his gold watch. 'Now I must leave; I'll be seeing you very soon. In the meantime, be good. Don't give any trouble. You promise?'

'I promise, Papa.'

As his father's limousine disappeared into the traffic Charles watched with his hands thrust into the pockets of his coat, wondering if his chance had passed him by again.

After his father left Paris, Charles spent his days at home, leaving his room only when he heard the postman. All he lived for was the day his passport and ticket would arrive, and it was as though, as his mother said sarcastically, he had already left the family. The atmosphere in the crowded flat was tense, reflecting their resentment at Charles's impatience to leave them.

He passed his time reading magazines and books, and indulging in fantasies about Saigon. With his European experience he would soon rise to the top in the business. Charles imagined his own car, a house, a Vietnamese wife. He hoped that his humiliating experiences in France would be forgotten. Perhaps he would join the army and fight in the jungles. This seemed a romantic idea, and he could see himself driving a tank. There was a knock on the door and Jacques entered.

'Charles, I have a surprise for you.' He handed him a manila envelope.

Inside was his new French passport — the thin blue book that gave him his freedom to travel. He opened it and looked at his name, neatly lettered, and his photograph on the first page.

'The visa for Vietnam?'

'It's there,' Jacques said smiling. 'But they only give you six months. Who knows, by then you might want to come back to France.'

'No, I won't. My father can extend the visa.' He returned to his examination of the passport, and before dinner that night he showed it proudly to the other children.

This put him in a good mood for days, but then the old doubts began gnawing. Had his father forgotten him? Hotchand had returned to Saigon a month ago and the ticket had still not arrived.

'I'll pay my own passage,' he thought, 'but I need money. Where can I get it? Go back to work? But, no, that takes too long. My mother? Impossible. She cares only for gambling and wouldn't help. I could steal. But how to begin?' He lay on the bed trying to think of a plan. He rushed down to the letterbox. There was still no ticket. Flicking through the evening newspaper, he read a report about housewives being robbed at home in the daytime. He felt his heart thumping.

Charles dropped the gun, jumped on her, and put his hands over her mouth. 'Shut up! Don't shout! I won't hurt you.'

'Oh God,' she said, 'be careful, I'm pregnant.'

Charles felt ashamed and wanted to go, but he heard himself saying, 'I won't harm you, Madame. Just give me your money.' He followed her into the kitchen, half planning to ask her forgiveness and disappear.

The woman picked up her handbag from the kitchen table and gave it to Charles. 'It's in the purse,' she said. He stuffed the notes into the pocket of his jacket.

'I'm sorry, but I must tie you up.'

'Please, can you do it in the bedroom? My baby's there.'

'Of course,' he said, following her. 'I'm only doing this to give myself time to escape,' he apologized.

Without a word the woman sat down on a chair near the crib as Charles took two towels from the bathroom and tied her hands and feet to a chair. 'Please don't gag me,' she said.

'All right, but you must promise to give me thirty minutes before you shout for help.'

'Yes, I promise.'

Charles left and took the train back home. Disappointed with the seventy francs, he put the gun back in its hiding place and fell asleep until Jacques woke him for dinner.

Two days later Charles repeated the crime, this time throwing his coat over the young housewife when she screamed. Her six-year-old son ran out of the flat to the landing, crying, and Charles fled downstairs to the basement. There was a long corridor with a series of gates on each side. Charles squeezed himself into one of the storage rooms and lay on a heap of coal behind two crates of wine. It was twenty minutes before he heard the voices.

'Look! A pair of feet. Can't you see? Let's get him.' Charles wanted to faint. In a few seconds he was blinking into the glare of a flashlight. A fist hit his face. He fell down and was kicked in the stomach. Two gendarmes pushed through the crowd and hurried him upstairs where more tenants rushed towards him, trying to attack him. Police formed a cordon and dragged him to the van.

At the Prefecture, the police took down his name and address and put him in a cell. Charles sat on the bunk, sobbing. Later he was taken into an office where he saw

Jacques and his mother and the woman he had just tried to rob. He stared at the floor and said nothing.

'What have you done?' Noi asked bitterly. 'Why have you done this?'

Charles still could not speak.

'Don't you think you should beg this lady to forgive you?' she said.

Jacques looked dazed, with a sad faraway expression in his eyes, lost for words. Charles made an impassioned plea to the woman and asked her forgiveness.

She smiled and said to the station sergeant, 'I withdraw my complaint.'

The police drove the Roussel family home with Charles staring at the floor in silence and Jacques trying to stop Noi's angry denunciations.

'Go to your room and sleep, Charles. You look tired,' Jacques said. 'We'll talk about it later.'

In the morning Jacques took his stepson with him on the Métro. 'I understand that you do not wish to accept me as your father, Charles,' he said to the boy, 'and I don't wish to hold you back from going to Vietnam. Be patient. Hotchand will send the ticket. You must try to realize from this experience what a dreadful mistake you have made. Until the ticket arrives, I must ask you to come with me to the office every day.'

Two days later a call came from the police station asking Jacques to bring his son in for further questioning.

'Have you done anything else, Charles?'

'No, nothing,' he answered.

Three hours later he was taken before the judge of the Juvenile Court and arrested for the offence committed against the woman in the first flat he had entered.

'Why, Charles, oh, why have you done this? If you wanted to go so badly, I would have paid for the ticket.' Jacques was almost weeping.

Charles was taken into a cell and ordered to strip naked. His clothes and his body were closely searched. When he was dressed, he was put in a cell with two other prisoners whom he ignored. Curling up on a bunk he faced the wall and drifted off to sleep. All the next morning he remained there, trying not to wake up.

When Jacques and Noi came to see him that afternoon, Charles refused to talk to them, or even look up. Noi wept, and Jacques, grim and depressed, sat in silence with his arm around her shoulder. Thoughts spun in Charles's head. Is this really happening? Is it possible that I'm in jail? -- he said to himself in despair -- that I robbed a woman? Back again in the cell he curled up on the bunk and tried to fall asleep and convince himself that the situation was just a dream. Two days later Noi returned alone to visit him.

'Where's Jacques?' he asked. 'Where's my father?' breaking his prohibition against using this word for Jacques.

'He's in the hospital with a nervous breakdown,' she replied. 'He doesn't recognize me any more. That's what you have done. Are you pleased?'

Charles rushed from the visitors' room back to the cell, tears streaming down his face. He sat on his bed crying, indifferent to the jeers of his two cellmates. When Noi returned to the juvenile jail two days later, she told her son that Jacques Roussel's condition had worsened.

'He's completely insane, now,' she said. 'He'll be in the hospital for the rest of his life.'

'Oh, God, Mother, get me out of here. It's my fault. I'll never be bad again. Only let me see him.' He had realized at last that Jacques cared for him, and he hated himself for what he had done.

A few days later Charles was called before the examining magistrate. His mother was in court and so was his first victim, the pregnant woman.

'Mother, I want to apologize to the woman immediately,' he said and asked the policeman to let him talk to her.

The woman looked at him, surprised. Charles said nothing. His face swelled up with tears again, and he could find no way to put his remorse into words. She looked at him encouragingly.

'Please forgive me,' he blurted out, 'I don't deserve it, but I beg your forgiveness.'

'You must have hurt your parents very much,' she said, her eyes softening. 'You must promise never to do such things again.'

Noi introduced herself to the young couple, and they talked until the case was called. The woman told the court that she

wished to withdraw her complaint. Her request was accepted, but the magistrate explained that Charles would have to appear before a special children's court in a few days. Then Charles was sentenced to six months' imprisonment, suspended under the First Offender's Act.

His mother took him home on the bus, weeping quietly. All the way back to the flat neither of them spoke, until they were inside and Charles's brothers and sisters were hugging him.

'Don't think you weren't punished,' Noi said. 'While you were in jail the police came and took away your passport.'

'Why? Because of ... what happened?'

'No. They said it was a mistake that you got it. They said that you aren't a French citizen.'

Charles had been born illegitimate, and although Jacques Roussel had begun adoption procedures, the application had lapsed and the question of his nationality had never been resolved.

'But I have to go to Saigon ...' he said, and his face was stricken with panic.

'Jacques has arranged for you to get a *laissez passer*, instead of a passport. It's for one journey only. It was the last thing Jacques did before he fell ill.'

The following day Charles went to visit Jacques in the military psychiatric hospital. His stepfather looked old and very small in the white bed. He smiled weakly as Charles came into the room.

'Oh, Papa, forgive me,' he said as Jacques embraced him.

'The most important thing is that you are out of prison.'

'And there's more good news. Guess what arrived in the post this morning -- my ticket to Saigon!'

'I'm glad for you, boy. I hope Vietnam is all that you dream it is. For me it was a nightmare.' Jacques's eyes closed and he seemed to have gone to sleep. Charles tiptoed out, relieved at the brevity of the visit.

Charles's *laissez passer* was stamped with a temporary visa to South Vietnam, and under the heading 'Nationality' the issuing official had written the words: 'To be determined'.

On a crisp and clear day in March 1961, the gaily coloured streamers snapped and blew in the breeze as Charles waved

goodbye to his mother, who was crying, and to his old teacher from Miramars, who had unexpectedly turned up to see him off. The now familiar sight of the cliffs of Marseilles filled him with euphoria. This time, nothing could go wrong. His room in the house of Hotchand Sobhraj was waiting for him.

Three weeks later the passenger liner docked by the banks of the Saigon River and Charles saw his father and three of his daughters, Shibani, Madhu and Rajni, waving their bright scarves on the wharf.

'You'll find so many things changed, here, now,' his father said, beaming as Charles was bundled into the waiting taxi, 'and the first thing you must learn is how to speak English.'

Charles had remembered Saigon as a city of bicycles — now the streets buzzed with Vespas and Lambrettas. Crew-cut men in Hawaiian shirts drove Chevrolets bearing red, white, and blue stickers on their bumpers depicting an American-Vietnamese handshake.

'The Yanks, burning their dollars,' Hotchand explained as he waved to an American officer in a passing jeep. 'They pick up the tab for the government and put a sticker on every gift they give us, so you'll see a lot of them. They've equipped the army, and the civil guard ... even the peasants in the fields.'

Hotchand Sobhraj was an impressive figure. He was handsome, and had a reassuring air of prosperity that Charles had always associated with him. He enjoyed the way so many people waved and nodded to him as they drove through the city, past the tanks and barbed wire barricades.

The wide, tree-lined boulevard which Charles remembered as Rue Catinat was now called Tu Do Street, and with its pavement cafés and flowerstalls it still looked French, although the graffiti on the white concrete walls of all the new buildings were now scrawled in English: *Support Only President Diem ... Don't Give Information to the Vietcong*. Twice, Hotchand's car was stopped and searched by police.

The car turned off Tu Do Street into Ngo Duc Ke and pulled up at number 80. It was a two-storey cement building, with the drapery shop downstairs and the six-room flat on the second floor. The family's four servants lined up to welcome him, and Chu, who had been his nursemaid and was now his father's wife, greeted him coolly. Her fingers glittered with gems.

Hotchand's decision to marry the Vietnamese servant when she became pregnant had outraged the Indian community in Saigon. The conventional practice was to send the woman away with a small pension. Instead, as mother of his three daughters and now pregnant with a fourth child which Hotchand hoped would be a boy, she was mistress of the comfortable flat.

Charles was given his own room, and his three half-sisters giggled and showed him round the flat. Behind the shop-front was a big garden shaded by plane trees, and in the living room, in pride of place was a record player and a collection of records. Although luxury in Saigon was nothing by European standards Charles was delighted by his new status as the son of an important and wealthy merchant.

Hotchand ran his household as efficiently as he ran his business. French, Indian, and Vietnamese food was served on consecutive nights, and at dawn every morning a servant rang a bell to wake the family.

For the first two weeks after his arrival, Charles got up eagerly, and dressed in the new clothes his father had given him. It was Charles who was downstairs first to open the shop at 7.30 a.m. Business began early to avoid the midday heat and the downpours of the rainy season. Rattling his keys with self-importance, giving orders to the staff and serving customers with the charm of a born salesman, he was absorbed briefly by the novelty of his new life and imagined the day the sign-painter would come to change the title above the door to Hotchand Sobhraj and Son.

In the warm evenings he left the shop and strolled down Tu Do Street to the American Vietnamese Friendship Association School where he was enrolled in English classes and a commercial business course. Typing and shorthand failed to hold his attention for long. Instead he had discovered karate.

The Vietnamese passion for karate was a legacy of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War. In the cavernous hall hung with prayer flags, incense burners, and paintings of Buddha and Confucius, among the hundreds of men and boys in traditional white pyjamas, Charles felt he had rediscovered his Asian identity as he practised the graceful movements of the ancient martial art. The philosophy of self-discipline and emotional restraint appealed to him, but

more important was the new sense of physical power as his body became lithe and strong, and he developed new and lethal skills.

The daily routine of the shop soon began to bore Charles. In a city that lived under the constant threat of bombs and whose whole economy depended on shady deals, punctuality and accounting ledgers seemed irrelevant. He began skipping classes and missing work and instead met his friends in the cafés of Tu Do Street to discuss the business deals he dreamed up. He discovered gambling and girls, both passions which required more money than his father gave him. His first scheme was a smuggling operation. A hairdresser who worked on the ocean liners that berthed in the Saigon River agreed to provide him with duty-free perfume and cigarettes. There was a black market that controlled the retail life of the city and it would buy whatever Charles could supply. In order to start his 'business' Charles stole from his father.

Their conflict began over Hotchand's car. Charles would take it out without his father's permission on jaunts with girls to Cap St Jacques. One night he was brought home in an ambulance, sulky and covered with scratches, after having overturned the car on a mountain road. He hadn't even been drunk. Hotchand would have understood better if he had been, but Charles despised the use of alcohol and drugs. Gambling had become his passion. Hotchand had begun to notice that valuables were missing from the shop and the house, and he started to regret the boy's reappearance in his life.

When Charles's visa expired he was called up before the military board of Saigon. His nationality was still undetermined. He was told that since his mother was Vietnamese and he had been born in Saigon, he had to join the Vietnamese army. Hotchand would have none of it. Charles thought half-heartedly that he wanted to fight for his homeland but he went along with his father's plan to arrange an Indian nationality for him. This would exclude him from the draft. An official explained that to be naturalized Indian, Charles would have to live in India for at least a year, learn a dialect, and acquire an understanding of Indian culture.

Three weeks after putting his son on the boat to Bombay, Hotchand Sobhraj came home to find Charles at the table

wolfing down beef and noodles. He looked up, and without swallowing, launched into an angry diatribe.

'Why did you send me there? I was hungry all the time. They are vegetarians. I couldn't speak the language and I hate India.'

'How did you get back here?' asked his father.

'I stowed away, and climbed over a fence here when it got dark,' he said, proud of his resourcefulness. Although he had disobeyed his father, Charles had been sure that Hotchand would be happy to see him back again. But his father was furious.

'You could be arrested as a spy. I could get thrown out of the country if someone reports this. Come with me. I'm taking you straight to the immigration police. You're going back to Bombay on the next boat.'

After being locked up in the immigration compound, Charles was bidden farewell a second time. A few days later, he arrived in Bombay, from where he travelled to Poona and the modest house in which Hotchand's relatives lived. It made Jacques Roussel's standard of living seem opulent.

'I've come all this way to live like a peasant,' he shouted at his hostess as she served him another dinner of lentils. She didn't understand his French and Charles couldn't speak Hindi. It was a disaster for the Indian family, having this sullen and arrogant adolescent in their placid household. For a few days Charles moped on his rope bed, dreaming of fast cars and the fun his friends were having in the Hollywood Milkbar in Tu Do Street. He then ran away to Bombay.

Charles sat on the steps that ran down to the sea in front of the Victoria Gate. Ferries kept coming and going, disgorging European tourists. Charles thought how much he loathed Indians. He didn't want to be associated with a people who seemed to him servile. Charles was proud and ambitious and the only thing he liked about Bombay was the Taj Mahal Hotel, that splendid symbol of wealth and power. He took his notebook and pencil from his pocket, and stretching out on the grass in the nearby park, wrote a letter to Noi.

My Dear Mama,

In one month I have eaten almost nothing and in two or three weeks Geeta will drive me out. What will I do? I know nobody in India and I have not a cent in my pocket. Will I live on the street and die of hunger? One more time, my dear Mama, I ask you to pity and help me. Please, Mama, borrow 900 francs for me so I can return to France. I swear I will work hard to repay it.

I speak English very well and will easily find a job in a great hotel or restaurant and get 250 or 300 francs a month. Within six or seven months I will be able to give you back those 900 francs.

I beg you, Mama, send me the money as soon as possible. I will kiss you very hard as well as Papa. Your son who loves you and puts faith in you — Charles.

Noi did not reply.

When Charles turned up at his father's house a second time, Hotchand Sobhraj slapped him across the face.

'Why do you come back? Do you think I want you here? To steal my money, crash my car, to set a shocking example to my children? You had your chance. Now go back to India. Learn the ways of our forefathers and stop thinking you're too good for them. Do you want to stay here and get killed or maimed for a lost cause?'

'Yes! That's what I want. To fight. To do something. To know that I belong somewhere!'

Their shouting had awakened the baby. Chu had given birth to a son. Despite his brave words, Charles realized that he couldn't stay in Vietnam. He passed the next few days in a state of misery as his father again made arrangements for his departure.

When Hotchand saw him off at the dock his parting words were firm: 'You're not wanted here. Remember that.'

Charles stayed up on deck, watching the dusk fall and the coast of Vietnam recede. The thought of the hidebound household in Poona, with its traditional Indian values, made him shudder. He was French, after all. How could his father expect him to sleep on a straw pallet on a mud floor in a house without plumbing?

'Where does the ship go after Bombay?' he asked a sailor.

'We go on to Marseilles. Then we come back.'

He would refuse to leave the boat in Bombay, he decided. When he arrived in France his mother would be forced to pay for his passage. She would have no other choice.

Benard sat at his desk, going through the documents that Noi had given him. Charles's life had been so complicated and unhappy. Benard wondered if the boy had any chance at all. Now he understood the story, he was convinced that Charles's statelessness had contributed to his feeling of dislocation and his criminal record.

When, as an eighteen-year-old, he had arrived back in Marseilles after his disastrous trip to Saigon, French immigration authorities had given him only a temporary visitor's permit and refused him permission to work. This led to a pattern of petty crime, mainly car stealing, for which he was punished with ever-increasing jail terms (including four months of the sentence suspended by the juvenile court for his boyhood housebreaking) and a deportation order.

After Charles's current jail term he was supposed to be deported from France. But to what country? India? Vietnam? The problems would only repeat themselves. Benard got up and walked out into the night air, on his way to the library, where he had already spent months poring over history books and legal records relating to France and Cochin China.

He thought that there must be a solution to the problem, and since current legal opinion was ambiguous, he had been searching for forgotten laws that might still have effect. At the end of the evening he found it. A law of 1898, regarding France's colony, Cochin China, which proclaimed that people born in Saigon at that time automatically had the right of French citizenship.

It was Saturday, April 6, 1968, and Charles was twenty-four.

'Happy birthday!' Benard said, handing him a large brown paper package. 'See if they fit. The guard won't mind if you try them on.'

'Thanks, Alain, I'm so happy today. I don't give a damn that they've put me back in solitary. It's funny, they expect

me to work. Work? I refuse to work! I told them, "How can I work with only eleven more days to freedom!"'

'I've never seen you look so healthy,' Benard said.

'I sleep well, eat well, do yoga, and say my prayers. Every day that passes fills me with joy. Did you bring a suit?'

'No. But Hotchand has sent you some. They should be here by the time you're free.'

When Benard had first written to Charles's father he had replied with a frankly despairing account of his son's visit to Saigon. The letter had ended, 'Anyway, when he left, I forgot him for ever.' In the ensuing eighteen months, the father's attitude softened and he sent a measuring chart to Charles so that he could make him some suits. Hotchand offered to have his son back and to make him manager of a branch store. He wrote to Benard, 'If he behaves nicely, some day he will be rich.' Noi had also kept in touch. 'Thank you very much for all the things you do for my son Charles,' she wrote to Benard soon after their first meeting. 'Tell him I've forgotten the past, and I think of him always.'

Charles had barely stopped talking since Benard arrived. 'It's been five years now, Alain, five years of jail since I was eighteen. What a waste! And now, thanks to you, it won't happen again. It will never happen. It can't. I feel so different. I'm a new man, Alain. When I look back at my past, it fills me with horror. Didn't you feel the same?'

'Not for what you did, Charles, more for what was done to you.'

'It was the day you gave me a country. That's when everything changed. You came through that door and handed me a future.' It was three weeks earlier that Benard had finally secured Charles's passport.

'I didn't give you a nationality, Charles. You were legally entitled to it.'

'But before you, nobody cared,' he said, buttoning up his new white shirt. He stood before Benard in his new outfit. 'So, how do I look?'

'Like a business executive on his way up to the top,' Benard said, impressed by Charles's transformation.

Even in his prison clothes Charles had looked stylish. He was always meticulous, Benard had noticed, about his personal appearance. Now, in the black trousers, white shirt, and

sports jacket Benard had given him, he was transformed into a young man that any personnel manager would hire on the spot. He glowed with an air of purpose, of intensity, and radiated a commanding presence as he stood near the window.

'How about the shoes, do they fit?' asked Benard. A week before he had received some sketches from Charles with an urgent note, 'I don't know my foot size. Here's an outline. Don't get pointed toes.'

'Like they were handmade,' Charles replied. 'Have you heard from Sofami yet?'

'Yes. They agreed to take you. You start two weeks after you're out, and in three months they'll give you a car.' At Benard's instigation a fire equipment company had agreed to take Charles on its staff as a salesman of fire extinguishers.

'Alain. A country, a job, even your flat ...'

'Only until you find one of your own, Charles.'

'Without you, what would I have?' Finished with preening himself, Charles walked to the table and sat down opposite Benard. 'I want you to know that you can trust me, Alain. I know I've been impulsive in the past, but not any more. Even before I met you I realized that inside of me were two natures.'

Benard was surprised. He had already concluded that Charles had two contradictory natures, but he had not expected the boy to have reached the same level of frankness about himself.

'Two natures at war with each other. On one side is my logic and intelligence, even my spirituality. And on the other, which is my weaker side, are my emotions. And it is this side which became deformed and made me fixated on my father. It was an obsession that drove me back to Vietnam and to disaster. And so when I ended up in jail, I decided to kill this side of myself. That's why I went on hunger strikes, Alain. And the first few days were torture. I wanted to give up. "This is crazy," I said to myself. "It's too hard. Forget it." But I answered myself. "No, don't give up! Resist! Suffer! And then you can anchor this suffering inside yourself."' Charles slapped himself in the stomach with his fist. 'So if ever my feelings get swept away again and become deformed, I have this inner core I can cling to, this rock. That's how I

could last forty-five days without food.'

'But if you eliminate your feelings, Charles, you'll turn into a monster.'

'It's only control I want, Alain. As for feelings, I still have them.' He looked at Benard significantly. 'They were dormant for a while, but then one day you came into this room and told me that you had seen Noi. You said she had given you all the papers relating to me and told you, "Here is my son. Take him. I give him to you." Well, then a strange sensation came into my heart.' Benard fidgeted in his chair. 'And then the day came when you showed me my citizenship papers. It was the day you gave me a fatherland.' (Charles had been studying German, too.) 'All this you did for me and more, much more. And then one Saturday you didn't come. All day I waited in the cell, expecting them to call my name. It got dark, and still I waited. Where were you? Why weren't you here? And when at last I realized you wouldn't come, the strange sensation flowed into my heart again, stronger than before. It took me back to my childhood. I smelled the soup stalls near the river in Saigon. What was it? I analysed this feeling. Suddenly I remembered what it was. It was the emptiness in my heart when Noi took me away from Hotchand.' He was pacing up and down the cell, like a young beast, eager to be free, Benard thought, remembering a phrase Charles had used in one of his letters.

'It was a yearning, an ache, my emotions for Hotchand *before* they became obsessive. And then I laughed. I laughed, and then I wept. I had gone all around the world searching for my father until I landed in Poissy Jail and then here, deep in the dungeons, my father comes to me, my true father.'

Benard was deeply moved by Charles's speech although he fought against this feeling. Since his first meeting with the prisoner he had gone regularly to an analyst. The Jail doctor at Poissy had said it would give him the tools to deal with Charles. His analyst told him to remain detached from the case, not to involve too many emotions.

In theory he agreed, but there was something about the boy that drew him in like a black hole. He was caught up in the ebbs and flows of Charles's inner disorder.

'Do you realize, Alain? You have become my father.'

A guard pushed open the door.

'Do you need anything else before the seventeenth?' Benard asked.

'Just a belt, the trousers are a bit loose. Alain ... I'm still young aren't I? At twenty-four? There's a chance for me, isn't there?'

'Your future is in your own hands' now, Charles. I'd say you have a few good years ahead of you. More than a few.'

'I've studied my lifeline, you know. I'm going to die a very old man.'

At dawn, eleven days later, Alain Benard drove through the forest of St Germain en Laye to Poissy Jail. He wanted to be waiting for Charles as he came through the gate. At home, the boy's room was ready, and the day before the suits had arrived from his father in Saigon.

As he turned the corner out of the forest, he saw a small figure sitting on a suitcase under the streetlamp in front of the tall iron gates. As he pulled up beside him, Charles was grinning broadly.

'They couldn't wait to get rid of me,' he said.

The murmur of pre-dinner conversation rose and fell, and the silver candelabra blazed on the sideboard. Three bottles of burgundy were uncorked with jovial ceremony, and the hostess spooned gazpacho into pink china bowls. Alain Benard, sitting at the woman's right, passed the bowls to the rest of the dinner guests while he discreetly eyed Charles. The boy seemed to be enjoying himself.

Why does Alain's friend keep gawking at me? Chantal asked herself, thankful that the soup had arrived as a distraction. Tonight she was in no mood to cope with male gaucheries, however flattering. That morning her boyfriend, a fellow student at the Sorbonne, had told her that he wanted to end their relationship and Chantal's wide green eyes betrayed the sadness she felt. The chatter around her passed her by but, being a well-brought-up young woman from a respectable family, she was instinctively too diplomatic to let anyone guess. Chantal smiled at Alain, a casual acquaintance, and again she averted her glance from the striking young man sitting near him. The intensity of his furtive glances unnerved her. He was smiling and talking to the people around him, seemingly at ease, but there was something about him that singled him out from the rest of the guests, mostly voluble intellectuals with comfortable pasts.

The host sunk the carving knife into the duck, and his young niece stood next to him ladling the orange sauce. Conversation lulled as the plates were passed along the table and the guests served themselves from dishes of sautéed potatoes, glazed carrots, spinach à la crème, and baby string beans. The men stuffed napkins into their shirt collars as Charles, who attached little importance to food as a result of having been so long at the mercy of institutional cooking, looked on with detached amusement. He glanced again at the beautiful girl at the other end of the table, anxious not to scare her off. Her poise and the arrogant way she held her head drove all other thoughts from his mind.

Benard passed around the bowls of lemon sorbet. He was amused at the way his protégé was trying, without success, to conceal his attraction to the woman.

For the past weeks, culminating in Charles's release from jail yesterday, Benard had shared in the boy's increasing excitement and interest in life. Watching Charles, in his new suit and tie, talking urbanely with other guests, Benard was filled with pride. The boy was going to make it. With his brains and charm, how could he fail?

'Forgive me, Mademoiselle,' the young man said to Chantal. 'You caught me glancing at you a few times. I admit it. I was looking at your hands. Has anyone ever read them?'

The guests had dispersed to the library for coffee. Chantal had chosen a seat by the window where she could see a group of young people, students she thought, being questioned by police under lamplight. She was not surprised that the man had chosen this moment to make his move.

'Do you believe all that?' she asked, extending her thin right hand. While Charles strove to be elegant and light-hearted, he carried his intensity like a sack of coal.

'I can see a journey across two cultures,' he said to her, studying the lines of her right hand, and looking deeply into her big green eyes.

'I was born in Morocco,' she said cheerfully. 'Does that count?'

'Maybe that's it,' he replied, 'although I was looking at the path of the future.'

'Cognac? Cointreau? Calvados?' the host asked, wheeling a cart stacked with bottles of liqueurs. Charles and Chantal waved it on.

'I suppose you swear by this,' she said, 'like people obsessed with astrology.'

'It goes against my love of logic,' he replied, smiling and looking into her eyes. 'Have you read Cheiros? He's completely convincing,' and he proceeded to tell her the stories of the Edwardian palmist's most famous predictions. 'And of Oscar Wilde's hand, he said, without knowing who he was, that he was a king who would send himself into exile! I can't claim the same accuracy,' he continued, looking again at Chantal's hand, 'but your matrimonial line is quite conventional. I see a wedding, a baby ...' His presumption of

intimacy annoyed her. Anyway, his forecast was unrealistic. She was going to live in Spain after she graduated from her Spanish literature course and then return later to Paris to teach. Chantal was relieved when Benard pulled up a chair and joined in the conversation.

'Do you work with Alain?' she asked Charles.

'No. I'm his guest at the moment while I finish my studies.'

'What in?' she asked, lighting a cigarette.

'Law,' he answered, looking shyly at Benard, 'but mostly I travel and do business in different parts of the world.'

Chantal sensed his evasiveness although she was only half listening. She appeared absorbed, but her mind was drifting back to her Russian boyfriend who, she now realized, had been trying to disentangle himself for the past months.

Charles was up early the next morning and dressed in one of his new Saigon suits, tailored to his detailed specifications; single-breasted, high-buttoned, with narrow lapels and tapered trousers. He splashed himself with Benard's Eau Sauvage and lightly oiled his short hair.

'Alain, is it possible for you to advance me a few francs on my future salary?'

Benard agreed. He had guessed the boy was headed for the centre of Paris, although a court order forbade Charles from entering the inner city arrondissement; under French law such exile was a common restriction for ex-prisoners.

From the Métro, Charles joined the crowds walking along the Boulevard St Michel. The tourists sat in cafés watching the girls from behind copies of the *International Herald Tribune*. A man played a flute, and there was laughter in the air as couples strolled arm in arm toward the Luxembourg Gardens. It was the free and easy atmosphere of a Parisian spring and for a moment Charles felt part of it. With his whole life ahead of him and now that he was safely anchored to the community as a citizen of France, he was ready to seek his fortune — preferably an enormous one — to make up for the five years of captivity.

He sat in a café in the Place de la Sorbonne from where he could watch the arched stone gates of the university. The most commonplace sights enthralled him, and he savoured

the passing hours — he was free. Then, Charles saw her. In a short tartan skirt and a silk blouse with a satchel slung over her shoulder, Chantal was walking towards him, caught in the stream of the lunchtime crowds.

'Hello,' he said, rushing up to her, trying to look casual. 'I've been doing some research in the library. What a lucky coincidence! How about lunch?'

'Why not?' she smiled.

For the next few weeks he pursued her relentlessly, driving her to her classes in Benard's Triumph Herald, surprising her with expensive gifts, narrating selected episodes from his past, being attentive, serious and devoted.

In May, without warning, the students of Paris stormed the streets. They burned cars, built barricades, and draped red flags over the statues of Victor Hugo and Louis Pasteur. 'It is forbidden to forbid,' proclaimed the graffiti. 'We are inventing a new original world.' The Sorbonne was occupied, a lecture hall renamed 'Che Guevara', and a jazz band played day and night in the courtyard. The riotous mood closed factories and schools, and all of France shut down for a 24-hour general strike. In support of the students, half a million people, men, women, and children, marched forty abreast from the Place de la République through the Latin Quarter to the Place Denfert Rochereau chanting, 'De Gaulle — Assassin!' A sign hung from the Sorbonne: 'Ten days of happiness already'. In the middle of May, Charles and Chantal wove their dreamy way through the disarray of barricades to the blossoming cherry trees on the banks of the Seine. Oblivious to the crackle of tear gas and the echoing chants of 'Freedom now!' Charles asked Chantal to marry him.

The summer season was over. The summer people had left Deauville for the warmth of Cannes and Monte Carlo. In the lavish, half empty casino formal attire was no longer required and the rhumba orchestra had been scaled down to a dance combo. Its syrupy melody floated into the gaming room where a small crowd was watching Charles win at chemin de fer. In three hours his handful of chips had become a cluster of tall towers. Chantal sat near him in a blue silk dress, the diamond necklace her mother had given her glittering in the

light from the chandeliers. Drinking Perrier, she managed to project a serenity which she did not feel.

Chantal was in love. She watched Charles commanding the cards with the cool poise of a professional. Wheezing old men drinking brandy and smoking cigars surrounded him, looking on with awe. She forgot her fears. Win or lose, what did it matter? This was the man she was going to spend the rest of her life with. She loved everything about him. His strangely sculptured face, with the high cheekbones and thick sensuous lips, so unique and compelling that she never wanted to take her eyes from it. He caught her stare, and, as always, his deep, black eyes engulfed her with intimacy. He smiled and lightly touched her.

The croupier pushed another mound of chips towards Charles, and Chantal could stand the tension no longer. She walked out onto the terrace, glancing impatiently at her watch. Why didn't he quit? Surely he had already won enough. They needn't wait to get married if he stopped playing now. Perhaps they could even afford a car. Then he would stop borrowing cars from his friends. She didn't know why they let him use them. Charles didn't have a licence. Lately, this had worried her. Charles seemed to be doing well at his job, and he would soon be promoted and given a car of his own. She was afraid he would lose this chance if he were caught driving illegally. Chantal realized that the return trip to Paris would be no better than the drive down. The Ford sedan was jammed in second gear, the windscreen wipers were broken and only one headlight functioned.

On an impulse they had come to Deauville after work. It was not to gamble — she had never been to a casino before — but to be alone together. An only child, Chantal still lived at home with her elderly parents at Chatenay Malabry, a town on the outskirts of Paris. Some nights she stayed with Charles in his room at Benard's flat, which led to bitter arguments with her parents. And Benard, too, made her feel uncomfortable.

'Does your father mind you staying here?' Benard asked her one morning as she poured the coffee.

'Yes, Alain, he does,' she had answered, 'but I remind him that I am twenty-one now and soon getting married.'

Benard had smiled a lukewarm smile and disappeared

behind the pages of *Le Monde*. She didn't understand his attitude. He was never rude to her, and yet, he kept her at a distance, avoiding friendship. Was he jealous, she wondered? In any case, she had been glad to get away from his flat.

The grey skies of the resort town did not dampen her joy at the forthcoming wedding. They would go far, she and Charles, with their combined intelligence and beauty. She would do anything for him. At night after her classes, she typed out the lists of prospective customers and ironed his shirts. She enjoyed mothering him and dismissed feminist polemics as immature. Up to a few months ago, her whole life had been given over to 'culture', to art, music, ballet, and poetry. Now she thought of these occupations as adolescent. Real life, a shared adventure with Charles Sobhraj, was to replace them. Chantal's only sadness lay in the coldness with which her father had greeted the engagement. Mr Lemaitre was a conservative civil servant, and he had learned that Charles was a man with a criminal past. 'Given his wretched upbringing,' she insisted, 'it would be surprising if Charles had not got himself in trouble!' She had not pressed her beloved for the details of his past convictions and he didn't like to talk about them.

His mother had been unable to devote much time to his upbringing, that was obvious. When Chantal had met Noi at Villa La Roche, she had admitted as much. 'There were so many others,' Noi kept saying, trying on a new dress, watching herself in the mirror.

'Oh, well,' she sighed, 'whatever trouble he has been in, it won't happen again.' Her love was the antidote to the insecurity which must have sparked his criminal behaviour. In the end, she would even win her father over.

She saw Charles coming towards her, and she knew what had happened. 'Everything?' she asked.

'Everything. More than everything.'

'You talk so much of self-control, Charles. Why didn't you stop?'

'You know. I kept thinking — just a little bit more, and we can own our own house. And then, what about a new car? Of course, I thought, we will have children one day. I want the best schools. Today my luck is running high. My dreams ran away with my logic, I kept playing. But I started to lose. Then

I thought, I'll get it back to what it was, and then, little by little'... he shrugged, looking ashamed, and she loved him all the more.

'Darling,' he said, 'forgive me.'

How could he tell her what he was feeling? That he resented having to work each day for so little. He would never regain the years stolen from him by France. Five lost years! He wanted to win them back! Chantal did not know the extent of his criminal past, so how could she gauge the bitterness he felt? Even to himself, Charles couldn't admit that his gambling was a compulsion.

'Of course I forgive you, my darling. You lost a lot, but remember, you began with little.'

'As a matter of fact, there are some details I must settle with the management before we can go back to Paris. I will need to borrow your necklace.'

'Charles!'

'Darling, I'll pawn it. We can get it back later.'

'It's from my mother, and her mother gave it to her. It's a family heirloom!'

'I know, darling, that's why we will get it back,' he said, caressing her while unclasping the necklace.

That night, as they set off for Paris, it was pouring. Visibility was bad. Charles avoided the Normandy Autoroute and took secondary highways. Near Lisieux they picked up a hitchhiker and when they reached the village of Thiberville, Charles ignored the speed limit. Sirens wailed and two motorcyclists chased him. 'I must ask you to excuse me,' Charles said turning to the hitchhiker who cowered in the back seat, 'I just don't have time tonight to stop for the police.' Despite her fear, Chantal was about to giggle when the car crashed into a pole and she lost consciousness.

The three of them were rushed to nearby Bernay Hospital for observation. Chantal was given eight stitches in her chin, and the hitchhiker was discharged. As he was waiting to be X-rayed, Charles disappeared. Chantal could not understand why until the police explained that Charles was driving a stolen car. The following day he was arrested and sent to Evreux Jail.

In the prison hospital waiting room, where Christmas tinsel

hung from the ceiling, Alain Benard wondered why Charles had been rushed to the emergency ward. Had he done something desperate? Was the shock of yesterday's court sentence too much for him? Charles had often said that if he lost Chantal, he would kill himself. Had the revelations of his criminal background broken his spell over her? From the beginning Benard had watched the whirlwind courtship with alarm. Chantal was an innocent, adoring child who had attended a convent in Morocco until she was eighteen, and whose friends were the transplanted children of middle-class colonists. Her love for Charles made her easy prey to his grand delusions.

Often Benard had wanted to warn her and tell her that Charles had spent five years of his life in prison, that legally he was not even supposed to enter the metropolitan area of Paris, that some nights he came back to St Germain with young girls who had later phoned Benard complaining that Charles had tricked them into giving him money. He had wanted to warn her, but he had vowed to remain a neutral ally of Charles. It was not his role to be the bell around a leper's neck, and the boy was already handicapped enough by his past, Benard assured himself. So, in the end, Benard had said nothing. Whenever Chantal had stayed the night at St Germain, he could never fully disguise his embarrassment at her ignorance.

'Alain, I didn't know you were here.'

It was Chantal. She was looking pale, and there was a scar on her chin. Usually, by mutual agreement, they visited Charles on different days.

'How is he?' Benard asked. 'What's happened?'

'You'll be amused,' she said. 'They've taken him off to operate. You know what he did?' Her eyes shone; her mood had been helped by overhearing two of the guards complimenting her. 'He swallowed a spoon.'

'My God! What was he trying to do — kill himself?'

'No. It was so they would transfer him from Evereux Jail to here. The visiting hours are longer. I've just been with him for three hours.'

Benard postponed his own visit and offered to drive her back to Paris. For most of the way their conversation skirted the subject of Charles, but as he neared Chantal's parents' home, he said, 'So you finally found out.'

'Yes. The first time I went to see him in Evereux Jail he told me everything, and about you too, Alain. He owes you a lot.'

He would have liked to say that Charles owed him nothing, that he received 'grace' for what he did, but instead he asked, 'Will you still marry him?'

'Of course, Alain. I tell you honestly; I love him now more than ever. I know what you're thinking, and it's true. Until the crash I was blind, a stupid, love-crazed schoolgirl. But I was knocked out and a light went on.' She laughed at the phrase. 'Now I can see the little boy behind the façade, and he knows it. And he also knows that I'll stand by him. That will help him adjust to reality, don't you think?'

'Another six months in jail could have a bad effect,' Benard said. 'He'll be bitter. Charles won't reform overnight.'

'Nor will I abandon him overnight,' she said. 'Do you expect me to drop him because he's not a model fiancé? Or that I haven't learned? Next time he tells me he's borrowed a car from a friend, do you think I'll believe it? It will take time, Alain, of course, but it's worth it. You already know that. He's a special person, isn't he? Unique, gifted, more intelligent and real than those revolutionaries who used to hang around the Sorbonne. I love him, Alain. I'm committed. He's dropped into the abyss, and if I do nothing else in this life, I just want to help one human being climb out of his own despair.'

'But when you're his wife, Chantal, you'll be dependent on him. He's strong, he'll overpower you. He needs treatment.'

'I'm strong too, Alain. I can give him what no psychiatrist can. Love.'

'He already had your love when he stole the car.'

'He was miserable in other ways.'

'His work was going fine. So why did he suddenly ruin everything? It's more complicated than just giving him love or security.' Benard pulled up outside her house. 'The court psychiatrist said there were problems.'

'What do you mean?'

Benard explained that Charles was compulsively rebellious and perhaps incapable of profiting from his past experience. He might even be unable to sympathize or identify with others who knows? He could even show a lack of remorse at harming others.

'Did the psychiatrist say anything good?' Her voice was brittle.

Benard wondered if he had gone too far. He had only wanted her to see that Charles had a black side to him. 'Yes, that his adjustment to society was possible, with treatment, and that he wasn't dangerous.'

'Of course not,' she said. 'There's such gentleness inside him, such spiritual awareness. He is really searching for something deeper from life, I think. But you already know this. Otherwise you wouldn't have bothered so much with him. He's not just another petty crook, is he?'

Forced to respond, he said what he had often thought: 'No, Chantal, he is not a gangster in his soul.'

A few days later Benard received a letter from Charles which thanked him for all he had done and then went on to say, 'You no longer have any power over me. Get out of my life. Lay off Chantal.'

Benard sent a copy of the letter to Chantal with a note: 'I knew Charles would not pardon me for warning you. Take courage, Chantal. It will be sad if you become the victim of your own generosity. This letter from Charles is like the last chapter of a book. Please don't ask me to open it again.' Benard asked her to get the key to his flat from Charles and post it to him. Benard's last line was memorable: 'How shocking is this tragic destiny I see unfurling.'

Alone in his cell Charles wondered why God had not answered his prayers. Since his arrest four months ago he had read the Bible every day, the one Benard had given him in Poissy. Every morning and night he had prayed on his knees with tears in his eyes. 'All I want is to love, to live, to have a family like everyone else.' He pleaded, 'Oh Lord, Dear Lord, get me out of here.'

Until the day of sentencing he had been hopeful. The court psychiatrist had seemed understanding. After all, he had only wanted the car for a night, Charles had insisted, to take Chantal on a weekend trip. Yes, it was one he had stolen before, but he had returned it to the street where he had found it. He couldn't help noticing that the owner had not reclaimed it after two weeks, and he was overpowered by temptation, surely understandable, given his family history. Benard had

prepared a sympathetic biography for the court. Yet the judge had ordered that he remain in jail until June 1969, six months! God had answered him with silence.

Therefore, God no longer existed for Charles. He buried himself in books on comparative religion. Confucius was too authoritarian; the Koran, too much like the Bible. In the end he chose Buddhism for its offer of freedom from the fetters of the mundane world. God is not in the sky, Charles concurred, but in me. There is no need to pray. From now on, he would rely on himself. Charles posted the Bible back to Benard, whom he had not forgiven for his attempt to alienate the affections of Chantal. It was his love for his future wife, Charles realized, that made jail even more intolerable this time. How he suffered being separated from her! And now, Buddhism addressed itself to his suffering rather than his sin. And so he was confirmed in his new faith, a faith which was, to Charles, solidly grounded in reason.

He replaced prayer with meditation. In trying to get close to God, Christianity had lost touch with the reality of man, Charles reasoned. He resumed his studies in psychology, concentrating on the peculiarly French tradition of Characterology — a system of personality study. This was the antithesis of psychology as expounded by Freud, Jung, and their descendants who sought to understand human behaviour from within. Instead, characterology was an attempt to categorize people. It enabled its practitioners to predict and manipulate the behaviour of those they encountered.

In the books of a Sorbonne professor, René Le Senne (*Lying and Character, A Treatise on Characterology*) and a later populariser, Gaston Berger (*Character and Personality*), Charles absorbed a system for classifying people. From three basic divisions of character, Le Senne formulated eight fundamental types. Fit your subject into one of these types, it was argued, and his tendencies become clear and predictable. Charles tested the system on himself.

As for the first division (*Emotive or non-Emotive*), he knew that he was Emotional, judging from the frequency and intensity of his feelings, no matter how hard he tried to suppress them. Second (*Active or non-Active*), he was a type who took pleasure in action, not one to sit around brooding without moving. Third (*Primary or Secondary*), Charles believed

LE CARACTÈRE

TABLEAU DES 8 TYPES

		Formules	Noms	Exemples	
Emotifs	Actifs	Second . . .	E-A-S	Passionnés	Napoléon, Pascal, Racine, Corneille, Flaubert, Michel-Ange, Pasteur.
		Prim. . . .	E-A-P	Colériques	V. Hugo, Mirabeau, G. Sand, Gambetta, Péguy.
	Non actifs	Second . . .	E-nA-S	Sentimentaux	Vigny, Amiel, Biran, Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Robespierre.
		Prim. . . .	E-nA-P	Nerveux	Baudelaire, Musset, Poe, Verlaine, Heine, Chopin, Stendhal.
Non émotifs	Actifs	Second . . .	nE-A-S	Flegmatiques	Kant, Washington, Joffre, Franklin, Turgot, Bergson.
		Prim. . . .	nE-A-P	Sanguins	Montesquieu, Talleyrand, Mazarin, Anatole France.
	Non actifs	Second . . .	nE-nA-S	Apathiques	Louis XVI.
		Prim. . . .	nE-nA-P	Amorphes	La Fontaine.

The table of eight fundamental 'character types' from the system of René Le Senne, reprinted here from Gaston Berger, *Caractère et Personnalité*, by kind permission of the publisher: Presses Universitaires de France.

that he was not a Primary, not one who was like a mirror to experience, where all is recorded but nothing remains. Charles recognized himself as Secondary, a type which is purported to react after, rather than during the event. He saw himself as a prisoner of his own past. According to Le Senne, that made him EAS, category I, known as Passionate. Napoleon, too, was in this category.

That's me, Charles thought, and delved deeper into Le Senne, expanding his understanding of the other seven types, which he tested on fellow prisoners. Many French people use characterology, along with graphology, the study of handwriting, to observe and construct their everyday relationships. For Charles, these bourgeois occupations would become a lethal tool to help him in the outside world. With the system of Le Senne, he believed, he could play people like pawns in a game of chess.

Each morning Charles stripped in his cell and knelt on his left leg, crossing the palms of his hands over his left knee and stretching his right leg behind him. 'Be a refuge to yourself,' Charles remembered that Buddha had said. After the stretching exercises, Charles would stand up and relax into his martial arts pose, knees bent, feet apart, fists clenched at his waist. He began his Kung Fu, his 'meditation in motion', a personalized ballet between a fight and a slow motion dance with spins, pirouettes, twists, drops to the split position and a graceful routine of circular jump kicks. His body became very strong and lithe.

This time, in June 1969, when Charles was released from Evereux Jail, it was Chantal who was waiting outside for him. Five months later, in the town of Chatenay Malabry, they were married. A small reception was held at the home of the bride's parents. Alain Benard was there, having responded to Charles's renewed overtures of friendship. Sipping champagne, he endured the rage of Chantal's father with his customary ease. 'Sobhraj has ruined my daughter forever,' Mr Lemaître said, 'the boy's a public danger. What are they waiting for to arrest him for once and for all?' It would happen one day, he believed, probably in a foreign country. The only member of the bridegroom's family to attend was his mother, Noi, looking dainty and younger than her forty-

six years as she made polite small talk with Mrs Lemaître, while the father of the bride stood near the wedding cake, scowling.

In the early months of 1970 Charles worked as a waiter, then as a salesman for personalized matches. Because of his criminal record, the court again exiled him from metropolitan Paris, and again, Benard successfully appealed for the prohibition to be lifted. In return, Charles was ordered to report to the police once a week.

After four months of married life, Charles was becoming demoralized by the grind of steady work and his compulsory visits to the police station. He was free, but not completely. He dreamed of starting a new life with his wife in Asia. All he needed, he thought, was capital. Without money in Asia he would be even worse off there than here. His sister, Nicole, was loaded, Charles thought. His only full-blood relative managed a restaurant owned by her wealthy boyfriend. But she would never lend him any money. Not that she needed it for herself — Nicole just stored it away like a fat squirrel. If only he could borrow some cash for a few hours, multiply it, and return it with interest ...

On the morning of Tuesday March 17 1970, Charles rushed into the Moules Farcies restaurant managed by his sister, whom he had always resented for accepting Jacques as her father. 'Come quickly, Nicole, your son is hurt, crushed by a truck.' As he comforted her, they sped to Charles's studio flat at Rue Ursuline, a half hour away from the centre of Paris. When Nicole rushed inside, Sobhraj locked the door behind her. Her son was still at school, quite safe.

He drove back to the restaurant. 'It's an emergency!' he told the cook. 'My sister asked me to bring her handbag and the receipts from the cash register.' Charles forged Nicole's signature on her cheque book, withdrew 6,000 francs from her bank, and rushed to a casino. Although his name had been officially listed, at his own request, as banned from every casino in France, it failed to prevent him from reaching the chemin de fer table at Enghien. He then lost every sou.

Chantal did not waste words scolding him. She rushed to see Nicole, returning her cheque book and the customers' receipts from the cash register. She said she would repay all the money in instalments as fast as she could and offered to

sign a binding legal agreement. Nicole refused. 'Charles's behaviour is impossible to forgive,' she said. To Chantal, Nicole was 'inhuman'. They ended up quarrelling, and Nicole phoned the police.

Charles was arrested and put in the Prison de la Santé, but the judge said that it was a family affair and he could be released if Nicole withdrew her complaint. The rest of the family tried to persuade her to change her mind. Every day Chantal wrote desperate letters to Benard who was away in the Middle East on a business trip. When she visited Charles in jail, she had never seen him more wretched. He was broken. 'I will die if I am sentenced again,' he said, breaking down. She tried to cheer him up with the news that she was pregnant, but this only made him more desperate for freedom. He wrote to Benard, 'Save me, Alain, my life is in your hands.'

After Charles's tenth day in jail, Benard returned from abroad and spoke to Nicole. At his request she finally agreed to withdraw the charges, and her brother was released from jail. When he got home, he found a letter from Saigon waiting for him. His father, Hotchand Sobhraj, wrote that he would soon be coming to Paris.

Every few years Hotchand Sobhraj took a trip round the world. He would do some business, look up his black market contacts, visit the major sights, and buy presents for his families in Poona and Saigon. As he walked through the arrivals' gate at Orly Airport on June 24 1970, he did not recognize the stylish young man waving to him. It had been eight years since he had last seen his son, disconsolately huddled over the rails of the S.S. *Laos* as it edged down the Saigon River. Charles rushed up to embrace his father. He was in good spirits and brimming with confidence as he drove Hotchand to Alain Benard's flat in St Germain en Laye where he and Chantal were staying while their friend was abroad on business. At last his father had returned to Paris and, this time, Charles -- not his stepfather -- could play host.

On Saturday morning Charles took Hotchand on a shopping tour of Paris. He was driving Benard's Triumph which he was in the process of buying. Hotchand followed his son into an expensive jewellers on the Place Vendôme and watched admiringly as Charles negotiated the purchase of a \$500 gold wrist-watch. Charles waved aside the assistant's reluctance to accept a cheque by paying a portion in cash. His air of self-confidence allayed any objections.

Charles turned to his father, 'Would you do me the favour of presenting this watch as a gift from you to Chantal? She would love you for that.' Charles was pleased to see that Hotchand was impressed. His son might only be twenty-six but he was already making his way in the world, the older man thought. All Charles had needed was a chance, some encouragement, and he could conquer Paris just like his father had conquered Saigon. 'Come Papa, choose something now for your wife.'

Chantal giggled as her Indian father-in-law related Charles's childhood pranks in Saigon. The three of them were dining

together in St Germain en Laye, with Charles resolutely drinking Coca-Cola as he poured his father champagne.

'I'm thinking of going East soon, Papa,' he said, handsome in a new hand-tailored blue suit, 'to branch out, to launch an import/export business.'

Chantal was not surprised by this announcement. Ever since her husband had got out of jail he had talked of going back to Saigon and starting a new life. Charles began to tell his father his plans of returning to Vietnam and opening a chain of retail stores, maybe to sell precious stones to the tourists. Chantal smiled at the two men as she listened to them talk. She had liked Hotchand Sobhraj on their first meeting. He had the same ease of manner as her husband, the same grace and style; a nobility of bearing and an engaging smile. His effect on Charles was to make him deferential and respectful. And he really did look like Mr Pompidou! 'If you plan to sell gems in Saigon, my son, you'd better hurry. The rich are beginning to leave and there's fear in the air. The Yanks have got themselves in a bloody mess.' Hotchand told Charles that Saigon was on the brink of bankruptcy, that the good times were over. Luckily, because of his dealings on the currency black market and his contacts at the major money exchanges all over the world, Hotchand was still doing fine. But for how much longer?

'But Papa, Asia is where I belong. I'm an outcast in France -- haunted by the mistakes of my past. I want to go home!' His mind was racing. The cheques he had been cashing all morning were drawn on an account he had opened the day before with a token deposit. On Monday the fraud would be discovered. He had spent thousands of dollars. How could he save himself between now and then? It was madness, he knew that, but he owed nothing to France. To his father, however, he had a duty to hold up his head, to be proud and dignified.

Hotchand told the couple about his stopovers in New York and Los Angeles. 'Everywhere I went the young people were misbehaving and up to no good. It was shocking. Some of them tried to burn down the Bank of America. In Central Park they were smoking marijuana, and the boys looked like girls.'

'Oh, Hotchand, it's the same everywhere,' Chantal was

laughing and pushing back her hair with her hands. Already the Maoist students had rampaged through the Latin Quarter, she told him, and everyone was predicting a repeat of the 1968 riots. Charles sat quietly, thinking. He would make a run for it. First he would go home and clear out his desk, pick up the passports. There was no point in staying there again. (It was a spartan studio flat a few doors down the street from Alain Benard.) The bank would give that address to the police.

Charles stood up. 'Excuse me, Father. You two finish your meal,' he said, handing some cash to Chantal. 'I've got a business appointment. I'll meet you back at Alain's in an hour or so.'

When he had gone Hotchand said to Chantal, 'He was such a scoundrel when he was a boy. Thank goodness he seems to have come to his senses. You know, my dear, he was always a devil with the ladies. I'm glad he seems to be settling down, especially with someone as beautiful as you.'

Chantal was pleased. She could see from whom Charles had inherited his charm. Hotchand took a small parcel wrapped in tissue paper from his pocket and presented it to her.

'Father, it's beautiful! You shouldn't have done this!' she said, holding the thin gold watch in the palm of her hand. She leaned over the table and kissed him.

'You deserve it,' he said, 'and I believe you are going to present me with a grandson.'

'I hope so, Hotchand. The baby's due in November. That's why we've been working so hard.'

'Well, it seems to have paid off,' he said. 'Charles told me this morning that he had five thousand dollars in the bank.'

'He said that?' Oh, no, she thought. It couldn't be. What has he done? Surely there was a mistake. Ever since she had told Charles she was pregnant, he had seemed a changed man, working hard, applying himself.

'Oh yes. He was spending money like water today,' Hotchand continued, 'writing cheques like he was papering walls.'

'Well, maybe we should go back home now,' Chantal said. 'You must try to get some sleep since you're leaving for Geneva in the morning.'

In Benard's flat Chantal carried a silver tray of coffee and liqueurs into the study. Her father-in-law was looking at the family portraits on the wall.

'I'm sorry not to have met Mr Benard. He seems to have done a lot for my son, and now I'm staying in his flat!'

'Perhaps on your next trip.'

He asked Chantal about her life in Morocco and she answered automatically only half-concentrating on the conversation. What was Charles doing, she wondered? Where was he?

The door opened, and Charles walked in, carrying a suitcase. 'Father, how would you like a lift to Geneva tomorrow?'

Chantal greeted him tersely motioning him into the bedroom. She shut the door, leaving Hotchand spreading out his itinerary on the table.

'Your father says you were writing cheques for huge amounts.'

Charles said nothing, and she knew it was true.

'Are you mad?' You'll be arrested.'

'No, we've got twenty-four hours to get out of the country.'

'Oh, darling, no.'

'Chantal, it was only a bank, a lousy French bank. No one gets hurt. It's all paid for by insurance. Can't you see there's no other way? I don't belong here. I can't get a decent job. Every time a Vietnamese commits a crime, the police come looking for me. Your family hates me. We need a chance. Well, today I got it, six thousand dollars. It's enough to begin; it's worth ten times that in Asia. We'll go to Saigon and be near my family. I can start a business.'

'But what about me? Us? Our baby? I have a job on Monday. I can't just drop everything and go to Saigon. It's half-way round the world.' Her green eyes filled with tears.

'I have to get out of here or it's jail. Look, we'll decide in the car. Just pack a few things and come to Geneva. You can fly back tomorrow if you want and still go to work.'

She didn't know what to do. If she didn't go with him, would she ever see him again?

'Listen, darling, the world is changing. Students *burn* banks. People are beginning to wake up about the State and the system. The French kept me behind bars for five years. I had nothing before that except liberty — and they even took

that away. I was forced to live like a pirate. It was my fate and the deed is done.' He waved a wad of notes, 'This is our break. Let me work hard for a few years, and I'll turn this into a million. And then we can stop. In the end you can pay it back if you like. Take our chance now while we're young and free. For our baby. It's the banks that are paying for the weapons that destroy my homeland.'

He was raving now, she could see. In tears, she packed her suitcase. Charles went into the living room where Hotchand was tactfully absorbed in examining Benard's collection of records.

'This Benard must be a very cultured man. I see he even has some Vietnamese music.'

'He bought it especially for me,' Charles said, walking over to his father.

In the bedroom, Chantal heard music and the haunting, high-pitched voice of the Vietnamese singer. Then she heard another voice over the top of it, a voice she knew, but with so much depth of feeling that she forgot her anger and came into the room. Hotchand sat on the couch with a glass of whisky watching his son with tears in his eyes. Charles stood beside the turntable singing along with the music, his voice faltering over some of the words, but persevering, getting louder and louder until it drowned out the recorded voice. He held the other two in a trance, for once oblivious to his surroundings, lost in the music of his homeland.

One hour later, at 2.30 a.m. on Sunday, the three of them piled into the old Triumph and drove east, reaching Geneva by 10.30 in the morning. At the bar of the Grand Hotel that day, Charles and Chantal kissed Hotchand goodbye as he set off on his Grand Alpine Tour.

'It's only eight thousand kilometres to Saigon,' Charles said, turning to his wife, 'and Papa will be so happy to see us again.'

Saigon
29/August/70

Dear Chantal,

I have received your letter dated 5 August from Iran. You have made a great mistake to come this way by car. The roads are very bad and mountainous and you find different kinds of people in every place. The roads to Afghanistan are very dangerous --- besides, you are pregnant and it is hard to go such a long way by car.

I have received a letter from your father. He says you and Charles disappeared from Paris on 27 June and never said a word. He and your mother are worried about you. In France the police are after Charles because he issued cheques without funds ... They are after you both.

Here in Saigon the BNP bank has informed the Consulate General about you and the consul has informed the Immigration Office to arrest both of you on your arrival and send you back to France for trial. Therefore it is advisable for you not to enter Vietnam at any cost --- if you enter you will be in great trouble.

Police were looking for me in Paris also because I was still with him when he bought the watch and issued the cheque, somehow they knew I am his father. I left the country one day earlier, otherwise they would have put me in jail also. God saved me.

I told you in Paris that this boy is no good. He is intelligent but he is number one CROOK. One day he will throw you in sea or in jail.

Now this country is no good for foreigners, many Indians are closing their shops and going to India. Americans are leaving, so the others also. Please, for God sake, don't come.

Your loving father,
Hotchand Sobhraj

After three months on the road, crossing ten borders and thousands of kilometres, Charles and Chantal arrived in Bombay. This exuberant port on the Arabian Sea, with its florid Gothic buildings, moth-eaten beaches, and red double-decker buses was the financial centre of India and Charles chose it as his base. The couple moved into a cheap hotel near the docks, scented with drying fish. Nine years before, he had stowed away from Bombay, penniless and unwanted. Now he was back, determined to make a success of his life. His first move was to join the Bombay branch of the Alliance Française society. This gave him access to leaders of the foreign business community and their rich Indian friends. Chantal, with her beauty and obvious good breeding, was an asset. Everyone adored her. The director of the Alliance Française invited them both to live in his own spacious flat. On November 15 Chantal gave birth to a daughter, Madhu.

As the capital of the country's huge film industry, second in size only to Japan's, Bombay throbbed with a vitality and glamour unusual in India. There were families of enormous wealth whose children had cultivated a taste for flashy consumer goods and possessed the means to acquire them, were it not for the government's ban on their import. At parties in the posh mansions on Malabar Hill Charles listened to local playboys roll brand names off their tongues like mystical incantations: Rolex, Cartier, Alfa Romeo. Impossible dreams because of the government and its puritanical laws. Not at all, Charles maintained. He could supply them. With his own Dupont pen he wrote down the orders in his black leather book and took their deposits telling them, 'Leave it to me.'

When Chantal and her new baby, Madhu, came out of the hospital, Charles rented a flat on Nepean Sea Road on Malabar Hill overlooking the sea. It was there that Chantal spent most of her time, along with the baby and her nurse. For Chantal the hot days and nights passed as slowly as the air stirred by the ceiling fans. Charles was usually off on one of his business trips, away for weeks at a time. He had found his fantasy world at last, a continent where his confidence in himself seemed to be justified.

Chantal could no longer ignore the fact that a lot of Charles's business could be better described as crime, but now, so many miles from home, she found it easier to leave

her questions about his life unasked. When she was forced to face up to his criminal practices, she thought of them as 'pranks'. When she found out that he had been having an affair with an Indian girl, now pregnant, it was not Charles, but the girl, with whom she had the showdown. Despite her husband's unreliability and extra-marital flirtations, and her loneliness, Chantal remained faithful to Charles and to her upright bourgeois ideal of the devoted mother and loyal wife. Charles was so unusual, allowances had to be made for him. He was not bound by conventional laws, Chantal decided.

Sometimes there was no money. At other times, bank notes lay around the flat like waste-paper. She tried to live philosophically – day to day. Charles would suddenly turn up, empty his pockets of thousands of dollars in various currencies, and they would go out, hand in hand, to the pictures and then to dinner at one of the nightclubs in the Taj Mahal Hotel or the Sheraton where the cocktail bar looked down on the Arabian Sea.

Immaculate and handsome, Charles would talk about their future. 'Soon I'll have enough to buy a house for us, darling, a home, in Ceylon, maybe. I can write books.' His eyes reflected the warmth of a devoted husband and father. The next day he would be off again, to smuggle diamonds to Bangkok and work a currency deal in Beirut, then lose all his money at the casino in Rhodes and suddenly make it all back again through mysterious underworld contacts in Hong Kong. One of his mottoes became: 'Why waste a trip?'

Charles had understood the black market perfectly ever since he was a boy of six in Saigon. It was a matter of contacts and mobility, being in the right place at the right time. At duty-free ports he bought radios, watches, cameras, and jewellery with stolen travellers' cheques or cheques which would bounce. All he needed to run his business was a constant supply of passports and a battery of disguises. Sometimes he would alter the description of the bearer on the passport, and sometimes it was easier to change himself to fit the description. Although his face was strong and unusual, it lent itself easily to disguise. With the indeterminate mixture of his race he could make himself look less Asian or more Asian, or not Asian at all. He could pass for Filipino, Puerto Rican, French, Italian, or English. A criminal friend

taught him the art of disguise in Hong Kong, and it was there that he bought a wig, beard, and moustache which he always carried in his attaché case. It was with these theatricalities that he outwitted India's stringent attempts at preventing black marketeering.

There was a ban on importing luxury consumer goods into India. In the case of tourists, the items were recorded inside their passports, and if on leaving India, the visitor could not produce the belongings listed, he was compelled to pay their full value in customs' tax. So, each time Charles left India on one of his forays, he needed a new passport.

He found the solution to this problem in a crowded, hole-in-the-wall café called Dipti's House of Pure Drinks on Ormiston Road near the sea in the Colaba area. Dipti's stood across the wide palm-shaded road from Bombay's two famous hippie hotels, the Stiffles and the Rex. The yellow paint was peeling from the fretwork shutters of the adjoining Victorian mansions and on their dirty marble steps sat the ragged travellers with their backpacks and habit of adopting the national dress of whatever country they were passing through. Dipti's was their meeting place, the one spot in Bombay where they could count on meeting others with the same problems: where to buy a student card, where to sell a pair of hiking boots, how to get through Burma, whom to bribe for a six-month visa for Indonesia. These were the long-haired, pot-smoking types Charles had first noticed on the streets of Paris in 1968. These young people were travelling through life in a direction opposite to that of Charles Sobhraj. For these young middle-class travellers from the West Asia was the last frontier. Most of them had worked for a few years after school or college, saving money for a leisurely journey across the non-Western string of countries that lay between Europe and Australia. They travelled light and cheap.

Despite his abhorrence of them, Charles came to see these Western nomads as a vast, untapped resource. The irony amused him. He could use these anti-materialists to help satisfy the voracious appetites of his Indian clients. He despised the young wanderers' interest in marijuana and hashish and the pleasure they took in discussing how high they were and how many drugs they had consumed. He hated the

way they dressed, deliberately separating themselves from society. Yet when he sat down among them, his charisma captivated the travellers. Charles soon learned that these overlanders were often innocent and gullible. He could lift their passports in seconds. Having just discarded the morality of their parents and society back home, he discovered some of them had a philosophical vacuum he could fill with his own ideas.

After all, what was a crime? To steal from a fat, over-insured tourist, or to shower Vietnam with bombs? And wasn't capitalism simply corporate theft? And in view of this, wasn't it justified for the poor to steal from the rich? And if you sold your passport for \$50, who was hurt? No one but an overpaid consular official who had to fill in a few forms. There were many ways of making money in Asia, and never any danger involved. Even if you were caught all you had to do was distribute a few dollars among the local officials and the matter would be forgotten. Charles could make anything sound reasonable. And all his schemes, gem smuggling, car smuggling, and stealing from the bourgeois tourists in their luxury hotels, had an element of revolutionary glamour.

Whenever he needed an accomplice for one of the growing number of his rackets, he could find one at Dipti's or its equivalent in other cities. The advantage of using amateurs was that they accepted a smaller cut of the take. To travellers who paid a dollar a night for a room, \$200 was a windfall. Dipti's House of Pure Drinks became his employment agency and passport bank.

It was a game he enjoyed, picking out a likely accomplice, sitting near-by at one of the grubby tables, striking up a conversation, and analysing their potential using René Le Senne's system of characterology.

Charles would make an assessment and slot his prospects into one of Le Senne's eight categories. One man, a run-away lawyer, was, perhaps, type 4, Nervous (EnAP). The 'E' meant he was easily moved by his emotions and the 'P', standing for Primary, meant he tended to live in the present — love, hatred, joy, and sadness passing quickly through his heart. Finally, because he was non-Active, nA, he would express his highly charged feelings in words, not actions. In all, easy prey for Charles's manipulations, one who could be

quickly enthused and goaded into performing a part — no doubt one which fitted Charles's larger design.

Charles's popularity among the affluent of Bombay was confirmed when he demonstrated his ability to produce shiny and apparently new Alfa Romeos, BMWs, Maseratis, and Mercedes. In the whole of India there was only one auto factory, an obsolete British plant which had been dismantled and shipped to Bombay where it produced fifty models a day of the dull and sturdy Ambassador. Indian playboys dreamed of driving the best Europe could build, but the restrictions made it impossible until Charles arrived on the scene and promised to deliver them at a third of the official cost. He collected deposits from several customers and flew to Geneva or Frankfurt where he stole and bought second-hand the requisite number. 'Do you want to earn \$200?' he would ask backpackers heading east, and with Charles leading the way the convoy of flashy European cars sped eastward through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. After showing a car to its future owner Charles took a further instalment and promised to present it to them with papers legitimizing the ownership. He booked a room at a five-star hotel, using whatever name or disguise was convenient. The car was taken to a garage he had rented for the purpose and stripped of all its extras. In the back streets of Bombay a crash was staged, involving the shell of the car. From his hotel Charles called the police to report the wreck's whereabouts while one of his accomplices removed its engine and gearbox. The police would report back that thieves had plundered the car. Charles was then entitled to sell it to the State Trading Corporation which in turn put the vehicle on auction. One of his accomplices would buy the shell of the car and along with it the documents entitling him to its possession not subject to excise taxes. The car would be returned to the garage, repaired and refitted, and presented to its purchaser complete with the correct and necessary paperwork. Who could ever unravel such a complicated chain of minor illegalities?

His new friends found him dynamic, endearingly eccentric, and 'always five jumps ahead'. He had studied law in Paris, he said, and engineering in Japan, but his hobby was psychology. Reading their palms, and analysing their handwriting, he talked about self-mastery and hinted mys-

teriously at his own karate skills. He seemed to have found a hundred short cuts to the good life, and to be ready to share these secrets with his new friends. There were no limits to his generosity. 'Don't buy anything,' he'd say. 'Just tell me what you need, I'll pick it up in Hong Kong.' He also taught them how to do three-point turns at 100 kph in the fast cars he sold them. What an amazing man! He was always the centre of attention. His mere presence made life more exciting. As for the scores of passports lying around his and Chantal's flat in the Meherina Building, they accepted his explanation that he needed them for his business, and learned not to ask naïve questions.

With Chantal, he lived simply — their flat was modest. His wife had been reared to be careful with money. She was amused by the Indians who, having purchased a freezer, would keep it on display in the living room. 'These Indians,' Charles would tell her with a laugh, 'I could sell them the wind.'

After six months in Bombay he counted among his personal friends top-ranking businessmen, the stars and directors in the Indian film world, and the upper echelons of the French community living in Bombay. Dinesh Shah, the son of the president of Shah Construction, bought an Alfa Romeo from Charles and became his intimate friend. The two young men formed a business partnership. Following the success of 'Le Drugstore' in Paris, Charles and Dinesh formulated a plan for an updated mosaic of retail outlets and began renovating a building. A drugstore, a restaurant, a discothèque... Charles was on his way. Hotchand would be proud of him. In the First National City Bank of Hong Kong he had saved \$14,000.

In a city where, ten years ago, he had sat hopelessly on the stone steps of the Victoria Gate, penniless and unwanted, he now entertained millionaires in the bars of the Taj Mahal, the grand hotel that had once symbolized everything he dreamed of. Now Charles felt that all the faith Alain Benard had in him had been justified, and he knew he was capable of doing anything he wanted to do.

In April, Charles turned twenty-seven and he boarded five-month-old Madhu and her nurse in the house of a friend and took Chantal off to Hong Kong and the adjacent Por-

tuguese island of Macao for a holiday. He was rich. He had made it! It was time to celebrate! As soon as he arrived Charles wrote to Alain Benard in Paris.

My dear Alain,

I am now in China. I have truly come a long way, right? I will stay in Hong Kong and Macao on business for twenty days and then return to India. Chantal is here with me, happy, for she has been dreaming for a long time to know this part of Asia.

Yesterday I offered myself a little caprice, a joy, and bought for myself a beautiful golden Rolex watch, extra flat, with a bracelet made of gold. I'm as happy as a kid for I have been dreaming of it a long time, and, as you know, spending half a million francs for a caprice was not always within my means.

At last, Alain, my dear Alain, I do not forget that in my success I owe everything to you. Whether you agree or not, I am your work. Without you and everything you did for me, where would I be? God only knows.

To give you an idea of the money I make in my business, when I return to Bombay at the end of April, my profit will be \$30,000. And, Alain, beginning at the end of June, it doesn't matter how much you need, you will have it. You can have as much as you can as long as you and I will be alive. About my drugstore, at last my partner and I decided to buy the place instead of renting it. Isn't that fantastic?

And you, Alain, what are you doing? Life is sad when one's one and only friend stays silent. My little daughter Madhu awaits with impatience the visit of her godfather.

I kiss you affectionately.

Charles

Bombay, November 14, 1971

The ceiling fans turned slowly in the bedroom and Chantal was brushing her hair as she watched the Indian nurse feeding Madhu. Tomorrow, her daughter would be one year old.

Charles had promised to be home to light the candle on the birthday cake, but she hadn't seen her husband for several days. Chantal picked up the morning newspaper, the *Times of India*, and looked through it for the latest news on the deteriorating relations between India and Pakistan. People said there might be a war and she tried to concentrate. Every time she heard a car pull up at the curb on Nepean Sea Road, she looked out of the window, hoping it was Charles.

What an impossible husband! After two years of marriage she loved him more than ever. He was strong, charismatic, sexual — anyone could see that, and even those who claimed Charles had cheated them still liked him. Inside, he was something more. Exasperated by his unreliability, Chantal once threatened to leave Charles and he broke down and cried like a little boy. Some of her friends joked that she loved him because she hardly ever saw him — he was always travelling. Business trips, he claimed, but it was a compulsion. (His mother once told her: 'My son always wants to be where he's not.') She had guessed that his business was usually illegal, although he tried to deny it and hide the details from her. She was afraid he would be caught one day, but Charles boasted that he was invincible. 'How could they hold me?' he would ask with a laugh. It was a tragedy about the drugstore. Charles had seemed serious about it, even honest, but oh what a disaster! And all because of that trip to Hong Kong and Macao. 'A Portuguese city in China, you'll love it, a real honeymoon!' Charles had said. When she and her husband arrived, Charles booked into the Lisboa Hotel and went straight to the casino. She couldn't believe it. From a few hundred dollars he won thousands, hundreds of thousands, the crowds gathered round and he was betting \$20,000 a throw. His pockets were bulging with money and by the time he had won a quarter of a million Hong Kong dollars Chantal was so nervous she went to bed. By morning he had lost it all. Worse, he had cleaned out his own savings account and was in debt to a Chinese moneylender. She had to remain alone on the island as 'security', while Charles flew to Bombay and borrowed 60,000 rupees from Dinesh Shah, his business partner ... A honeymoon to remember. In Hong Kong he cashed phoney cheques; money was needed to get home to Bombay and to little Madhu. Charles could never face his

partner again. Now he had gone to Delhi, promising to return home with \$10,000 from a gems deal. A sure thing, he said. Chantal's eye was caught by a newspaper headline: TWO FRENCHMEN HELD IN CITY: DELHI ROBBERY. And she read: 'In a surprise swoop, Bombay police arrested two French nationals allegedly involved in the sensational robbery from a jewellery shop in Delhi's Ashoka Hotel.'

Oh no, not Charles! 'The police have also unearthed a gun-running racket with international ramifications.' Oh God, she had once seen some guns in the back of his car. 'The alleged Ashoka Hotel robbers were caught near the Taj Mahal Hotel. Charles Sobhraj walked into a police dragnet.' Oh God! she thought, the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay. He must have been on his way home for Madhu's birthday.

Chantal skimmed through the rest of the story. It was like something out of the cinema: A blonde flamenco dancer had been held up in her room for three days, while Charles had tried to drill a hole in the floor to the jewellery shop below. The drill broke, so he had persuaded the woman to entice the shop manager up to the room with his best jewels and Charles tied him up in the bathroom. He fled from the hotel with diamonds worth \$10,000. They tried to catch him at the airport, but he got away. 'Disappeared,' police said.

When Chantal put down the newspaper she knew what she must do. Her husband might be unreliable, incorrigible, and untruthful, but she loved him. He was like no other, both superman and superchild.

'Quick! Pack Madhu's clothes!' she said to the nurse.

*Room 42, Willington Hospital, Delhi,
December 5, 10.30 p.m.*

Charles was lying on the bed, playing with Madhu, who had just arrived from Bombay with Chantal. The long-suffering wife had found her husband recovering from an appendicitis operation. He had faked the symptoms to get himself out of jail, where he was being held, and now he was under guard in a small hospital room.

His daughter was crawling around his bed, and Charles kept kissing her, lifting her up high in his arms and teasing her with nursery rhymes, looking into the small, petal-

smooth face. She was his most precious possession. He smiled over Madhu's head to Chantal. 'Darling, play cards with them tonight, or keep them talking. You know what I mean.'

Chantal nodded. She sat on the chair next to his bed. One of the guards in the adjoining room, a tall Sikh with a beard, in military uniform and green turban, called out to Charles to stop speaking French.

'Can't I even say good night to my wife?' Charles replied lightheartedly in English.

The guards smiled. They liked Charles. He was always joking with them, handing out American cigarettes, and very polite. He had taught them how to play gin-rummy.

In the bare room Chantal sat serenely with her hands folded in her lap. The skirt of her floral cotton sundress came well below her knees, but still the guards with their moist dark eyes were staring at the curve of her calves and her slim ankles. Their own women kept their legs well hidden beneath their saris, so the sight of this beautiful Western woman was a treat. They could not make Chantal out. Was she a hippie or a respectable memsahib? If she was a hippie, there was a good chance that for a few rupees she might make love. Fully aware of the subject that obsessed them, Chantal kept her smiles friendly but reserved as she watched her beloved Charlie and Madhu laughing together. The sounds of the hot Indian night came in through the bars on the open window, crickets, frogs croaking from the open drains, the thin-pitched siren of mosquitoes.

'This is the first night the doctor hasn't given me a sedative,' Charles was saying to the guard whom he had called to his bedside. 'He asked me to try to do without it tonight. Do you mind turning off the light for a few minutes to help me sleep?'

The guard was suspicious. Charles had already given his colleagues the slip at the Delhi Airport on the night of the robbery. 'All right, Mr Charles, just for a few minutes, but I must chain you to the bed.' He signalled to his assistant. The two guards took a large, clanky pair of shackles and attached one cuff to the iron mattress frame. The other they locked tightly around the prisoner's left ankle.

Charles turned over and adjusted his pillow, watching the guards move into the adjoining room. Chantal assessed

the situation, opened the door to the corridor and joined the guards. The three of them began playing cards while Madhu stayed sleeping by her father on the bed. Charles wriggled his right hand. He had shoved it down the leg of his baggy silk pyjamas when he was being shackled, now he removed it. It was an easy matter to slip his leg loose. In the next room the guards vied with each other to answer Chantal's battery of questions. It was twenty minutes before they turned on the light and saw that Charles had disappeared.

The city was blacked out and under curfew. A few hours later Charles was caught wandering in his pyjamas around Delhi Railway Station, and Chantal was charged with aiding his escape. In jail she discovered that her husband was a criminal celebrity. The Ashoka robbery, which took place while Henry Kissinger was an official guest, was considered one of the most sensational ever performed in Delhi.

The beautiful flamenco dancer trapped in the room had fallen under the power of Charles's personality. He was the gentleman jewel thief, leaving her money to compensate for the trouble he had caused and ordering her to take hot baths to calm her nerves. 'You were born to dance,' he told her, 'just as I was born to be a gangster,' and he claimed to be part of an international organization. At the airport he eluded police and flew to Teheran, where he completed some profitable business deals (selling second-hand gaming equipment to a casino) and then he was on his way back home for Madhu's birthday, when the police jumped him.

Among the inmates of Tihar Jail, he was a hero. The notoriety of being the wife of Charles Sobhraj made Chantal as uncomfortable as the jail itself, where she spent her time in a cell with a group of pickpockets.

After arranging for her own bail using an Indian lawyer, the next problem was Madhu. Their money was running low and Chantal wrote desperate letters to Benard for help. He would not send money. To do so would only encourage her blindness, and Benard thought it was time for Chantal to accept the consequences of marriage to Charles.

India's relations with its neighbouring country worsened. The Pakistani commander of Dacca surrendered to Indian forces, and in December the Republic of Bangladesh was established to rule the old eastern part of Pakistan. Rumours

were rife that, in retaliation, Delhi would be bombed. Chantal worried about Madhu. She must be evacuated from this beleaguered city. Four days before Christmas she arranged with a woman who was flying to Europe to deliver the little girl to her parents in Paris. Chantal intended to stay in Delhi, an uptight, mean, and conspiratorial city, she thought, not as easy-going as Bombay. But her first duty was to her husband.

In January 1972, Charles was granted bail by the Indian courts. Soon afterwards he and Chantal fled the country.

Afghanistan, June 1972

Why were they in Kabul? Chantal had no idea. She wasn't sure if Charles knew either. They both seemed to be spinning out of control. By now she had abandoned herself to the challenge of surviving life with Charles. She had lost track of all borders and distances since fleeing India. The manager of the Intercontinental Hotel was beginning to hint broadly that it was time for them to pay their bill and Charles told her they would leave at dawn to drive the 2,400 kilometres to Teheran, capital of neighbouring Iran. It was to be their new home, he said.

All day they sped across seemingly endless deserts in a rented car, stopping only for dry biscuits and Coca-Cola in the village oases of a few mud houses clustered under the date palms. After Kandahar, where they spent the night, they continued across the Dasht-i-Dargo, the Desert of Death, dotted occasionally with the strange black tents of the Couchi tribes until, at sunset, they drove into Herat, the last Afghan city before the Iranian border. The dusty road was lined with casuarina trees, and meagre man-made streams from which women enveloped in ghostly chadours were drawing water to wash their clothes. Men squatted in groups in their baggy white trousers and grey vests. The road was crowded with horses and buggies, beautifully plumed with red and pink pompoms and ribbons. They would spend the night here and cross into Iran as soon as the border opened at dawn. They parked outside the bank and went in to exchange their money. Two policemen stopped them. The car they had rented in Kabul should not have been driven out of the city limits, the police explained. Charles apologized pleasantly and promised

to return it the following day.

'We will go with you,' said the police.

'Fine,' said Charles. 'What time should we leave? Where will I find you?'

'We will find you,' the police said, and left them.

If they went back to Kabul they could be arrested for not paying their hotel bill and perhaps for trying to steal the car. It would mean jail. They ate a dinner of rice and meat in a chai shop. They must leave at midnight, Charles said, and drive into the desert as close to the border as possible and cross into Teheran on foot.

In a little over an hour they reached Islam Qala, the Afghan border town, and the couple abandoned the car in the street. They walked into the desert. Charles said it would be easy to navigate their way across the border. It lay to the west, somewhere between where they were now and Taybad, the Iranian border town. Perhaps those were the lights in the distance. It was bitterly cold. All night they wandered under the glaring stars toward the lights of Taybad. When dawn broke there was nothing to guide them. They kept walking. It was hot now, over 100 degrees. 'Come on, darling. Soon we'll be in the swimming pool of the Teheran Hilton,' Charles said.

After an hour or so Chantal sat down. She couldn't go on. It was so still. Charles pointed to a cloud of dust in the distance, and slowly a truck came into view. He rushed over and asked the driver for water. Of course, the driver nodded, smiling and clearing his throat to spit. It was the police, the ones from Herat. 'You said you would find us,' Charles said with a friendly shrug.

On July 3, Charles and Chantal were jailed in Kabul on charges of failing to pay their hotel bill, stealing a rented car, and attempting to cross the border illegally.

*Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital, Kabul,
Afghanistan, July 31, 6 a.m.*

The Afghans were more thorough with their shackles than the Indians, Charles thought, as he lay on the straw pallet, both ankles chained to the iron bedstead. Once again he was in the hospital, and the hospital was a great improvement over jail. He estimated that it increased his chances of escape by about 75 per cent. Now, all that stood between him and

freedom were two rusty but efficacious shackles and the bored guards, one on each side of the bed, nodding off with .303 rifles between their knees.

He had got himself admitted by duplicating the symptoms of a peptic ulcer. Vomiting blood was relatively easy to fake, and a peptic ulcer was superior to appendicitis symptoms because you weren't rushed off and cut open. He would certainly have escaped that time in Delhi if he hadn't been still weak from the operation. Now, surely, he would succeed. And what about Chantal? She had been in jail almost a month and Charles missed her.

He was in a room of his own, and when he saw the night boy he called out and asked him to bring some tea. Earlier the previous day, claiming to be in terrible pain, he had asked for sleeping pills. Now he had four of them, God knows what kind they were, probably Largactyl. One thing he could thank Western hippies for, Charles thought, was teaching him all about pharmaceutical drugs and their easy availability in Asia. At first it had seemed like some strange language: Quaaludes, uppers, Mogadons, speed, Librium, Largactyl, downers ... but no, these were modern drugs and some overlanders actually enjoyed making themselves unconscious. Surely it was the sickness of a generation. Anyway, you could get all kinds of drugs over the counter without a prescription in Asia and a few downers dropped in a drink had made his getaways easier. Charles tried different kinds, different mixtures and tested them on unwitting subjects in coffee, whisky, and milk. Pharmacology had become part of his arsenal.

Now, while he waited for the boy to come back with the tea, he ground the Largactyl to a powder in his hands. When the boy arrived with a battered silver tray and three glasses, Charles dropped the powder into the teapot which he stirred and then roused the guards. 'Hey, chai?' Both men woke up with a start, grinned, and accepted the proffered glasses. They were not supposed to be dozing. They were big men, more than six feet, like most Afghans. In twenty minutes they were snoring again. Charles stretched out, crawled along the floor on his hands, and just managed to reach the key ring attached to a belt. Within a few seconds he had unlocked his shackles and disappeared into the back streets of Kabul.

Still wearing the dirty prison pyjamas into which he had sewn three hundred dollars, he ran across the bridge where all the carpets were hung out to dry. He stole down the steep narrow streets of the bazaar, lined with rickety vegetable stalls and stands selling pots and pans and stuffed satin quilts until he came to a clothing store. He pointed to the clothes worn by the proprietor.

'How much?' he asked in Parsee.

The man shook his head and spat fiercely on the floor. He sold only new clothes.

'No, I don't want new clothes. I'll give you five dollars American for what's on your back.'

A few minutes later, wearing a tattered striped coat, baggy grey trousers, and an old turban wound around his head, he was transformed into an Afghan. He took a trishaw into the Shar-i-nao where, behind the high walled gardens, were the diplomatic quarters and the classier hippie hotels. He left the trishaw and walked down the footpath which was covered with antique rugs and jewellery of the street vendors until he saw what he wanted, two stoned-out-looking French boys lounging against the hood of a gleaming white Citroen DS, enjoying the afternoon sun.

'May I speak to you?' he said in French, his voice low and urgent.

They were surprised to hear this stocky, hawk-eyed Afghan speak their language. Charles told the two travellers a tale about how he had been stopped by the police for hashish and how he had jumped from the police station. He offered them \$200 to drive him east to the Pakistan border. They agreed. Near the border Charles waited in the car by the side of the road until he saw a van which he hailed. It was full of young people on their way for a holiday in India. Charles told them his colourful story about drugs and police persecution. He asked them to hide him. A few minutes later Charles crossed into Pakistan's Khyber Pass on top of the van rolled up in a Persian carpet.

Paris, sixteen days later, August 16, 8 a.m.

It was warm already. Bees buzzed around the boxwood hedges, and the brass doorknobs shone in the morning sun.

The blinds were up in all the windows of the quiet street and one by one the cars pulled out of the driveways as residents left for work. Charles sat in the rented Mercedes opposite the house watching the front door, waiting for Chantal's father to leave. He knew if the old man spotted him, he would call the police.

It was dangerous for Charles in France now. He had been sentenced to one year's jail *in absentia* for defrauding the bank, but he longed to see his baby daughter. He had a desperate plan to steal Madhu back and return with her to Asia, to reunite the little girl with her mother and rebuild his family. Charles had begun to form a plan to break Chantal out of jail. He would park a Volkswagen van with a trapdoor opposite her cell and tunnel under the ground into the jail. Madhu would be waiting in the van. All they needed were three false identities and they could start a new life. Madhu needed stability now; the travelling was harmful (the air-conditioning in hotels gave her colds) and Charles did not want her to suffer the same insecurities as he had as a child. The door of the house opened and he saw Chantal's father walk to the car with his briefcase and drive away. A few minutes later, Charles was ringing the doorbell.

'Forgive me for disturbing you so early in the morning, Mrs Lemaître,' he said, smiling reassuringly.

The woman's mouth dropped open. Her son-in-law looked pale and gaunt, as though he had suffered and changed.

'Chantal is sick and they let me bring her back to France. She's asking for you now and she wants to see Madhu. We're at the Hilton.'

Mrs Lemaître asked Charles into the house. As she got herself ready, Charles embraced his daughter. She had grown so much in six months, and now she was walking. She looked well and happy, and he dressed her.

'What's wrong with Chantal? How serious is it?' Mrs Lemaître kept asking.

'She'll have to go to the hospital for tests, but I don't think it's too serious. Come quickly, let's go.' He didn't give her time to think.

Twenty minutes later Charles, carrying Madhu, led Mrs Lemaître into the lobby of the Hilton Hotel and up to his empty room. He was registered in the name of a student

whose passport he had stolen in Pakistan. Charles picked up the phone. 'Hello, reception? Can you tell me if Mrs Sobhraj is with the doctor now? Yes? Thank you.' He turned to his mother-in-law, 'The hotel doctor is seeing her. She'll be back in half an hour.' Charles suggested he order breakfast from room service while they both waited for her. Mrs Lemaître accepted the invitation and Charles played happily with his daughter. He hadn't seen her since the night he escaped from Willington Hospital in Delhi and Chantal had put her on a plane with the returning tourist. Room service arrived with the breakfast tray and Charles added sugar and cream to the coffee and took a cup over to his mother-in-law. She drank it and collapsed on the floor.

Charles cradled his daughter against his waist and collected his small attaché case. Outside the door he hung the notice, Do Not Disturb. At the reception desk where he had already paid two nights in advance, he told them not to wake his elderly relative who needed a long rest before taking an international flight. With the baby beside him, he drove along the Champs-Élysées and headed for the Swiss border.

Rawalpindi, Pakistan, September 3

It took Charles three weeks of evasion and adventure to return from Paris to Asia. Now he sat in the front seat of a rented Chevrolet with his daughter in the back curled up on the lap of an English girl he had hired as her nurse. The landscape was dusty and drab and mangy dogs roamed on the side of the road. He was on his way to free Chantal. He could do anything. What was an Afghan jail against Charles?

His life was charmed, he often thought, something special. In the Mercedes he had survived a five-car pile up in the mists of the Swiss Alps and the police had escorted him to hospital with Madhu for a check-up. Both of them were fine. At the Yugoslav border there was another narrow escape. Madhu had pissed on his stolen American passport and the photo of himself came unstuck, which aroused the suspicions of the border guards. They had searched the car and found a dozen false passports and a set of radio microphones which he had planned to smuggle to Chantal (they looked like fountain pens and could tune to any FM radio frequency). The Yugoslavs

had placed him under house arrest at a nearby hotel, but with little Madhu in his arms he wandered into the kitchen searching, he said, for a special food for his child and he slipped out of the staff door. From there it had been a taxi back to Belgrade and some fast talking with friendly tourists to persuade them to smuggle him and his daughter into Trieste. Freedom again! In Rome he bought a batch of passports on the black market and flew to Rawalpindi, where a few days before he had booked into the Intercontinental Hotel. This morning, after filling the suitcases in his room with newspapers, he had hired an air-conditioned Chevrolet from Akbar Tours and told the driver who, by law, came with the car, that he wanted to explore Pakistan's tribal frontier. Now he was on the road to Peshawar, 160 kilometres to the northwest, a lawless town near the Afghan border.

As Marilyn, Madhu's nurse, struggled with the baby's nappies and bottles, Charles refined his jailbreak plan. He wondered whether Marilyn might, for a price, agree to get herself busted in Kabul where she would be sent to the same jail as Chantal. He would teach her to draw up a precise set of plans of the layout. With another girl, someone to visit Marilyn and smuggle the plans out, it would be easy to tunnel inside and free his wife. All he needed was money to pay for a fast getaway car. The two Frenchmen who had helped him escape from Afghanistan would be waiting for him now in Peshawar with their Citroen. He had already offered them the job. Guns! He would smuggle them to Iran where he had contacts in the anti-Shah underground. In the boot of the Chevrolet he could cross the border with two dozen sten guns.

Charles looked at the fat Pakistani behind the wheel. This one would be no problem. When they stopped for lunch at a small town, Charles took the teapot from the serving tray and passed a glass to the driver.

Peshawar, 4 p.m.

Under the relentless sun everyone shoved and pushed fiercely, shouting and spitting. As the men strutted by with their guns and knives dangling from their belts, their dark hooded eyes, under dirty turbans, ignored Charles. Madhu was at the Park

Hotel with her nurse. He walked down the narrow alley of Quissa Khawani, the street of storytellers, where the frontier tribes, the Pathans, Afridis, Tajeks, Uzbeks, and a smattering of Western junkies came to buy supplies. Charles felt at ease in this town where the code of the Pathans demanded that all fugitives be granted the right of asylum. At a chemist's he bought disposable syringes, a bottle of Largactyl, and packets of Mogadon and Mandrax. The Chevrolet's driver was already sleeping in the boot of the car, but Charles wanted to give him a shot of Largactyl before dumping him on the way to Darra, the village of the gunsmiths.

Charles walked back to the hotel. It was so hot in the green windowless rooms that no one closed his door. As Charles strolled through the courtyard, his glance fell appraisingly on the array of stoned overlanders stretched out on their beds. He saw a blonde girl wearing jeans. She was travelling alone and accepted his offer of a free, air-conditioned ride to Teheran. Her name was Diana and she was Dutch. Delighted with her luck, she climbed into the back seat with Madhu and Marilyn.

Charles headed south into the hard, rocky hills towards Darra, a town that had been duplicating western armaments for over a hundred years. It was dusk. The trucks rumbled past them, painted like carousels, strung with lights and rattling with loose chrome. A caravan of camels trod in ungainly shambles on the side of the road. He drove until he came to a long, straight stretch of desert with no further signs of people and stopped the car beside a crumbling mud hut. He could drop the driver here. By the time the man woke up they would all be lounging by the pool at the Royal Teheran Hilton. He opened the boot, and stench filled his nostrils. The fat man lay in a pool of his own filth.

Charles began to lift him up, but when he saw his face, with its eyes staring unseeingly and the mouth hanging open like a door off its hinges, he realized that he was dead. The boot wasn't airtight, so how could he suffocate? Unless the Largactyl was contaminated or, maybe, the man had a weak heart. Yes, that was likely; he was so overweight. Or the heat ... it must have been hot in there.

It was irritation he felt, more than anything else. Charles already had enough problems. Flies had discovered the

corpse and buzzed around his handiwork as he stood lost in thought. He heard a gasp. The Dutch girl was standing behind him. Her mouth dropped open to show her stained teeth. 'Diana, I told you not to get out of the car,' Charles said.

They got back into the Chevrolet and Charles studied the map. Madhu had fallen asleep. In the now tense atmosphere of the car, Charles wondered whether the Dutch girl would tell the police. Luckily she knew nothing about him, not even his name. Still, he would have to make her feel involved, implicated, to buy her silence with fear. He had better forget the arms deal.

They drove through the night heading southwest to Quetta. The country changed from desert to fields and from fields to forest. Somewhere, they crossed a bridge. Charles turned the car down a dirt track between the trees and got out. Moonlight shone across the rushing waters in a silver path. He thought it must be the Indus River, swollen by the monsoon. Madhu and her English nurse were sprawled asleep on the back seat. He had to get rid of the body — intelligently, coolly.

'Diana, lend me a hand. You've seen the beginning; now you must see the end.' Charles unlocked the boot, averting his face from the smell. He dragged the body through the pine needles to the bank of the river. 'Quick, help me undress him,' he said to the girl. They stripped the body. Then Charles rolled it into the swirling waters where it bobbed like a shining white seal before disappearing. Startled by a gasping sound, Charles turned to see Diana doubled up against a tree, vomiting. 'It's all over now, little one,' he said in a soothing voice and curling his arm around her shoulder. 'Accidents happen. Don't worry, no one will ever know.' The Chevrolet continued its journey westward to Iran.

The women's section of Dehmazang Jail in Kabul was a warren of old stone buildings which housed several western drug offenders, and it was here that Chantal prayed every day for an earthquake to level the walls. Charles's escape was the talk of the jail, but what could she do? Her trial wasn't scheduled for months and she had no money to pay a lawyer to apply for bail. She wrote to her parents and to Benard who

would not help her and did not even seem surprised at her predicament. She wondered if, unconsciously, they all thought it would teach her a lesson. Her only hope was that Charles would make contact and send her the money she needed. But Chantal's first news of her husband's movements came from her father in a cold, succinct letter informing her of the facts of Madhu's kidnapping and the drugging of her mother at the Hilton Hotel. Chantal's father had contacted the police, but no traces of Charles or his child had been found. Maybe he was on his way to her. Maybe it would not be an earthquake that levelled the walls, but her husband.

Royal Teheran Hilton, September 27, 2 a.m.

Carrying Madhu in his arms, Charles walked into the lobby of the lavishly appointed hotel, owned by the Shah of Iran's family, with Marilyn beside him holding baby gear. It had been a relief to check in here after the punishing fifty-hour drive across dirt roads from Pakistan. Madhu had been restless and whining; Marilyn, increasingly unable to cope; and the Dutch girl, Diana, sullen and uncooperative after the unfortunate incident with the Chevrolet driver.

Charles stopped at the desk, where he sensed a change in the clerk's manner; a flicker of awkwardness, and, looking around, he noticed that the usual lobby attendant had been replaced. Charles guided Marilyn to the lift. Until yesterday everything had gone so well. The contraband passports he had picked up in Rome had been sold, and the two French travellers with the Citroen who had followed him across the border into Teheran were now standing by, ready to take him to Kabul. In order to implicate the Dutch girl in criminal affairs, he had persuaded her to drop some Mogadons into the drink of a tourist at the bar of Teheran's Intercontinental Hotel. Then taking Marilyn with him, he had robbed the room. But yesterday Diana had taken fright and run away. Charles had spent most of his time since searching for her. Back in his room Charles wondered if the police planned to arrest him. Probably some tourist had complained. Should he run? No, it would not be so serious. With cash, it was easy to smooth things out in Asia, and, anyway, Madhu made flight cumbersome. Watching Marilyn undress his sleepy child and

put her in the crib, he said nothing about his apprehensions. As usual, he slept soundly.

In the morning, mist was still hanging over the Elburz Mountains. Charles could see them through the window as he was shaving, and they seemed to surround the hotel like a huge wall. Marilyn was dressing Madhu when he heard the knock at the door. He had not ordered breakfast so he knew it must be the police. Charles stood near the bathroom, naked from the waist up, watching Marilyn put Madhu on the bed and open the door. A man wearing a grey suit and dark glasses came into the room. Charles saw the barrel of a machine gun pointing at him. *Trapped: stay cool, smile, co-operate.*

'Good morning,' he said with his habitual affability. 'You want something?'

'Police,' the man said.

Suddenly the room was filled with seven other men in suits and dark glasses, all carrying guns.

'Who is this?' asked the first man. Marilyn, in a T-shirt and panties, sat down on the bed and took the baby on her lap.

'My daughter and her nurse. Do you mind if I finish shaving?' Half his face was covered with foam.

'It will have to wait.'

Smiling politely, Charles dabbed the foam off his face with the towel he was holding. Five men had stationed themselves along the plate glass window as though they expected him to try to jump from the balcony. The one who appeared to be the boss picked up from the bed a black attaché case with a combination lock.

'Open this, please.'

'I'm afraid it's jammed,' Charles said.

'Okay, we'll blast it open.' He started to take his gun from his holster.

Charles smiled again and shrugged. He flicked the combination and, opening the case, placed it on the bed. Inside were passports and valuables stolen from tourists. Several of the passports had his own photograph inside them.

'Which one of these is yours?'

'That is difficult to say.' He smiled apologetically. He wasn't worried. He had good contacts in Teheran.

'Come with us.'

'Certainly. Just give us a second to finish dressing.'

As Marilyn pulled on her jeans he smiled at her reassuringly. Followed by Marilyn and Madhu, Charles was escorted downstairs and out of the back entrance of the Hilton. Four black Mercedes were parked in the driveway. A few of the hotel staff members who saw what was happening shrank away as they walked by. Charles realized he was in a much worse situation than he had first thought. He was in the hands of the SAVAK, the Shah's secret police.

One of the men blindfolded him, and the car drove off. The police had the rest of his luggage in the car. When they searched it, they would find some hashish, ammunition, and equipment for altering passports. Such minor infringements of the law did not interest the SAVAK. It would only be during his interrogation at their headquarters that Charles would learn why he had been picked up by the secret police. The Dutch girl, Diana, who had run away from him, had spent the night with an Iranian. She happened to tell him about a Frenchman she knew only as 'Charles' who had smuggled a load of passports into Iran. Her lover turned out to be an agent for the SAVAK. Aware that the passports could be destined for the anti-Shah underground, he arrested Diana. After she was questioned, the raid was launched on Charles's hotel room. It would take Sobhraj more than a few hundred *rials* to get out of this.

For Chantal, cramped in her cold stone cell, September and October passed slowly. Still there was no word from Charles. She tried to be brave, to be worthy of him, but the uncertainty of her future began to depress her. She had no one she could talk to who would understand except Alain Benard. She wrote to him frequently. At the end of October she learned that her husband had been arrested in Teheran and that Madhu, through the auspices of the French Embassy, had been sent back to her grandparents in Paris once more.

A few weeks later she received a cutting from the October 22 issue of the *Journal of Teheran* which reported the charges against Charles in Iran, the usual ones of passport forgeries and tourist muggings, and stated that since Charles was being sought by Interpol, he would be returned to France to face other criminal charges. Chantal was shocked by the news and wrote to Benard, 'What we have always feared for Charles has

happened — his extradition!’ She wished she could do something. Could Benard help? ‘If you saw the face of our Charles in the picture...’ she wrote, ‘he looks exhausted, at the end of his revolt against himself and his dramatic situation. I’m afraid he has lost his will to hold onto life. I am afraid he might commit suicide.’

On December 18 she received a letter from Charles. He was sure he was going to be sent to trial for another affair, this time in Pakistan. Chantal wrote to Benard, ‘I have the impression that this time Charles has reached the summit of all the idiotic things he could do. Since Delhi, he has been behaving like a moth hurtling itself towards a flame it knows will burn it after having, in desperation, torn a wing. In search of what? I have no idea. It is inexplicable. It must be some need for destruction.’

In Teheran the Dutch girl, Diana, had made a statement to Interpol about the death of the Chevrolet driver, and the disposal of the body in the river. Charles was now sought by the Pakistani police for this alleged abduction and killing. On October 30 the *Pakistani Times*’s report of the arrest of a ‘gang of international swindlers in Teheran led by a Frenchman named Charles’ revealed that the Chevrolet’s driver had been Mohammad Habib, thirty-five years old, the father of three children. His body had never been found.

On January 12, 1973, Chantal was finally freed on bail. She would not be allowed to leave Afghanistan until she had paid a fine of 50,000 Afs, about \$1,000. It would take her family three months to bypass legally the stringent French regulations on the export of currency. In the intervening period as she waited for her case to be cleared up, Chantal met a young American traveller in Kabul buying carpets and silk. They became friends. At the end of April Chantal was at last allowed to go home. She had often written to Benard of how she would like to help Charles prepare his legal defence. Now that she had a plane ticket to Paris, she would stop off in Teheran to see her husband. ‘My love for Charles has ripened,’ she wrote to Benard. ‘At present I am clear, Alain, totally clear, because I have suffered. I can’t wait to clasp Charles and my child in my arms again.’

Teheran, October 1973

A black Mercedes drove through the gates of Ghars Jail and, a few minutes later, drove out with Charles in the back. He had just finished a twelve-month sentence. The car swayed along mountain roads past truck wrecks, and women hidden beneath their dark-coloured chadours carrying pitchers on their heads. Goats and hens scattered from the wheels. Charles wondered if the hawk-nosed men in the car in their suits and dark glasses would stick to the deal.

When the secret police had burst into his room at the Royal Teheran Hilton the year before and found his cache of passports, Charles had been cool and optimistic. But when the agents of SAVAK suspected he was supplying the anti-Shah underground he was certain they would torture him first and then blast a hole in his head. Madhu was with him then; he couldn't try any escape tricks. He had been forced to sit tight and make a deal. Charles had given them the names of two Iranians against the Shah, and, in return, SAVAK had handed him over to a civilian court. The year inside had gone smoothly and he had heard often enough from Chantal. By now she must be back in Paris with Madhu, waiting for him. But he was still afraid. These men in the car knew he was wanted by the police in eight countries. Two of these, Afghanistan and Pakistan, shared a border with Iran.

As night fell, they reached a neat, scrubbed town lined with flags and pictures of the Shah. Charles was given chai and a kebab and put in a roadside lock-up. The next day the Mercedes sped through the desert, then passed icy cabbage fields and sooty mud hut villages. Finally Charles noticed a long line of parked cars snaking up the mountain. He knew where he was. He had come this way many times. The Mercedes roared past the waiting line and the wayside truck drivers cooking dinners by campfires. At the top of the hill stood a compound of tin sheds. The Mercedes pulled up. The man sitting beside him opened the door and gestured to him to get out. The plump man in the front heaved himself out of the passenger door. He took a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Charles.

'*Laissez passer,*' he said and pointed toward the customs' shed. '*Alvida.*'

'Goodbye,' Charles said. '*Merci.*'

'*Bon voyage,*' the other man said and shook his hand. The Mercedes made a U-turn, and the two men got inside. Charles picked up his attaché case, now empty of stolen passports, and walked toward Turkey and freedom. He would always be grateful to SAVAK.

Istanbul, November 1973

The Istanbul Hilton stood on the steep banks of the Golden Horn, its balconies positioned to catch the view of the blue sweep of the Bosphorus and the minarets silhouetted against the sky on the opposite bank of the legendary waterway.

'Okay, Guy, I'll cable a ticket and meet the plane.'

Charles put down the phone and walked across the room to the balcony where the evening breeze brushed his skin. '*Allah Akbar ... Allah Akbar*,' the cry of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer rose above the screech of traffic and the hooting of ferries. He sat cross-legged on a low stone table. From this vantage point at the edge of Europe, he looked across the crowded waterways toward the ancient fortresses on the darkening shore of Asia. He was free. It was amazing. But there was not that heady rush of euphoria which usually followed a lucky escape. On the river, rush-hour ferries plied between the two continents, making him remember his own first crossing with Chantal, both sitting exhausted on the hood of the battered *Triumph*. 'Now it's your turn to cross a culture,' he had said to her. As the wind had rustled her long brown hair, she had smiled with that sweet, gentle look he could never forget.

It was a miracle he was still alive. But since he had heard the news about Chantal, he hardly cared any more. She had left him. Chantal had taken little Madhu and gone to live in America with another man, a traveller from New York she had met in Kabul. Now she was suing him for divorce.

It was dark now, and all the minarets were silhouetted against the sky like rockets. In his meditation position, with his back straight, he stared at the patterns of twinkling lights, letting them blur as tears filled his eyes. His emotions, which he had kept locked in the deep, dark swamp of his unconscious, had broken free. Everything was hopeless. He was nothing, a nobody, a pariah. The self he had constructed by

years of effort had crumbled now that Chantal had left him. 'I can't go on like this forever,' he thought. 'If I do, I'll be destroyed.' He had always avoided thinking of his past. Now this shock of betrayal had reopened the wounds of his childhood, when love and security had turned into abandonment and rejection. It had happened again, this time to little Madhu. His own child had been wrenched from him. The cycle of suffering went on.

Charles closed his eyes. He thought back to the hunger strikes in Poissy Jail before he met Alain Benard. He remembered the inner core of hardness, and he slid his mind into a deep, searching meditation. The pain could be stopped. It was his choice. He imagined his mind as an enormous ocean and then he turned this sea into ice. Charles sat straight and breathed slowly. He pushed this mighty Arctic down through his body and brain until it quenched the cauldron of his memories, crushing the pain. The Buddha had said that suffering was caused by attachment, so from now on he would set himself free. Strength, survival, victory — easy. He would internalize the power of karate and put muscle on his will.

The cry of the muezzin came with the rising sun. A flock of pigeons flapped above the jumble of red tiled roofs, and horses clattered on the cobblestones below. The two bridges across the Golden Horn, the Galata and the Attaturk, opened in the middle for the dawn procession of ocean liners. From the stillness of the water their mournful foghorns echoed up the banks of the Horn. Charles stood up, stretched his arms, and walked inside. He called room service for coffee and croissants. Moving the furniture to make a space near the wall, he stripped to his underpants. He drove his body through a series of bending exercises and then, standing up, held his arms in front and, sliding his right leg behind him, lowered himself to a kick stance. Circling his left arm, he kicked his right leg as high as his head, slapping his toe with his free hand. He did this ten times and then switched legs. He executed twenty circular kicks, balletic leaps which spun his body 360 degrees one way and then the other, ending with a fierce slap of foot against hand. There was a knock at the door, and Charles motioned the boy to leave the tray on the bed. Charles finished his routine by running across the room and

jumping five feet in the air, striking the wall with his feet and landing lightly on all fours. This he did ten times, then he bathed and dressed in a new blue suit and sat down to breakfast. He felt like a new man, he would later say of this day, but a hard man.

On November 15 Charles was waiting at Istanbul's Yesilkoy Airport when his brother Guy Roussel flew in from Paris to join him. They took a cab to the centre of the city. Guy had not seen Charles since he was sixteen, five years ago, when the older brother he had always idolized came out of Poissy Jail and brought his fiancée down to Villa La Roche to meet his mother. A few days ago when Charles had phoned him in Paris at his job at the wallpaper warehouse and invited him to Turkey, his fantasy came true. Guy had left France without a second thought.

At the park surrounding the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia, the taxi turned left into a maze of side-streets lined with cheap hotels in cramped terraced buildings with tiled roofs and faded pots of geraniums. Guy had not been out of France since he was eight, when the family lived briefly in Senegal. All he remembered was his older brother leading the games and stealing toys for him. Charles booked him into the Eiffel Hotel and took him on a tour of the city.

'I work scientifically, now, Guy,' he said to his brother. 'No stick-ups or knockouts. My main weapon is psychology.'

Little boys trailed them, selling postcards and Turkish Delight, as the brothers rounded the corner where a huge glazed dome glittered in the sunlight. Tourists milled around, and Guy was filled with the wonder of being twenty-one and on an adventure in a foreign city.

'You look a bit like a chicken coming out of an egg,' Charles said to Guy, who was wearing a brown leather jacket and tight bell-bottom jeans. His brown hair was lightly slicked back with oil.

He smiled at Charles and said, 'I've never been on a plane until today.'

'With me you'll be using them like taxis.'

'I haven't even been in many taxis,' he said. Guy was younger, slimmer, and more Asian-looking than Charles, but he had the same prominent cheekbones and fine grave features.

'Guy, I'll show you a different kind of life. Growing up with our mother and Jacques on his miserable soldier's pay, it makes you think you're lucky when you get a new pair of shoes.' The two men came to a park surrounded by the dust-caked vans of overland travellers. 'So, tell me, how are Noi and Jacques?'

Charles and his mother had not been in contact for three years, since she had scolded him for losing all his money in Monte Carlo. Noi had since kept up with his movements through Alain Benard.

'Poor old Jacques is still in the hospital,' Guy said. 'He gets worse all the time. You know, one night he escaped from the hospital and turned up at the front door in his pyjamas. Noi called the police to take him back.'

Charles showed no surprise. 'If only Jacques had met a nice little French girl instead of our mother, he would have been fine. With Madhu, at least I tried to be a good father.'

'She's beautiful, I saw her,' Guy said.

'When?'

'In Rouen. Chantal came and showed Madhu to Jean-Daniel.'

'Did she say anything about me?'

'She said she left you because she thought you were going to be shot.'

'Who told her that?'

'The French Consul in Iran, I think. She stopped there on her way home from Kabul. She was looking for you after she got out of jail. I think she asked to see you, and they said it was impossible, that it was the end for you.'

'That French Consul is a bastard,' Charles said. 'I'll get him one day. What else did she say?'

'Oh, that whatever she did in the future would be for the sake of Madhu ...' Guy's manner suddenly became coy.

'Yes?'

'That she still loves you.'

'Yes, she had to do it,' he said, matter-of-factly. 'I always told her that if anything serious happened to me, she should find someone to take care of her and our little Madhu.'

At the end of the park Charles led the way across a road to the Pudding Shop. Charles and Guy sat at a table near the door, looking across a chaotic vista of jeans and khaki shorts with

splashes of jade and ivory and a tangle of shoulder-length hair. There were noisy discussions in several languages, and it seemed the only Turks in the restaurant were the waiters and cooks. Signs hung on the walls warning of the dangers of getting caught with hashish. Guy grinned broadly at his older brother. For him, this was a bizarre environment.

'So, this is your trip — hippies.'

'No, not really. I work mainly in the big hotels,' Charles said, 'but anywhere people have a lot of cash and no routine is good. Like where I am now, at the Hilton. Every day travellers deal with new faces, and so it's natural for them to make friends with strangers. Once they decide you're their friend, the guard drops.'

A beefy traveller covered in grime and hauling a huge rucksack came in the door and stood staring at the counter, his eyes fixed on the custard tarts. 'Man, I've been dreaming of this since Isfahan,' he said aloud to no one in particular.

'It's one thing to befriend these kids,' Guy said, lowering his voice a little. 'It's hard not to, but what about the straights with bread?'

Charles ordered two Cokes from the waiter. 'Everyone has one weakness, Guy,' he continued in a tone of controlled patience, 'gambling, women, boys sometimes, diamonds, drugs. As soon as you know, you let it drop that you have access to this wonderful girl, or gem dealer or drugs, or maybe an amazing investment.'

A woman in an Afghan couchi dress, her eyes ringed with Kajal, wearing a gold ring in her nose, smiled at Charles as she went out of the door.

'You like the fancy dress?' Charles said. 'Look. For this kind there is one performance, a kind of hippie theatre —'

'But why do you bother?' Guy interrupted. 'What do they have?'

'In this business you bother with everyone,' Charles shot back. 'Never turn down a chance to meet anyone. A contact is a resource; if not now, then later. And with the hippies it's quick. It takes, oh, about ten minutes to take a wallet and a passport.'

'But what's inside a hippie's wallet, Charles?' the younger brother asked, gazing around at the Pudding Shop's raggle-taggle clientele.

'You'd be surprised. A lot of these kids are carrying \$1,000 in travellers' cheques; the drug dealers, more. Don't judge by appearances, Guy. Not all entrepreneurs wear suits. I'll teach you better ways to sum up a person's assets than by his clothes.'

'But all these — ' he looked around him. 'They must be junkies. So many of them are so thin and sick looking.'

'That's what I used to think. Actually, most of them are just nice young students having their last fling before they settle down. Their resistance is lowered from smoking hashish. Then they get sick, and go down with dysentery. After a few months on the road diarrhoea is just about their only topic of conversation. The businessman is just as easy as a hippie. He always has a plan. You find out what it is, subtly, by indirect means, and then drop part of it in your conversation as though it was in your own itinerary. "Oh, I'm doing the same thing," he'll say, and you smile in surprise. Always let them be the first to invite you to join them.'

Charles and Guy left the Pudding Shop and walked down Unkapani-Eminonou to the Galata Bridge which rocked on its pontoons. The noise, crowds, and traffic closed in on them. Men bent double with huge loads on their backs struggled to pass. Shoeshine boys grabbed at their hands. Pungent cooking smells wafted from cafés, and Guy stopped to buy some bread rings covered with sesame seeds. They crossed the crowded bridge, and he followed his brother up the steep cobbled street to Beyoglu and the Hilton Hotel.

Istanbul Hilton, November 17, 7 p.m.

Guy sat in a quiet corner of the Karagoz Bar watching the smartly dressed diners flow into the Terrace Restaurant. He felt high, just sitting there nursing a cognac and looking like a regular hotel guest. It was his second day in Istanbul, and he had never felt better. In Paris he had a propensity for gloom and, despite his good looks, didn't go out with many girls. Most nights he spent at home in a rented room learning English and listening to the Rolling Stones. He began to feel a new confidence in himself and a graceful ease in moneyed society. It was all thanks to Charles.

Guy saw his brother return with a portly middle-aged man and a tall woman with rabbit teeth wearing a purple kaftan and a black feather boa. The couple were laughing. Charles ordered a Scotch on the rocks for the man, crème de menthe for the woman, and a Coke for himself. The woman's red hair was pinned in a knot. When she finished her drink, Guy heard her say, 'I'm going off to pack and relax. You two boys have a night on the town.' The man ordered another Scotch and Guy saw his brother's hand move imperceptibly over the glass as he passed it to his jocular companion. A few minutes later the man left the bar.

Charles signalled Guy to join him. 'I spiked his drink. He's got the shits. Now he's under my control.' Charles told Guy that his contact at the casino said the couple must be carrying thirty thousand dollars and the same amount in jewellery. 'We're going to clean them out and be at the airport in three hours.'

'All my luggage is at the hotel.'

'Forget it. You can buy new clothes in Athens. Sssh! Hi, Richard. Feeling better?'

'Bloody awful. What do these wogs put in Scotch?'

'I've got some vitamins. They'll fix you up. We can't let it spoil our last night in Istanbul.'

As the man gulped down two tablets, Charles introduced him to Guy. The man was perspiring in his navy blazer and grey flannels, and his face was as pink as the carnation in his lapel.

Later, Charles and Guy dragged the groggy boutique owner to several nightclubs, and then they all went to see the newly released film *Serpico*. When the houselights went on, their new friend was wheezing and snoring. The two young Frenchmen, in a mood of exuberant bravado, walked him back to the Hilton. 'One too many,' Charles said a few times to curious onlookers as, supporting the man at each arm, they helped him up to his room. His wife opened the door. Her make-up had been replaced by a layer of face cream. Guy barely recognized her.

'Your husband's got a bit of stomach trouble,' Charles said with a look of concern. 'It happens all the time in Asia. What bad luck on his last night.'

'Bring him in, boys. He's such a bore,' she said, follow-

ing them into the middle of the suite. 'In Tangier he tried smoking kif and threw up all over a duchess. Put him in the bedroom.'

Holding each arm, Charles and Guy helped the semi-conscious man on to a bed. 'Go and talk to the woman,' Charles whispered. 'I'll search the room.' Guy wandered casually into the sitting room. His English was still basic. When he tried to relax and begin a conversation, his mouth went dry and he couldn't think of anything to say. He lit a Benson & Hedges.

'Can I pour you a drink?' the woman asked from where she sat on a sofa littered with fashion magazines.

He felt he needed one badly, but before he could answer the man's blurry voice drifted from the bedroom.

'Good God, man, what do you think you're up to?'

There was the sound of a slap, a thump, and then vomiting.

'You filthy pigs,' the woman screamed, jumping up. 'I'll fucking get the police.'

Guy froze as she picked up the phone. Charles dashed from the bedroom, turned up the built-in radio, and from behind, grabbed the woman around the mouth. 'Get the kit, Guy,' he said calmly. Guy took the pouch from his shoulderbag and handed Charles a syringe and a small screw-top jar. 'You do it,' Charles said with a patient smile. 'Can't you see my hands are full?'

Guy filled the syringe as the woman struggled. In the bedroom her husband could be heard stumbling and vomiting. Guy stood uselessly, brandishing the syringe. This was horrible. 'All right, you hold her. I'll do it,' said Charles. When Charles loosened his grip, Guy had trouble subduing her. Luckily Charles had managed to stuff a handkerchief in her mouth. Next, he lifted her bathrobe and jabbed her in the buttock. A few seconds later — it seemed like ages to Guy — she passed out.

Charles knelt down and twisted a huge diamond ring off the woman's finger. 'Okay, Guy, get one of their bags. Fill it with everything, cameras and jewellery. She's got a mink coat somewhere. I've seen her wearing it. Don't leave them with a thing. The more they lose, the more they must look after themselves, and the less time they have to try to catch us.' Charles put the man to sleep with an injection and helped

Guy stuff the bag. As they left the room, Charles put a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door.

'That was really disgusting,' Guy said as they sauntered to the lift.

'Yes? Why do you say that?'

'I can't stand the smell of vomit. It makes me sick.'

At the hotel desk Charles checked out from his own room and showed them the key he had just stolen. 'Would you mind opening my safe, please?' Guy tried to keep calm as Charles was led off to the hotel's vault. Ten minutes later the two of them were in a taxi on their way to Yesilkoy Airport. From the thick wad of stolen notes and travellers cheques, 'Yes, thirty thousand, at least,' he said, Charles peeled off a thousand U.S. dollars and gave them to Guy. 'Take the next plane to Athens. Book into the Alfa Hotel. I'll be there in a few days.'

Guy was bewildered by the pace. He asked, 'What about you?'

'I have business in Copenhagen. Then I must stop off in Spain and Rome,' Charles said. 'I won't be long, three days at the most.' He handed Guy the pouch containing the syringe and the sleeping draught. 'Get rid of this,' he said, disappearing into the crowd with the bag of stolen goods. Guy left the pouch in the gents' and in the early hours of November 18 he boarded a plane for the second time in his life.

Athens, November 29

One week later Guy was still hanging around his hotel room waiting for Charles to arrive. He had bought two new suits and some casual clothes and paid his hotel bill. His money was running low. Athens wasn't much fun. There was a curfew. To quell the demonstrations demanding his resignation, President Papadopoulos had imposed martial law. Students at the Polytechnic Institute were protesting against the military junta and the President had sent in soldiers with tanks. It was cold, there were no tourists, no girls. He was bored and lonely. And then Charles turned up in the lobby of Guy's hotel and pointed out of the window to a Fiat parked in the street.

'Chantal!' Guy exclaimed.

'She looks like her, doesn't she?' Charles said. 'She's American. We met in Copenhagen. I can't introduce you. I don't want her to have anything to do with my criminal life.'

In Guy's room the two men sat facing each other from the edges of adjacent beds. 'I feel good today, Guy. Business went well. You know, I've made love twice already this morning. When she comes, she makes the same sounds as Chantal.'

Guy was annoyed. His brother hadn't apologized about being late and leaving him short of his share of the money. Now, here he was boasting about his sex life. They argued. Instead of giving his brother more money, Charles told him it was time for him to try a job on his own. It suited Guy. Anything was better than hanging around this hotel.

Four hours later he phoned Charles at the Athens Hilton. 'I've done it.' He was exhilarated.

'Already?' Charles asked, doubtfully. 'How?'

Pleased at his brother's note of surprise, he said, 'Just like you taught me, Charles, with sleeping pills and smiles.' He grinned at the memory of the friendly Lebanese businessman. 'Two Mogadon in his café Grecque. He didn't have his passport on him, but I got a lot of cash. I'm still counting it.'

Guy's euphoria returned. Here he was, only twenty-one, and making his own way in the world. As he sauntered back to his hotel with the stranger's wallet in his pocket, the view of the Acropolis in the cold afternoon sun struck him, for the first time, with its beauty.

An hour later Charles came to Guy's room. Their fight was forgotten. 'Tomorrow I want you to do a big job.' He opened an attaché case filled with passports of many nationalities. 'These are going to Lebanon for the P.L.O.,' he said. 'You can leave in the morning.'

'I'd rather this afternoon if there's a plane,' Guy said. He was sick of Athens and eager to follow up on his success.

'Sure, if you feel like it.' Charles packed a set of walkie-talkies into another bag. He wrote down the name of a hotel in Beirut and gave Guy a thousand dollars.

'And this time, don't leave me alone while you chase girls,' Guy said as his brother slammed the door of the taxi which took him to Ellinikon Airport.

After a routine security check Guy sat in the departure

lounge sipping cognac. He felt high again and glad that his life in the warehouse was behind him. This is what he had often imagined; fun, travel, adventure, jet-setting the world with his older brother, living in luxury hotels, and making fools of the police. Soon he would be checking into the Beirut Hilton and going on a shopping spree. Then Charles had promised to take him on a big job in India, a surefire jewellery heist. At 4 p.m. Guy's flight was called, and he boarded the bus taking passengers to the waiting plane.

A swarthy man in a suit rushed up to where Guy sat with a suitcase on his knee and knelt on the floor beside him, rolling his eyes. 'Allah be praised! Allah be praised!' he shouted. The man bowed his head to the floor as everyone stared. 'Thanks be to Allah. He sent me the thief!' The man pointed to Guy. 'You! You take my money.' He began screaming, 'You! You!' and jumping up and down, waving his arms.

By two-way radio, the bus driver called the police who rushed aboard and ordered everyone to lie on the floor. It was Guy's bad luck that his Lebanese victim had recovered quickly and was on his way home on the same flight. Guy shook his head at the policeman, showing his French passport and denying that he had ever met the man. The bus returned to the terminal, and the young Frenchman and his accuser were taken to the police station. Guy's luggage was searched; he was arrested and taken in handcuffs to a police station in Athens. The walkie-talkie in his bag was more sophisticated than those used by the Greek military. Who was this French boy with a bag of passports? He was surely too young to be acting alone. Police questioned Guy most of the night.

In the morning Guy still stuck to his story. He was acting on his own initiative, he said. Police led him to a basement. An army officer with a silver-tipped cane opened a cabinet and pointed out an array of ancient-looking torture implements. Guy was stripped and tied face down to a bench. The officer spat on a rag and put it in his mouth. A black hood was put over his face. Other men came into the room and began beating his body with knotted ropes. At first it was like the times Noi had beaten him, saying she was going to give him ten lashes and then losing her temper. But, finally, she had stopped. These men just continued.

For the first time in ten years Guy began to pray. Men

jumped up and down on top of him. Others began whipping the soles of his feet. They soon felt as big as balloons, as though they were dipped in molten lead. 'I'm alone on this fucking dirty trip,' he wept to himself. 'Charles will never get me out.' Guy lost consciousness. When the officer revived him with a bottle of smelling salts under his nose and asked again who had sent him to Beirut, Guy sobbed, 'My brother, Charles Sobhraj. He's at the Hilton.'

About an hour later Guy was lying on a filthy bunk in a cell, moaning and rubbing his feet. The door opened and two policemen hurled Charles inside. Unruffled, he said, 'If only you could have held out for another hour, Guy, I would have been out of the country.'

'Oh God, man, I thought I was going to die!' His shame at his brother's arrival made him even more pathetic.

'Remember how I suggested you leave the next day?' Charles said as he walked towards where Guy was lying. 'You picked the flight yourself.' Charles was contemptuous of his brother's bad luck.

'Oh man, my feet! I can't bear it!' He was fighting back the tears.

'Come on, Guy, you'll be okay. But you've got to walk. Keep the blood flowing or they'll swell up.' He helped his brother to his feet and supported him as they moved slowly back and forth across the cell. In a soothing voice Charles said, 'It will be much easier if you and I swap identities, Guy. Interpol knows me and knows my escape record. It's better they think I'm a first offender. I can skip easier. Then I can come back and break you out.'

Guy agreed. The two looked similar, and the interrogating Greek officers failed to notice that the young first offender, Guy Roussel, had assumed the identity of the notorious Charles Sobhraj. It was a heavy yoke that Guy agreed to bear, unaware that his brother had been arrested by the Greek police in June 1971, on one of his periodic gambling sprees to the island of Rhodes. He had tried to recoup his losses by robbing tourists and Charles had escaped that time by jumping out of the window of a police station. The court had since sentenced him to thirteen months in jail *in absentia*. Apart from that, even Charles had lost track of the number of countries which sought him.

Charles walked his brother back to the bunk. While Guy lay on his side rubbing his feet, Sobhraj sat on the edge of the mattress staring at the floor. He was in a fury. Now the American girl knew he was a professional criminal and not an affluent European businessman. When the police had nabbed him at the Hilton that morning they had arrested her too, and pulled the diamond ring from her finger. It was the one he had given her from the job in Istanbul. 'As soon as I skip this place,' Charles said to his brother, 'I'm going to print myself a document which says I'm a secret agent, maybe for Iran or China. I'll show it to her. It'll convince her I'm not just a gangster.'

Three policemen walked into the cell, chained the brothers together and led them away.

Koridalos Jail, Athens, February 1974

Most of the foreign prisoners wore T-shirts and jeans. They played volley ball, strummed guitars or lounged on their bunks writing letters home. Some smoked marijuana, the contraband currency of jails. Charles began each day with a hundred push-ups and his improvised workouts of Kung Fu and karate. He took care of his appearance, usually wearing his blue suit and a pair of sneakers which, to look like dress shoes, had been blackened with boot polish. He kept his hair short and his face clean shaven. 'If you dress like a boss,' he told his cellmates, 'the guards will treat you like one.' Charles's cell was bare with none of the makeshift comforts others had scraped together, like curtains and lampshades, as though he expected his stay to be brief. The only concession he made was books which were neatly piled up on the floor by his bed, in German, French, and English. There were trashy thrillers and popular psychology, but Charles was usually absorbed in volumes by Carl Jung and Frederick Nietzsche. He kept a journal of his reactions to their views which grew to hundreds of pages of notes expounding his own ideas on politics and psychology.

Twice he had attempted to break out of the chains on his way to court. Each time he was overpowered by the guards. In February, two young drug offenders from the United States were placed in the adjoining cell, and Charles, along with

Guy, welcomed them to Koridalos and at the same time encouraged them to view their judicial future pessimistically. One of these Americans, Jerry from New York, was a former data processor for IBM who had dropped out to travel to Greece where he was busted for possessing marijuana. A stocky, quiet man, he readily agreed to Charles's plan of escape.

During the times Jerry's girlfriend visited the jail, she smuggled in needles and thread, a hacksaw, rope, and some thin iron spikes. During TV hour one Saturday afternoon, Jerry sat in the doorway of his cell with a pile of bent nails and a rock. He made a show of straightening the nails while Charles hid underneath the bed and attacked the concrete floor with a hammer and the smuggled iron points. Jerry was often out of synchronization, and the noise under the bed disproportionately loud, but Charles was right. No one noticed. 'People only see what they expect to see,' he told Jerry. After forty days they had tunnelled nine feet.

With bags sewn into their trousers, the men carried the earth to the meagre prison garden which gradually changed colour from brown to red. When there was no more room to dump the soil, they began flushing it down the toilets. The tunnel was close to completion when the pipes burst, washing red earth and faeces across the prison yard. The maintenance men were called, and a suspicious warden rotated the prisoners. Because the new cell occupants were bound to fall in the hole expertly camouflaged with cardboard, and in order to give Charles a chance to launch a new escape plan, Jerry voluntarily gave himself up to the guards. He was tortured and sent to a punishment jail.

In September, when Jerry was returned to Koridalos, Charles had organized another tunnel. This one was already fifty feet long, being a continuation of one dug by the Greek prisoners to the women's shower rooms, and it aimed for the outside road. Under Charles's leadership a dozen young foreigners of various nationalities worked on the scheme. To safeguard security all those involved had agreed to avoid transfer to another prison. Jerry was welcomed by Charles and invited to join the team. One day while he was playing chess with Charles in his cell, a wiry young Englishman came into the room.

'I've been told to pack my things,' he said. 'It must be a transfer.'

Charles looked up from the board. 'Well, Jeff, we have the agreement.'

'Yes, of course. That's why I came. You can have my left hand,' he said, holding out his arm in front of him and looking away at the wall.

Charles cracked the arm down on his knee, breaking the hand at the wrist. Jeff hardly flinched, and Jerry realized then that Charles could kill if he had to. He knew little about the past of the French-Vietnamese apart from rumours of his having run drug caravans through the Khyber Pass.

'I'm afraid we must make this more convincing for the stupid Greeks,' Charles said. Jeff nodded, and Charles picked up a piece of board, part of the bedstead, and whammed it down on the broken joint. Instead of being transferred to another jail, Jeff was sent to the prison hospital.

Early in the new year the tunnel had almost reached the planned exit. After shower recess on a Saturday morning, Charles organized the breakout. Twelve young men crawled sixty feet to the road. The guards were waiting for them. Everyone rushed back along the tunnel except one man who was caught and beaten. He gave Jerry's name. The guards wanted the ringleader. Jerry was beaten twice a day, at 6.00 a.m. and at noon by men with wooden clubs, metal bars, braided telephone wires, and bare knuckles. After several days of this he thought he was going to die, but he knew he would never give Charles's name no matter what they did.

The French-Vietnamese had electrified Jerry with purpose and hope and given him more insight into his own character than anyone else ever had. Sure, he knew Charles had manipulated him, played him like a piano, but he didn't care. He had liked the tune. Charles had taught him never to submit to circumstances, no matter how overpowering they might seem. Jerry realized that if he could withstand the torture, he could become the master of his future. This was the test of all he had learned from Charles. After six days of beatings when Jerry's body was a bloody pulp, the guards gave up and he was transferred to another prison. Jerry never talked, but Charles was implicated in prison-yard rumours, and he was ordered to be sent to a high-security prison on the island of Aegina. It

was a place reserved for incorrigibles and those facing the death penalty. From Aegina, no one ever escaped.

'You're a folk hero, now,' Guy said to his brother as he was stripping his bed and packing his books. 'Some of the others think you're superhuman.' Charles shook his head and said nothing. They shook hands. 'We nearly made it,' Guy said, 'but ...' He shrugged, defeatedly.

Charles had already emerged from twenty days' solitary confinement looking robust and cheerful, before the transfer to Aegina. 'The harder it gets, Guy, the more you must try.' The door opened, and Charles was ordered to pick up his things and follow the guard. As he went through the door he turned to Guy and said, 'Always remember that their desire to keep me locked up is no match for my will to be free.'

Aegina Island, April 1975

The mountain which rises gently from the sea on the horizon of Athens is the island of Aegina. In the spring of 1975 goats grazed on the hills among groves of almonds and pistachio trees. The ferries from Piraeus brought people on day-long trips to the beaches and pilgrims to its ancient convent. On the tip of one of the spits framing a port, rimmed with tavernas, stood the whitewashed chapel of Aghio Nikolaos with its sky-blue cupola. The tourists who straggled up the hill to visit ruined Doric temples were not taken on a tour of the grim stone building, formerly an orphanage, and which now housed the chief offenders of Greece and those waiting to be put to death.

In the two months that Charles had spent in his cell on Aegina, he had been working on another escape plan. Everything was ready to go. The syringe was hidden behind a loose brick. Now it was time to use it. Jabbing it into his arm, he filled the cylinder with his own blood, then squirted it into his cup and drank it, keeping most of it in his mouth. The guard was at the other end of the corridor. For once, he wanted to attract his attention. He kicked the bars of his cell and moaned. As he heard the footsteps running toward him, he lay down and began coughing noisily. By the time the guard reached him, he was choking in a pool of blood. The prison doctor diagnosed a peptic ulcer and recommended Charles's transfer to the hospital in Athens. The warden refused. He did not want this prisoner let off the island.

Later Charles was reading on his cot.

'How's it going?'

He recognized the broad twang of his Australian friend, Peter, the cat burglar. 'It takes a lot of blood to convince these Greeks,' Charles said.

The other prisoner, who was short and balding, glanced up and down the corridor. 'Man, I'm aching like hell,' he said.

'When the doc sees my bum, he'll declare a bloody emergency.' For the past week this prisoner had been using a Coca-Cola bottle to induce a prolapsed rectum.

Charles smiled. 'Everything's fine. I just got a message.'

They heard the guard coming towards them.

'Well, good luck,' the Australian said. 'You'll need it.'

'It isn't luck, Peter,' Charles reminded him. 'It's method.'

The next day, when Charles collapsed in his cell, his symptoms were more extreme. He was chained to a stretcher and carried aboard the ferry to Piraeus, the port of Athens.

Christian's face brightened up when he saw his superhero being carried into the hospital ward. Several days before, the slim, olive-skinned Corsican had been rushed from Aegina with all the symptoms of appendicitis and was now recovering from the operation. 'Mary's back,' he whispered quickly in French as Charles was carried past. Mary Ellen Eather, a young Australian nurse, had met Christian when she was travelling and wrote to him after he was jailed for the hash offence. Idealistic and bright, she had agreed to help him break out and when the pretty freckle-faced girl with shiny brown hair hanging down to her waist arrived to visit a patient, the guards did not look closely at the gifts of food she carried with her. The following day Peter was also admitted to the hospital. In Christian's bedside bureau was the food parcel Mary had brought to the ward that day. It contained a tin of orange juice, a pound of butter, and a loaf of bread. Inside the bread was a silvery skein of angel wire that could cut through steel. The butter concealed a small Spanish pistol. With a syringe Mary had drained the tin of juice and refilled it with petrol.

In the days that followed, Charles waited for a chance to jump the guard and lead a break-out, but, by the time he and Christian were due to be discharged, there had been no opportunity for them to make a move.

'Okay, tomorrow we try the second plan,' he told Peter and Christian over a game of chess.

'But what about me? My operation's in the morning. They won't send me back for days.'

'Tell them you refuse to go through with it,' Charles said. 'Say it's against your religion.'

The next day, on the morning of April 26, after signing a release absolving the hospital of responsibility, Peter was told to pack and he was led out to the police van where Christian and Charles were already sitting, with three Greek prisoners, all chained by their ankles to the floor. The doors clanged shut behind them, and the bolts fell heavily into place. Inside it was stuffy, with a tightly sealed row of small windows near the roof.

Five guards sat in the back with the prisoners, three in front with the driver. Charles joked with them in Greek, offering them cigarettes and chocolate bars. For hours he had laboured over these innocent looking candies. They had been melted down and mixed with strong doses of ground Mogadon sleeping pills, reshaped, and repackaged. The van jerked through the traffic to the port. The roar of trucks and motorbikes muffled the squeaking of angel wire cutting through chains under two pairs of grimy prison trousers.

'You don't eat it?' Charles asked a guard who had put his chocolate aside.

'I'm saving it for my daughter,' he said, grinning behind a bushy moustache.

The van came to a halt. From the sounds outside, the prisoners could tell they were at the port waiting for the ferry. The guards began playing cards while the prisoners stared at the sweat on each other's faces. Christian was shivering. Plan Two had failed. None of the guards had eaten the chocolate. They were prepared for Plan Three, but that seemed impossibly dangerous to Christian — maybe Charles was all talk; maybe he was crazy: the way he was sitting there with that distant smile on his lips as he worked with the angel wire.

'When are we getting out of here, Charles?' whispered the Corsican.

'As soon as the chains are finished. Cool it,' hissed Charles.

'But the ferry will be here in a few minutes. Can't you hurry up?'

'No. We have to be calm and wait for the right moment.'

'We'll never make it.'

'Relax, Christian. The Greeks are always late. Now we're going the dangerous way and the most dangerous is always the best.' He really believed that.

Every time the Corsican heard the hoot of a steam whistle,

he thought their ferry had arrived. It sounded again, closer. And Charles just sat there, smiling. Well, he liked action, violence. Christian would show him. He would go alone. 'I'm getting out of this shit hole.' As he spoke, he lifted his shirt and the bandage on his abdomen and ripped out his stitches. Screaming, he collapsed on the floor, his blood staining his clothes. 'I don't care. I'm not going back.' He was doubled up in pain.

'Hey, quickly! This man is sick,' Peter called out. The guards broke off from their card game.

'His stitches ...' Charles pointed.

An ambulance arrived, and the boy was carried from the van on a stretcher. Because of Christian they had missed the ferry, and there would be a long wait. In the stuffy, silent van the guards resumed their cards and the three Greek prisoners dozed off. With his feet Charles slid the severed chains under the bench. He looked across the aisle at the Australian.

'This is it! Now we go.'

'Are you sure, Charles? Can we make it?' The moment had come; Peter's eyes darted about nervously, like a rabbit's.

'Trust me, man, okay? Everything will be all right.' Working behind his jacket, Sobhraj opened a shampoo bottle which he had filled with petrol and poured it on a newspaper. 'Do you want a light, Peter?'

'You know I don't smoke.'

'Of course you want a light,' he repeated, flicking the lighted match onto the floor. Orange flame leaped into the air. The Greek prisoners jumped to their feet and tried to stamp out the fire. 'I'll do it!' Sobhraj said as he pulled a wad of pre-soaked rags from his pockets and kicked them into the flames.

Black smoke filled the air, and the van's upholstery caught fire. The five guards jumped out of the back and slammed the door. In excited voices they argued whether the van would explode or not. Peter looked desperately at Sobhraj who stood in the aisle quietly smiling and breathing slowly, his face averted from the smoke. The three Greek prisoners, who had not been chained, rushed down the aisle, kicking and screaming to get out. Sobhraj positioned himself behind them and, when the door opened, pushed them all headlong on top of the anxious guards. Taking advantage of the mêlée, he jumped out and disappeared into the crowd.

No one noticed him. In his rumpled blue suit he could have been any passenger after a long ferry ride. The jostling bystanders were intent on watching the drama taking place around the smoking van. Would it explode? Policemen struggled with fire extinguishers and traffic backed up in a frenzy of honking horns.

On the left side of the street were the docks, crowded with fishing boats, yachts, and the huge steam ferries which plied the Aegean Sea, linking its thousands of islands to mainland Greece. The pavement cafés were crowded. It was spring. The air was bright, and the sea flashed under the sun. Old men sat with their ouzo and black coffee, tapping their feet to the bouzouki music from a radio. Charles kept walking briskly, his hands in his pockets. 'Ai! Oy!' The crowds moved back. He heard the sounds of a chase. The balding Australian burglar was running toward him, followed by the guards waving their guns in the air. 'You're crazy!' Sobhraj yelled, but now Peter had caught up with him, and the guards had seen him. 'Split up! You go left; I'll go right.'

Sobhraj veered off around a corner and up the hill that led away from the docks. He rolled under a parked car and took off his suit and white nylon shirt. Underneath he was wearing jeans and a T-shirt. He waited, lying still, watching the feet hurry past. Out of his pocket he took a beard and moustache made in jail from his own hair. He spat on the prepared glue and stuck them both to his face. It had taken only seconds to assume this new identity, a routine he had rehearsed many times in his cell. The burglar had run onto the docks and been trapped. Charles waited until he could see no feet near the car and slipped out into the bright sunshine. He sauntered down the street and hailed a taxi.

By nightfall, Charles had made his way to Thessalonika, in the north of Greece. The next day he lifted a passport from an unwary French student and found a men's room in a small hotel near the Turkish border. He locked himself in a cubicle, lit a match and softened one end of a stick of sealing wax. He shaped this into a circle the size of a silver dollar. Opening the stolen passport, he eased off the bearer's photograph with a pocket knife and smeared it with butter. He pressed down the wax on the embossed seal, checked the imprint and waited for the mould to harden. Charles took out a small photo of

himself and pressed it face down on his facsimile wax seal. With the knife blade, he pressed down on the back of the picture, pushing it into the tiny grooves of the wax. The process took only a few minutes and he had lost track of the number of times he had done it. Now Charles glued his own photograph into the title page of the passport, careful to match his freshly faked seal with the official semicircular one on the page. His new identity was complete. The bearer's photograph was convincingly stamped with the seal of the Government of France.

Charles crossed over into Turkey, where he was still wanted by the police for the robbery at the Istanbul Hilton, and caught a bus to Ankara. Stealing another passport, Charles boarded an Air France flight to Delhi in the name of Alain Gittienne, a French photographer. He would seek his destiny in Asia, which he saw again now as his spiritual home, a place where the odds were in his favour.

He had escaped from the toughest jail in Greece. Despite all odds, it had happened again, truly a triumph of will. Charles sat in the plane drinking Coke. Below him was the flat, arid landscape of India, the colour of dull orange where occasional lumps of mud were clumped together in prehistoric villages. He was the tightrope walker, gazing down on the common herd. *The devotion of the greatest is to encounter risk and danger and play dice for death.* Charles had soaked up Nietzsche in Koridalos Jail. *The greatest joy of existence is to live dangerously! Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas. Live in conflict with your equals and with yourselves. Be robbers and ravagers as long as you cannot be rulers and owners, you men of knowledge!* Below him, the labours of teeming millions had left a modest mark of irrigation ditches and aimless coils of smoke rising up from the vastness. How he hated India, except as a land of easy pickings, and although its blood flowed in his veins, he rarely acknowledged it.

His father was dead. Rajni, his half-sister in Saigon, had written to him through Alain Benard while he was in jail. Hotchand had died of a stroke, and his ashes had been scattered over the Saigon River. When the news reached him, Charles had told his jailmates that he would be rich, but that wasn't true. Hotchand's Vietnamese wife, Chu, afraid that all the money would go to Geeta, the Indian wife in Bombay, had squandered his wealth. As Hotchand lay dying, she sold the furniture around him and lavished his life's savings on diamonds and gold. Charles would get nothing. Now he was a man without a father, without a fortune, without a home. He could never go back to Vietnam. The news had just been announced: the Americans had fled. Saigon had surrendered to the Vietcong, and his birthplace had been renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

When Charles landed in Delhi early in May of 1975, the old *Wanted* posters of him from the robbery at the Ashoka Hotel

still flapped from police station notice boards. He bought a pair of boots, flared jeans, a bright red shirt, and dark glasses and decided to let his hair grow. He would change his 'look'. His future was before him.

Charles spent two hundred dollars sending telegrams to friends and contacts in six countries. He cabled Alain Benard and said that he was having a good time. To his brother Guy and to Jerry, Christian, Peter, and others he had left behind in Greek jails, he sent his exuberant good wishes and self-congratulations.

Because of the two brothers' identity switch, Greek authorities believed it was Guy who had escaped. The remaining brother was being taken to court to be tried for passport thefts in the name of Charles Sobhraj. From Paris, Benard wrote to the Greek authorities suggesting that there was an identity confusion, and Guy tried in vain to prove who he really was. In the end he was saved by the officer with the silver cane, the man who had tortured him when he was arrested. In his own name Guy was sentenced to two years and ten months in jail.

On May 5, as the plane crossed the barren plains of Jammu on the flight to Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, Charles was so engrossed in conversation with a French couple that he was unaware of the covert glances of a young woman in jeans and a T-shirt who sat several seats in front of him. She was a serious looking girl with a sharp, intense face, deep blue eyes, and dark shoulder-length hair. When she overheard Charles speaking French, her own language, she was pleased.

This was the fifth day of Marie Andrée Leclerc's three-week holiday in India and the first time she had travelled overseas from her small town in Quebec.

Her companion, a young, balding accountant from Montreal, fastened his seatbelt, and Marie Andrée looked back at the Eurasian man. She hoped she might see him again.

Below, the landscape changed abruptly as the Air India DC9 crossed the barren Pir Panjal Range and dropped into the Vale of Kashmir. The terraced hillsides were patched with neat squares of green and gold, and streams ran down from the Himalayas into a network of connecting lakes which glistened up at the passengers like mirrors.

The famous houseboats on the lakes were rented from their proprietors at the Government Tourist Centre in the capital,

four miles from the airport. It was there amid the crowd of gesticulating Kashmiri landlords and earnestly bargaining tourists that Marie Andrée again caught sight of the man she had observed on the plane. He was arguing in English with a Kashmiri man in an embroidered skull cap and waistcoat, with the patient smile of an old hand. Although she couldn't understand what was being said, it was obvious that the man with the compelling Eurasian face was controlling the situation. The Kashmiri almost jumped up and down as he spoke:

'My dear sir, there are three double bedrooms, each one with a flushing toilet, meals included, also morning and afternoon tea. Fifty rupees a night, worth double.'

'We need only two of the bedrooms,' Charles said, 'So why should we pay for more?' He turned to his French friends. 'This man is unreasonable. There are plenty of other houseboats.' He knew it was a good deal but the locals despised bad bargainers.

'It has all the luxuries, sir,' the Kashmiri pressed on. 'Fully carpeted, with antiques, sterling silver. You will find it greatly to your liking. A very lovely view of a Moghul fort, sir, very high standard, worth the money.'

'No, we won't pay for a room we don't want.'

'May I suggest, sir, that you save money by sharing with other tourist people? It is often done.' He gestured at an uncertain-looking couple standing nearby, and Charles's glance lighted upon Marie Andrée and her accountant friend, Jules Dupont. He introduced himself and explained the problem. Yes, they would be happy to rent the third bedroom. Grinning like a cat in a TV commercial, the landlord hurried them all into his rickety sedan for the drive to Dal Lake.

Intersecting streams gushed beside the road; ducks paddled, dogs barked, women sat on the ground selling apricots. They drove down a track through an apple orchard and pulled up beside the lake. The giant cedars and willows shaded the banks and the huge, fanciful houseboats, each one outdoing the next in its display of woodcarving and paintwork, bobbed gently in the still water that reflected the peaks of the Himalayas. The landlord led the group to a boat built of yellow walnut carved with Islamic curlicues with pink gauze

curtains fluttering at its windows. The five travellers filed across the gangway to a front porch lined with pots of geraniums and chintz cushions. A miniature flight of steps at the stern led to the water where a skiff was tied. The landlord proudly showed them the rooms and introduced the cook, a stooped old man with a white beard and turban who ran out to show them his book of testimonials dating back to well-fed generals of the British Raj. That afternoon everyone stretched out in deck chairs on the roof of the houseboat while the bearer served afternoon tea, a British tradition continued on most of the craft on the lake. The white peaks of the mountains turned pink in the setting sun. A man in a long skiff piled with roses and lotus blossoms paddled from boat to boat, calling out: 'Flowers, groovy flowers for your sweetheart.'

As Charles watched Marie Andrée push her dark hair back from her face and stand at the railing looking out across the incredible beauty of the scenery, she reminded him of Chantal. The divorce had become final while he was in jail; it had been granted on the grounds of his incorrigible criminality. This woman, Marie Andrée, had that same proud way of throwing back her head, that apparent stubbornness which, once overcome, was eternally devoted. Chantal, he believed, still loved him. One day they would meet again and he would hold her and his little Madhu in his arms. In the meantime Marie Andrée was obviously very attracted, and he liked her. He decided to play a little game. The outcome mattered little; he was not about to become involved again with a woman; once was more than enough.

In the days that followed Marie Andrée, her balding companion, and the French couple toured the sights of Kashmir. The boatman picked them up at dawn in a shikara, a long skiff cushioned and curtained like a sultan's bedroom and the two couples floated off to the bazaars and carpet factories, the lakeside palaces and the terraced Moghul Gardens ... 'Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar.' Marie Andrée was irritable — how disturbing to be walking through the gardens of Shalimar, the Abode of Love, with an *ex* fiancé.

She was still friends with Jules, the plump accountant who trailed by her side, but once she had loved him. In Canada two years ago she had spent all her free time with him,

all her weekends and spare nights. They had even built a little house in the country together. She was happy then, wonderfully happy, except when his mother came to the house and André's manner would change. He became nervous and cruel. Was it to show his mother he preferred her to Marie Andrée? Still, they had loved each other. One Christmas they decided to get married and she was so excited. She designed her own wedding dress. It was beautiful. She had it crocheted. Her whole family was happy for her and she dreamed of children, a family. But months later, as it came close to the wedding, Jules Dupont had still not told his mother about his plans. So his mother had first heard the news from the next-door neighbours. 'You must both come and live with me,' she had demanded, dashing Marie Andrée's plans of living with her husband in the little house that both of them had built. Marie Andrée said no. She would not marry Jules Dupont. The wedding was cancelled and she did not regret it.

On the houseboat in Kashmir, Charles always refused invitations to join the other two couples' touristy outings. Once he had taken them all to dinner at an expensive restaurant in the town, but usually he went off on his own or stayed on the boat. Soon the holiday would be over. They would go their separate ways, and life would resume its provincial regularity for the girl from Quebec.

To Marie Andrée, Charles seemed aloof, as though he had more important matters on his mind than just enjoying himself, and he gave her the impression of being very profound and clever. He spent his time reading and from the fragments of his conversation he always seemed to be speaking from vast experience of the world, a well-spring of learning mixed with street argot and a suggestion of bright lights in faraway cities. He was wealthy, successful, charming, mysterious, and his physical presence electrified her. Sometimes, passing down the narrow corridor to their bedrooms, their bodies would touch in a way that disturbed her.

There seemed no situation in which he was not in control. At first, the floating merchants had besieged the boat, trying to sell tailored suits of Harris tweed and music boxes carved in walnut. This man, 'Alain', (as he was known to her), shooed them away with such offhand authority that they

never came back. Sometimes he would gaze across the Himalayas and let drop a cryptic remark about China and the advance of communism, 'they talk honeyed words, but they sharpen their stings,' as though he identified his future with all of Asia. And yet he was very French. Marie Andrée was a Catholic and she sensed that even the subject of the Almighty would not embarrass this man, like it did so many people, and as with the overzealous Kashmiri merchants, he would take it all in his stride.

He had a strange body, stocky and lithe, and very erotic. She watched him as he stretched out on a deck chair in the sun, self-absorbed and centred upon himself, almost as if he were his own goal. Close to him she felt excited, adventurous. His face, sometimes so scholarly and distant, lit up when he spoke to her. His tone of voice was an instrument of courtship. His business seemed vague, something international which caused him to travel a lot.

Charles was toying with her. Much later, when her love remained undimmed, a hidden burning flame, he wrote his own detailed account of his courtship of Marie Andrée Leclerc:

Did it happen on the last night? The second last night? He could not be positive.

The two couples had retired. Charles remained in the Edwardian-styled living room, stretched out on the crimson velvet sofa, reading. He was always reading. The door opened and Marie Andrée, wearing pyjamas, walked softly into the room. He looked up over the top of his glasses as she came through the doorway and asked, 'So, you're not asleep yet?'

'No, not yet,' she said, drawing the footstool close to the sofa and sitting down. In the soft pink glow of the lamps she looked very pretty and vulnerable. Looking up firmly into his eyes, as though she had been rehearsing her resolve to make this move, she said, 'May I kiss you?'

Charles returned her gaze without emotion as the boat rocked gently in the silence of the lapping water. In his head he counted the seconds and said aloud, 'Why not?'

He put his arms around her. For several minutes they kissed until Charles heard footsteps coming from the hallway

and pushed her away. Dupont, her ex-fiancé, was standing in the doorway in his robe.

'Come to bed, Marie Andrée,' he said sharply, ignoring the other man.

In the morning, when Charles and Marie Andrée were alone on the roof of the boat, he asked her what Dupont had said. 'Oh, he was angry,' she said, 'and asked if we kissed. I said no.'

'We'd better stop this here,' he said. 'I don't want to come between you.'

'Oh, he's nothing to me, Alain.' Marie Andrée told him that Dupont had once been her fiancé. It was over now and they travelled together on the understanding that both of them were free to do what they liked. 'We're good friends,' she said, 'but I'm under no obligation to him.'

'Maybe, but you sleep in the same bed.'

'Yes, but we do not make love,' she said.

'Well, why aren't you frank with him about me?'

'He might get angry and spoil our holiday.'

The merchants, their skiffs loaded with embroideries and carpets, were already skimming across the lake shouting their wares, and tourists from the other houseboats were heading out towards the bathing barge.

Charles said, 'Anyway, when we get to Delhi today, I'll be leaving you, so it doesn't matter.'

'Don't say that. I think I love you,' she blurted out. 'Don't you feel anything?'

'Maybe, I don't know,' he said. Western women were useful in Asia, especially pretty ones without criminal convictions. 'I don't like your cat and mouse game,' he said. 'Let me speak to Dupont.'

'No,' she said.

'As you like,' he replied, but he had already decided to have a talk with the affable accountant.

After breakfast the two men walked along the edge of the lake. Washing flapped on the lines hung between the willow trees, bright splashes of colour along the lush green of the shore. Charles asked Dupont if he was planning to marry Marie Andrée.

'If you are, I'll just disappear the moment we return to Delhi.'

'No, I haven't got a chance,' Dupont told him. 'Do what you like.'

After four days on the boat, Charles and the two couples flew back to Delhi. On the plane he sat next to Marie Andrée. 'I talked to Dupont,' he said. 'He loves you a lot. Why don't you marry him?'

'I already told you, it's over,' she said. 'But why did you tell him I made the first move?'

'I didn't want to take the blame for breaking up your relationship,' he said. 'My life is very complicated at the moment. It's not easy and, to be frank, I live outside the law.' Charles claimed later that he knew she wouldn't give a damn what he did, and his candour would only impress her. 'I like you very much,' he said, 'but what's the point? You live and work in Canada. I could never go there.' She said it didn't matter to her. 'You mean you would come to Asia and live with me?'

'Of course I'd have to think about it,' she said, 'but why not?'

'And I'd have to think about it too,' he said. 'You know, this is the only time in my life that a woman has ever been the first one to ask for a kiss.' His bewilderment was genuine. Charles had spent so long in jails that feminism had passed him by.

'I did it because I guessed you would do nothing, and time is short.'

When they arrived in Delhi, Charles and the two couples took three separate rooms in the Nirula, a small hotel off Connaught Circus. The next day they all took the morning express to Agra to see the Taj Mahal. In the evening they returned to the hotel. Charles asked Marie Andrée whether she would like him to find a way for them to be alone together and she agreed. He had not been with a woman since he was arrested in Athens, seventeen months ago. The French couple left the hotel and continued their flight to Bali, unaware that his courtship of Marie Andrée had distracted him from drug-ging and robbing them.

In the morning Charles was the first one of the three to go to the dining room. 'Come down to breakfast,' he called through

the door of the Canadian couple's room as he passed. At a table in the faded dining room he ordered coffee for three, and Dupont and Marie Andrée entered as Charles was filling their cups. After breakfast the three of them strolled around the dilapidated circular colonnades of Connaught Circus. Charles kept looking at his watch, waiting for the effect of the five Mogadons he had slipped in Dupont's coffee. After twenty minutes the accountant began to stagger.

'What's the matter?' Charles said. 'Are you sick?'

'I don't know. I feel dizzy.'

'It must be sunstroke from our visit to the Taj Mahal,' Charles said, holding him by one arm in case he fell, 'I told you to wear a hat.' Marie Andrée held the other arm and Dupont was helped back to the little hotel. Charles brought him a glass of water. 'The best thing for you is vitamins,' he said, handing him another sleeping pill. When the accountant was lying snoring on the bed, Marie Andrée followed Charles into his room.

The next morning as Marie Andrée lay beside him in bed, she asked Charles when he expected Dupont would wake up. 'Don't worry. He'll sleep until ten at least,' he said. But according to his calculations Dupont was awake already and he hid this from Marie Andrée because he wanted the other man to catch them together. It would force them both to face the facts. At seven-thirty there was a knock on the door and they heard the accountant shout, 'Marie Andrée, I know you're inside. I've been listening at the door for the last half hour. You spent the night there.'

'She will come to see you in your room in twenty minutes,' Charles called through the door.

They took a shower together and he asked Marie Andrée if she loved him. Oh yes, yes she did. Would she leave her job in Canada and come to live with him? Of course she would, and so she agreed to be frank with her former fiancé.

After she had been with Dupont a few minutes, Charles entered the room and told him to stop shouting at her.

'Listen, I asked you in Kashmir if you wanted me to leave. You said then that you didn't mind and that you weren't jealous. Now you have to face the reality.'

The two men talked it over and the accountant agreed he would have to step aside.

'All right, man, no hard feelings,' Charles said, giving him his hand.

Later that day Charles invited them both for a trip to Katmandu and Bangkok, offering to pay both air fares and all their expenses. From then on Marie Andrée moved into a room with the man who called himself 'Alain'. Their three days together in Katmandu were happy ones for Marie Andrée. Charles was attentive, romantic, generous, perhaps a little in love with her. Still paying the expenses, he swept the Canadian couple off for eight days in Bangkok where she grew closer to him than ever, and then, on May 25, the three of them returned to Bombay, where Marie Andrée and Dupont were due to catch their flight back to Quebec. It was a month since Charles had escaped from Aegina. At the airport he took Marie Andrée aside, leaving Dupont to supervise the luggage. 'Alain is not really my name,' he told her and explained that for reasons of business he must travel constantly and keep changing his identity. It sounded romantic, important -- he was an adventurer, a buccaneer, a man of a thousand faces. 'In case we lose contact,' he said, 'I'll give you my mother's address in Marseilles,' and as he spoke she wrote down Noi's address at Villa La Roche. 'And quick -- your address and phone number,' he said. 'I almost forgot.' He scribbled it down and slapped the other man on the shoulder.

'Well, Monsieur Dupont, I hope you enjoyed Asia.'

Yes, a wonderful holiday, the accountant assured him, picking up the bags as Charles embraced Marie Andrée. 'You will come back to me and be my little queen,' he said, 'my princess, share my house ... my life.' His voice was low, urgent, compelling and as he looked into her deep blue eyes he said, 'It is so strange, you remind me so much of my wife, my first wife ...' He liked her actually, he would say later; he did want her to come back to him and he knew that she would.

On a hot July afternoon in San Pedro, California, a tall, rangy woman in her early sixties said goodbye to her three assistants at Irene's Beauty Salon and walked outside. Emma Knowlton was in high spirits as she crossed Weymouth Road. Her grand-daughter, Teresa, was coming to visit her.

Teresa had been in California for the past three weeks attending a course on meditation at Lake Arrowhead. She was a Tibetan Buddhist. Emma had not heard from Teresa during the course, where they all took vows of silence. But the minute it was over, Teresa had phoned. She would be coming to stay for a couple of weeks before going home to Seattle and back to college. She was bright and now that she had settled down to studying seriously she was doing well. Her report card showed A's and B's in everything. Emma now hurried up the driveway of her Spanish style stucco bungalow which was painted yellow tan and had a tiled roof. She eased off her shoes, sat on a chair near the window, and lit a cigarette.

It was about three years ago that Teresa had first told Emma that she was 'into Tibetan Buddhism', after she had come home from a trip to the East with her boyfriend. Another fad, Emma thought, and like the others, this one would soon pass. Teresa had already been a Rosicrucian and a Theosophist. This time though, her grand-daughter really did seem like a new person, and the lamas had impressed on her the importance of respecting old age. She was so sweet and obedient now although they had always been fond of each other, even during difficult times. Emma was closer to Teresa than most grandmothers were to their grand-daughters.

Emma's son Robert had left Teresa's mother and gone off to Alaska. When Teresa was twelve her parents divorced and she came to live with Emma and her husband George. It was a difficult time for Emma Knowlton, handling a teenager in the late 1960s. Teresa took drugs at San Pedro High School and went boy crazy. In 1970 when Teresa was seventeen, she left San Pedro and went off to try living with her mother in

Seattle. It didn't work. Teresa grew wilder and took more and more drugs. She left her mother and had herself fostered-out to a black man she met at high school, a part-time security guard, with lots of other foster children.

Emma remembered the time her grand-daughter had come to visit her. What a shock! Bare feet, dirty jeans. As a child, her mother used to dress her up and thought nothing of spending \$70 on a trouser suit and having her hair done with a blonde rinse. Teresa had beautiful hair.

When she was nineteen, after her trip overseas with a boyfriend, Teresa started raving about a Buddhist monastery in Katmandu called Kopan. The monks there were from Tibet she said, and somehow they managed to give Teresa something to replace all the drugs and wildness. The change was a miracle. Emma wasn't sure she liked Tibetan Buddhism with its emphasis on death, but after what it had done for Teresa, who could complain?

Emma Knowlton heard the loud toot of the car horn, and she hurried onto the patio. The red Volkswagen was parked in the drive, and her grand-daughter was bounding up the steps with that lovely, big, vivacious smile.

My God, then it hit her. 'Teresa! What have you gone and done?' Once her grand-daughter's pride and joy, now it was gone. Teresa's hair was cut into some kind of bob around her ears.

Teresa threw her arms around Emma and laughed, 'Oh, come on, Grandma, aren't you glad to see me?'

'Of course I am darling,' Emma said as she led her into the living room. Teresa was wearing a long Indian skirt and a white cotton blouse which she had embroidered herself with flowers. She was a short girl, less than five feet, and shared her grandma's wide smile and firm jaw. 'Why the heck have you gone and done a thing like that?' Emma asked.

Giggling, Teresa bounced onto the beige vinyl sofa, slipped off her sandals, and sat cross legged, wiggling her toes. She told Emma that she had cut her hair off at the Buddhist retreat as part of her quest for spiritual enlightenment.

'I guess I've just grown accustomed to it,' Emma said. 'You were born with it. The day your mother brought you home from the hospital to this very room, Grandpa and I admired your lovely hair.'

'Don't take it so seriously, Grandma,' Teresa said. 'It's symbolic, that's all.'

Emma asked her about the meditation retreat.

'Oh, Grandma, it was wonderful! I feel so high! We did samsara visualizations. That's when you sit with your eyes closed and the lama reads out the steps that you go through when you die.'

'It sounds morbid to me,' Emma said.

'It's just the opposite,' Teresa said. 'Do I look morbid?'

Emma smiled. Teresa never looked morbid.

'It's just so that when the time comes, Grandma, you'll know what to expect. It means you can find your way around, and you won't get frightened.'

Teresa's spiritual adviser was Lama Yeshe, whom she had met on her first trip to Kopan. A small man with a maroon robe and shaved head, he had come to America for the first time a few weeks ago to teach the course at Lake Arrowhead. 'Some of the students took Lama Yeshe to Disneyland,' Teresa told her grandmother. 'He really wanted to go.' Emma asked her how he liked it. 'He went on the ghost train, and all the kids were worried for him, Grandma. They thought he'd be scared. After all, he'd only been out of Katmandu a week. When he got off the train, he said, "Oh, that was nothing. I've seen it all before in my visualizations."' Teresa imitated the solemn, halting Asian English.

'Oh darling, you always make me laugh so much,' Emma said, wiping her eyes. Like her grand-daughter, she was emotional, and happiness and sadness brought tears easily. 'Can I get you anything?' Emma asked. 'Something to drink?' No, she wanted nothing. As usual, Teresa was on some kind of fad diet. What a joy to see her, so alive and happy, no longer so wild and rebellious or harming herself.

'Grandma, I made this big decision while I was on retreat. It's another reason why I cut my hair.' Teresa's brown eyes were wide and intense. 'In October I'm going back to Katmandu, to Kopan. I'll do the meditation course and stay on when it's over to help the lamas.'

Emma was disturbed and she tried not to show it.

'I can teach the children maths and work on my karma. Just being close to the monks is very good for karma.'

'That's nice, darling, if it's what you want. Are you going

with a group?’

‘No, Grandma, I’m going by myself. It’s time for me to start doing things alone. Anyway, at the monastery everyone is a friend.’

As she lit a cigarette, Emma asked how long she would be gone.

‘About a year,’ Teresa said. She wanted to have time to work things out and to force herself to be more serious. ‘Doing the course is one thing, Grandma, but then you get back on a plane, fly home to America, watch television, and eat junk food again. It’s just not the right path for a Tibetan Buddhist.’

Emma reminded Teresa that she had been doing so well at the Community College in Seattle. ‘Why do you want to give all that up?’

Teresa had planned it out. She would apply for a year’s study leave and continue learning Tibetan for credit. She would do a paper on the role of women in Buddhist society.

Emma tried not to oppose her grand-daughter’s independence. Once Teresa had given her a little paper scroll with a saying by Kahlil Gibran, ‘Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself.’ As long as she was happy. That’s all that mattered.

‘I’m so excited, Grandma, just to be seeing Asia again. On the way I’ll stop off at Hong Kong and Bangkok. It doesn’t cost any more, and I’ve never been to those cities.’

This news caused Emma to shiver. ‘Hong Kong and Bangkok, Teresa, why? Those places are rough. Katmandu is one thing, you have friends there, you know the place. But Hong Kong and Bangkok are no places for a young girl on her own. Why don’t you go straight to Katmandu?’

‘Oh, Grandma, Hong Kong is on the way and I want to see Thailand. That’s a Buddhist society too.’

‘Teresa, I just don’t want you to go to those places, especially not to Bangkok.’ Emma found she was crying. What was wrong? Why did she feel this sense of foreboding?

Teresa came and comforted her, putting her arms around her grandmother’s shoulders. ‘Silly,’ she said. ‘I’m a Buddhist, remember? It’s like going home for me. No one will hurt me there.’

Teresa stayed with her grandparents until mid-August while she taught a course in meditation to a neighbourhood Buddhist group. She ate raw vegetables from her grandfather's garden, sometimes cooking Emma and George meals with soy beans and buckwheat which they couldn't get down, but Teresa didn't mind. At last they had all learned to respect each other's beliefs.

With a friend Teresa put statues of Buddha in the four corners of the backyard. While her grandfather potted around in his vegetable garden, the two girls sat in the sun in the lotus position, reciting the rehearsals for death.

O Compassionate Ones, this person, Teresa Yeshe Kunrig (her Buddhist name), is going from this world to the other shore; she is leaving this world; she is dying without choice; she has no friends; she is suffering greatly; she has no refuge; she has no protector; she has no allies; the light of this life has set. She is embarking on a great battle; she is seized by the great evil spirit; she is terrified by the messengers of the Lord of Death; she is entering existence after existence because of her karma; she is helpless. The time has come when she must go alone, without a friend.

In August as Teresa packed her belongings into the Volkswagen, Emma gave her a small, gold Bulova watch engraved on the back with 'Emma 12/25/37', a Christmas present from George thirty-eight years ago. Teresa hugged her grandmother and promised to write from each stop on the way to Katmandu the moment she arrived. As the Volkswagen rolled down the driveway on the start of the journey home to Seattle, Emma Knowlton cried as she watched her grand-daughter drive away.

A few days after saying goodbye to Marie Andrée Leclerc at Bombay airport, Charles was walking along the city's shaded Ormiston Road to one of his old recruiting grounds, Dipti's House of Pure Drinks. The afternoon sun shone on the mustard coloured shutters of the cheap hotels opposite, as Charles strolled through the door and sat down at one of the grimy wooden tables. The place hadn't changed in the last few years. A few western travellers stared dolefully into their glasses of beetroot juice, with that air of having forgotten their own names. Charles smiled at the girl next to him; she was beautiful, and he began talking.

The next day, June 5, after a French nuclear scientist failed to turn up at Bombay's Atomic Research Institute to deliver a lecture, he was discovered unconscious in his room at the Taj Mahal Hotel with an empty bottle of Chivas Regal by his bed. His valuables were gone, and he had been injected with Quaalude. The last thing he remembered, he said later, was having coffee with a Swedish girl who introduced him to a French-speaking man with Asian features.

Two weeks later, when the lobby of the Taj Mahal Hotel was buzzing with the latest news about Indira Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister, who had just been told by the High Court that she had won her parliamentary seat illegally and must give it up, an alert security guard saw Charles walk through the door. As he watched him move across the vast white marble foyer, toward the Shamiana coffee shop, he remembered the description given by hotel victims of their assailant's peculiar panther-like gait. As Bob Thomas, the security chief, went to arrest him, Charles, with his uncanny sixth sense, slipped away. Thomas checked his files. Yes, the culprit was almost certainly Charles Sobhraj who was still wanted in India for robbing the Ashoka Hotel four years before. The Bombay police were alerted and later, as Charles was checking out of the Ritz Hotel with a Chinese man and a Swedish girl, he was arrested and locked up in the back of a

police van. By the time the van arrived at the lock-up the only prisoner left inside was the girl, Laura. She said later that she was moved to pity by the story Charles had told her of his early life and she wanted to stand by him. Laura was jailed.

On June 26, after hundreds of political leaders had been arrested, a state of emergency was declared in India and all constitutional rights were suspended. Charles made his own contribution to the country's chaos as he zigzagged across the continent, leaving a trail of dazed and penniless victims.

Charles next surfaced in Hong Kong. Why? To continue his routine of befriend, drug, rob? Charles would say later that he had come to the colony for a far grander purpose. And that when he had sent those telegrams from Delhi he had let certain people know that he was now free to offer his services. He had accepted an engagement by a criminal organization based in Hong Kong -- a group of Chinese businessmen involved in the smuggling of heroin from Thailand to Europe. This organization, which invested huge sums of money in the heroin trade, had declared war on amateurs -- the small-time operators and their young travellers who, for a few thousand dollars, would carry consignments of heroin from the source to the marketplace. They were disrupting the business. Amateur drug rings made a small investment, took high risks, and often got caught. The large organizations based in Hong Kong invested millions of dollars and took minimal risks. Their merchandise was rarely intercepted. But now the carelessness of the small timers and the constant arrest of their couriers was attracting unwanted publicity and forcing world police and customs officials to tighten borders. One Hong Kong organization decided to discourage amateur involvement in the heroin trade by recruiting Charles Sobhraj -- so he would claim.

A large fee was to be paid into a bank account. He would be given some names and also discretionary powers in following up leads. It was suggested that he establish a suitable front in Bangkok, where an assistant would be sent to him.

From this point on, he would be carrying out orders.

While in Hong Kong in July, Charles also met a young French geologist, Denis Gautier, and stole his passport. Charles retained the first name from his previous identity (Alain Gittienne), perhaps because it reminded him of his

friend Alain Benard, and took on the surname of Gautier, which he was soon to make infamous throughout Europe and Asia.

In Singapore on July 28, he stopped off at the Hyatt Hotel to visit a Cartier representative he had met earlier in Hong Kong. Over breakfast he borrowed the key to the young man's room, and took fifty silk shirts, just delivered from the tailor, two new suits, a silk robe, two calculators, a camera and a crocodile-skin attaché case. Downstairs he asked for the key to the safe deposit box and cleaned it out. ('A hotel safe is never safe,' he said afterwards.) And then, after buying five diamond rings with the man's credit cards, flew on to Bangkok. It was from here, three days later, that he made the phone call to Marie Andrée Leclerc, the girl from Quebec. The call would change her life.

The woman from Brooklyn looked out of the window of the plane, waiting for the first sight of the little Mediterranean island. In her heart she was hoping that at last she could marry the man who would be waiting in Ibiza. Dear, gentle Ved, how she loved him! But marriage was out of the question unless he had changed, unless he had kept his part of the promise they had made to each other. She was proud of herself. She had lost fifteen pounds in weight and never looked better. But Ved? He had said he would do anything to keep her. Had the ethereal Turk kept his word? Carol would know as soon as she saw him.

The Boeing flew high over Spain, eastwards towards the Mediterranean. Carol felt that childish rush of elation which hit her every time she came back to the island. It was Ved who had first shown it to her. She had met him five years ago at a Christmas party in New York when she was nineteen. Carol had noticed his clothes, silk and velvet and snakeskin, faintly antique, as though they belonged in a museum; a purple velvet jacket embroidered with silver and gold thread, white satin trousers, and a silk kurta from India. She had never seen a man look so wraithlike, a dream figure so frail you could almost see through him. His shiny black hair cascaded down to his shoulders in waves; his face was strong and sensual; he had a small moustache like a pirate. He seemed drawn to her too. She didn't know why; Carol had been so straight in those days. Now she laughed at the plump innocence of the little girl from Brooklyn she had been. The day after the Christmas party Ved moved into her flat. She was at college then, studying to be a teacher. Not long afterwards he had asked her to marry him.

Vitali Hakim was Turkish, a Sephardic Jew whose ancestors had fled to Turkey from the Spanish Inquisition. He joked about how pleased his parents would be that he had found a nice Jewish girl. The family owned a thriving textile business in Istanbul and Ved had been groomed to inherit it.

He was well educated and spoke five languages fluently: French, English, Hebrew, Turkish, and a pure, classical Spanish. When he was younger he had been asked to manage a family store and had made a mess of it. 'Too much booze,' he told Carol. Ved ran away to Israel and fought in the army. Later he started travelling and lived for a time with a girl in California. He had friends all over the world. Ved stayed with Carol in her Brooklyn flat until the summer of 1970. Then he had taken her to Ibiza. 'I want to show you where I hang out,' he had said. Ibiza! An enchanted isle out of the Middle Ages. She would never forget that visit.

After Spain opened the doors to tourists in the late 1950s, it had taken a few years for the word to trickle out about its islands in the Mediterranean. Like countless other rambling students from Europe and the United States who turned up in Ibiza from the early 1960s onward, Carol never wanted to leave. The cobblestone port with its fishing boats and yachts, the outdoor cafés that filled the air with the smell of calamari fried in butter and garlic, the pathway curving up to the lighthouse. And the beaches! Clean water and golden sand. Everyone young and passing marijuana joints, talking a dozen different languages. There was a morning scene at the Montesol for *café au lait*. At each full moon, which looked so much bigger from Ibiza than from Brooklyn, at one of the white-washed farm houses in the vineyards, Ved hosted an LSD party for his friends with paella steaming on the campfire. Flutes and guitars played as hundreds of guests sprawled out under the carob trees watching for falling stars.

Vitali Hakim rented a flat in town and a sixteenth-century Moroccan built farmhouse in the country, surrounded by fields of narcissus. After Brooklyn, the lack of running water and electricity just made it seem more wonderful to Carol. Ved hooked his cassette player up to a car battery, made candlesticks out of rocks, and decorated the house with big satin cushions and rice paper prints. The Turk could turn any place into home. In one of his Javanese sarongs Ved wandered around the house, playing with their puppies whom he fed by hand with warm milk and honey. Like many people on the island, he never seemed to work. Generous with money, the Turk often treated dozens of hangers-on to dinners and disco nights. Carol wondered how he did it. Ved talked airily of

import/export. After six months she finally caught on. The man she was going to marry was a drug smuggler.

It was a clear day. The Mediterranean was bright blue, glittering in the eighty-degree sunshine. They would be landing in twenty minutes.

The news had not shocked her. In Ibiza it was thought that bringing marijuana to the people was a noble profession. Even the Spanish landlords winked knowingly at their long-haired tenants who disappeared to the East for a month and came back loaded with cash. Smuggling was an island tradition; the locals had long funnelled whisky and cigarettes into the mainland. In the town square stood a statue commemorating Riquer, an eighteenth-century pirate. Ved made a trip to the East once or twice a year. After arranging airline tickets for his couriers, he would go to Peshawar for the oily black cakes of hashish or to Chiangmai in Thailand's Golden Triangle for a load of mind-spinning Thai sticks. These he would pack in false-bottomed suitcases and pass to conservatively dressed couriers who would later meet him in Europe, hand the bags over, and receive a fee of between two and three thousand dollars. Ved owned two passports and avoided carrying his own merchandise across borders.

Carol never joined him on these business trips although she did go East with him in 1971 to check on reports about Goa, an emerging dope resort on the beaches of a former Portuguese colony in India. On the way, they stopped in Istanbul where she was charmed by Ved's father, Leon Hakim, who wanted his son to come home and settle down. Although Ved loved his father deeply, he had come to feel that he no longer belonged in Istanbul. 'Why should I work in the family store,' he would say to Carol, 'When I can go off grooving in Ibiza?'

From Istanbul they had continued eastwards along the dope trail to India. At first Carol was dazzled by the roller-coaster life; nights in luxurious suites in the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay, days spent combing the bazaars or stoned in ratty cafés with a wild assortment of road freaks, everyone living from day to day and taking risks with their lives. But all this gradually came to seem self-destructive to Carol. She sickened of the road and told Ved she wanted to go home. Carol had wearied of artificial euphorias, and in the ensuing years she watched Vitali Hakim fall apart.

His business moved on from marijuana. A kilo of pure No. 4 heroin could be bought for \$4,000 in Bangkok and, heavily diluted, fetch a quarter of a million dollars on the streets of New York. Like most small-time operators Ved dealt with middlemen in New York or Europe. The merchandise changed, and so did his style. Ved became a careless dealer, sloppy and indiscreet, and he became a junkie. He tried to be ethical. Sometimes he would run away and hide to avoid supplying those he thought couldn't handle it. Pretty soon Carol could see Ved couldn't handle it himself. There seemed to be a tenacious karma about heroin that destroyed anyone who tried to profit from it. Four years after they met, Carol left Ved and returned to live in the United States.

But it wasn't over. Ved telephoned on her birthday, and in February of 1975 he was standing on her doorstep with a bouquet of flowers. He was thinner, frail, but still as adorable as ever. He wanted her back, he said. He promised he would make enough money so they could start a legitimate business on Ibiza and he would stop dealing. Ibiza had changed. It now had hordes of conventional tourists, traffic lights, and a flourishing garment trade. The ex-hippies were pushing their macramé, fashionable tat, and leather work, running bars, making fortunes. If she would come back and marry him, they would open a boutique and start a new life together.

'All right, Ved, but on one condition,' Carol told him. 'You give up drugs, all drugs.'

'What will you give up in return?' he had asked, his eyes twinkling.

'Food,' she had said.

It was a deal. And so she had lost fifteen pounds.

'*Fasten your seatbelts, please.*' In a few minutes she would know.

Carol walked through customs and saw him waiting for her, leaning against a wall. He looked beautiful, tanned and glowing in his embroidered white jacket. He was smiling and hurrying toward her. Then he staggered and almost fell. Oh, no! He kissed her and said his car was outside, slurring his words.

'No, Ved,' she said, almost in tears. He had overturned too many cars in the past for her to take the chance. So they arrived separately at his flat in the port, Carol in a taxi. She

tried to be philosophical, but she was crying. 'It isn't smack,' he kept saying, 'only Dormadena.' These were the potent local sleeping pills. Only to help him 'come down', he said.

That night they went out to a disco. Ved threw his wallet into her shoulder bag, shouting, 'Mind this,' as he went off to dance. Back with her old friends, drinking sangria and glad to be 'home', Carol lost herself on the dance floor. Some time in the night the wallet disappeared. It had contained \$10,000, the money Ved had made to start their business. She had not known it was there. He hadn't even warned her to be careful. It was gone. Ved didn't seem to care. He just kept staggering around with other stoned friends. Carol told him she was leaving, but he didn't hear her. She moved out and stayed with a girlfriend, working as a waitress to earn the fare back to the States.

She flew home and later moved to California to a place that reminded her of Ibiza, only with better plumbing. Carol became a vocational counsellor and made herself forget about the Turkish man in a sarong who lay around in the Spanish sun, planning his next dope run to Bangkok. Vitali Hakim would leave for Thailand in October.

Back at the Clinique Dorthope Diede in Levis, Quebec, Marie Andrée was hearing from Charles almost every day, sometimes three or four times. Telegrams arrived from Delhi, Karachi and Hong Kong with messages of love and proposals of marriage. On one day, thirteen postcards arrived from Sri Lanka. Charles also telephoned her at the clinic, often two or three times a day, and usually spoke to her for twenty minutes or more. He was spending thousands of dollars on her. It was very flattering, very romantic, like a girl's Arabian Nights dream. Nothing like it had ever happened to her before.

She was one of six children of a railwayman. At school, the Convent St Charles, she had shown promise in written expression and public speaking, and as a member of the Christian Community Club she worked conscientiously on charity projects. At eighteen Marie Andrée had gone to Sherbrook College to train as a medical archivist. It was drudgery, with long, cold hours on a bus every day. When she graduated a year later her family moved to Levis near Quebec City, where there were no openings for a medical archivist. She took a night job waitressing at the Marie Antoinette restaurant. Later she combined this with a day job as a doctor's secretary for \$40 a week. Her dream was to own a car and with hard work and scrimping she finally got it, a Volkswagen. At last she had independence.

Then, a week later, as she was leaving a shop, a pane of glass fell on her foot. In the hospital her faith wavered. Until then she had been a devout Catholic. At least she still had her car. She asked her sister to park her Volkswagen outside her window at the hospital so that she could look at it. Her foot was in a cast for a year and doctors said they would have to operate. She refused. With will power, she said, she would walk again, and she did.

With her leg still in a cast she had returned to the secretarial job with the doctor, and for the ten years throughout her

twenties she had worked long conscientious hours, saving her money and her love, for in all the years there had been only three men that mattered to her, and all of them had disappointed her. Jules Dupont, the accountant who travelled with her to Kashmir, had been the second. After the Asian holiday and the flirtation with the mysterious Alain, her life seemed drab. It lacked passion, and her future in the small town looked bleak. Her current boyfriend in Quebec was married. The affair made her feel guilty. And Alain loved her.

Why shouldn't she go to him? There was nothing to lose. Hadn't she earned this after all she had gone through? And if it didn't work, she could get on a plane and return to her job at the clinic. Was it right to go through life without taking a chance? Maybe his businesses were not all legal, but in Asia the rules were different. An extra passport, an alias, it didn't matter much. He had apartments all over the world he said, and he wanted a child. A life of luxury, love, and travel. That was just what she needed, she thought.

It was seven in the morning on July 31 when the phone rang in Marie Andrée's flat. She had already sold her car. Now she packed quickly and took the flight to Bangkok feeling, as she later wrote in a letter, 'like a bride, nervous but happy at the thought of being taken by the man she loves.'

'There's a limousine waiting,' Charles said briskly when he met Marie Andrée at Bangkok's Don Muang Airport on August 2. She was chilled when he did not hug her or express any affection. After her bags were packed in the boot, the couple sat in the back of the Mercedes as it sped along the expressway, passing rice paddies and shoddy wooden houses beside the canals. Charles took four jewellery cases from the pockets of his denim jacket. 'For you,' he said, putting them in her lap.

She opened the boxes, holding up in turn a jade pendant, a matching jade ring, a diamond ring, and a sapphire ring surrounded with diamonds. 'They're beautiful!' she said.

'I'm glad you like them.'

'But I cannot accept.'

'Not accept? What do you mean? You've come to live with me.'

The countryside was flat and drab. Through the haze of exhaust fumes ahead the gilded spires of the city looked trashy and make believe against the gleaming towers of modern hotels.

'Perhaps later, darling.' She found it hard to call him that, the way he sat next to her, his body barely touching hers. 'Why don't we see how it works out first. I might disappoint you.'

This flash of independence showed Charles a trait he didn't like in a woman. 'You know, Marie Andrée,' he said, looking at her absently over the top of his glasses, 'that I do some small illegal business here. It's not at all dangerous, and you won't be involved, but maybe it's better for you if sometimes I introduce you as my secretary. And for your protection, we won't use your real name, okay?'

The car nudged its way into the dense logjam of Sukhumvit Road where panoramic advertisement hoardings stood at intersections, depicting gory scenes from local horror films. Children pushed garlands of jasmine and frangipani against

the car windows. Marie Andrée breathed the cold air-conditioned air and hid her shock behind a haughty tilt of the chin. To pose as his secretary? Use a false name? She didn't have to accept this, she thought.

The car pulled up at the Rajah Hotel, a concrete box rushed up in Bangkok during the building boom of the 1960s. Heat shimmered up from the asphalt. American soldiers lounged in the lobby, as bar girls with vacant smiles circled aimlessly in hot pants and platform shoes. Asia did not seem quite so romantic for Marie Andrée as she unpacked her clothes in the chill of the small air-conditioned room. Why was he so distant? she wondered. Why had he changed so much?

Before Marie Andrée's arrival, Charles had been juggling an assortment of girlfriends, one of them a Thai, Ann Chai-pongse, who managed a jewellery shop. It was always handy to have a local woman attached by bonds of love, he thought. If there was trouble, she was security. If he had something hot to drop, she could keep it. She could be his spy, his translator, and arrange useful business contacts. The day after her arrival when he took Marie Andrée to meet Ann, he explained all this to her. 'At first, I'll introduce you as my secretary,' he told her. 'Then she will have time to get used to the idea that you are more to me than that. In a month she will accept you as my wife.'

Charles had chosen a name for Marie Andrée. She would be called Monique. Like the Thai girl, she too was being forced to submit. 'Monique' Leclerc, sometimes wife, sometimes secretary of 'Alain Gautier'. Soon after her arrival, she spent days alone in the hotel room. He did not like her roaming around the city on her own. She read paperbacks and wrote letters home to her family, hiding her unhappiness to save them from worrying, but hinting that she might be home sooner than expected. After their first nights together, nights when all his coldness melted, leaving her feeling physically and spiritually close to him, he had stopped making love to her although they still slept in the same bed. 'I'm tired,' he would say, or, 'I have too much on my mind.' Marie Andrée felt that her lovemaking did not please him and that Alain no longer desired her. She became nervous, aggressive, frustrated, and she believed that his love for her was shallow. Alone in the hotel room, she felt sad and deceived.

Actually, Charles did feel affection for her but, as he insisted to himself, that 'Quebeçois pig-headedness had to be eliminated.' It was a psychological game — he would break her. He rose early, and often she was still asleep when he went out. Charles dressed like a businessman and carried his newly acquired crocodile-skin attaché case, which was full of papers. But what he did exactly, he kept a mystery.

A week after she arrived Charles was on his way out. 'Darling, can you lend me \$500?' he said. 'It's a Thai holiday and my bank's closed.' As Marie Andrée signed the travellers' cheques he asked her whether she had decided to stay with him. 'You always say you are waiting to see whether it will work out,' he said. 'What do you think?'

'I still don't know. You have other girls here. You don't seem to care for me. Maybe it would be better if I went back to Canada.'

Her indecisiveness suddenly infuriated him. 'It's as you like, little girl, but make up your mind. I haven't time for this uncertainty. In my business I can't afford a girl who's unsure of her loyalty. Learn to be either black or white,' he shouted at her, 'not always different shades of grey — do you understand?' Holding her travellers' cheques, he left her sitting on the bed and slammed the door.

Marie Andrée was aware that she had hurt his masculine pride. Of course she was undecided — his coldness was not an inducement to be otherwise — she had tried to build pretty castles before with her lovers, all three of them, and they had each come tumbling down. She had been left alone among the ruins; alone with her suffering. The first man, Daniel, was already married — to his business. She would drive hundreds of kilometres through the mountains to see him, and sit around all alone, waiting for a few hurried embraces. Jules Dupont could never bring himself to leave his mother. And the last man, Jean, already had a wife and family. Jean, Jules, Daniel ... her dreams had collapsed. She was a woman who had suffered so much in her life, she thought. And now here was Charles, a man full of secrets, with Thai girlfriends, false names, and a murky background. Could she really dream of setting up a home with him? One full of sunshine and children? Maybe she would try? At least he seemed like a man who was master of his own destiny.

After fifteen days in Bangkok when her landing visa expired, Charles arranged for its extension. He borrowed another \$500 from her, the last of her money. 'I'm too busy to go to the bank,' he told her. 'Soon I'll return it with interest.' He was so offhand, it was as though he had access to unlimited funds. When her visa came up for renewal again at the end of August, he promised to take care of it. Instead, he let it lapse. Now she was an illegal alien without cash or a return ticket. I am his prisoner, she thought to herself, with a shiver of apprehension. And still, Charles was not making love to her.

On Thursday September 4, an Australian couple lay on the sand of a Thai resort, their stomachs raw and rumbling in the aftermath of a bout of diarrhoea and vomiting. Next to them the French-Vietnamese psychiatrist and his wife ate crabs the fisherman had caught that morning. A jumble of giant rocks marked the southern edge of the beach, giving a name to the oldest seaside resort in Thailand, Hua Hin, 'Head of Stone'. It was an apt description of how the two Australians felt; their heads weighed heavily on their necks, and their eyes closed shut against their will.

'We heard you being sick last night,' said the psychiatrist. 'It sounded quite violent. Did you ever get to sleep?'

'No. We were up all the bloody night,' said Russell Laphorne, a college professor travelling overland through Asia with his wife, Vera. They had first met 'Jean Belmont' and 'Monique' a few days before at Pattaya, a beach resort on the opposite shore of the Gulf. Over a few beers the psychiatrist suggested that they could team up and travel south to Singapore by train, stopping at beaches on the way.

Monique played in the sand with a fluffy, white puppy, Franky. 'Jean Belmont', her handsome husband with a taut, muscular body, swam a few laps in the water, ran back to them, and picked up his towel. 'I'm going to the shop,' he said, hardly out of breath. 'I'll buy some tinned milk to soothe your stomachs, and by tomorrow you'll feel much better.'

The night before the four had eaten together at a local shellfish restaurant. Later the Australian couple had rushed back to their room at the Railway Hotel, pale, shaking, and wracked with stomach cramps.

The psychiatrist smiled down at them as he patted himself dry. 'Seafood is always risky. I remember my wife once, after a bouillabaisse in Marseilles, I thought she would die.'

At 3 p.m. Russell and Vera, weak from their illness, stretched out on deck chairs on the shady verandah, where the potted palms rustled in the afternoon heat. Jean Belmont

emerged from his adjoining room which opened on to the verandah carrying a tray of glasses filled with chocolate-flavoured milk. He put a bowl on the floor for the puppy and passed a glass to each of his Australian friends.

'Thanks, Jean,' said Vera, gratefully sipping the milk. 'I still feel a bit dizzy. I think I'll go to bed.'

Monique threw a rubber ball along the verandah for Franky to chase, and Russell curled up in his chair with his book, *Oil Politics*. The French-Vietnamese man leaned across the balustrade. It was the rainy season. The air was sticky, and clouds were gathering for the afternoon thunderstorm over the South China Sea.

When Vera Laphorne woke up, she got out of bed and fell over. The surroundings were strange. She tried to rouse her husband. It was Saturday September 6, thirty-six hours after they had drunk the glasses of chocolate-milk. When the hotel maids found them sprawled on the floor both of them were taken to the local health clinic. While they were unconscious, their stomachs were pumped. Vera was the first to make it back to the Railway Hotel where their passports, marriage certificate, driving licences, and all other identification were missing, as well as \$900 in currency. Gone too, was a cine-camera and Vera's jewellery -- a diamond ring and a gold chain. Vera knocked on the door of the adjoining room and was answered by an unfamiliar voice. The man who claimed to be a psychiatrist named Jean Belmont and his wife Monique had vanished. All they had left behind was a used battery from a cassette recorder and Franky's rubber ball.

While Vera stood on the verandah of the Railway Hotel, stunned by the meticulous treachery of the charming French couple, Charles and Marie Andrée were already back in Bangkok signing a lease for a flat. The building was called Kanit House. It was a five-storey, U-shaped cement structure built in the 1950s, now run down, but convenient and respectable. A kidney-shaped swimming pool in the central courtyard added a token touch of glamour. Their flat, Number 504, was on the top floor at the end of one of the wings. Through the bedroom windows they could see the gleaming white tower of the Dusit Thani Hotel which stood there among the rows of red-roofed bungalows and shops like a symbol of the affluence and success Charles so desperately wanted.

There were two bedrooms, a balcony, and a living room with a kitchenette partitioned by a padded vinyl bar. On the liver-coloured rubber tiles stood a cane sofa and two chairs.

Charles had no belongings to add warmth to the barely furnished flat, except for his black leather punching bag which he hung near the door. It was for his guests. They would come to do business and end up fooling around with the bag. That would put him in a position of strength, he surmised. Charles saw the flat as his business headquarters as well as his home, and he had picked it mainly for its location. Kanit House was close to the tourist section of Bangkok and near the bars of Patpong and most of the big hotels and shopping arcades. Another distraction for the people he planned to entertain was Coco, a tiny gibbon monkey bought at a stall in the Sunday market. Coco was kept in a cage on the cement balcony that overlooked the swimming pool in the courtyard.

'We have a flat, and that is new hope,' Marie Andrée wrote in a letter. 'At last we spend the night, just the two of us, in our home. This makes me really happy.' For her complicity in the drugging of the Australian couple, the Laphornes, Charles rewarded her with a night of lovemaking.

Dizzy and destitute in Hua Hin, Russell and Vera sold their Kodak Instamatic to pay for their hotel room and took their story to the local police. An interpreter recorded a statement, and the police, bemused, shook their heads smiling. Nothing could be done. A sympathetic businessman lent them the train fare back to Bangkok, and they went to their embassy for help. A few days later Russell collapsed with a high fever and abdominal pains and was rushed to the hospital where he remained for two weeks.

Marie Andrée was not to have Charles to herself for long. Two weeks after they moved into the flat, they drove 800 kilometres north-east from Bangkok to Chiangmai, taking with them a plump, middle-aged Frenchman.

Chiangmai held many attractions for a visitor. Elevated about 300 metres above sea level, the climate was temperate and the ancient capital also had a reputation for its roses and beautiful women. The streets were lined with the traditional

wooden Thai houses on stilts standing in gardens shaded by flame trees. A towering backdrop to the city were the mountains of the Golden Triangle that border Laos and Cambodia, the home of the hill tribes who divide their time between embroidering costumes and cultivating opium on steep, inaccessible fields that supply 70 per cent of the raw material for the world's illicit heroin market.

According to Charles, his passenger had been sent to Thailand by a European heroin ring to pay off local suppliers. The Frenchman, allegedly, was one of the first names on the list supplied by his Hong Kong employers (or 'investors' as Charles preferred to call them). His name was André Breugnot and Charles had been told that this man would be flying from Paris to Bangkok via Hong Kong in early September and checking in to the Royal Hotel. Charles claimed to have hung around the Royal Hotel until he had sighted a solitary, middle-aged figure sitting at the bar. Charles sat near him and began to drop phrases in French to one of his Thai girlfriends. As so often happened with the French in Asia, André Breugnot had been delighted to hear his own language spoken. Breugnot struck up a conversation with Charles Sobhraj, and the rest was easy.

Charles had mentioned casually that he was planning to take his wife, 'Monique', on a trip to Chiangmai, which he knew was Breugnot's destination. Later, when they met for another drink, Breugnot, who was posing as an antique dealer, according to Charles, volunteered that he too was going on a visit to Chiangmai, and Charles offered to drive him there.

And so, on September 20 they arrived in Chiangmai together. After a sightseeing tour of the city and a few drinks, Charles said goodbye to Breugnot, whom he had mildly dosed with laxatives, and drove back to Bangkok. For this trip there was another passenger in the car apart from Marie Andrée — a bearded young bank clerk Charles had picked up at an 'overlanders' restaurant, Dominique Rennelleau. For most of the journey the young Frenchman was unconscious.

When Dominique opened his eyes, he was in a shadowy room cut with some slats of sunlight. For a few minutes, as he realized how much his head was throbbing, he watched the specks of dust moving aimlessly around in the sunbeams. Where was he? Another hotel room? Yesterday, or was it the day before, he was in Chiangmai. Alain and Monique were charming, a nice straight young couple, and really, he thought, the man's conversation was fascinating. They lived in Bangkok, they said, where Alain had a gem business. It was after the dinner they shared that Dominique's memory faded out. He remembered rushing back to his dilapidated guest-house in a trishaw, only just making it to the grim cement squat lavatory before his bowels exploded with diarrhoea. And it continued all night. It never stopped. Dominique had been sweating, shaking, and vomiting all at once until he had felt like an empty shell of a man. He had heard other travellers talking about this sickness: Delhi Belly, the Katmandu Crappers, Thai Stomach. Everyone joked about it. He'd always assumed it was something other people suffered from, people more careless than he about drinking unboiled water. 'Well, it served me right,' he thought, 'but where am I now?'

The morning after the dinner in Chiangmai with Alain and Monique, he had woken up on the floor of his room. The man with that strange sallow face and bottomless black eyes was looking down at him saying, 'Well, you've got the bug, haven't you? I know all about it. You'd better come home with us. We'll look after you.' They had helped him into their car and given him something that 'would set his inside like concrete'. And now?

There was a tap on the door, and his host entered the bedroom. He was smiling and carrying a glass of white medicine. Dominique drank it. Then his limbs and head felt light and yet heavy at the same time, and consciousness washed away from him again.

Charles would say later that one reason he had taken Dominique Rennelleau back to Kanit House was as an alibi for the job he now planned. After tucking his house-guest into bed with another sleeping draught, Charles caught the afternoon flight back to Chiangmai where a Thai friend met him at the airport and drove him to the Chiang Inn, the most luxurious hotel in the city. There, resting in his room, was André Breugnot.

When Charles recalled the incident, he laughed about something the man said to him soon after his surprise arrival at Room 207: 'Who are you? I thought you were my friend.' Charles had heard that before — it was his style, to use friendship as a weapon to break and enter into his victim's life. Intimacy — and pills; laxatives first, to induce illness so he could diagnose their complaints and offer helpful advice; later, when their trust had been won and defences disarmed, he would move in with heavier weapons: Largactyl, Quaaludes, Mogadons, and other assorted soporifics.

Once he had put a man on Mogadon for a few days, Charles believed he could make him do anything. What happened that afternoon between him and André Breugnot would later be recounted in his own words:

'Breugnot was so surprised when I suddenly appeared at the door and told him that we had business to discuss. "What do you come to Chiangmai for?" I asked him, "as a tourist or on business?" At first he denied everything and I continued to question him. Later I gave him a Japanese slap on the side of the head and he fell to the floor. When you're hit like that you don't see anything for a few minutes, and you get confused. "What's your trip, tourist or business?" I asked, and kept asking. He didn't answer so I kicked him and lifted him up by the shirt — he was a fat fellow dressed in a grey suit. "You're from the Thai police?" he asked me, and I laughed. "No, I'm French," I told him.'

' "What do you want from me?" He was shaking.'

' "Your names in Bangkok," I said.'

'He told me he knew nothing and that he only came to Chiangmai once a year. "You're not a small boy," I told him, "You're over forty — you must know a lot."'

'Later I made him take a Mogadon and waited for it to take effect. I didn't want to leave any marks. I showed him a gun.'

"Either you speak up, André, or I work on you — no one will ever know what you tell me."

'All this time I was speaking softly. So Breugnot said, "If I speak to you they will kill me."'

"No one knows you're in the room, André. In a few minutes you can be free."

'You see the psychology? Now he becomes a conspirator. He is turning to me for help against the gangsters he works for. I picked up a paper napkin from the breakfast tray and tore it in half. "This one is your life," I said, laying down one sheet of paper in front of the man, "and this one is your death," I said, putting the other piece by its side. "Which one do you choose?"'

'Then the man asked me in a slow voice, "Are you sure no one outside this room will ever know?"'

'There's an atmosphere about Asia which makes Europeans insecure — it helps people talk. "No one will ever know," I assured him.'

Breugnot then revealed details of his heroin business and gave him names of some couriers who would be coming to Thailand.

'Afterwards, I made him take some more capsules. "It's just to secure our getaway," I said. "When you wake up everything will be fine."'

'When the guy passed out I undressed him, and I put all his clothes neatly on the bed. I carried Breugnot to the bathroom — he was fat and heavy — and put him in the tub and turned on the tap. I laid his pipe near him on a stool by the bath and propped a newspaper, half in the water and half on the outside of the tub. I left some sleeping tablets on the sink. One thing, I didn't touch his passport or wallet. I held André Breugnot's head under water until he was dead. Then I dusted my fingerprints, locked the door behind me, and put up a Do Not Disturb sign. I worked fast and reached the airport in time to catch the afternoon flight to Bangkok.'

Records at the French Embassy in Bangkok showed that an André Breugnot, aged 56, was found dead in a hotel room in Chiangmai on September 21. The maid found the body in the bathtub — blood had been dripping from the nose — and local police concluded that there was no trace of foul play.

Charles would call this operation 'a cleaning' and boast about it. It was the perfect murder — one still officially listed as an accident — and among the names this man had given him was Vitali Hakim, a Turk from Ibiza known to his friends as Ved. He would be coming to Bangkok in October to buy heroin and pack it in false-bottomed suitcases for the couriers who would take it to Europe. The second name, allegedly, was that of a girl who would come from the United States to take a consignment of heroin from Bangkok to Katmandu. From there it would be smuggled to Europe. Agents of the United States Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), based in Thailand, had been putting pressure on the authorities to increase surveillance of all travellers flying from Bangkok bound for Europe and the States. The new smuggler's route went via Katmandu where, Charles would add, 'You could take a cow out through the airport.'

An agent for the DEA based in Bangkok later confirmed the existence of this alternative courier route.

And Charles would claim later that André Breugnot had named the second courier as Teresa Knowlton, the girl from Seattle who was now packing her bags for her trip to Kopan Monastery in Katmandu.

It was October 5 1975, a mild autumn evening in Seattle, and Teresa Knowlton was sitting cross-legged on the mattress in her living room, saying good-bye to her cat and giving advice on its care to Bonnie, her new sub-tenant.

'If you want her to obey, talk to her in Tibetan, that's all she understands, isn't it, darling?' Teresa kissed the cat on the nose and switched on a cassette recorder. Giggling, she began to record a command in Tibetan.

From the porch her girlfriend Kym listened and smiled to herself. 'What's that mean?' she called out, and Teresa laughingly translated, 'It means "Do it outside!" In case Bonnie has any trouble, you see, she can just play my voice and my darling cat will obey.'

Kym was glad to hear her laughing. Since Teresa had decided to go back to the monastery in Katmandu she had been moody and withdrawn. The following day she was flying to Hong Kong, and Kym was helping her with last minute details.

Looking from the twilight into the room where the two women were talking, Kym frowned as she read the card Teresa had stuck beside the front door — *Suffering Is the Righteous Path*. She had already told Teresa what she thought of that sentiment. It was downright morbid in her opinion, and although she respected Teresa's conversion to Tibetan Buddhism she wondered if it was really suited to her friend, who was inclined to emotional extremes. Kym practised Transcendental Meditation. They had both chosen different paths, Kym reflected, and had both changed and grown since the summer of 1971 when Teresa had first moved to Seattle.

It had seemed then that a blue haze of marijuana smoke hung in the air above the beautiful brisk city and its garden suburbs on the hills overlooking the bay. The barefoot children carrying dulcimers and brave new ideals, playing Frisbee in the park, wore roach clips and peace signs on their T-shirts and stayed up all night in each other's bedrooms talking about

the meaning of life. And Teresa could out-talk and out-smoke any of them. To make pocket money Teresa sold L.S.D. and mescaline and grass. She was insecure about money. Sometimes Teresa would tell her friends stories of how she had once gone to bed with a man who promised her a bicycle. She claimed she had begun having sex when she was eleven and made money at it. Maybe, Kym thought, it was guilt that made her choose Tibetan Buddhism and the idea that suffering was the righteous path and that was now sending her off to Katmandu to consider becoming a Buddhist nun.

Teresa was still fussing inside. Her conversion to Buddhism, Kym thought, had not toned down her outspokenness about sex. After she had returned to Seattle from her second trip to the monastery in Katmandu, Teresa had decided to leave her boyfriend. She announced that sex with him was too boring, complaining, 'I'm just not getting fucked enough.' Kym often remembered a game they had all played together at school, 'Tell the Truth', when in answer to a question about her favourite pastime, Teresa had said 'oral sex'. Her discarded boyfriend found someone else, and after Teresa came out of her black mood, she devoted herself to becoming independent and self-contained. It had been a turning point in her life. This little flat was the first place she had ever had on her own. It was half a wooden coach house in the back garden of an old stucco mansion on Capitol Hill. She made it look like a Tibetan nunnery, furnished with cushions, bamboo mats, and shells. She slept, usually alone, on a thin mattress, although she still had strong crushes on friends of both sexes.

'Hi, Kym -- ready at last,' Teresa said, as she walked out onto the porch with her suitcase.

Kym drove Teresa round to the other side of Volunteer Park, where the water tower stood silhouetted against the night sky. On the hot summer nights, after dancing down on the waterfront at Shelley's Leg, the girls would come here and talk, sitting on the stone statues of camel and rams outside the library. Tonight the city lights twinkled and the illuminated boats were reflected in the black waters of the bay.

'Do you think I should go?' Teresa asked her friend. She had obviously made up her mind, but retained some element of doubt.

'If it's what you want to do -- if you feel it's your karma,

sure — go!’ Kym was convinced that Teresa was meant to take this trip — because of the way she had suddenly started to receive money. People were just sending it to her ‘out of the clear blue’, it seemed to Kym. In the last weeks Teresa had often phoned to say: ‘I’ve just got another cheque,’ and once she had even found some money. Kym had gone with her to the bank and watched her buy \$1,500 in travellers’ cheques. She sewed another \$200 into the hem of her jeans.

The two girls drove to Kym’s flat, two rooms filled with plants and pictures of fairies and posters of TM devotees ‘flying’. Incense was burning, and Monika, another girlfriend, was singing along with a Labelle record. Teresa’s two suitcases lay open on the floor. Her friends had brought small presents, things they knew she would need: herbal deodorant, toothpaste and a little mauve alarm clock to wake her for the dawn meditation. Teresa sat crosslegged on a cushion. She always said that that position helped slim the thighs. She fiddled with the brown string around her neck, her protection cord.

‘I wonder what would be the best way to die,’ she said.

Oh boy, morbid again. What had got into her, Kym wondered?

‘Drowning, I think,’ Monika said. ‘I wouldn’t mind drowning, better than something violent like a car accident.’

‘Yeah, I think drowning too,’ Teresa said softly.

‘Are you guys crazy? I’ve nearly drowned twice,’ Kym said. ‘There’s nothing pleasant about it. Struggling and choking.’ She shuddered and changed the subject. ‘If you send us back the two tiny rubies I dreamed about, I’ll keep you supplied with fudge for as long as you’re in Katmandu.’

‘It’s a deal,’ Teresa giggled. She had so many worldly desires to overcome. Her passion for Barbara’s Indecent Fudge was another stumbling block.

‘Of course, we’ll send you anything you need. Just ask us. Don’t go to any trouble to get the rubies, and only if they’re really cheap.’

Kym and Monika went on with the packing. While Teresa wasn’t looking, they stuffed the corners with twenty bars of Barbara’s Indecent Fudge.

‘You know, you guys,’ Teresa said, ‘I’m really lucky to have friends like you. I’m going to miss you. I’m scared.’ She

giggled, playing again with her protection cord. Kym felt she was going to say more, but she didn't.

'Why, Teresa? Why are you scared?'

'Just because I'm going by myself I guess.'

'Listen, just stay at good hotels along the way. Don't mind what you pay, and fly straight on to Katmandu. Once you're there the lamas will protect you.'

'Yes, you're right, Kym.' But she didn't sound convinced. Then with her brow creased with worry she said, 'I swear on my lama's heart that if I get some money I'll send it to you for that TM course.'

Pamela and Carolyn, two more of Teresa's girlfriends from the Nova School, arrived. After sitting on the last suitcase to close it, the five girlfriends put on their best clothes and make-up and drove down Capitol Hill for their farewell dinner at Boondockers, Sundeckers and Greenthumbs. It was a fancy restaurant in Seattle style, all polished wood, hanging plants and plate glass. They all felt extravagant walking inside, but when they were shown to a booth and all ordered Black Velvet cocktails, they suddenly felt elated. Usually none of them drank and soon they were all tipsy. Teresa talked so loudly about her own and her friends' sex lives that the couple in the next booth came over and thanked her for enlivening their evening.

By the time they eventually reached the airport they had all worked themselves up to a state near hysteria. Teresa couldn't carry her third bag and she walked around the crowd looking for someone with the 'right vibes' to help her. Another young traveller had a small pack and agreed to carry Teresa's bag on board. He was a law student who knew Asia well. As her friends waved goodbye, watching Teresa walk across the tarmac they were relieved that she had already found a travelling companion.

At the top of the steps, just before Teresa went into the plane, she turned and grinned at them, kicking her heels in the air, and waved. Kym said to her friends: 'Wasn't that the most beautiful exit you ever saw?'

When Dominique, the bearded young bank clerk, woke up again in Kanit House, he felt better. 'My God, how lucky I've been,' he thought. 'If Alain hadn't found me in Chiangmai — How did he find me? I never told him where I was staying — I could be dead by now.' Instead, here he was ensconced in the guest bedroom of the French couple's flat in Bangkok. It was simply furnished with a bed and a chest of drawers. When he pulled up the venetian blinds, he looked down into a courtyard with a swimming pool, a rock garden, and sugar palms. That night he was strong enough to get up and his host invited him out for a tour of the city.

In green neon script the sign above the window in Nana Nua Road spelled out the name of the Grace Hotel, and beneath it hung a banner that read 'Wilkommen Liebe Geste'. Noodle stalls cluttered the footpath outside. These were for the customers who need to sober up before they went home with one of the bar girls from inside, Charles explained. He pointed to the small hotels that lined the street. 'That's where the girls go. Short time hotels, three dollars for two hours, five dollars the whole night.' Cab drivers lounged near their cars, and two Thai bouncers watched the *sarangs* — foreigners — filing in and out under the red canopy.

It took a few minutes for Dominique's eyes to adjust to the smoky darkness. The room was large with a full-length bar, and waitresses circulated with wet trays of beer as two juke boxes boomed out American rock. He followed Charles to a table. Everywhere he looked were girls, all so garishly dressed and brightly made up that it was hard to tell the young from the middle-aged or the women from the transvestites. With all the dancing and chatter, it was a perpetual party where the female guests were for sale.

Dominique would never have come to a place like this alone, but Charles was completely at ease, his hawk's eyes seeming to take in everything that was happening. Some of the girls smiled and waved at Charles. 'Do you like these

'Thais?' Dominique asked his host nervously, not wanting to say the wrong thing.

'Not in the way you think. I've never had a prostitute in my life. I only come here to meet the tourists for my business.'

Charles was just starting out, he said, but soon he would build the biggest cut-rate gem business in Bangkok. 'I can buy direct from the mines, cut out the Chinese middlemen, make a thousand per cent profit and still give my customers a bargain,' he said. Charles had recently decided to supplement his income from crime by dealing in gems. Bangkok was a city where few failed to succumb to gem fever. The most sacred Thai statues were coated with gold and encrusted with precious stones. Women spent hours having their hands manicured into a showcase for gold rings which glittered with sapphires, rubies and diamonds. Velvet-lined shop windows were spotlit with displays of antique and futuristic jewellery and down in the back alleys of Chinatown, red-and-gold-painted shops were stocked with jade and gems. Everywhere there was the flash and sparkle of precious stones and the lowliest traveller, who wouldn't know turquoise from tin, often ended up falling in love with a trinket.

'Maybe I'll take you to the gem mines at Chantaburi,' Charles said to Dominique above the noise of the juke box. 'You can take some stones to Paris and make a profit.'

The quiet bank clerk reached into the back pocket of his jeans to pay for a round of drinks and realized that his wallet was gone. Nor had he been able to find his passport and travellers' cheques when he had dressed that evening. His \$1,100 had been hard earned on the tobacco fields of Australia, where he had worked for months to pay for a leisurely overland trek back to France. Dazed, he turned to Charles and explained the situation.

'Oh, I meant to tell you,' Charles replied. 'I've put all your valuables in my safe at the bank. You're still so sick and I'm out all day. While you're my guest I feel responsible for you. Let me know when you need them.'

Charles had other plans for Dominique's passport and for the young man himself.

Charles was only one of many who used the Grace Hotel to find customers. A French Moroccan antique dealer called

Albert Goyot, who resembled Charles physically, went there to pick up some customers and find a girl. As often happened, he got himself into a fight — one which would have far-reaching consequences in the life of a man Goyot would never meet: Charles Sobhraj, *alias* Alain Gautier. It happened on a cool October night when a Belgian diplomat was leaning against the bar at the Grace Hotel after a hectic round of diplomatic cocktail parties. The seasonal lull in the tourist trade made the girls more attentive and co-operative, and Baronet Gilles de Giverney often came to cruise the tables at midnight when the other bars and massage parlours closed down. In his long-sleeved light blue sports shirt, silk cravat, narrow cord slacks, and Gucci loafers, de Giverney exuded an arrogance that had been his air since birth. He was talking with one of his favourite girls, a beautiful half-Balinese and half-Thai. Because of licensing laws, the waiters' trays held teapots filled with beer. When de Giverney looked up from ordering an apéritif, he saw the girl talking to Albert Goyot.

'What a common type,' he thought. He heard the girl striking a bargain with Goyot for an all night session and when she went off to the ladies' room de Giverney remarked: 'You paid too much.' The man's manner irritated him, and he did not like his face in which a mixture of French and African or Asian moulded the high cheekbones, sallow skin, and heavy, sensuous mouth. 'People like you spoil the scene for everyone else,' he continued. 'Don't you know about bargaining yet? I would have thought you would by now.'

'I pay whom I like what I like,' Goyot said, 'and I don't see why you should object.'

'It's inflation to which I object, monsieur. You should be ashamed to pay so much for a girl. Let's leave that to the Americans.' De Giverney was being rude, but he felt like a fight tonight, tense and exhausted from the workload in his tiny, understaffed embassy.

The stocky Frenchman drew himself up to his full height. 'To me, quality is important.'

'I had your girl last week, sir, for a tenth of what you're paying her.' De Giverney lit a thin cigar.

'So, she gives a discount for coming quickly,' the Frenchman said. He looked furious, like a puffed up frog, Gilles thought. The combination of too many drinks and his in-

stinctive dislike of the man who was going off with his favourite girl led him to abandon all his diplomatic habits.

'Oh, piss off.'

The man started shaking, his eyes blazing. 'Apologize for that!'

'Go to hell!'

'You've made a big mistake, de Giverney. You'll regret this.'

'Do what you like. I have diplomatic immunity. So go screw yourself.'

The girl had returned from the ladies' room. She was standing at the table in her satin hot pants with her long, freshly brushed black hair falling past her waist.

'Don't think you've heard the last of me,' the Frenchman shouted over his shoulder, but de Giverney had already dismissed the incident and he was admiring the girl's gently undulating behind and silken brown legs disappearing through the door with her client.

After a week at Kanit House with the French couple, Dominique was ready to move on. He wanted to see more of Asia and be home by Christmas. 'I have to leave now, Alain,' he told Charles. 'I'll need my passport and money back.' The next day he was suddenly sick again. He couldn't seem to shake off the stomach bug. Alain and Monique are being so wonderfully patient, he thought to himself, as Marie Andrée put his glass of milky white medicine on the cocktail bar.

On top of the diarrhoea, he felt weak and sleepy, his memory drifted, and when he woke in the morning, he forgot where he was. But always there was Charles, sticking his head in the bedroom doorway on his way out and asking, 'So, how are you today, Dominique? We'll soon have you cured.' How concerned and kind he was, Dominique reflected, despising his own weakness; he was always sick, always flushing the toilet, or just sitting, his head between his knees, as his bowels exploded and he listened to his hosts' justified laughter. 'There he goes again. He must use a roll of toilet paper every day,' Charles would say. Then Dominique felt alone and wished he was at home, in his house near the sea, with his mother to look after him. Why did they put up with him, he wondered? Early in October he started to feel better, and

Charles said he could stop taking the medicine Marie Andrée had been dispensing for the past ten days and accompany them both on a trip to Pattaya beach resort and the gem mines at Chantaburi.

For six hours Charles wandered up and down the shabby streets of Chantaburi, the gem mining town 480 kilometres south of Bangkok, sifting his hands through the sapphires and rubies piled on the pavement trestle tables. 'See, most people would think this is valuable,' he said, picking up a large blue sapphire and holding it up to the light, 'but not really, the sparkle is caused by tiny flecks of green.' The old Chinese dealer nodded at Dominique and Marie Andrée, both sitting bored nearby: 'Your friend is an expert.'

Back at Kanit House Charles installed metal filing cabinets in the living room and filled the drawers with little white envelopes of stones from Chantaburi. Charles acquired scales, tweezers, magnifying glasses and other paraphernalia.

Dominique planned to leave when he was struck again by the mysterious illness.

And then the Indian boy arrived. He just turned up at the door one day, smiling a lot with his fine white teeth flashing in a handsome, brown face. Charles welcomed him as he walked in and put his small cardboard suitcase down near the punching bag, which he sparred with jokingly. He was slightly built, wore dark trousers, a white shirt, and a thin moustache which added to the impression of personal neatness which contrasted, Dominique realized uncomfortably, with his own unshaven face and crumpled clothes. The Indian thought himself to be in his own words 'hip' and addressed Dominique as 'man', using English with an Indian accent which Dominique could barely understand.

'Oh by the way, Dominique, I'm afraid I have to ask you to move out of the spare room,' Charles announced over breakfast. 'Ajay is going to need it; he'll be working for me. You can sleep on the couch.' Dominique was surprised. He had often heard Charles make jokes about Indians which gave the impression that he despised the whole race. He concealed his irritation at losing the room to the newcomer; after all, he expected to be leaving in a few days.

'I met Ajay in the park,' Charles volunteered. 'He was lost.'

'Yes, I still get lost around here,' the Indian said, sitting

almost formally on the sofa as though at any moment he was going to get up and dance a tango.

Dominique asked, 'Where have you been staying?'

'At the Malaysia Hotel. It's a good place. I like it.'

'Why does everyone stay there?' Dominique asked.

'Oh, it's a cool place.'

'Ajay is going to find me customers at the Malaysia. I think he'll be very good at it,' Charles said, wolfing down the sandwiches prepared by Marie Andrée.

Dominique tuned out of the conversation. English required too much concentration. Ajay didn't speak French, and Dominique was feeling sick again.

From then on flat 504 became crowded with a passing parade of visitors, all potential customers, and the coffee table was usually littered with white paper packages of gems, ash trays, and coffee cups.

Young travellers from the cheap hotels were drawn in droves to the flat by the stories they had heard from the charming Indian about 'Alain Gautier' and his cut-rate sapphires and rubies. Sometimes Dominique was asked to come into the room and pretend he was a good customer, one who made many profitable trips to Paris, selling the stones he had bought at Kanit House. Dominique didn't know how to refuse. He felt so guilty about always being sick, Marie Andrée nursing him, and Charles paying for his upkeep. The least he could do, he thought, was to help the family business.

Overnight, the flat had turned into something like a youth hostel. There were French, Americans, English, and Germans, and Charles spoke to them all in their own languages. But it was when Charles was out on his mysterious rounds that the atmosphere relaxed, for everyone knew that Charles, the hard-nosed businessman, was not sympathetic to their wondrous life-style of wandering the world in a haze of marijuana smoke.

'Drugs are the sickness of your generation,' he would often say, rolling up his shirt sleeves to show he had no syringe marks. 'So many people have tried to convince me to smoke hash, so far, nobody has succeeded.'

Dominique had travelled the same roads as the visitors who flocked to Kanit House but always with a map and a guide-

book. So many of them, he realized now as he talked with them, drifted across Asia not knowing where they were going or why and treating it all like a Disneyland tour of Xanadu. Wide-eyed, they spoke of the restaurants in Bali that served omelettes prepared with hallucinogenic mushrooms, their illegal border crossing into the territory of the hill-tribes of the Golden Triangle, the excitement of crossing the Khyber Pass under the influence of L.S.D. Many overland travellers pined secretly for the comforts of home, and at Kanit House was a kitchen where they could drink Nescafé and cook a steak. It was a luxury to lie around reading *Newsweek*, and to play badminton in the courtyard. It was a break from the chain of dollar-a-night hotels that had plastic jugs of water instead of toilet paper, and menus written in Urdu. You could walk out of flat 504 with a pocket full of sapphires or a ruby ring, and when you got home, you could, maybe, sell the stones for such a profit that you wouldn't have to work for another year. So you could take off again, maybe to South America.

Some came and went; others stayed around, fascinated by the personality of 'Alain Gautier'. One visitor, introduced to the flat by Ajay, was Paul, a tall, fair, medical student from Montreal. He too was a karate expert. When he worked out with Charles in the living room, he acknowledged the superiority of the lethal and unorthodox French-Vietnamese. As Paul wiped the blood from his mouth, Charles lay down on the floor and invited the onlookers to jump on his stomach. As they did, he smiled up at them. Dominique thought, Why, he's a man of steel, mentally and physically. It made the young bank clerk feel more pathetic than ever.

Marie Andrée served trays of pineapple and papaya and endlessly poured cups of coffee. She had felt happy when she and Charles had first moved into Kanit House — but for only one night, she thought to herself bitterly. Since then she had been living her life among strangers and, unlike Charles, she was not adept at hiding her true feelings. Sometimes Charles would catch her scowling at the guests and he would hurry her into the bedroom and shut the door. 'Come on darling, smile, be polite,' he would say, 'don't scare away my customers.' She tried. She had sworn to herself to do anything to please him. Her love was intense and it eclipsed anything she

had felt before for a man. But little by little I am becoming his slave, she thought to herself, the one who must stand everything without stumbling, the one who must never be discouraging. She was the one who had always to be available, smiling, on call twenty-four hours a day -- if only to please him. But her devotion was not paying off. There was no communication between them. Charles was always elsewhere, busy promoting his gem business, seeing the Thai girl, Ann, from the jewellery shop, the woman Marie Andrée had met when they first arrived. As Charles had predicted, Ann now accepted her as his wife, his number one wife, but that had not stopped her from sleeping with Charles and being his number two wife. It was a shock to Marie Andrée, when she found out, a humiliation, even though Charles claimed it was merely to ensure the Thai girl's loyalty. How little I mean to Charles, she thought to herself, I'm just an employee satisfying his whims. How she suffered. Marie Andrée could never understand why she suffered so much in her life. Strangest of all, her love for Charles was growing.

It was on one of those afternoons when the living room was filled with visitors that Ajay turned up with an American girl. 'Hi,' she said, 'my name's Teresa.' As soon as she walked in the door with her big smile and sat down on the cane sofa it was as though she had brought a party into the room with her.

Wanting to be hospitable in the house which now felt like his home, Dominique offered to go out and get some beer. Teresa was telling everyone about the monastery in Katmandu where she was going to become a Buddhist nun, and she flashed a smile at Dominique as he went out.

By the time Teresa Knowlton's flight from Seattle arrived in Hong Kong she had made friends with five other travellers. To save money, a preoccupation they all shared, the six of them bunked down in one room in their sleeping bags at the Boston Guest House in the cavernous Chung King Mansions in Kowloon.

A week later, on October 12, Teresa took Air Siam Flight 909 to Bangkok, arriving early the next day. The man who carried her bag onto the plane in Seattle had told Teresa about a hotel in Bangkok popular with overlanders and he wrote down the number of the bus she should take from the airport. Teresa Knowlton checked into the Malaysia in the early hours of October 13.

The Malaysia, behind a high wall in the narrow Soi Ngarmduplee, achieved its word-of-mouth reputation on the drifters' trail by being one of the few budget hotels with a swimming pool, air-conditioning, and Western plumbing. Built in the 1960s to attract American GIs on rest and recreation from Vietnam, it resembled any one of thousands of modern motels across America. When overlanders first set out to cross the continent, dollar-a-night hotels with rope pallets or lice-infested mattresses were a novelty, but by the time they reached Bangkok, a mid-point, they were willing to spend \$3.50 on newly appreciated luxury, and the Hotel Malaysia was the place where most road people stayed. Day and night the foyer and adjoining coffee shop were crowded with footsore travellers. There were clean-cut students on their maiden voyages, agog with breathless innocence, eager to talk politics with the locals, as well as bedraggled taciturn veterans with only a bed roll and a string of Nepalese prayer beads; junkies, executive drop-outs, and buoyantly healthy backpackers, everyone in perpetual motion.

Downstairs, next to the lift, was a notice board of the road which guests used to swap Afghan lapis lazuli for jungle boots

or to hawk forged student cards or perhaps find someone to cross a desert with. Around the swimming pool of the Malaysia, bright blue, heavily chlorinated, and lined with coconut palms, it was possible to draw one of the few generalizations that can be made about the overland travellers. By the time they reached Bangkok few of them were fat. A sign said bar girls were prohibited from entering the pool. Guests lay on deck chairs and smoked joints or drank beer. Frequently the Malaysia was raided by the Thai drug squad, but guests were usually tipped off in advance.

Among the other foreign travellers at the Malaysia when Teresa arrived were a young couple from Amsterdam who had been on the road for seven months. Cornelia Hemker, 'Cocky', was a tall, quiet 24-year-old girl, with blue eyes and flowing fair hair, who had worked as a secretary while saving for her 'trip of a lifetime'. Her boyfriend of five years was Henk Bintanja, who had inherited his swarthy skin and dark hair from his Indonesian father and, from his Dutch mother, bright blue eyes. By road standards they were withdrawn, usually keeping to themselves, as they conscientiously visited every sight recommended by the guidebooks. They took photographs and sent them back to their families, all the time recording their daily experiences neatly in exercise books.

Amsterdam had been blanketed with snow, and the canals were frozen hard when Cocky and Henk had packed up their small flat in Oosterparkstraat eight months earlier and put their bicycles in storage. Henk was close to completing his Ph.D. in chemistry at Amsterdam University when he decided to take this year off and see the world before settling down. His laboratory work on the purification of water was finished, and while on the road he was completing some of his paperwork, corresponding with his course supervisor and even correcting proofs for his technical articles and posting them back to the University. Cocky's sister Marijke and her husband, John Zant, a psychologist in an Amsterdam Rheumatism Clinic, had joined them on this trip for three months in Bali. It was there that John Zant noticed Cocky and Henk had become less excited by the novelty of travelling and often preferred to spend time alone in their hotel room reading books and writing in their journal. After their relatives returned to Holland, Cocky and Henk flew to the Malaysian

Peninsula, then travelled north toward Thailand by train. On September 29 they took the twenty-four-hour trip from Butterworth near Penang to Bangkok and booked into the Malaysia Hotel. In their journal they wrote:

October 2-15: We arrived early. Knew the Malaysia was one of the cheapest hotels. There were many tourists whom we saw on the train, and we had to wait for our room until 10 a.m. It was 13 guilders. When we got inside, better than expected. Reception desk leaves something to be desired; if you ask for assistance, the girls yawn into your face and look annoyed, perhaps because they spend the nights on their backs with the tourists. Later, shopping in Silom Road. To tourist office for info. Going by bus we are glued together. Unbelievably humid especially when the bus stops, because of exhaust fumes. At the tourist office it becomes clear that for tourist visa, extension is difficult. Easier to go to Vientiane in Laos to get new visa.

Unimpressed by Dusit Zoo.

Went to Wat Phra Keo, 2nd visit but didn't regret it. It was again thirsty weather; we sat somewhere and ordered milk, but got soybean milk. At Oriental Hotel saw Thai dances; tickets 50 baht, the cheapest. We took a small beer, 44 baht, highly inflated price. Looked awfully five star. After show wanted to get food. Lunch was 90 baht (\$4.50) so we declined. Walked down New Rd. but couldn't find anything.

Just ordinary tourists, it seemed, but Charles would say later that his men in Hong Kong had put their names on a list.

When Dominique Rennelleau returned to flat 504 with two dozen bottles of Singha beer, the group of young travellers was in fits of laughter. He had never seen the living room so lively. Even Marie Andrée had discarded her familiar gloominess, and her thin body was shaking with incredulous giggles. Dominique opened the beers and put them on the coffee table in front of the guests and then sat on the sofa, next to Teresa. His English was basic and he wondered if he misunderstood what he was hearing Teresa talk about. All eyes in the room

were on her. Two visiting Americans, a Thai girl, and Ajay and Marie Andrée were all absorbed in Teresa's account of her sex life in Seattle. Her brown eyes were sparkling and she picked up her beer, shrugging, 'And so when he asked me to sleep with his friends, I thought, well why not?' In an incredulous undertone Marie Andrée was questioning Dominique in French to make sure she understood the gist of the risqué stories Teresa was telling about her sexual experiences. It was a hot night and everyone kept drinking beer as Teresa chattered on. It seemed to Dominique that she was drunk. As she talked, she began stroking his thigh. Startled, he went to the refrigerator for more beer.

At 11 p.m. the door opened and Charles came into the room, looking trim and businesslike in a light blue open-necked shirt and dark trousers, carrying an attaché case. 'Oh, darling,' Marie Andrée called out, 'come and meet Teresa, she's fantastic!' She went up to Charles and kissed him, and led him into the room.

Charles glanced around at the chaos of empty bottles and cigarette butts, then focused his attention on the new guest. 'Hello, Teresa,' he said, smiling and walking towards her. She looked up at him and flashed her sultry smile. It seemed to the others that an electric current passed between them. 'I hope you will allow my wife and me to take you swimming one weekend,' he said, 'to Pattaya. It's a beach resort. We have a bungalow there.' The invitation was so direct and unprompted, as though Charles had planned to ask her before he walked in the door, that Dominique would always remember it.

Charles made his rounds among the guests and then sat down next to Teresa. She was wearing a long maroon skirt and halterneck top; her skin was smooth and tanned. Around her neck she wore a protection cord.

'And so what's all this about your sex life?' Charles asked.

Teresa giggled, 'Oh, all sorts of things, sorry you missed it.'

'My wife tells me that you're off to a monastery in Katmandu. I was born in a Buddhist country. It's the greatest of all the religions, I think, and I've studied most of them.'

Already it seemed as if their intimacy had eclipsed the other house-guests. Teresa was giggling in erratic bursts and it was easy to see she was drunk. Charles knew the type well, he

thought, he had used a hundred like her on his old jobs in Bombay — they'd sleep with anyone for a few dollars, get involved in his life, and then help him drug and rob businessmen.

'Maybe you think it's strange for me to be drinking and talking about sex before going to a monastery?' Teresa said.

'There are a thousand roads to reach Nirvana,' Charles replied. 'It doesn't matter which one you take.' It was a flexible religion, he argued, that's why he liked it. Even the Thais kept an open mind. They were not supposed to kill, but Thais like fish, and fishermen must feed their families, so they solved the dilemma, in their own minds, by believing they simply took the fish from the water and let them die of their own accord.

Teresa was giggling again and Charles asked her, 'Do you expect to reach Nirvana?' he smiled, '... up there in those hills, where Buddha was born? Do you really have the self-discipline?'

'I don't have a real lot of self-discipline, but I'm working on it. How about you?'

'To me, it's the most important quality a man can have. You know, Teresa, when I was a little boy, I was like you. Running around, searching for something ... reading Buddha, the Bible, philosophy, and in the end, I realized that here, inside me, I had truth.'

He could see he had touched a chord in her. It was so easy with this type.

'Have you ever dropped acid?' she asked suddenly.

'No.'

'Well I have, Alain, hundreds of times. We used to take it at school. And once I had a trip, where I just sat, and I felt as though I was an onion, and one by one the skins peeled off until they were all gone, and I was gone too, but it was the most wonderful feeling I've ever had — much better than fucking — and after that I began searching, but it taught me that what I'm looking for isn't inside me, but outside me. So I disagree with you.' She giggled. 'I'd love another beer.'

Charles was not a man who enjoyed being contradicted, especially by a woman. And as for her sexual assertiveness, he found it repugnant. (He had never stopped teasing Marie Andrée about that night on the houseboat, when she had

asked for the first kiss.) Charles would claim later that when he walked into the room that night he had already been instructed to kill her. This was the woman whose name he had got from André Breugnot, the Frenchman he had killed in Chiangmai — so he would say.

‘Okay, everyone,’ Charles announced to the guests that night, ‘let’s go to Patpong.’

Ajay and the other guests stood up as though it was a military command. ‘But, of course you’re still too sick,’ Charles said to Dominique. ‘Perhaps you’d better stay at home tonight.’ It was true. The young Frenchman had enjoyed himself, but the state of his health was precarious. He was just as happy to have an early night and hasten his recovery. Anyway, once you had seen Patpong, it was usually the same old hoary routine.

It was a brightly lit privately owned street lined with bars, only a few blocks from Kanit House, and invariably crowded with tourists, hustlers, tarts, and transvestites. Noodle stalls and girls lined the pavements. Daily flights flew in from Frankfurt on package tours to Patpong, famous the world over for its sex clubs. Thai boys thrust cards in tourists’ hands promising ‘Elephant smokes hash’, ‘Love with a goldfish’, and other unlikely delights. The clubs, supposedly illegal, were Patpong’s attraction. The atmosphere was relaxed and cheerful, and men and a few couples were served drinks by Thai waitresses; naked women on stage lightheartedly assaulted each other with dildoes or swallowed goldfish with their vaginas and flipped them into buckets. Using the same highly trained muscles, performers could puff cigarettes or pop ping-pong balls across the room. It was to such a club that Charles had proposed to take Teresa Knowlton.

Dominique was the first to wake up the next morning. The others must have had a late night in Patpong with Teresa, he thought. It was not comfortable sleeping on the sofa in the living room. He got up, folded his sheets carefully and finished cleaning up after last night’s party. He couldn’t get Teresa out of his mind. She was so outspoken. It had shocked him. Still, that was America, Dominique thought. And then she had put her hand on his thigh. At first he thought that she

must be attracted to him, but later he had seen her doing the same to Ajay. He wondered what she must have thought of Patpong.

When Dominique came out of the shower, Marie Andrée was up frying eggs and making the morning coffee. 'How was last night? Where did you go,' he asked.

'To a sex club,' she said, indicating by the tight set of her mouth that she was in no mood to elaborate. Marie Andrée was probably angry with her husband again, he thought. There was psychological warfare going on between those two and he couldn't quite work it out. She was always sulking while Charles rarely dropped his friendly, warm-hearted sociability. Sometimes he watched them go off into their bedroom and lock the door, and he heard low, angry voices.

Marie Andrée measured his medicine, a half glass of Kaopectate for his diarrhoea and pushed it across the bar. 'Here you are, Dominique,' she said with the brisk efficiency of a senior nurse. He took a sip and decided to save the rest until he had eaten, thinking to himself that despite her cool manner, his hostess had a heart of gold. Without her he never would have remembered the medicine. Something was happening to his own memory — but she never forgot. The phone rang and he hurried to answer it, trying to make himself useful. A girl's voice asked in French, 'Is Charles there, please?'

'Charles?' Dominique replied. 'There's no one named Charles living here.'

Charles's voice called from the bedroom, 'Tell whoever it is to hang on a minute.' A few seconds later he hurried from the bedroom and took the phone. 'Yes? Oh, it's you, Nadine. Yes, I'm here. I don't like the name Charles, so I tell my friends to call me Alain. How are you this morning? What are you doing? Well, why not come up now. My wife is just making some coffee.' When he put the phone down he told Dominique that he had met a French girl who lived downstairs. She could be useful in his gem business.

In her flat downstairs Nadine Gires hung up the receiver and stood in front of the bedroom mirror, tidying her brown hair and hurrying on some pink lipstick. She was a tall, big-boned woman with an olive complexion and a pleasant, straightforward face. She had been married for two years to Remy, since she was nineteen, and had lived in Bangkok for the past eighteen months after he had been appointed chef at the Oriental Hotel. Remy worked hard and long hours in the kitchens, and Nadine was lonely in 307A, their tiny Kanit House flat. She had grown up in a suburb of Paris, the eldest of four daughters of a baker and a lady's maid and was used to the convivial conflicts of a hardworking but happy family. The life of enforced leisure in Bangkok had been getting on her nerves. Sometimes she worked part-time at the Laotian Embassy, translating English press cuttings into French, and there were the activities of the Alliance Française society, but most of the French people she met there were of another generation and another world. They were snobbish and stylish. She had no patience with the fashion-plate diplomats in their white suits and their wives for whom Asia was a place to collect antiques. She hurried up the cement staircase to flat 504. Yesterday she and Remy had been on their way out when a neighbour had come up and introduced himself as a fellow Frenchman. He was charming and very friendly and told them he was starting a cut-rate gem business and flattered them by asking their advice as long-term residents of Thailand. Did they know of a printer for his gem catalogues? What did they think of the Thais? 'Don't trust them,' Nadine and Remy had said laughingly. After he had come down and had coffee with them, he had suggested that since Nadine was at home alone most of the day, he might be able to offer her some work. She had asked him his name and he said it was Charles.

The upstairs flat was on the opposite side of the building, and to reach it Nadine had to cross an open-air walkway that

lined the two wings. She looked down over iron railings at the swimming pool, a small orange spirit house on its pedestal, and the car park. She disliked Kanit House, but it was cheap and close to the Oriental Hotel so Remy could walk to work and avoid the hellish traffic jams. Passing down a dim concrete hallway to the end of the wing, she reached flat 504 and knocked on the turquoise door. Charles opened it with a welcoming smile, dressed as he had been yesterday in dark slacks and an open neck business shirt. A flat gold Rolex watch glinted on his wrist, hinting at a prosperity that was not echoed inside the flat. It was much larger than her own, and a door opened onto a cement balcony that ran the length of the living room, shaded by white aluminium awnings. Inside, the room was shadowy and dank and she was surprised to see a black punching bag hanging near the door. It seemed to be the only personal touch apart from a dog-eared stack of gemology magazines and books on the coffee table. In the corner stood a grey metal filing cabinet. A thin dark-haired woman looked up from the kitchenette behind a padded vinyl cocktail bar where she was busying herself with cups and a jar of Nescafé. Charles introduced his 'wife, Monique', and his house-guest, Dominique, a thin, apologetic young man with a kind face and short brown beard, before disappearing back into the bedroom saying he had to finish getting ready for an appointment.

Marie Andrée put the mugs on a tray. She did not look very friendly. 'I told you to take your medicine,' she said to the house-guest, adding the glass of milky liquid to the tray which she set down on the coffee table.

'What's wrong with you?' Nadine asked.

'Oh, I don't know,' the boy smiled self-deprecatingly. 'My latest theory is malaria. I caught it in Chiangmai three weeks ago, and I've been staying here ever since.'

'Haven't you been to the hospital?' Nadine asked.

'He doesn't need to do that,' Marie Andrée said. 'My husband is an expert on Asian diseases, and we're already looking after him here. Why should we pay for a hospital as well?'

'I'm quite willing to make a contribution for my upkeep,' Dominique said. 'Alain is taking care of my money, and ...'

'Oh, don't worry,' Charles said, coming out of the bed-

room, his hair combed and shoes on. 'My wife is a little bad tempered this morning.'

The four of them sat drinking coffee. Ajay's bedroom door was closed. He was either still asleep or out. Sometimes he stayed overnight at the Hotel Malaysia. Nadine answered Charles's questions about the French community in Thailand while Marie Andrée played with the dog. Charles was curious about the contacts Nadine had made through the Alliance Française and the embassies she had worked for. 'Diplomats make wonderful customers,' he said, holding a ruby to the light. Charles told her that he was selling quality gems at wholesale prices, and that if she brought him customers, he would give her a 10 per cent commission. Apart from the sapphires and rubies he bought at the mines in Chantaburi and the diamonds he got from Hong Kong, he had his own goldsmith in Bangkok who could design the settings according to his customers' specifications, or to his own.

'Well, think about it, Nadine, and we'll talk again later. It was lucky that we met, don't you think? Not that I believe in luck.'

Kissing Marie Andrée lightly and picking up his attaché case, Charles excused himself, saying he had a business appointment. Nadine wondered if she should leave, but decided to stay since it was pleasant, sitting around, talking French. She lit another cigarette and walked to the windows overlooking the balcony. In a cage beside the railing she noticed a small monkey with its head in its hands. Marie Andrée began clearing away the coffee cups.

'You should have been here last night,' Marie Andrée said. 'There was an American girl here, Teresa. She told us such funny things about her sex life.'

'Really?' Nadine asked with a smile. 'But the Americans are so outspoken. How long have you been married to Alain?'

'Oh, we're not married, Nadine. He just calls me his wife. He says that in Asia it's better for business. It makes a better impression. I've been living with him for a few years now. I used to be a nurse in Canada.'

As she helped her clear up, Nadine thought that Marie Andrée seemed nice, though depressed. There was a pained, resentful expression in her blue eyes. Nadine was sure they

would become friends, and then, perhaps, this woman would confide in her. It would be nice to have a girlfriend.

After her first visit to flat 504, its occupants became a part of Nadine's life and she dropped in every day. She was friendly with people from the airlines and embassies who were always looking for bargains to take back to Paris, so she agreed to work for Charles. Dominique who was still staying at the flat, seemed to be wasting away with his illness. One morning Nadine went up to find that the monkey Coco, had died. Marie Andrée was very upset. 'It's your fault, Dominique,' she was saying. 'You always leave your medicine around. Coco must have drunk it.'

On October 18, five days after Teresa visited Kanit House, a fisherman dragged his small wooden boat into the gentle waves off Pattaya Beach. The red and yellow prayer flags knotted around the prow floated on top of the transparent green water as he threw his nets out and hauled them in. It was a rhythm Chid Chamuen had known since he was a boy. He rowed adjacent to the beach, south of the resort area where the long white strip of sand was usually deserted. The sun was rising over the distant mountains as he passed the Sea Gull Bungalows which were newly built and still secluded. Once Pattaya had been miles of white beach backed by jungle: no speedboats, no tourists. Now seafood restaurants lined the strip of Pattaya Beach and the fisherman had grown more wealthy selling his catch directly to their kitchens. Chid rowed on, trailing his nets. Then, looking to the left, he saw something floating in the water. He rowed towards it. Sometimes the turtles came in, turtles as big as men. Their shells were valuable. As he came closer, he saw that it was not a turtle, but the body of a girl in a bikini, a drowned *farang*. She was floating face down in the warm green water.

Blue blotches mottled the body. The short brown hair looked like seaweed as it washed back and forth. Chid believed it was bad luck to touch a corpse. He took the rope that was coiled under the seat and looped it around the body's neck and tied it to the side of the boat. With the red and yellow prayer ribbons floating beside it, the body was brought back to land and laid out on the beach in the sun. The local people gathered around in their sarongs and bamboo hats, looking curiously and hurrying away. At 8.30 a.m. the local police arrived. There was no sign of injury on the body except a small cut on the neck believed to have been caused by the fisherman's rope. The fingers and toes were already turning blue. The eyes were closed. The right earlobe was pierced, but there was no jewellery on the body, nothing to identify a tourist who had apparently drowned. The sergeant

in charge took a photograph of the body with his Instamatic.

How did the body of Teresa Knowlton come to be floating in the water that morning? Later, in another country, Charles would offer a confession: knowing Teresa would check into the Malaysia Hotel, he had sent Ajay Chowdury to pick her up with his talk of cheap gems. After the visit to his flat, Teresa had been delighted to accept his invitation to join him for a weekend at Pattaya.

With Ajay he picked Teresa up at the Malaysia Hotel. He could not remember the exact date. Teresa told him she was surprised that 'Monique' was not going with them to the beach resort. Charles told her: 'She has to stay behind at Kanit House to look after our house-guest. He's sick again.' With Teresa sitting between the two men, Charles drove the rented Holden Torana south along Sukhumvit Highway, leaving the city at 6.30 p.m. The road passed through rice paddies and black buffaloes plodding through the water. During the journey Teresa put her hand on his thigh, but he pushed it away, saying, 'No, Teresa, not now.' He thought she was a nymphomaniac.

Teresa talked cheerfully and Ajay sat quietly, staring out the window, ready for whatever his boss might ask him to do. He was a smart fellow, Charles thought, and he would claim later that the Indian had been sent to him by the men in Hong Kong as an able assistant.

Although Ajay had only been at Kanit House for a few days, Charles had already tested him and assessed him according to the categories of the French characterologist, René Le Senne. Ajay was *Emotional, Inactive, Secondary* (EnAS), which put him in category 3, as *Sentimental* — like Robespierre. He was clever, but blocked. The factor of *Inactivity* meant that between the Indian's thought and action there was always a gap. This made him confused and indecisive. The only way *Sentimentals* could properly fulfil themselves was if they were in second place to a strong leader, someone who could take care of life's practicalities and make all the major decisions. Only then, Charles believed, would such types be truly in harmony with themselves.

Ajay was a man of discipline and fidelity, with a tendency

towards idealism. Religious people were usually of this type, such as Kierkegaard, and once convinced of the merits of an action, they would stop at nothing. Charles believed he had penetrated so deeply into the Indian's mind, that he could pull the strings and make him dance to whatever tune was desired. Yes, he was a smart boy, who had picked up Teresa at the Malaysia with grace and style, using some of Charles's rubies as bait. Above all, Ajay was searching for adventure.

There could be few more romantic bars than the one at the spot where Charles would say he and Ajay took Teresa for her last drink. Under the roof of thatched palm leaves, the view from the bar swept across the South China Sea through the silhouettes of palm trees that lined the beach to the sunset behind the jagged offshore islands. To the left, the black sweep of the beach continued, unpopulated. Music from nightclubs and discos on the docks hung in the air. It was not the Asia that Teresa loved, the austere beauty of the Himalayas, the temple bells, the silence of the lamas at their ancient meditations, but tourist Asia at its most seductive. As she looked across the bar, where the fishermen pulled their boats onto the beach, Charles dropped a sedative into her drink.

'I've got business on the strip,' Charles said. 'Let's meet back here at midnight and we'll drive to the bungalow. Maybe we'll have a swim before we sleep.' He strolled to the Sandbox, a nearby disco where local rock bands blared out Western hits. During a break in the music a sheet of canvas was rolled out on the dance floor, and the crowds returned to their tables or sat close to the improvised boxing ring. Two teenagers with quivering muscles and bright satin shorts came on stage. With a quick balletic gyration each one made the ritual sign of homage and then they began to punch and kick each other. As bets were placed, money flashed among the audience and it was here that Charles filled in the hours until it was late enough to finish off his business with Teresa.

It was nearly twelve when he walked back to the car, where the smiling American girl and Ajay were waiting for him. They were leaning against the hood, joking with the strolling bar girls and the children hustling cut glass 'diamonds from Burma'. 'Okay, let's go,' Charles said.

He drove south again, along Sukhumvit Highway toward Cambodia. Because of the fear of bandits who roamed the surrounding jungle, few people strayed from their homes or the brightly lit tourist areas, and traffic was sparse.

After about ten minutes, Charles turned right at an ornate Buddhist temple on the side of the road, its five flashy pagodas standing out against the sky. He drove for 3 kilometres until he reached the edge of the beach where the road was briefly paved. He turned right past two construction sites for new tourist bungalows. He kept going for a short distance until the road reverted to dirt and there was no sign of settlement. It was deserted although less than a mile from the Sea Gull Bungalows. He turned the car right and bumped it across a field. He turned off the lights and the engine.

The field faced a long, grey strip of beach that stretched away endlessly to the horizon and down the coast towards Cambodia.

Charles would claim later that he could remember the conversation with Teresa clearly.

'Do you know the reason I brought you here?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said, 'for a weekend at the beach.'

'There is something else, too,' Charles said. 'Who do you work for?'

She was very surprised. 'What do you mean? I'm not working. I'm on my way to Katmandu. I'm going into retreat at the Kopan Monastery, to teach the children.'

He put his hand on her shoulder as if she were a little girl. 'Teresa, I don't think you are telling me the truth.'

'Yes, I am,' she said.

'You know, this really doesn't interest me. I've been engaged in illegal matters for a long time now, and I know you came here to do a little business.'

'Oh, well, sometimes I have done some business,' she said.

'Yes, and many people who have lived in Katmandu like to take a little powder through,' said Charles.

'You mean from here to there?' she asked.

'Yes. It's easier to take from Katmandu to Europe. From here direct is getting difficult.'

'I suppose so.'

'Tell me, Teresa, do you have to take something from here

to Katmandu this time? Do you?’

‘No,’ she said.

In the car that night, Teresa continued to deny that she was involved with heroin.

‘Come, Teresa, I think you have to do a little business.’ His hand was still over her shoulder and he squeezed her harder. Ajay was staring straight ahead. Teresa must have felt foggy and confused from the capsule he had dropped in her drink. She kept shaking her head at his questions: ‘No, Alain, you’re crazy.’

‘I think you do have to carry some powder, Teresa, and you are silly to hide this from me. You see, I already know the one who has to give it to you.’

‘You do?’

‘Yes, I know.’ They stayed silent for a while and listened to the waves. When she seemed to relax again, Charles said, ‘Teresa, how do you like Katmandu? How do you like the life there?’

‘It’s good,’ she said. ‘I can’t wait to get back.’

‘Don’t you think what you are doing now can harm some human being? You know what it’s like at the other end of the heroin market. You know the harm. You say you study meditation, and part of this philosophy is to respect the human being. Don’t you think that what you do is contrary to this respect?’

It was a game he loved — ensnaring people in their contradictions, and he would claim that Teresa answered him:

‘Well, you know, Alain, that I do this only for the money.’ And then she said, ‘Did you put something in my drink? I’m feeling weird.’

‘It was only to relax you, Teresa, because I must tell you that I think I have to do something bad to you.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Well, you choose your way of making money. You know the risk of it. Sometimes the risk can be high.’

‘What are you going to do to me?’

‘It’s not my fault. I have the order to do something to you, and I have to carry out my order.’

‘Are you going to beat me up?’

‘No, Teresa, I am not going to beat you.’

‘What are you going to do?’

'Something better.'

Ajay opened a vacuum flask and poured coffee into a cup, then he took three capsules from his pocket. In each of these according to the story Charles would tell, was fifty milligrams of Mogadon, five tablets ground to powder and packed inside. Charles dropped these capsules into the coffee.

'Drink it,' he commanded.

'I don't drink coffee.'

'This time you will have to make an exception, Teresa.'

'What will it do?'

'You will just sleep. I want to keep you asleep.'

'What for?'

'We are going to visit some people now to talk business. I don't want you to see the way. Afterwards, we will ask you some questions, and you can go.'

'Really?'

'Yes, Teresa. Just drink up and it will all be over soon.'

Charles would later describe how he and Ajay undressed Teresa Knowlton, put her in a bikini and removed her jewellery. Then he took a two-way radio from the back of the car and walked through the prickly pear bushes and low scrub to the road. Ajay stripped to his underpants. Charles searched for signs of traffic or people, and then whispered the signal to Ajay who backed the car onto the road and parked it on the grassy bank by the beach.

He walked up to the car and said to Ajay, 'Take her for a swim.' She was quiet and didn't struggle. Ajay put her arm around his shoulder and his hand around her waist, helping her from the car and down the embankment. He dragged her across the sand to the water's edge, then picked her up, carried her into the water and swam out with her. Then he let her go.

A few hours later, on October 18, she was found by the fisherman. Charles would claim he killed Teresa on the same night he collected her from the Hotel Malaysia, but records show that she checked out on October 14 — four days earlier. Her whereabouts during those days remain a mystery.

The unidentified corpse was wrapped in a plastic bag and buried in the local Sawang Boriboon Cemetery. On the day

she was buried, her grandmother, Emma Knowlton, wrote to her at the Kopan monastery: 'I am very worried about you. I haven't heard from you since you left, and I can't understand it. Anyway, we are fine here. Steve and Grandpa are getting on well, and the garden has been lovely, with a big crop of courgettes.'

For seven months the body of Teresa Knowlton would rest anonymously in this overgrown field.

Nadine was lying in a deck chair beside the swimming pool dabbing suntan oil on the bikini strap marks on her shoulders. She took off her sunglasses and looked up when she heard Marie Andrée calling down to her from the balcony of the top floor flat.

'You don't go in, Nadine? You're always sunbathing.'

She smiled and waved to the French Canadian. 'Come and join me,' she shouted, 'and then I'll go in.' Nadine was nervous in the water, and she usually splashed around in the shallows of the chlorinated pool.

'I'll be down in a few minutes,' Marie Andrée called.

Over the last few days the two women had come to know each other better. She was obviously lonely, Nadine thought, in love with Charles, but in a way that seemed to make her miserable. She could see why Marie Andrée was so crazy about the gem dealer. What an unusual man, prosperous in business, charming, intelligent, a real man of the world, yet it was a quality above all these that was so captivating. There was something curious about their relationship, she had sensed, something secretive and hidden. Yes, it was very different from the happiness she had found with Remy. But then, the two men were such opposites. Nadine had to admit that Charles was charismatic, sexy, domineering in an almost hypnotic way. Even so, at the back of her mind she wondered if he was using tricks he had learned from all the psychology books lying around his flat. Nadine's husband, Remy, wasn't sure about him. Charles made him unaccountably suspicious and he rarely went up to flat 504.

Marie Andrée walked along the path of the pool. Her hair was pinned up, and in the glaring sunlight the lines of her forehead were etched deeply. She sat down, hunched up with her arms around her knees, and Nadine asked her why she looked so unhappy.

'So many people coming and going and doing business, and I'm the one who has to clean up after them.'

'But doesn't Dominique help?'

'He tries, but he's so sick.'

Nadine sensed that the cause of her unhappiness was Charles rather than her responsibilities as a hostess which she discharged efficiently if not graciously.

'Now he's met another Thai girl. Roong!' Marie Andrée spat out the name like a curse. 'I was with him. We were having lunch at the Indra Coffee Shop, and he started talking to the waitress. I could see what was happening. She's eighteen. Now he sees her every day, and he says, "You know that this is only for business. I need Thai girls to help me." He buys her presents, takes her out. And me, I am just his wife, and his wife is just the woman he is cheating on.'

So this was the problem. Her friend was not the first European woman to confide in Nadine about a husband's Thai mistress. They were one of the drawbacks of Thailand like the mosquitoes and the heat. Among diplomatic circles it was said that only a strong marriage could survive a posting to Bangkok.

'You know, Monique, you don't have to stand for it. If it makes you so unhappy, you can always leave.'

'I know. Sometimes I think I'll go, then he says he needs me, and I know he does. If it wasn't for me, I'm sure he'd never eat. All he thinks about is his business.'

They lay side by side in the deck chairs, their eyes hidden from one another by sunglasses.

'Nadine?'

'Yes?'

'My name isn't really Monique.'

'Oh?'

'My name is Marie Andrée, but Alain doesn't like it, so he gave me the name Monique.'

Nadine remembered something Charles had once said: 'I don't like the name Charles, so I ask my friends to call me Alain.'

Nadine laughed. 'I think Marie Andrée is a nice name,' she said, glad that her neighbour was beginning to confide in her.

Vitali Hakim, the Turkish drug smuggler who lived on Ibiza, had floated through the summer in his sarong, going to parties, getting stoned, and planning his next trip to Bangkok. Carol, his girlfriend from Brooklyn, had left Ved for good, and, if he registered the loss at all, it only made him sloppier than ever. Some of the girls on the island did not view Ved as generously as his former fiancée had and they made fun of his apparent decline. Once they tied a tambourine to the back of his shiny new car. In September the police on the island picked him up for carrying fourteen grams of marijuana. The only difference in Ved's next trip to Asia from those he had made in the past was that it would be financed by someone else, another Turk. This man was based on the off-shore island of Formentera, a smudge on the horizon from Ibiza where he lived with a Danish woman. Their operation was known locally as the Danish-Turkish connection and they would arrange the couriers to collect the consignments of heroin from Ved and bring them back to Europe.

Also living on the little island of Formentera was a 24-year-old Parisian girl, Stephanie Parry. She had come to the island three years before, in 1972, to see her older sister and had decided to stay. She had finished her Baccalauréat in Paris and was training for a career in advertising. Instead, spell-bound by the beauty of the island, she moved into a small stone farmhouse and made her living by designing dresses to be sold at boutiques in nearby Ibiza or in Madrid. She was a beautiful, but withdrawn, girl. Stephanie had told her family in Paris where her stepfather played violin at the Lido nightclub that she would be home for Christmas. That was her plan, only she did not mention that she would fly there via Bangkok.

With his long, wavy hair, embroidered shirts, and platform heels, Ved looked like the embodiment of the 1960s when he closed his house in October and said goodbye to his friends

from Ibiza. He carried enough cash to provide for his own needs and two couriers, and assuming that each of them could smuggle between two or three kilograms, he must have been holding any amount from ten to twenty thousand dollars when he landed in Bangkok.

On November 4 the *Bangkok Post*, an English language daily, carried a picture of a girl lying on her back in a bikini with her arms outstretched. It was an easily recognizable photograph of Teresa Knowlton, one taken on the day she was found. Unable to identify the body, the police had sent the picture to the *Bangkok Post* which reported: 'No traces of any foul play and police and doctors inspecting the body concluded she must have drowned.' An appeal was made for anyone who recognized the body to contact the police.

Charles read the *Bangkok Post* every day. 'I'm waiting to see how long it will take the communists to control Asia,' he would tell his visitors, who kept coming to Kanit House in increasing numbers. It was a continuing party. On November 5, the day after the picture of Teresa's body appeared in the newspaper — which Charles managed to keep from Dominique — two new house-guests were settling in. One of these, François Dubily, sat on the sofa as he went over in his mind the events that had brought him there.

François didn't like it when his life went out of control as it had since he arrived in Bangkok with his old friend Yannick Masy. It was more than irritating — Charles had not failed to make jokes about it — both men were ex-detectives and both had now been robbed on the same day. François watched Yannick who was talking with Charles about the gem business. His friend seemed happy to be here and not at all bothered that his passport and travellers' cheques were gone. Yannick's pale blue eyes were alive with adoration for their suave French-Vietnamese host, who called himself Alain Gautier. Yes, François knew all the signs. Yannick was swept away again.

It was like the crisis that had led to his friend's resignation from the police force in Paris in May 1968. Yannick, an officer on duty, had been so inflamed by the rhetoric of the student revolutionaries that he had switched sides. Naturally, he was fired, and François, a quiet, solidly-built young man with a dark brown beard and pale skin, had resigned in solidarity. They had worked at other jobs in France to save money to travel, but not enough. By the time they were ready to leave Bangkok, a city where many young men stay longer than they had originally intended, they were so low on funds that they were ready to listen to the American they met one night in the Blue Fox, a bar opposite the Malaysia Hotel, who told them about 'Alain Gautier'. It seemed that the name was on every traveller's lips. The following night 'Alain' himself turned up

at the bar and assured them he could help them all find work.

First, he took them to the immigration compound, folding a hundred baht note inside each of their passports, and arranged an extension for their visas. Then he had given them a ride down to the Pattaya beach resort, telling them that they would certainly find work in one of the big tourist hotels. Yannick had been a chef before he became a policeman. But none of the hotels that lined the palm fringed beach strip was interested in employing them. Now, back on the sofa at Kanit House, François tapped out his pipe and rummaged in his pocket for a tin of tobacco.

There was a knock on the door, and Nadine ushered in two new customers whom she introduced to Charles, then she joined François on the sofa and asked him what had happened when he went to Pattaya with Charles.

'It was very strange,' he began. After breakfast at the Sangkew Bungalow, François had suddenly felt sick and went to lie down in the room he shared with Ajay. When he woke up, his passport and remaining travellers' cheques were gone. Charles had told him it must have been one of the staff at the Bungalows.

At dinner that night Yannick had become dizzy. He was helped from the table and they all walked along the strip, but Yannick remembered he had left his shoulder bag behind. They rushed back. The bag was gone. 'It's probably as well for the French police force that you two have left it,' Charles had joked and then suggested they both come to stay with him at Kanit House. While waiting for their passports and travellers' cheques to be returned, he offered, they could help him sell gems. He would rent the adjoining flat for them.

'Yes, he's so generous,' Nadine said. 'You were lucky to meet him.' François nodded in agreement.

'I think my friend Yannick is almost glad that it happened. He thinks Alain is some kind of guru. He isn't even bothering to apply for a new passport. Me? I've been going to the embassy every day. It takes so long. Now Alain says he will employ me to sit around the bars and tell people about his bargain-priced sapphires and rubies.'

The two new customers Nadine had just brought to the flat walked over with Charles and sat down, both looking pleased. 'Your friends want to go skin diving at Pattaya,' Charles said

to Nadine. 'Ajay and I are going to Chantaburi for more stones tomorrow, and we can drop them on the way.'

Yes, Nadine thought, he really was a helpful neighbour.

The next day, at midnight, Nadine and Remy were in bed when the phone rang. Remy answered and listened, his face becoming grim. 'Okay, you'd better come back here and spend the night. And go to the police in the morning.'

'What's wrong?' Nadine asked, sitting up and lighting a cigarette.

'Your friend Alain Gautier looks like a thief,' Remy said, putting down the phone. The call had been from their two friends who had gone to Pattaya with Charles and Ajay. They had just returned to the bungalow they shared with them both and discovered that everything was gone, their passports and travellers' cheques, four thousand dollars' worth.

'I told them to stay at the Tropicana and put their money in the hotel safe,' Nadine said to her husband, 'especially after what happened to François and Yannick. Why didn't they listen? Air France employees get fifty per cent off at the Tropicana, and it's much nicer than that creepy bungalow.'

'Your friend Mr Gautier can be very persuasive, my darling,' Remy said as he turned out the light and got back into bed.

In the morning after she had spoken to her two friends, who had thumbed a ride back from Pattaya, Nadine walked slowly upstairs to the flat on the top floor. Marie Andrée opened the door. She was wearing flared jeans and a black nylon T-shirt, and her hair was screwed into a knot at the top of her head.

'Is Alain back yet?'

'No. Come in, Nadine. Have some coffee. They're still at the gem mines.'

'Monique, forgive me for asking, but how well do you know Ajay?'

'He's a good friend of Alain's. I like him, don't you?'

The two women sat on bar stools while Nadine told Marie Andrée that her friends said Ajay had left them suddenly during dinner, which was when their money was stolen.

'Oh, Nadine, that's dreadful. How can you imply Ajay is involved? Alain will be upset.'

That night Nadine was home alone while Remy worked late at the Oriental. The phone rang. It was Charles, and he sounded angry. 'It's ridiculous what you're saying about Ajay,' he said to her, 'and very unfair. His father is a big film producer in Bombay; the whole family is rich. He doesn't need to steal.' By the time she put the phone down, Nadine was reassured. Charles was so certain about Ajay and, after all, he had confronted her head on, not like someone guilty or suspicious of his friend. Later, Charles spoke to Nadine's two friends. He told them their allegations were slanderous and unfounded, and that Pattaya was renowned for its high crime rate. The two young men were by this time less certain that it was Ajay who had stolen their belongings. It was flimsy and unconvincing evidence, really. 'Circumstantial,' Charles called it. So they apologized.

'While you wait for the return of your money,' Charles told them, 'I will rent you a downstairs flat and lend you some cash, but before you leave Thailand, you must repay me.' He drew up a contract to that effect, and they signed it. 'I must tell you,' he said, 'that in Paris I studied law, so if you do leave Bangkok without paying me back, I could sue you in the courts.'

Nadine was now reassured that Ajay had nothing to do with the thefts at Pattaya and that the incident a week earlier with the two French policemen was a coincidence. Remy, however, was not convinced. 'You know, my darling, you can keep working for him if you like, but I am a chef, my nose is good, and in my opinion there's something about this clever new friend of yours that smells.'

Nadine accompanied Charles to an international gem convention at Bangkok's Indra Hotel. She marvelled at his ease with the managers of the most exclusive jewellery shops of Paris.

'You have seen what the Thais have to offer,' she observed him saying to a famous dealer from the Place Vendôme, 'but my own samples are by far superior, and, because I buy directly from the mines...' Here he laughed and murmured in an intimate undertone, 'If the Chinese knew, there would be trouble. My prices are rock bottom.'

Charles had been a great success and the following day he returned with a newly printed business card: 'Alain Gautier, gemologist' and on the back was a location map of Kanit House. Charles had also collected the cards of all the important European dealers.

Back in the flat when he opened his attaché case to remove the cards for filing, Nadine happened to be standing behind him and saw, to her amazement, a false beard and moustache in a plastic bag.

'Alain!' she giggled, reaching over and picking them up. 'What do you do with these things?'

He grabbed them from her and put them back in the case which he snapped shut as he said, 'In this business, Nadine, you have to be prepared. For anything. Selling gems in Bangkok, you know, is not the same as selling cheese in Paris. It's a rough game. But that's not your problem. Your job is to keep bringing me customers.' He smiled warmly. 'You've been doing very well.'

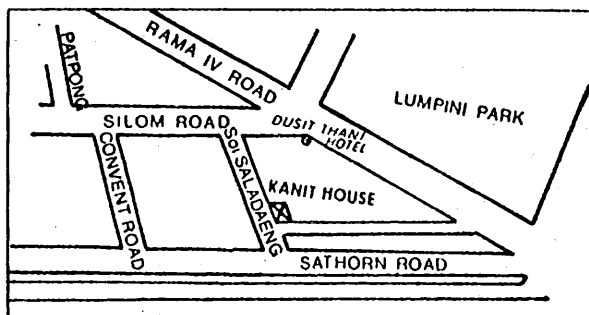
She decided this was the wrong time to raise the matter of the commissions he owed her. Some employees of the French Embassy she had sent to him had placed big orders. Now Charles was planning to buy his own jewellery shop. His Thai girlfriend, Ann, would be the official owner since it was illegal for aliens to own businesses in Thailand.

Nadine had introduced him to a young German boy,

A. Gautier
Gems Dealer

Kanit House
77/5 Saladaeng 1
BANGKOK

Tel : 861284 ext. 504



Charles Sobhraj's business card.

Reiner Stein, whose father, a Bangkok resident, was also in the gem business. Reiner had left home and moved into one of the spare rooms in Charles's complex of flats at Kanit House. He had two interests in life, his 1500 cc motorcycle and gems. Although Reiner was only seventeen, he had grown up with goldsmiths, sapphire cutters, and gem traders and knew the business well. He was sitting at the bar going over the lease on a factory space he and Charles were planning to rent. The space was to house casting machinery they were going to import from Germany, to cast the metal settings for gems. A wing of his short fair hair fell across his face as he leaned over the file, absorbed in his figures and excited about his association with the suave Alain Gautier.

Charles was talking quietly with Yannick whom he had put in charge of his filing system. Tall and fair, the ex-policeman

looked self-important as he nodded in agreement with Charles who clicked a tape of South American music into the cassette player. A hot breeze blew in the open window. In one of the armchairs sat a handsome Turk, staring at a non-existent point in the air.

Nadine came into the room. She had never seen a man so decoratively dressed as Hakim. He wore a black shirt covered with a design of gold stars, and a silver necklace and bracelets. His long, wavy hair was shiny and soft as though he really cared for it. They had talked yesterday, and Nadine liked him for his gentle manner and the far-off, quizzical look in his eyes as though he was starting to wonder what life had in store for him. He had been stoned then, but today he looked more than stoned. He was very pale and barely seemed to know where he was.

'Ved. Hi, how are you?'

'Nadine, good to see you. You know, I think I'm getting sick. It began, I don't know, after dinner last night.' With a weary gesture from his be-ringed hands, he pushed his long hair back from his face and neck. She touched his forehead. It was hot.

'Alain,' she called, 'Ved's getting a fever. You know, I've been in Thailand eighteen months now, and until I started coming to your flat, I've never seen so many people sick.'

'It's just because I look after them, Nadine. Do you expect me to abandon them to Thai medical care?'

'Maybe it's Quebec cooking,' Nadine joked, 'or perhaps you have some sort of vibration which provokes illness, Alain.' Several people in the room laughed, even Charles.

Heroin dealers on business trips do not mix with strangers. Most choose middle-class hotels and keep to themselves. Later, his friends thought that Vitali Hakim's carelessness reflected his constant need for company. The flamboyant clothes and platform boots reflected his insecurity, and Charles Sobhraj, the Eurasian who held court over a flat full of nomadic Westerners, would have been very attractive to Ved — a glowing success.

That summer on Ibiza, after Carol had left him, he reverted to using heroin and lost weight. He was about 9 stones when he arrived in Bangkok. Oddly, when Charles would later

confide about that night — October 27 -- he recalled Ved as 'a hard man, a strong man, a real Turk'.

The other guests in the flat had the impression that Ved was going with Charles and Ajay to the gem mines; apparently he wanted to make such a large order of stones that it was necessary to go to the wholesalers. It seemed strange that they chose to leave so late at night, it was at about 11 p.m. when Dominique noticed Ved leaving the flat, loosely supported by Charles and Ajay. He seemed to be staggering, as though he was still sick.

Charles wanted this to be a different kind of murder. His instructions from Hong Kong, he would later say, suggested it was time to make an example of one of these amateurs. It was for this reason that he had already packed a can of petrol in the boot of his car — a maroon Holden Torana that was parked downstairs.

Vitali Hakim was still very drowsy, lying in the back seat, when the car came to a halt soon after they had set off. Charles and Ajay opened the back doors, rolled him onto the floor and handcuffed him to the bottom of the seat.

Stuffing his mouth with a rag and taping it shut, Charles told his guest that soon he would be asking him some questions. Leaving Ajay in the back, he slipped behind the wheel and drove south. Later that night the car stopped at the fishing village of Sri Racha. He needed rest, Charles said, and he wanted to leave the Turk some time to think, a few hours of silent terror that would break down any resistance or loyalty. The Turk had names and addresses that Charles needed. Ajay stayed with the prisoner that night, while Charles slept in a bungalow.

Late the next day they set off in the direction of Chantaburi. 'Did you give him the Sodium Pentothal?' Charles asked Ajay, who was checking on the sleeping figure under the blanket. The Indian smiled back — he had Charles to thank for teaching him to use a syringe.

Dozens of dirt roads branched off the highway and Charles turned right on one of them, stopping when he spotted a secluded clearing through the trees. With Ajay's help, Charles ungagged Vitali Hakim and dragged him into a field. His eyes stared up at their moonlit faces. Charles began the interrogation by asking him the names of his contacts. 'The

operation was small,' Ved protested, 'only a family business.' He said the couriers were just hippies living on Ibiza.

Charles wasn't satisfied. He thought the man was sly, revealing a fragment in order to hide the whole story. No one could beat Charles at that game. He had practised the technique in police stations all over the world.

Ajay re-cuffed Ved's hands and squatted on the grass near him, watching. With others, Ajay could be lively, but working with Charles, he usually looked on silently, a mute gravedigger.

'We're professionals, Hakim,' Charles said. 'If you don't tell us, you will disappear and nobody will care. You're in Asia, so who's going to help you?' Later he would tell what happened next:

'When I had beaten him enough, I took off the gag. The first person he told us about was Stephanie Parry. She would come in December. (In fact she came earlier than he told us.) We beat him some more, and then he said he had two people in Peshawar. I was writing the names and addresses down on a piece of paper about the size of a cheque-book. He said these two men could come anywhere to help him or the courier if there was any trouble. I beat him again, and then he told me about Spain. He had another Turk there, someone with a joint bank account. I wrote it down. This was the man who knew all about the Copenhagen operation. I beat him for about another twenty minutes, and he told me about Hong Kong, the name of a top dealer there. He used to buy hash in Hong Kong. And he also gave me one of his contacts in Amsterdam and some small fry, a few couriers he had used before. I just took all the names. I sent Ajay to the car for the scissors. This was in case the fellow had anything more to tell. He had long hair, and so to break down his last resistance, I cut it all off.'

Charles and Ajay re-gagged Vitali Hakim, put him in the car and drove back towards Pattaya. Before reaching the resort, they turned right, off the highway, along the road to the Siam Country Club. After 5 kilometres they turned right on a dirt path and drove a few metres. When the path curved, it was hidden from the road by tapioca plants and palm trees.

'Ajay and I dragged the Turk out of the car, and — clack! — I broke his neck. I took out the petrol and left it next to the

body. I reversed the car back onto the road and faced it in the direction of the highway, about 600 metres from the track. Then I came back to Ajay, and we threw some rags over his face and poured petrol on it. It burns better that way. The rags stop the liquid from evaporating. If you put it straight on the face, most of the petrol just runs to the ground.

'I poured some more under the head and the body, and all through his clothes, soaking them, otherwise it would have just burned the grass. You know, this is one job I wanted to be a message. Not for everyone — just the people who sent him. That's why I took him back to Pattaya. I wanted it to be in the same area as Teresa. I wanted it to be a deterrent to the others in the business.

'And so after the petrol had soaked through everything, I say to Ajay, "Okay, in one minute you light, and as soon as you do, run towards the car." Already I started hurrying to the car because I knew there would be a big flame. I got in the car, turned on the lights, and then I saw it. Whoooooosh! A big red flame, the whole sky lit up. Ajay came running, and we drove off.'

The small wooden house of Tuan Chanmark, a rice farmer, lies a few kilometres south of the sea down the road that leads to the Siam Country Club. The house is set back half a kilometre from the road, hidden behind a grove of coconut palms. The country that surrounds it, emerald green rice paddies and the lighter green of the tapioca fields, was still bathed in the monochromes of the cool dawn when at 4.30 a.m. on November 28 Tuan arose and went outside to start his day's work. It was then that he saw a fire from the direction of the road about 500 metres from his house, but he paid no attention to it, assuming that a farmer was burning grass or rice stubble. But at 6 a.m. when it was full daylight, he happened to walk up the track and came across a charred body, still smoking. It lay at the edge of a bamboo patch beside a tall coconut palm. The eyes in the blackened face were closed; the mouth clamped shut; the nose half burned off. There was something insect-like in the position of the slight figure, something reminiscent of the praying mantis in the way the hands were raised as though in supplication. The legs were splayed out, and the knees raised. The head was

thrown back as though, before he died, he had been looking up, looking up and seeing something towering above him.

Tuan Chanmark walked around the body. The last tongues of flame that had been consuming the shirt, a black shirt with a pattern of yellow stars, had gone out. Later that day the police arrived at the scene. They found no tyre marks on the grass that led from the road to the corpse, but the ground was hard. The clothing that remained, a pair of blue underpants and zippers at the wrists now burned into the skin might have furnished clues, but they weren't examined. One of the villagers who came to look noticed that there were a few hairs still left on the legs, and that they were light brown, but this wasn't reported to the police until much later.

Lieutenant Suthipong Ramawong who was in charge of the investigation assumed the case was a suicide. It was probably one of the many jobless Thai employees of the former American bases flocking to Pattaya in hope of getting work. These people were impossible to trace, and the death of one of them was not of enough importance to warrant an investigation. Without ceremony, the corpse of Vitali Hakim was wrapped in a sheet of plastic and buried in the Sawang Boriboon Cemetery only a short distance from another unmarked grave, that of Teresa Knowlton.

Nadine visited the flat the next day, wondering if the Turk was feeling better. She found that he had gone off on a trip with Charles and Ajay.

'And so what happened to him?' Nadine asked Marie Andrée.

'Oh, Alain says he met some of his druggy friends in Pattaya and decided to stay there.'

'But what about his things?' Nadine asked. She had noticed his silver necklace lying on the coffee table, and his case was still in the bedroom.

'Oh, he'll be coming back to collect them in a few days,' Marie Andrée said.

A few days after the charred body was buried near Pattaya, in November 1975, a warm afternoon light bathed flat 504 one hundred and fifty kilometres away in Bangkok. Dominique sat on one of the stools next to the cocktail bar idly reading the label of a bottle of Kaopectate. 'Do not use for more than two days or in the presence of high fever.' This was the medicine Monique had been giving him since he had first arrived, and he had been drinking it dutifully. But strangely, it was only when he did not get around to taking a dose from the bottle that he ever felt better. He began to wonder — it was impossible — if he might be being poisoned? Surely not. 'What would be the reason? He felt better today because he had not taken the medicine recently, but now Marie Andrée and Charles were getting angry, saying that he was already costing them so much money by being sick — sometimes she had to bring his meals to him in bed — and that if he wanted to get well, he should take more Kaopectate. How could he suspect them of drugging him? This illness was driving him crazy! But he *did* suspect. Then all he had to do to test his theory was take the medicine one more time and note its effects. Yes, he would have to find out what was happening.

It had been fun at Kanit House for the first few weeks despite his illness, because there was always so much happening around Charles. He had a zest for life which the mild-mannered banker had never been close to before. Those first few days had been something out of a fantasy; nightclubs, discos, expensive restaurants, gambling, and trips to Pattaya and the gem mines.

It was on one of those very enjoyable weekends that the two ex-detectives, Yannick and François, had both been robbed of their passports and money. Later, when Nadine's two friends had lost theirs in similar circumstances, the coincidence disturbed him. Was Charles a passport thief? Well, it's none of my affair, Dominique decided. But I'd better get out of here as soon as I can.

It wasn't so easy. Each time he asked Charles to return his passport, he just made an excuse, saying, 'Oh, tomorrow, tomorrow, it's still in my safe at the bank.' He had noticed that Ajay had started to carry a nine-inch flick-knife, which was not all that uncommon in Bangkok. The Indian was always asking Dominique to do the laundry or to make coffee. Actually, he and François did most of the daily chores now. The other policeman, Yannick, had become more of a personal secretary to Charles. The gem business was booming. All over the flat saucers were filled with sapphires and rubies, and customers constantly streamed through the door.

When Nadine's two friends, who had lost their valuables at Pattaya, returned to Paris, Dominique moved downstairs to 103 with François. Alain wanted him off the couch because so many customers were coming to buy gems. Alain was making so much money. He had watched Yannick counting out piles of hundred-baht notes. One morning he saw Charles walking down to the car with wads of bahts in his hands almost as if he wanted everyone by the pool to see how much he was making. He was spending a lot, too, with the five people he supported in the flat and all the passers-by. Sometimes Charles would sell the stones at a huge profit. At others he seemed to sell at a loss, just to meet more people. It didn't make sense.

Dominique Rennelleau often thought of Les Sables d'Orlonne, his village, with its yachts and fishing boats bobbing peacefully in the port and the string of waterside restaurants with candles, shiny silverware, and red checked tablecloths where he used to eat with his family. Now his mother was worried, as well as grateful. She had promised Dominique that she would 'send Alain Gautier a wonderful Christmas present' in return for looking after her wandering son. Dominique was determined to be home by Christmas. He had seen enough of the East.

The young Frenchman poured himself a half glass from the Kaopectate bottle. He knew he must be feeling a little better even to make this experiment. For the past eight weeks he had not had enough clarity to make any decisions at all. He had lost twenty pounds in weight. Sometimes he tried to force a decisive act, but in the end he just sat around, inert, unable to budge. Always there was the sensation of falling, falling. He

would soon know. Dominique gulped down the chalky white liquid. He began counting. By the time he reached sixty, he felt dizzy again and began to sway. Then crash! Dominique Rennelleau fell to the floor.

Behind the million neon lights of Kowloon the mountains of China were black, almost invisible forms against the night sky, but from Nathan Road and the windows of the Chung King Mansions all that could be seen were the lights of Hong Kong, doubled by their reflection in the wet streets and multiplied by the illuminations of Christmas. It was December 8, only seventeen more shopping days to go in the shopping capital of the world. Cardboard faces of Santa Claus hung between the vertical signs. All the store fronts glittered with artificial Christmas trees, and the record shops played carols over the din of the traffic.

Cocky and Henk, the two thrifty Dutch travellers who had earlier stayed at the Malaysia Hotel, were in their room at the International Guest House of the Chung King Mansions. It was on the same floor, though slightly more expensive than the Boston Guest House where Teresa Knowlton had stayed. It was another bargain, like the Malaysia, where they had stayed at the same time as Teresa. Here it was one dollar a night for a comfortable room with Western plumbing and a television lounge.

They had left Thailand, the two wrote home; because of the rainy season. Since arriving in Hong Kong three weeks ago they had visited the nearby Portuguese island of Macao where they stayed ten days before taking the ferry back to the British Crown colony and the guest house, where they had left most of their luggage. Over the last days they had been occupied with buying Christmas presents for their family and with getting to know a most unusual man. Cocky still found time to keep up her correspondence. That night she wrote to her sister and brother-in-law in Amsterdam, Marijke and John Zant:

Hong Kong
8 December 1975

Dear Marijke and John,

It is now 1.30 a.m. and we have just come back from a nightclub. The reason why I am writing to you so suddenly is the following: I have a white golden ring set with a deep blue sapphire and surrounded by 14 tiny little diamonds. It is so beautiful that I immediately wanted to write to you. But I will tell you first how this all came about.

Henk was sitting watching TV yesterday in the hotel here, but as the film wasn't any good, he started talking to a Frenchman, who seemed to deal in precious stones between Bangkok and Hong Kong. He told Henk that he and his wife liked travelling very much and were even earning their living that way. He knew that we were going to Bangkok and asked if Henk was interested in seeing the mines. This morning we went to his hotel room in the Hyatt Regency Hotel (refrigerator, closet with pushbuttons: when you pushed a button, you got whisky, cognac, Coca-Cola, gin, etc. all in small bottles.) colour TV, wall-to-wall carpeting, radio etc. He wanted to teach Henk how to appraise precious stones, and showed us all kinds of stones. He then asked us to have lunch with him, but we declined because the hotel was so expensive and we didn't want to appear too greedy by accepting it. In the evening he came to our hotel (he has a friend who lives here) to give us his address in Thailand and he asked if we would join him to have a drink in the bar of his hotel. I told him in the bar that I was interested in stones, but only in order to make a ring. After we went back to his room he got a white gold ring with a light blue sapphire. I looked a long time before deciding on a very pretty one. With a lot of pressing we put the stone in the setting and the ring is really very pretty. We got the setting at factory price, but not the stone, because that was the prettiest in the collection that he had just bought. All in all, the ring was very cheap because here

you can buy diamonds very cheaply and in Thailand sapphires and rubies are cheap, as long as you buy them in large quantities.

Later in the evening we had dinner in the Hyatt and sat afterwards in the nightclub. He insisted on paying and it really added up, and he also asked us to stay at his flat in Bangkok. We were already offered a typically French meal, because a French cook will be staying with him when we are in Bangkok. Something to look forward to.

If we continue that way a little further, then we can figure that we got the ring for nothing, sounds very greedy, but we have offered several times to pay a bill, but then he got angry and didn't want to hear about it. Just send me a souvenir from Holland, he said.

When John Zant read the letter in his Amsterdam flat, he thought it strange that anyone would be selling such a ring so cheaply. He said to his wife, 'Cocky and Henk have met someone playing Santa Claus.' He did not worry about them. Cocky and Henk were wary people, and he felt sure they would not be easily tricked.

Zant was right. Henk recorded his misgivings about the gem dealer in his journal:

'I was already wondering last night if our French friend was not a swindler who was adeptly cheating us by asking a high price as we don't know anything about precious stones. That's why we looked at the shop windows of the many jewellers who are nearby and there are dozens of shops in the neighbourhood. I find out that we bought the ring for roughly half the price they ask in the shops.'

'A girl was phoning here all day yesterday and asking for the Turk,' Dominique said to Charles who had just returned to Kanit House from Hong Kong. 'She phoned several times and she sounded worried.'

Since his Kaopectate experiment, Dominique was trying to present his normal, everyday front to Charles. He was confused about exactly what had happened to him -- or why. He waited for the chance to get his passport and go.

'Did the girl leave her name?' Charles asked as he threw his attaché case on the sofa.

'Yes,' said Dominique. 'It was Stephanie, I think.'

Charles went into his bedroom, shut the door, and called the President Hotel. He asked for Stephanie Parry.

The courier from Formentera had checked into the hotel two days earlier, on December 7.

'Hello, Stephanie. This is Alain,' he said when she answered the phone. 'I'm a friend of Hakim's.'

'Where is he?' she asked.

'Let's talk about that when we meet. Could you be in the foyer at eleven?' he asked her, explaining he had a message for her from Ved. 'Sit near the reception desk and read a copy of the *Bangkok Post*.'

As Charles would later tell the story, it was ten minutes to eleven when he walked through the revolving door and into the foyer of the President Hotel. Prosperous-looking tourists were milling about or sitting at the small gilt tables writing postcards. Charles sat on a sofa opposite the lifts — he wanted to observe the girl for a few minutes before introducing himself. It was just in case she was under the protection of another organization. A girl stepped out of the lift, and, looking at her, Charles did not need the agreed-upon signal of the newspaper to tell who she was.

She was wearing a mauve floral dress, without a bra. Her eyes were circled with black kajal and with her long brown hair and glowing suntan she stood out from the other tourists.

He watched her as she sat down and a few minutes later, he joined her. She said she was worried that Hakim had not returned the phone calls and Charles told her that her friend was on a short trip to the gem mines.

When Stephanie seemed relaxed, Charles said, 'Actually, I'm going to Pattaya this afternoon, which is near the mines. I could take you to meet Hakim.' No doubt disturbed by Ved's failure to make contact, the young Frenchwoman had nowhere else to turn. Alone in Bangkok on a dangerous mission, and short of cash, Stephanie welcomed this invitation from a sympathetic go-between and checked out of the hotel with Charles.

Much later that night, she found herself sitting in a car on a deserted road south of Pattaya, with Charles and Ajay each side of her. Charles was not interested in questioning her. She was just a courier. The dose of Mogadon he had given her at lunch had begun to take effect. He looked across at Ajay, pointed to a spot and got out of the car.

Charles nodded to Ajay and he dragged the groggy woman out of the front seat of the car and propped her up against a tree on the bank of a tidal creek. 'Okay, Ajay, let's get this done.' The Indian squatted down beside her, his hands circled her neck, and then he choked Stephanie Parry to death.

On Friday afternoon, December 12, three days after Stephanie Parry had checked out of the President Hotel, Nadine walked up the stairs at Kanit House, curious to meet the new arrivals. Last night Charles had mentioned that he would be picking up a Dutch couple at Don Muang Airport and bringing them back to stay. She opened the door to the two flats. Charles now rented flat 503 as well as 504, and had built an extended entrance, which joined both of them. Nadine walked towards the bedroom of 503 where she heard voices. By now used to the casual atmosphere of the flat, she opened the door. Nadine saw a dark-bearded, heavy-set man in his twenties sitting on the bed talking with Charles. She guessed he must be the Dutchman.

'Hello,' she began.

'Oh, Nadine, please go and see Monique,' Charles said quickly. 'We're discussing business here.'

He seemed angry, which surprised Nadine. He was usually courteous, to the point of excess, she sometimes thought.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Excuse me.' She hurried into the kitchen of the adjoining flat, surprised that Charles did not introduce her to his new customer.

'Hi, Nadine, coffee?' Marie Andrée asked as she made herself a cup of Nescafé.

Nadine sat on a stool at the bar.

'Alain is in a bad mood today,' she said. 'He just sent me out of the guest-room.'

'Oh, you know him. He likes to keep his business private.'

Nadine crossed her long legs in front of her and lit a Gauloise. Another woman walked into the room. She had blue eyes and long, fair hair. As she picked up an ashtray and walked back through the door, she smiled warmly at Nadine.

'Is she Dutch?' Nadine asked Marie Andrée who now sat next to her.

'Yes.'

'She's so beautiful.'

'I must tell you, Nadine, I don't like these Dutch. They can't talk proper French.'

'That's hardly enough reason to dislike them so soon,' Nadine said.

Marie Andrée shrugged. She was very tense. Each day for her was increasingly agonizing. 'I am exhausted physically and morally,' she would write later of this time. 'I feel sick, depressed and lonely. The dangers and risks of the business mean that I can never relax any more. At every moment I have to play a role. Our business makes me more and more nervous and scared.'

Downstairs in flat 103 two of Charles's house-guests were sitting at the kitchen table discussing how soon they could leave Bangkok. Since his experiment with the Kaopectate a month ago, Dominique had only pretended to drink his medicine.

He was feeling better and had trimmed his beard. The other man, the stocky, slow-talking François, had just received a refund of \$810 on his stolen travellers' cheques, and a new passport was waiting for him at the French Embassy.

'Now I've got to get my passport back from him,' Dominique was saying to François. 'I know he's still got it. It's in the new safe he's installed. I've given up all hope of getting back my eleven hundred dollars.'

In the past weeks both of them had painted No. 504 blue and done other repairs around the two flats as well as taking care of most of the shopping and the laundry. Yesterday Charles had asked them not to enter his flat. Instead they were to have their meals in the one adjoining it, 503.

François was also beginning to suspect that apart from Charles's gem business which seemed to be flourishing at the moment, he also stole the passports and valuables of tourists. But he did not raise the matter because, in a curious way, he was quite grateful to Charles for having put him up for the past two months, feeding him and giving him cash for odd jobs. He was sorry about his lost friendship. Charles had just bought his friend Yannick two pairs of new shoes and a suit, and employed him as his full-time secretary.

'You should tidy yourself up a bit,' Yannick had told François the other day.

Yannick wasn't even bothering about the return of his travellers' cheques and passport. In Asia such formalities require constant pressure and form filling.

Dominique and François wandered upstairs to prepare dinner. Afterwards Dominique sat on the couch next to the Dutch man who introduced himself as Henk Bintanja. The two of them discussed the usual subjects, travelling and gem stones. Henk told Dominique that he had been on the road for almost a year now, and while they still had some money in the bank, he and his girlfriend, Cocky, were thinking of making an investment. If they made the right purchases now, later, when their funds ran out, they could make a profit. Henk seemed a nice man, and although the two of them spoke in a halting mixture of French and English, Dominique, who was well disposed towards most people he met, recognized a kindred introvert.

The next morning, Saturday, December 13, he came upstairs to 503 and noticed that the bedroom door was shut.

'Shall I make coffee for the Dutch couple?' Dominique asked Marie Andrée, who was fussing at the stove.

'No, don't. They're sick.'

'Already? This place is becoming like a hospital,' he said, immediately regretting his outspokenness.

'Oh, they take drugs,' Monique said. 'That's what makes them sick. Marijuana. And Alain doesn't like it.' Everyone who came to Kanit House knew that Charles would not tolerate drug taking. Dominique remembered the night Ajay, the Turk, and some other travellers had shut themselves in the guest bedroom and furtively passed round joints.

'Why did he bring the Dutch here, then?' he asked.

'Oh, to sell them stones. They have money, and Alain will sell them more than they want,' Marie Andrée replied.

Dominique nodded. He had seen Charles in operation. He was uncanny in his talent to make people buy more than they planned. He also had a method for calculating how much money they possessed. By finding out how much they planned to spend on gems and where they were staying, he used a crude index to calculate the total funds at their disposal. As a bank clerk himself, Dominique was fascinated by Charles's almost mystical understanding of money.

Nadine came into the room to say goodbye — she and Remy were leaving for a brief holiday. When she heard the Dutch were sick, she made a series of good-natured jokes about Charles's effect on his guests.

Marie Andrée got angry. 'It's because of their drug habits,' she said, 'and Alain's generosity with travellers who don't know how to be careful with Asian food.'

'Or he could be drugging them,' Dominique said.

'Oh, really?' Charles said as he walked into the room.

'Well, the medicine you gave me, Alain, it never cured me. It must have been mixed with something?' He was surprised to hear himself speaking.

Nadine smiled and Charles burst out laughing.

'What a sense of humour, Dominique! It's good to have you around. That's why I drug you, so I can support you. That's why I work hard, to earn enough to buy your toilet paper.'

Everyone was laughing now, even Marie Andrée. It's true, it just doesn't make sense, Dominique thought to himself. Of course it's not him. Maybe Marie Andrée doesn't know as much about nursing as she sometimes says she does. Maybe she mixed the medicines up, who knows?

'Well, I'll see you all in a week,' Nadine said, rising from the couch and playfully tousling Dominique's hair. 'I'll think of you all when I'm lying on the sand at Hua Hin.'

'I have to go, too,' Charles said, opening the door.

As Charles left the room, Marie Andrée turned to Dominique and said, 'We have so much important business going on here now, Alain would prefer it if you and François could stay down at 103 for the next few days unless we phone you that it's okay to come up.'

'Sure,' Dominique said, wondering what was going on now.

The wide tarmac of Route 3, which feeds traffic from the capital east towards Pattaya, sweeps around the Eastern Gulf after passing the tourist resort and follows the coast, past the American Air Base of U Tapao and onwards to Trat near Cambodia. Nine kilometres south of Pattaya a red laterite road runs off through the tapioca fields and the scrub of *nipa* palms that lie between the super-highway and the

beach. The road is called Haad Sai Tawng, Golden Sand Road.

At 6 a.m. on December 14 1975 a truck driver pulled up on Route 3 beside the small compound of peasants' houses that stood at the junction and began walking down Golden Sand Road, unzipping his trousers, looking for somewhere to relieve himself. Some of the leaves on the trees that shaded the road were curled into brown cylinders that were the homes of the ginger ants. The truck driver took this into account as he looked around for the right spot. A ditch ran on either side of road, dank with tea-coloured water. Fifty metres along the track, the truck driver saw something that made him run back along the road, holding up his trousers. The peasants he alerted in the nearby house rushed back with him, an old farmer and his toothless daughter in their muddy sarongs and bamboo hats. They looked over the edge.

The body of the *farang* girl lay with its feet pointing at them. This was very bad luck. It lay half in the water, and the girl's face was submerged, her long, brown hair floating, her eyes closed. The dress was bunched up around her waist revealing a pair of red bikini panties. Ants were crawling all over her.

On Monday December 15 Reiner, the young German, packed his bags in the bedroom of 504. He was taking a flight to Frankfurt to be home with his mother for Christmas, although Charles had been urging him to postpone the trip. He was excited about the future of his gem-partnership with Charles. What a go-getting businessman! They had decided to rent office space in the Air Egypt Building. Already Charles could hardly satisfy his customers' orders. He was always planning for the future; looking for furniture, shop space, good gem supplies, machinery, designs, contacts, Reiner had seen how successful Charles had been at the Indra with the gem cutters from France. He had taken thousands of dollars' worth of orders.

And it was not only Charles's business sense that gave him confidence in the partnership. Reiner enjoyed being with him — like the other day, when they were driving round the city, speaking to each other in German, Charles pouring out his ideas on philosophy and psychology. Incredible stuff. Nietz-

schian. The Dutch couple had just arrived in Bangkok and were sitting in the back. When they got out, Charles had turned to him and asked, 'What do you think of them?'

Typical travellers, he had thought, a bit on the hippic side.

'I'm thinking of getting them to do some travelling for me,' Charles had said.

Gems, Reiner thought. Charles was always asking people to smuggle gems for him, say, to take emeralds and rubies to Iran or fly diamonds in from Hong Kong to save the 25 per cent duty. He had also talked about giving that Turkish fellow a job. He didn't know much about Charles's other business. His mind was always racing ahead in a hundred ways. Lately, Reiner had begun to notice that Charles was gulping down little white tablets. 'Speed,' his partner said, 'business gets too big.' And Charles was certainly rich. Reiner had watched Yannick counting the money in the safe, bundling up wads of hundred-baht notes. It must have been twenty thousand baht, at least. Reiner closed the lid of his suitcase and checked his airline ticket to Frankfurt.

'AAAAAAAAAAAhhhhhhhhhhhhh!'

What was that? He heard it again. A scream. A thud. A banging noise and someone swearing. He rushed into the living room where Monique was tidying up.

'What's that, Monique?'

She shrugged.

'Oh, it's those Dutch drug addicts. I wish Alain would get rid of them, always so sick, and we have to cook for them.'

Reiner walked into the hall and tried to open the door of the adjoining flat. It was locked.

'Who's that?' Ajay's voice called out from behind the door.

'What's going on?' Reiner asked.

'Oh, nothing much, man,' Ajay said, coming out of the room and quickly closing the door. 'The Dutch have had some kind of fit. They're sick. Alain's with them now.'

Ajay was grinning and sharply dressed. Partly because of their ages — the two were among the youngest at Kanit House — the German boy and Ajay were friends. On that day they had lunch together at an open air restaurant on Silom Road and Reiner said:

'It sounds as if the Dutch could be dangerously ill. Don't you think you should call a doctor?'

'Yeah, well, Alain probably will. He knows about medicine.' The Indian averted his eyes.

Reiner asked a few more questions about the Dutch couple as the two tucked into their spicy shrimp soup, but he was careful not to be too curious. Last time he had questioned Yannick about unusual goings-on at Kanit House Charles had later said to him, 'What the hell are you quizzing my employees about?' Last night he heard Ajay get out of bed very late and return in the early hours of the morning. Reiner had pretended to be asleep. Oh, well, Charles had so many fingers in so many pies. It was hard enough just keeping up with the launching of their new gem business.

That night Dominique and Francois sat at the little kitchen table downstairs in 103 discussing their growing realization that Charles was a petty crook.

'I don't know why he bothers,' Dominique was saying. 'He makes so much profit from selling gems.'

'Yes but he throws the money away as quickly as he makes it,' Francois said.

'Yes, maybe he enjoys it.' Dominique was becoming obsessed with Charles. 'I often have the sense he's playing with you and your friend Yannick. He's fascinated because you were both once policemen.'

Francois made a sign to his friend to lower his voice. Both suspected the flat was bugged. They sensed Charles didn't trust them so much any more. In the last two days Dominique had become more and more insistent about having his passport returned. He was determined to get home by Christmas. Even away from Kanit House they both had the feeling of being watched. Two days ago Charles had given them some money to go to the bars in Patpong. When they came out into the street after a night of playful chatter with the childlike bar girls, they bumped into Ajay Chowdury, who had obviously been following them.

The kitchen door opened and Ajay walked into the room.

'Alain wishes to see you both,' he said, with a cold formal smile.

'Sure, let's go,' Dominique said.

'No, not together. One at a time. You first, Francois.'

Francois slowly got out of his chair and went upstairs. He walked into flat 504 and saw Charles sitting at his desk. On it

was a nine-inch flick-knife and a pair of handcuffs. Looking smart in his new suit, his old friend Yannick sat on the couch.

'Sit down,' Charles said.

'I prefer to stand,' said François. Then nervously he changed his mind and sat on the opposite chair.

Ajay stood near the door.

'You say you are taking a trip to Penang,' Charles began. 'Aren't you really going to Paris to complain to the French authorities because you know what kind of jobs we do in Bangkok?' His face and voice were expressionless.

'I'm going to Penang to have my visa renewed. You know it's so much easier there than with the Bangkok Immigration. You have no need to worry. I've suspected that you stole my passport for months now, but I did nothing.'

Charles smiled. 'Tell me, François, if a French policeman disappeared in Bangkok, what do you think would happen?'

'There would be a big search.' Is he serious? he wondered. No, it must be a game.

'Not here, François. Who cares about life here?'

'Interpol would take the case. And, of course, they are very thorough about disappearing policemen. Why do you ask?'

'I want to know if you can be trusted,' Charles said.

'Look, Alain, I'm only in your flat because you promised to help me. When I return from Penang, if you have jobs for me, I'll stay. I've got back my travellers' cheques.' He shrugged. 'In the end I've lost nothing.'

This answer seemed to appeal to Charles. 'Okay, François, I'll see what I can do. You don't seem to be an undesirable.'

'Sure,' he said with a smile that was very difficult for him. François was asked to return to 103. He tried to saunter out of the room with his hands in the pockets of his baggy jeans. He avoided Dominique's questioning glance as he was led into the flat, for fear it would be interpreted as collusion.

Dominique stepped back suddenly when he saw the three men he had thought of as friends looking at him like a tribunal of gangsters.

'Yannick tells me that if I let you go back to France, you will say a lot of malicious things about me and try to have me arrested,' Charles said as though he was only mildly interested in the proceedings. 'He says you will go to the French

Ministry of Justice and tell them I steal passports.'

Dominique said, 'That's not true.' He was angry, and he looked at Yannick who seemed terribly embarrassed. He suddenly felt that Yannick had said no such thing and that if this was a test it was a test of Yannick as much as of himself.

'And François just said the same thing as Yannick.'

'No. It's impossible,' Dominique said. 'We never mentioned anything like that.'

Charles repeated the charge, and Dominique kept wracking his brain for the right words.

'How could I complain about you when you and Monique have been so kind? I've been here now for three months.'

'So you will keep your mouth shut?'

'It's cool. I know you need passports for your work. It's none of my business. But I wish you would give mine back now.'

'Okay, then,' Charles laughed. 'Tomorrow morning, you'll get it.'

'I could have easily hidden their bodies in the jungles of Thailand,' Charles would say later, irritated by his listener's doubts. 'I got a message to go to Hong Kong and pick up the Dutch. I didn't make a profit on that sapphire ring. It was just the bait. I had been told that they were on their way to Chiangmai to set up a smack deal. After that they would have sent back dates to Amsterdam to the couriers. I could have killed them in Hong Kong, but it's too small. Although many bodies are dumped in the harbour there, I wanted this cleaning to make a big impression. Another warning. Like the Turk.'

Later Charles would tell the chilling story of the Dutch couple's last days: he said he drugged Cocky and Henk at Kanit House the day after he picked them up at the airport. 'I told Yannick we had to keep them a few days, not to kill them, just to get some information. Because of the drugs, it was easy. I used psychology. The guy was a bit scared because he sensed after two days that something was wrong. They were so much under the influence of drugs they couldn't think coherently for long, and the questioning was slow. Sometimes Bintanja would get dozy, and I'd shake him and say, "Answer this man, answer this!"'

'By the time we took them from the house, they were down although they could just about walk. I'd said to the guy in the morning that they were sick and I'd take them to the hospital, so in the car they were convinced that's where they were going. Ha! Convinced in their dream.'

Charles and Ajay helped Cocky and Henk down the corridor and across the walkway. The city was dark — only street lights and the red tail-lights of cars, and the white tower of the Dusit Thani Hotel illuminated with floodlights. Cocky's head lay on Ajay's shoulder. 'Come on — it will soon be over,' Charles said to her gently. 'Where are we going?' she asked, hardly managing to form the words. 'You're both very sick, Cocky. We have to take you to hospital,' the gentle, caressing voice seemed to reassure her.

Charles drove fast towards Don Muang Airport and continued through rice fields to the small town of Rangsit. The car crossed a canal and passed a police check-point on the look out for overloaded trucks. Traffic was scarce, and the rhythmic acres of paddy fields were broken occasionally by a well-lit junction or a cluster of shops and restaurants open late for truckers hauling teak from the north.

The shadowy pagoda roofs of the Kudee Prasit Wat which doubled as the village school were visible from the highway. Two kilometres past this the Toyota — the latest in Charles's string of rented cars — came to a stop.

Cocky was sleeping deeply with her head on her boyfriend's shoulder. The back doors were opened, and Ajay and Charles dragged the couple out of the car.

'What's this?' Henk asked. 'Where are we?'

As Charles would later recall it: 'When the Dutch guy started resisting, I hit him in the stomach, and he fell down. He was stocky, and he started to move, so Ajay kicked him in the stomach and then choked him. But he began to move again. He was strong, even under drugs.'

It had been raining heavily. Charles and Ajay dragged Bintanja over to a puddle of water and held his head under it. 'The girl never really knew what was going on. Ajay bashed her over the head, I think. On the side of the road we splashed them with petrol.'

As their car sped back to Bangkok, flames leapt up beside the highway.

At dawn on Tuesday morning a group of village schoolchildren on their way to Kudee Prasit Wat saw the smoke rising from the long grass and found Cocky and Henk lying near the road, side by side, on their backs. The bodies were still smouldering and Henk's right arm rested protectively on Cocky's shoulder.

His face was the colour of charcoal and his eyelids were drawn down. His expression had the serenity of a punch-drunk on the floor after a knockdown. The hair on the right side of his head was burned completely away as was the skin behind his ear and right cheek. His neck was broken in three places.

Cocky's knees were bent as though in fitful sleep. Her denim skirt, pulled above her thighs, was covered with mud. Her teeth were clenched. The back of her head was burned to the skull. Singed of its long fair hair, her oval face seemed to reflect the horror of her last moments. Her lower lip drooped down, and her open eyes seemed glazed with terror as though she had seen the match about to strike.

At 11 a.m. on the same day, December 16, Dominique Rennelleau went upstairs and knocked on the door of 504 to retrieve his passport.

'Oh, Alain's expecting you, but, of course, he's still in bed.' Marie Andrée had answered the door in her dressing gown.

Dominique went into the bedroom, and Charles carefully put down the copy of the *Bangkok Post*. In it was a story about Stephanie Parry.

EUROPEAN GIRL MURDERED

The body of a teenage European girl was found lying on a bank of a tidal creek near Pattaya yesterday, and police are treating her death as a case of murder.

Police are working on the theory that a person or persons held her under water until she drowned.

It was only 2 months ago that the body of a second foreign girl was found floating in the sea off Pattaya. The police have still been unable to identify her.

Charles would later claim to have killed Stephanie Parry on

December 9, when she checked out of the President Hotel. Her body was found by local villagers on December 16, and she had been dead only a few hours ... a discrepancy similar to that which emerged in the case of Teresa Knowlton.

'Here is your passport,' Charles said, handing Dominique a manilla envelope, 'but as you will see, I've been using it.'

The young Frenchman opened the envelope and saw what was left of his passport. It was a loose collection of pages, all falling apart, in different shades of blue, and Charles's photo was stuck where his own should have been. He was embarrassed and didn't know what to say.

'Don't worry. I'll fix the photo for you in a minute,' Charles said, explaining that he had removed some of the pages with the visas he required to insert them into other passports.

'So now I have taken some pages from other French passports and put them into yours, see?' Charles then cut a piece of one of the mis-matching blue pages off the passport. 'I'll take this to Hong Kong where I've got fifty passports and I'll match the colours.'

'But, Alain, I want to leave soon.'

'Okay. Today's Thursday. I'll be back in a week — next Tuesday. Monique and I will go for Christmas to Hong Kong.'

'But the picture?'

Dominique was still amazed. Charles had come out into the open now.

'I'll fix it up now for you. Have you got a picture of yourself?' Dominique handed him a passport photo he had picked up a few days before. 'Okay, you wait next door while I do it,' he said as he got out of bed.

Dominique knew that Charles kept a lot of seals and stamps and other printing equipment in the refrigerator.

'What about the Dutch?'

'Oh, they're not there any more. Last night I took them to the hospital. These people come to Asia and take too many drugs.' He shook his head sadly.

Dominique went next door where he noticed that Henk and Cocky had left some of their bags in the room. A few minutes later Charles called him back into the flat and handed him the passport which now had his own photo inside and was

stamped with the embossed seal of the government of France.

'It's not such a good job. I'll do a better one when I get back.'

Dominique noticed a rubber hose pipe on top of the refrigerator.

'Listen, Dominique, could you do me a favour? We leave for Hong Kong tomorrow.' He handed Dominique a pair of his trousers which were sopping wet and covered with mud. 'Get these dry-cleaned, please, same day service.'

The mud oozed all over Dominique's hands. Charles was usually so impeccable about his dress. Where on earth had he been?

Two days later, December 18, Dominique was downstairs alone in 103 when Yannick Masy burst into the room.

'You've got to go! You've got to get out of here! Today!'

Yannick's new clothes were crumpled, and his eyes were blazing. His long fair beard seemed scraggy and wild.

'I am going, Yannick,' he replied a trifle coldly, 'but why are you suddenly so interested in what I do?'

'If you don't go now, you'll never go. Look at this.'

Yannick handed him a copy of the *Bangkok Post*. He was talking wildly.

'I've just come back from driving the three of them to the airport — Alain, Ajay, Monique. I bought a copy of the paper, and I just read this upstairs. Don't you recognize them?'

Dominique opened the newspaper and saw the headline: AUSTRALIAN COUPLE KILLED AND BURNED.

'Australians? I don't know any Australians.'

'Look closely. Can't you recognize the skirt of the Dutch girl?'

Could it be?

'It's Cocky and Henk,' Yannick was raving. 'Alain and Ajay took them out late last night. I opened the gate of the compound. They were both drugged. Look, read the story.'

The partly burned bodies of a young Australian couple have been found in a ditch alongside a highway 58 kilometres south of Ayutthaya.

Police tentatively identified the couple as Johnson and

Rosanna Watson who had apparently been touring the Central Plains.

A Made-in-Holland T-shirt worn by the young woman indicated they may have arrived here from Europe on their way back to Australia.

'You're imagining things,' Dominique said, putting down the paper. 'It says it's two Australians.'

'I tell you that's a mistake. Look at this, it says the T-shirt the girl was wearing was made in Holland.'

Dominique was confused. He was one of those who tended to believe what was printed in the newspapers. But Yannick's panic was catching.

'We've got to get out of Bangkok before they get back,' Yannick shouted hysterically.

'I've got no money. Did he leave you any?'

'No, just a thousand baht to feed the stupid dog. But I have the key to his safe,' Yannick said.

The two men fell silent. Dominique looked again at the picture of the two burned bodies. The caption read:

'They had come halfway across the world for a date with death.'

'Oh, my God! What about François? He was supposed to be going to Penang three days ago. Do you think Ajay really took him to the bus station?'

'Katmandu!' a voice rang out from the back of the bus as it rounded a hill and the passengers saw tattered prayer flags flapping from poles; but the cry was premature. It was just another village of terracotta clay on the edge of the Himalayas. The bus pulled up at a scruffy hut and overland travellers scrambled out for bottles of Fanta and the home-brewed soda sold in old Coca-Cola bottles.

The bus resumed its precarious crawl on the roller-coaster road from Pokhara, a town in the west of Nepal, to its capital city. For hours now, the scenery had been a relentless spectacle of great gorges, roaring rivers, vistas of terraced hill-sides. The road was so sinuously death-defying that one false twist of the wheel by the jovial Irish driver would have plunged them into a ravine. The bus had set out from London months ago, and now, December 14, it was nearing its destination. Among its youthful passengers, most of whom had climbed aboard at Victoria Station, the excitement was reaching a crescendo. There were laughter and cheers at the children squatting on the roadside to pee. Hash smoke wafted along the aisle, someone played a flute, and a hip flask of Gurkha rum travelled from mouth to mouth. Through the window they could see women winnowing wheat, wearing fist-size lumps of coral and turquoise around their necks, with babies tied on their backs.

With her long dark hair parted down the centre, a red kurta, and jangling collection of Asian jewellery, 28-year-old Connie Jo Bronzich looked like a Nepalese hill woman herself, although she was Italian American. She had joined the bus in Delhi, after travelling overland from Athens. She looked scruffy and run-down, as would be expected after so many miles on the overland trail.

On the road, chance acquaintanceships turn into fast friendships overnight. At the last stop, three students had joined the bus, and were now responding to Connie Jo's weary, dislocated conversation with the wry indulgence of

the captive listener. Connie was stoned; that was obvious, or she wouldn't have been talking so much.

She had her own house, Connie said, in the redwood mountains of Los Gatos outside Santa Cruz in California, it was so beautiful, but she had to get away. Too many bad vibes. The mountains frightened her. It was a heavy heroin scene, around Santa Cruz, and in those mountains most roads weren't even on maps. The police just left it alone. She looked significantly at her listeners and one of them commented: 'Sure. Santa Cruz. Murder and drug capital of America.' Luke studied journalism at Texas University, and he had teamed up with the two girls sitting near him, Sally and Katy, who were law students from Australia. The bearded Texan's thumbnail portraits of his own culture had made it sound as exotic as the Far East.

Connie was typically Californian, it seemed to him, freaked out and a bit desperate.

'Yeah, my old man was in the smack business,' Connie was saying, 'but after a time, it gets you down. All these scumbags kept coming to the house trying to do deals. Man — were there some heavy hassles! In the end it all blew up, and I had to get away.'

She had come to the East to break her heroin habit, she said, which to Luke made as much sense as going to Mexico to give up chili peppers.

'I'm down to my last hundred dollars,' Connie was saying as she slid her fingers along her money belt. 'When my sister comes to Katmandu for Christmas, I'll probably have some more, but, anyway, this is gonna have to be a business trip.'

The Katmandu Valley, surrounded by the peaks of the Himalayas, looked as green and ordered as an opera backdrop. Connie stopped talking as suddenly as she had begun, and spent the rest of the journey staring out of the window.

They had finally reached Katmandu — the ultimate summit of the international freak scene. Those in the bus were cheering and singing and two girls who had unfurled a Union Jack, hung it from the back window. Shaky wooden houses and shops two storeys high leaned into the narrow streets. Lamps and candles lit windows of tiny bare rooms like tableaux from the Middle Ages — blacksmiths hammering, tailors sewing, small children mending shoes. In the gutter a

butcher disembowelled a side of buffalo. Beside him, a woman crouched in a long crimson skirt beside her fruitstall, where a half-dozen passion fruit lay in a line.

The bus crawled the cobbled streets into Durbar Square, almost nudging the men in loincloths, hunched under huge bundles of firewood and straw. Meandering in the ancient square, flanked by palaces and pagodas, were dogs, goats, chickens, holy men and snake charmers. The bicycle rickshaws whizzed past, their drivers hissing to warn the crowds. As soon as the bus pulled up children surrounded it, whispering through the windows the endless litany of the road: 'You want hash? Grass? Thai sticks? Best cocaine from Columbia?'

That night, Connie stayed at the ramshackle Star Hotel with the bus driver, and the next day she moved on to Freak Street. She checked into the Oriental Hotel where her other three friends from the bus had taken rooms.

Like most Nepalese buildings, the doors and ceilings of the Oriental Hotel were so low that Western visitors had to hunch up while inside. Its stairs were dark and precipitous, and even during the day the only source of light was a candle which burned on the reception desk. Connie's cell-sized room contained only a narrow cot. A tiny window looked down on the grubby stone courtyard. It cost ten rupees a night -- about a dollar. The hotel lobby led into Freak Street.

In 1975 genuine Tibetan treasures were still on sale in hole-in-the-wall stalls along this fabled alleyway. As well, there were versions of Tibetan and Nepalese national costumes which were run up by busy master tailors for the hordes that arrived ready to swap their precious blue jeans for strings of amber, and their sneakers for red felt boots embroidered with flowers.

If only she had money, Connie said as she browsed with Luke, Sally, and Katy. So many beautiful things. She was crazy about jewellery.

It had been fourteen months since hashish had been half-heartedly proclaimed illegal in the Kingdom of Nepal, under international pressure, but on Freak Street its heady aroma billowed out from the upper windows of cheap hotels. In the tea shops, where hash was optional in biscuits and chocolate cakes, loudspeakers blared the music of Bob Dylan and the Doors.

In the twilight of the Don't Pass Me By Restaurant, the four new arrivals sat down and giggled over the menu. 'It must be the worst food in the world,' Luke said. 'Well, girls, what will it be? Buffalo balls, yak butter toast, or gruel?' As they waited for their order, he continued to amuse the girls in his Texan drawl. In Bangkok he had seen newspaper stories about some young tourists burned by the roadside.

'Yep, burned black — two Aussies — like crispy critters.'

'Don't freak us out, Luke,' one of the Australian girls said.

Later in the day, Connie persuaded Katy, the other Australian girl, to accompany her on a visit to one of Katmandu's landmarks — the Pie and Chai Shop.

As they walked along the ancient streets they passed shrines wreathed with marigolds and smeared with a sticky red paste. Candles burned beside statues, and rats scuttled up and down their elaborate silk costumes. A low doorway led into a room of six tables. It was dirty and bare, and a tiny girl was crouching on the floor, washing dishes in a bucket. The pies were lined up on a shelf behind the flyscreen and there were more on the counter; lemon meringue, apple, banana, custard, pumpkin, and chocolate meringue — an anomalous array, and a legend from Bali to Istanbul. Connie went to the back of the shop and spoke to a man. A few minutes later, with the dexterity of a hardened junkie, she shot herself up with morphine.

A portrait of Connie Jo at the age of seven still hung in the comfortable living room of her parents' home in Saratoga. Wearing a light blue dress and her hair in long brown pigtails, she was smiling delightedly at the white puppy she held in her arms. Her bedroom was a confection of pink nylon curtains and fluffy stuffed animals to which she returned to do her homework after piano and ballet lessons. The adored only child of a prosperous business couple, the pretty dark-eyed girl with the eager grin was just one of the gang in high school and enrolled in Stanford College to become a radiology technician.

But before graduation she was asked to leave. She took a job with a local doctor but left suddenly without explanation. Some people who knew her at the time say it was because she had begun using hard drugs.

She was twenty-six when she married John Bronzich, a motor boat salesman who drank, and loved motorcycles. It was a garden wedding, California style. Connie wore traditional white, and the bridegroom wore a tailored leather suit. Now she had turned up alone in Nepal, wearing a lot of turquoise and coral, with a thirst for friends and a taste for morphine and smack.

Luke, Sally, and Katy didn't see much of Connie Jo Bronzich until three days later, December 18. In one of the larger rooms of the Oriental Lodge, a group of the young guests was sitting around on the three beds, passing joints and listening to a guitarist and a harmonica player warming up for a jam session. Connie joined Luke, Sally, and Katy around a hash pipe. They had managed to avoid her company. Her morphine habit depressed them.

'I feel great today,' Connie said. 'I've had my first hot shower in weeks.' Her long dark hair was smooth and shining, and she looked fresher and more alert than she had since her companions had met her. 'It was the first real luxury bathroom I've seen since Istanbul.'

'How did you manage that?' one of her friends asked.

'I met this guy, a gem dealer, he's really amazing. I had drinks back at his room in the Oberoi, and ...'

'Connie! You mean to say ...' Sally broke in teasing.

'No, you jerk. His wife was there too. He showed me some stones. They were incredible. He buys them at the mines in Thailand, and sells them cheap! I might stay with them if I go to Bangkok. They were both really nice, and even bought me drinks. They've got a car, too, and he said I could go with them to visit the garnet mines.'

Now another man entered the room, bending low to get through the door. When he straightened himself up again, he stood tall, wearing a checked flannel shirt, hiking boots, and jeans. 'Hi Laurent,' Connie said. 'Come and meet my friends.'

The Australian girls were surprised. Connie had not mentioned that she was expecting anyone to join her, and the burly Canadian man who soon began talking about the trek he planned to the Everest Base Camp was an unlikely boyfriend. Connie could only trek as far as the nearest morphine fix.

A cassette of bluegrass music was playing, and others

joined in with the harmonica and guitar. Luke, the conscientious journalism student, liked to hear travellers' tales and he listened to Laurent.

'You get a better education out of six months travelling than five years of poly sci and psych,' the Canadian was saying. Luke agreed. Laurent Carrière had dropped out of the University of Winnipeg, got his mining papers, and for the past four years had taken summer jobs and travelled during the winter.

'This way I will have seen the whole world in another eight years. But Everest, wow, I've wanted to see that since I was a kid. This is going to be the best Christmas of my life.'

'So you're raring to go,' Luke liked his enthusiasm.

'And glad to get out of Delhi. What a shit-hole.'

'Katmandu's a bit of a shit-hole too,' Luke said. 'There's rats here we'd be proud of in Texas. It's the people here who make the difference. Every darn one of them looks as though they've reached enlightenment. They must be the gentlest people in the world.'

At midnight, when the batteries in the cassette had run down, Laurent and Connie said goodnight to the others and drifted off to their room.

'Those two just don't seem to go together at all,' Luke said.

'He's got his trip together down to a tee. Money, maps, return tickets, and poor old Connie's down to her last hundred dollars ...'

'There's something tragic about that woman,' Sally said.

'Yeah,' Luke agreed. 'She's got tombstones in her eyes.'

For U.S. diplomats posted overseas, Katmandu is considered a hardship zone. In the leafy enclave of the embassy compound, behind a high brick wall, Alan Eastham, the First Secretary, sat in his office, clean-cut in a safari suit. On December 22 1975 an assistant hurried into the room.

'They found a man's body yesterday on the road to Dhulikel,' he said. 'It could be an American.'

Eastham closed his office and drove to the makeshift Bhaktapur hospital. The body was burned and hideously mutilated. The diplomat left the room quickly. For purposes of identification, he would have to come back the next day to take a photograph.

It was three days before Christmas. In Bangkok the gravel driveway of a wooden mansion was lined with limousines, their Thai chauffeurs standing among the shrubbery in crisp white shirts, smoking and talking. The lights in the house were blazing, and music filled the warm air.

The terrace that overlooked the Chao Phrya River was strung with paper lanterns. The guests laughed and chatted in groups as they took a break from the dancing.

Nadine and Remy usually circulated brightly among their many friends at the parties given by French expatriates. Tonight they leaned over the balcony, huddled together, looking at the lights moving up and down the river.

'It's a nightmare,' Nadine said. 'We must tell somebody.'

'Not yet, not until we get the whole story,' Remy said. 'It sounds crazy to say, "Excuse me, there's a killer next door."'

Nadine held him closer. 'Maybe Yannick is dreaming all this — a homesick detective.'

That morning Remy and Nadine had returned suntanned from their holiday at Hua Hin. Before they came to the party, they had gone upstairs to ask if anyone wanted a quick game of badminton by the pool. Charles's secretary, Yannick, had told them he couldn't leave the flat. He was expecting Gautier to phone from Hong Kong. If no one answered the phone, he might suddenly come back. Yannick had looked very strange, his pale blue eyes were staring. He was a mess.

'So what?' Nadine had asked.

'He's a murderer, and we've all got to get out of here,' he had blurted out. 'He killed the Dutch.'

Yannick showed them the story in the *Bangkok Post*, about the death of an Australian couple and he pointed to the reference to a 'T-shirt made in Holland', and said he would tell them more details later that night. It would take some time. Nadine and Remy had hurried off to make a quick appearance at the Alliance Française Christmas party.

A voice echoed from the doorway, 'Nadine! Darling!' It was one of their friends, an ambassador's wife. She floated out to the balcony in a Thai silk dress. 'Merry Christmas, you two! Why so miserable?'

'Oh, nothing,' they said, making polite conversation.

'Where's Alain?' the woman asked, 'I'm mad at him.' She had ordered a heavy gold chain from him for her husband's birthday and had heard nothing more. Alain was due back in Bangkok in a few days, they told her. As soon as they could, the couple left the party and rushed up to flat 504.

Dominique opened the door. He looked haggard and scared. 'Why them, not me?' he said. 'It's all I can think about.'

Flat 504 was in a shambles, cigarette butts spilling out of ashtrays and saucers, dirty dishes, newspapers scattered on the floor, Franky was whining for food, and the place smelled of dog shit.

Dominique took a piece of hose-pipe off the top of the refrigerator. 'Smell it,' he said, handing it to Remy. 'Petrol. It was there the morning after they took out the Dutch. To the hospital they said; hospital at two in the morning?' He was shaking. He told them how Charles had handed him the muddy trousers, and later he noticed his shoes were covered with mud.

Yannick stood stroking his wispy beard. 'I don't think they were the only ones,' he said.

Nadine opened the top drawer of a bureau in 503 and saw two hypodermic syringes, a walkie-talkie, some radio microphones, and a pair of handcuffs. Oh no! She picked up a silver necklace. 'I remember the Turk wearing this, the one who never came back from the gem mines,' she said. Yannick pointed to suitcases stacked in the corners which he said belonged to Cocky and Henk. A handbag on the table contained a purse of Dutch coins, and a package of contraceptive pills. 'Why should she leave without taking those?' Yannick asked. Nadine knew the pills did not belong to Marie Andrée, who had a coil.

Yannick led them to the safe in Alain's flat and took out a manilla envelope. He tipped out a pile of passports onto the cocktail bar. His own was among them with Gautier's picture inside. So were the passports stolen from Nadine and Remy Gires's friends in Pattaya.

Yannick Masy passed round another passport — it belonged to the girl from Formentera, Stephanie Parry. 'I think this one's dead, too,' he said. 'She came back here one day and later,' he drew his finger across his throat, 'strangled near Pattaya.'

'But why her and not me?' Dominique asked again, 'I cost them more than they got out of me.'

'Why anyone at all?' Remy said looking through bundles of travellers' cheques, some wallets, and fifteen passports.

Yannick put the envelope back in the safe and sat with Dominique and Nadine round the coffee table. Remy sat on a bar stool under the harsh fluorescent lights from the kitchen.

'Okay, let's discuss what to do next,' he said, making an effort to sound calm.

'That's just what we've been doing since Thursday,' Dominique said, 'and every time we decide one course of action, its consequence rules it out.'

It would be useless, even dangerous, to go to the Thai police. The only language they understood was money. Yeah, they all drove new model Mercedes. What about the French Embassy? No, Alain had too many friends there. Maybe that was why he always sold his gems and gold to French diplomats at cost, often less than cost. Nadine asked about Interpol, the international police agency. Its headquarters were in France at St Cloud, but no one thought there would be a representative in Thailand.

'When I get back I'll go and see them at their headquarters,' Yannick said. 'They can send a man out to arrest him.'

'But Alain and Ajay are coming back tomorrow,' Dominique said. 'We have to get out of here somehow.'

'Don't worry,' Remy said. 'Tomorrow morning, come with me to the bank as soon as it opens. We'll lend you the money for your tickets, and you can be out of Bangkok by tomorrow night.'

Ever since she had seen evidence of the killings, Nadine's shock was made worse by the guilt she was suffering. Remy had often warned her about this man, and she had laughed at him. Was he jealous? And now, tonight, he had not even turned round to her to say, 'I told you so.' Instead of voicing recriminations, her husband had taken control. Remy was a short man with a comical moustache who spoke only French

and worked long hard hours in the kitchens of the Oriental Hotel, and yet her husband suddenly made 'Alain Gautier' seem a pipsqueak!

Yannick, seemingly mortified by his former intimacy with Charles, kept on revealing new details. 'When I was driving the three of them to the airport, Alain told me he was on the way to make the best deal of his life. Then he gave me the keys to the safe and asked me to take care of things here until he got back on Tuesday.' Yannick had then asked him what to do if anything blew up. He knew something had happened to the Dutch, but Charles had said they were in the hospital and that after what he had done, they wouldn't remember anything for six months. Charles had told him in a mysterious tone, 'Don't worry. Nothing will happen to me in Thailand. I'm protected.'

The lights of the city were dimming, and the darkness was brightening into dawn. Dominique made coffee, and they all sat huddled together, chain smoking.

'But what about François? What's going to happen to him?' Dominique asked. 'He was supposed to be back from Penang yesterday.' For half a minute everyone was silent. The same thought had hit them all. The stolid ex-detective was last seen climbing into the car with Ajay.

Nadine and Remy got up to leave. The other two would meet them at the bank at 9 a.m. When they got to France they would go straight to the police — and then they would cable the money back.

Charles's files were scattered all over the flat. When Nadine idly opened one, she saw a large glossy photo. She called the others over. It showed a Vietnamese soldier standing in a charred field. In each hand he held a human head, dripping blood.

In the morning after her husband had gone to the bank to meet the boys, Nadine looked out of the window and saw a familiar sombre figure by the pool. It was François. She called out to him to come to her flat and told him what had happened.

'Everything falls into place,' he said.

'What do you mean?'

'A few days ago I saw my passport in his room, the passport that was stolen in Pattaya.'

'It's strange,' Nadine said faintly. 'I suspected something. So did Dominique, you, Yannick, and yet we all kept quiet about it. Why?'

François scratched his head. 'Alain has a way of making people not see things they don't want to see.'

Yannick and Dominique came back to Kanit House. Their bags were already packed and waiting in the hall downstairs. Their flight was not scheduled to depart until midnight, but they would spend the whole day at the airport where they felt it was safer. But Yannick still had no passport. The one in the safe upstairs had Charles's picture inside. He asked François to go with him to the French Embassy so that he could get an emergency *laissez passer*. As Dominique did not want to be alone at Kanit House, he arranged to meet them at the Hualombhong railway station. From there they would go straight to the airport. For the last few days he had hardly slept. The three of them said goodbye to Nadine. Dominique kissed her warmly. They had been good friends. Maybe it was being so close to Nadine that saved his life, he thought. If he had disappeared, she would have asked too many questions.

'Impossible! Impossible!' the official at the French Embassy told Yannick. His *laissez passer* would take days. Yannick created a scene. He told them he was a detective due back in Paris on urgent police business. He would make a scandal at a high political level if they refused to help him. Within an hour he was issued with the document.

The three frightened men arrived at the airport before lunch. Dominique suggested they check the times of all incoming flights from Hong Kong.

Yannick, twisting a strand of his beard, turned to him and said, 'I might as well tell you. They haven't gone to Hong Kong. That was a decoy. They've gone to Katmandu.'

'But why?' the other two asked. It was strange how Yannick kept issuing potent tidbits of information like press releases, breaking his habit of conspiratorial intimacy in fits and starts.

'I'm not sure,' he said, 'but back in Paris I'll tell you everything I know.' He was fumbling in his pocket as he spoke. He took out a key, the one to the safe at Kanit House, and hurled it in the trash can.

The other two noticed white envelopes bulging from his pockets.

'Sapphires and rubies,' he said, which he took from the safe as part of what Charles owed him for his work.

The airport was crowded with Westerners flying to Europe for Christmas, their arms and baggage carts overloaded with packages.

'I wish we could check into the departure lounge,' Dominique said. 'It would be safer there.' A flight was due soon from Katmandu.

'Don't worry,' François said, puffing his pipe owlshly, 'nothing can happen to us here.'

'I wouldn't count on that,' Yannick warned. 'Alain's with Ajay, remember. One of them might have a gun. He could create a scene here and have us all arrested. He could even pay the police to beat us up. We're not safe until we're on the other side of the world from him, and even then ...'

François glared at his old friend. Not that he disputed his words, but for the sake of the terrified bank clerk he wanted to play down the danger. He asked, 'Have you still got the knife Gautier gave you?'

'Like hell, it's at 504, but I wish I did.'

As their departure time came closer and there were no more flights from Katmandu due until early next morning, the three began to relax. Dominique knew at last that he was on his way home to the little village of Les Sables d'Orlonne in time for Christmas. He imagined his mother and father smiling a welcome as he walked in the door, rushing up to hug him.

At 11 p.m. the public address system blared an announcement. The Pakistan Airways flight to Paris would be delayed for two hours.

'Oh, my God!' Dominique said, and burst into tears.

François clenched his fist and his mind flashed to the atrocity picture the others had shown him. Charles must be crazy. There seemed to be no motives for the murders except paltry sums of money. It didn't make sense. All day he had worried about what was going to happen to Nadine and Remy when Charles and Ajay returned, but now his fears shifted to his own predicament.

Dominique buried his face in his knees. He hadn't slept for a week and was having visions and recurring flashbacks like

the time he had first been drugged by Charles. The face he kept seeing in the crowd — the high cheekbones, the deep, dark eyes, and the cruel, sensual mouth — belonged to the man who had the gift, like a nightmare's phantom, of appearing any time.

Earlier that day the Royal Nepal Airlines DC9 began the steep ascent needed to cross the Himalayas on its way to Bangkok. In front sat Ajay Chowdury and Charles Sobhraj.

'Did anyone see the car?'

'How could they, Alain, in that fog? And who'd be awake?'

'No one,' said Sobhraj, 'I've never seen a city so dead after ten o'clock. And how's your psychology?'

'No problems. I feel fine.'

'One thing is sure, Ajay, you now have my full trust. What time are we supposed to arrive?'

'About 3 p.m.'

'Fine. I hope Yannick kept everything under control. Anyway, in Nepal we have nothing to worry about. Those people are even more stupid than the Thais.'

At the same time, in Katmandu the U.S. First Secretary was returning from the crumbling fortress town of Bhaktapur through the fog. He had photographed the male corpse which had been found the day before and was driving down the winding road past tiny orange mud houses, their thatched roofs covered in pumpkin vines. As the road flattened out, he passed a solitary hoarding: 'Yak! Nepal's first king-size filter cigarette.' He neared the back of the airport and noticed police jeeps and a crowd on a road to the right. He stopped to see what was going on.

The small crowd was uncannily quiet as Eastham walked to the edge of the field. The fog had lifted, and the wide Bhagmati River was silver and still. Lying on her back in a field of wheat was the burned and mutilated body of a young woman. The face was black, and her tongue protruded from her mouth. The body was naked, except for a vest which was seared onto the skin, and had been stabbed erratically all over the chest. The legs were spread-eagled; the ankles were bound together with rope.

As he drove away he passed the Chief Superintendent of

the Katmandu Police, Mr Chandrabir Rai, sitting upright and benign beside his driver in the army jeep.

That night while the three Frenchmen were still at the airport waiting to board their plane, Remy Gires was in the Oriental's cavernous kitchens supervising a huge batch of chocolate mousse for the Christmas banquet. He was called to the phone.

'Hi, Remy. This is Alain. I'm just back from Hong Kong. How's everything?'

'Fine,' Remy said, trying to sound relaxed, yet busy.

'Where's Nadine?'

'Isn't she at home? I guess she must be visiting friends.'

Remy had asked Nadine to stay away from Kanit House until he could meet up with her. Next, Charles asked the question Remy had been waiting for.

'The others seem to have disappeared and there's no sign of Yannick. Did they leave any message?'

'No — they told us you phoned them from Hong Kong and asked them to meet you there. Did you miss them?'

There was a pause. Did the rat believe him?

Charles thanked Remy for his help and said, 'I might see you tonight if I'm not too busy.'

At midnight, when Nadine and Remy returned to Kanit House, they saw lights on in the upstairs flat.

Nadine's husband struggled to shift the huge cupboard behind their door. They lay close together in bed that night, talking in whispers.

The next morning, they looked through the blinds of their bedroom to see Ajay Chowdury walking along the corridor. With him were two Thai men in overalls, bending with the weight of a two-handled metal tool box. 'They've come to open the safe,' Nadine said. 'Yannick must have had the only key.'

In the early hours of Christmas Eve, the three terrified Frenchmen finally checked in for the flight to Paris. Luckily, Charles had not seen them when he arrived back from Katmandu with Ajay earlier the previous day. Dominique Rennelleau was worried the Thai immigration authorities might question Charles's crude alterations in his passport. But all

three boarded the plane without a hitch. They clicked shut their seat belts, and, as Dominique buried his head in his hands, François leaned forward to shield him from the view of other passengers.

'Come on, man. It's all over now. We're safe. We've been lucky.'

'But why not us?' Dominique said. 'Why not us?' he kept saying between his body's convulsive shudders. 'And what did Alain have against the Dutch? Who's going to stop him?'

'Try not to think about that until we get to Paris,' François said calmly. 'We can see the police and the Minister of Justice. They will have him arrested.' And, of course, Yannick had promised to pay a personal call on Interpol.

Dominique calmed himself. It was in Paris, twelve hours later, when he stood outside the railway station saying good-bye to the others, about to begin his journey home, that he broke down and wept uncontrollably.

At 2 p.m. on Christmas Eve in Katmandu, a battered military vehicle drove along Freak Street and pulled up outside the Oriental Lodge. The bearded student from Texas was sitting in the lobby when he saw three Nepalese men in suits, their faces shocked and sombre, walk upstairs to the room shared by Sally and Katy, his two Australian friends. 'Shit, has the impossible happened?' he asked himself. 'A drug bust on Freak Street?'

The shocked voices of the two girls echoed through the tiny hotel and they followed the police onto the landing. 'We have to go to the mortuary,' Sally called out to Luke as they walked down the stairs. It seemed a body had been found and the police wanted help in making an identification. Maybe it was Connie, their junkie friend from California.

Curious to see how the Nepalese handled the death of a foreigner, Luke climbed into the police jeep with the others.

The small square building looked like a weatherbeaten bunker. Two men at the doorway saluted the Superintendent and Luke suggested the two girls wait outside as he followed Superintendent Chandrabir Rai into the building. On a stone slab, Luke saw a charred corpse. All the clothes were burned off the body, except for a piece of checked flannel shirt around one wrist. Before he had time to absorb the sight, the Superintendent was beckoning Luke into another part of the building. This time he saw the blackened corpse of a woman, with deep gashes in her chest.

'Did you know her?' the Superintendent asked softly.

Looking down at the mutilated figure, Luke said, 'Oh Jesus, it just might be the one.' She was so badly burned, even her jewellery was charred. He turned away, trying to stop himself from vomiting. Luke would have to ask Sally to confirm the identification. She had talked the most with Connie Jo Bronzich.

As Luke walked back towards the door, he stopped again at the mutilated corpse of the tall Western male.

'Who's this?'

Chandrabir Rai looked supremely apologetic — he shook his head. It had been found three days before, in a gully about 35 kilometres from Katmandu. It had not been identified.

More from its size than anything else, Luke realized that it was probably the body of Laurent Carrière, the Canadian man who had turned up at the Oriental Lodge as a friend of Connie's. The night they had sung along with bluegrass the man had talked of trekking to Everest's base camp. The throat was cut from ear to ear, so deeply the head seemed decapitated. My God, it would take five men to hold him down to do that, Luke thought. The blackened skin was peeling back in places revealing red tissue. Black ash stuck to the skin of the chest. Half of the nose had been burned off, and the mouth seemed stuck together as though the face had melted. A scrap of flannel, which seemed to have been used to bind the wrists together, reminded Luke that Carrière had worn a checked flannel shirt, but then, so did many travellers.

As Luke forced himself to look at the corpse as a journalist would — objectively looking for clues, he hoped it wasn't the slow-talking Canadian. The reasons for the burning were obvious to him — the murderers had tried to render their victims unidentifiable. In the case of this male victim they had succeeded. Luke told the police Superintendent that although there was a good possibility that the corpse was that of Laurent Carrière, a Canadian friend of Connie Jo Bronzich, he could not make a positive identification.

'Is it Connie?' the two girls asked, shivering as they stood outside the door.

'Maybe. I don't know. Prepare yourselves for something awful,' he warned them. Sally walked into the mortuary and Katy stayed outside talking with Luke. There was no need for both girls to go inside.

Huddling in the doorway, looking miserable, was Sushill Mathema, a Nepalese student who worked as the receptionist at the Oriental Lodge. He had been unceremoniously wrenched from his economics class by police and, as a matter of course, he would be put in jail for a few days, in case he was concealing anything. Already he had told the police what he knew: four days ago Laurent Carrière had come downstairs early in the morning, wearing a backpack, saying he was going

off to visit Dhulikel — an ancient town 45 kilometres to the west. He was alone. Two days later when he hadn't come back, Connie mentioned to Sushill that she was going off to look for him. That was all he could tell the police except that once an Indian boy with a small moustache came to the desk to ask for them both. Sally rejoined her friends. 'I could tell by the earrings. It was Connie, all right.' Luke put his arm round her and she sobbed on his shoulder. Chandrabir Rai came out from the mortuary and looked at the three young travellers with an expression of such compassion that Luke thought: He looks more like a guru than a cop. The Texan felt that the worst of Western culture had come to despoil the serenity of this Himalayan kingdom.

Half an hour later, the old jeep drove the three students up the ramp of the building in Durbar Square to police headquarters. A young man, bowing low in the presence of the moon-faced Superintendent, brought them a tray of stale biscuits and tea. Luke, Sally and Katy told Chandrabir Rai everything they could remember about Connie. They had last seen her on December 22, the night before her body was found, when she had asked them if they wanted to join her for a trip to the Pie and Chai Shop. 'Oh, she talked about meeting a gem dealer at the Oberoi,' Sally said. 'She said he was Vietnamese looking — maybe he knows something.'

'Have you ever seen this gem dealer, Miss Sally?' asked the Superintendent.

'Not really,' she answered. 'I bumped into Connie on Freak Street once and she was with some people who could have been the ones. She said this guy had offered to drive her to the garnet mines.' Chandrabir Rai looked puzzled — there *were* no garnet mines in Nepal. He gave the travellers a notebook found in Connie's room. They looked through it and came across a name and address in Bangkok. 'This must be the man,' she said, pointing to the name, Alain Gautier, 504 Kanit House, Soi Saladaeng, Bangkok.

The Superintendent thanked them for their help and that night the three travellers went out to Aunt Jane's Restaurant where they had chocolate cake as their Christmas dinner and tried to forget what they had seen at the mortuary that day. But they couldn't, and knew they would never forget. Back at the Oriental Lodge, Sally vomited, and they sat up together

all night, counting the hours until they could leave the city which had once symbolized for all of them the dream of the overland trek.

Christmas morning dawned cold and foggy and the three travellers shouldered their packs and walked through the streets of Katmandu – a city leaping headlong into the fourteenth century, someone had joked. At 8 a.m. they boarded the bus which would take them to the Indian border.

The same morning, a white Datsun drove across the bridge over the Vishnumati River, and headed toward the sacred hill of the 2,000-year-old monkey temple, Swayambunath. From its gold spire the eyes of the all-seeing Buddha looked down on the inhabitants of Katmandu. All around the wooden pagodas on the sandy banks of the river, the saffron robes of the monks lay out to dry.

A jeep overtook the car and two men in the back motioned them to stop. Chandrabir Rai walked over to the Datsun and politely greeted its occupants. He asked for their names and nationality. Charles smiled. He had returned from his deserted Bangkok flat that morning, leaving Ajay to deal with the locked safe. He got out of the car, and shook hands with the Nepalese policeman. 'My name is Henricus Bintanja – Henk, for short – and I'm from Holland.' He explained that he taught sociology at the University of Amsterdam, and introduced the Superintendent to his wife: 'Cocky Hemker'. Behind her sunglasses, Marie Andrée managed a tight smile and a nod.

After the Australian girls had told the Superintendent about Connie meeting a gem dealer with Vietnamese features, Chandrabir Rai found that the guest matching the physical description was registered at the Soaltee Oberoi as Henricus Bintanja. 'If you have been to Holland,' the driver of the Datsun was now saying, 'you will already know my wife, Cocky. She's a celebrity – always on television.'

Rai showed them a photograph of Connie, taken from her visa application. Did they recognize the picture? 'No.' Both of them shook their heads.

'Is there something wrong, Superintendent?' Charles asked.

'We will just take a small look in your car if you don't mind.'

'By all means.'

Two young assistants made a cursory search of the back seat and boot of the car and handed Rai a pair of baggy jeans.

'Are these jean pants yours, Mr Henk?'

'I've never seen them before.'

'I am deeply sorry, but I must ask you to remain behind in Katmandu until we complete our investigations.'

'But we are due to be in Delhi in two days.'

'I am very sorry. And now I must ask you to follow me to the police station. Just a formality. I am very sorry.'

'Oh, well, Superintendent, perhaps it is fated. I welcome this chance to remain in your beautiful country.'

One hour after the bus left Katmandu with Luke, Sally, and Katy, it was stopped at a police checkpoint. The three travelers were asked to accompany police back to the headquarters.

'We have found a man who looks Vietnamese although it appears he is Dutch,' Chandrabir said to them. 'I wonder if you would recognize him as the man you saw with Miss Connie?'

'I couldn't be sure, Superintendent,' Sally said.

Just then another group of men came into the room. Sally looked up and saw a pair of black eyes glaring at her from a sallow, cruelly sensuous face. With him was a woman with long black hair and sharp features.

'I couldn't be sure, Superintendent,' she said, averting her eyes from Sobhraj. Why did that glare frighten her so much? Was it the same man she had seen briefly with Connie in Freak Street?

'I must say I am becoming impatient with all this,' said Charles, glancing at his gold Omega watch. 'And it is not nice for my wife.'

'You must excuse us, Mr Bintanja.'

'Yes, of course, you are doing your job. But may I now return to the Oberoi?'

'Certainly, yes.' The Superintendent bowed slightly as 'Mr Bintanja' left the room.

Sally wished the police had warned her he was already there. The cold dark eyes had bored right through and she was still shaking from the menace in his gaze. 'Maybe you should watch him,' she said to Rai after Charles had left the

room. The three travellers suddenly felt scared as though trapped in a web of ill-defined conspiracy.

'You could be in some danger here now,' Chandrabir Rai said, and for the few more days their presence would be required in Nepal, he assigned them a police bodyguard.

'When you feel the heat, go straight to the kitchen,' Charles had often said and on the morning of December 27, he walked into the office of Superintendent Rai and asked for the return of his pen. He had left it at his office the previous day. Over tea, Chandrabir asked 'Mr Henk' whether he had read about the cases of the burned bodies found in Thailand a few days ago.

'I never look at newspapers, Superintendent,' he said. 'And especially not ones in Bangkok' — as a sociologist he had observed the Thais to be a bloodthirsty race, not like the sensitive Nepalese — and now, touring Asia with his wife, he 'had no stomach for horror stories.'

After Charles had left the office in a pantomime of smiles and handshakes, Chandrabir Rai weighed the evidence against the man he thought of as Henk Bintanja. He did not display the usual qualities of a criminal; quite the opposite, he was gracious, carefree. And there was no firm evidence against him. In fact he had produced receipts from the restaurant at the Soaltce Oberoi, with meal times marked on the back, and other witnesses had verified his constant presence in the hotel casino. And there was another suspect. Records showed Laurent Carrière, who had shared a room with Connie Jo at the Oriental Lodge, had flown out of Katmandu. Could Carrière be the killer?

A farmer near the spot where the man's body was found had noticed a car turning round late on the night of the murder. The first digit of its number plate was 5, matching the one on the white Datsun rented by Mr Henk Bintanja. (There were not many modern white cars in Katmandu.) And the baggy pair of blue jeans found in the boot of Mr Bintanja's car had been identified by the two Australian girls as probably belonging to Miss Bronzich. Lining the shelves in Chandrabir Rai's office were old Sherlock Holmes books. He had used them to teach himself both English and police investigatory procedure. In this case, the circumstan-

tial evidence was powerful and there was something a little too methodical about 'Mr. Bintanja's' hotel receipts. In the morning, he decided, he would take both him and his wife in for further questioning and search his room.

Katmandu closed in on Sally, Luke, and Katy. As they walked to Aunt Jane's, their regular eating place, other travellers seemed to melt down alleyways to avoid them. News of the couple found burned on a roadside in Thailand had already cast a pall across the Asian trail, and now this atrocity in the Kingdom of Nepal, the birthplace of Buddha, had intensified the general paranoia.

Street talk centred on motive. A huge shipment of heroin from Thailand had just hit the city and was being pushed in Freak Street. Was the timing a coincidence, or connected with the murders? Day and night in candlelit dives, overlanders, looking like conspirators in old oil paintings, talked of nothing else.

'Whatever's going on around here, it must be mighty big,' Luke said to his two friends. 'Connie's notebook made me realize that,' Sally said. When they had looked through her papers at the police station, the two girls had found a hand-scrawled note: 'Go XX miles along the road to Dhulikel' — they couldn't make out the number — 'and pick it up.' There were also some names and addresses of well-known drug dealers.

Still, they had kept assisting the police with their inquiries. It was as if Superintendent Rai, sensing it was all outside his own criminal tradition, sought their advice and opinions to gain a Western perspective. Later, in acknowledgment of their help, Sally, Luke, and Katy were presented by police with a vial of hash oil.

Charles was not disturbed by the inevitable investigations into the killings. He knew he was invincible. He had perfected a combination of charm and psychology, sleight of hand, strength, and pharmaceutical expertise, to be able to dominate any human situation. The Nepalese police, in their alpaca breeches and peaked caps, were just a joke, he thought. His day-trip back to Bangkok, using the passport of Laurent Carrière, was enough to confuse them for weeks. They would

assume that Laurent had killed Connie.

Several years later, in another Asian city, Charles would make the claim that Connie Jo Bronzich died because her name had been given to him by his criminal employers in Hong Kong. She had been hired, he would claim, to fly to Bangkok and return to Katmandu with a consignment of heroin. Then two friends from Santa Cruz would have arrived to meet her around Christmas, carrying the contraband back into America. For this they would be paid \$5,000.

And the burly Canadian, on his way to see Mount Everest for the first time? He too would be characterized as a courier, who had been engaged in London. Brutality reached the ultimate extreme in both these murders, the first in which a knife was used.

It was intended to be a 'big show', he would boast, but Ajay 'had overdone it a bit ... These Indians ... they stab fifteen times when once would do.'

After Connie's body was identified on Christmas Eve by the Australian girl, Alan Eastham at the American Embassy drafted his telegram to Connie Jo Bronzich's parents in Los Gatos. It said a body had been tentatively identified and asked for Connie's dental records. He would wait a day before sending it. Her body was in the Embassy refrigerator, guarded by two Marines, ready to switch to a portable generator in case of a power failure, a common occurrence in Katmandu.

Laurent Carrière's unidentified body remained on a slab at the mortuary. There was no room in the small British cemetery, the only one in Katmandu.

Later, the American consul was to describe Connie as 'a nice young kid who had the worst luck anyone could have.' However, mysterious deaths had been part of Connie's life.

Ten weeks before Connie left California, her estranged husband, John Franklin Bronzich, was found dead at her home. The coroner's report stated the cause of death as morphine poisoning although his own family did not agree with this verdict. The amount of morphine found in his body (Blood: 0.05 ppm. Bile: 10 ppm) was not normally enough to cause death. On the night he died, John Bronzich was in a car with Connie on his way to a restaurant. He was not living with

her at the time and, according to his family, looked forward to this night's reunion. The couple had a fight, and John jumped out of the car. The next morning he was found sprawled on the floor in the mobile home attached to Connie's house, dead. There was a syringe on the floor, some small balloons, and an overturned chair. It is not known how he travelled the 65 kilometres home from the city of Santa Cruz to Connie's house in the mountains. His back was sprained, and at the time he wore a surgical brace, making it impossible for him to even walk down the long driveway to the mobile home. At the time of his argument with Connie, she had been dating a man with a long police record as a notorious Santa Cruz drug-dealer. Some people said there was animosity between the estranged husband and Connie's new boyfriend. Eight weeks before this incident, John Bronzich's best friend, Frank Santa Cruz, was found dead at the same address. On the night of July 13 he had come to Connie's house, taken off his boots, and fallen asleep on top of her bed. When she woke up in the morning, Connie told police, she saw a strange grin on his face and tried to wake him, but he was dead. This time the coroner's report was less positive in its conclusions. The cause of death was listed as 'undetermined'.

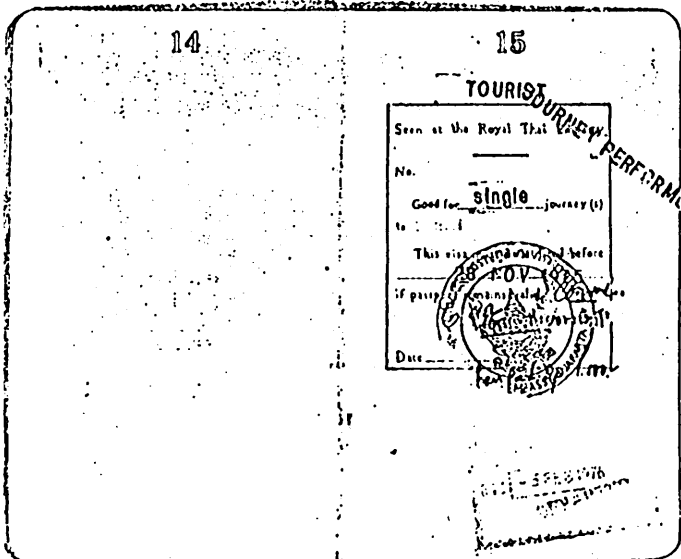
At dawn on December 28, Chandrabir Rai led a police raid on room 415 of the Oberoi Hotel. When no one answered the door, his men forced their way inside. No one was there. Several suitcases were overturned and their contents strewn about the floor. In the debris, police picked out eleven empty tins of Regulets (chocolate-flavoured laxatives) and boxes of coloured pencils and a protractor (part of Charles's passport-forging kit). There was crumpled black nylon lingerie, a portable fire extinguisher, some cassettes for learning Spanish, and sapphires and amethysts scattered on the floor. Among the jumble of paperback books was *The Secret of the Aura* by Lobsang Rampa, *The Book of Life* by Martin Grey, a French inspirational writer, and *Beyond Good and Evil* by Nietzsche.

Through the plate glass windows of the hotel room, Chandrabir Rai could see the city decked out with flags and flower garlands for the next day's royal birthday celebrations. His Majesty King Birendra Bir Bikram Sha Deva was the

living reincarnation of Vishnu, the Hindu deity worshipped as the restorer of Karma, of the moral order. The rising sun tinted the peaks of the Himalayas, which for centuries had encircled the valley as a protective wall. An awesome force had breached this citadel. Now, somewhere out there, a man of prey was at large.

'A new departure, a new life,' Marie Andrée would write later.

Everything is hope, it is a hard way but he holds me tight and we walk hand in hand. It is a new start: spiritual, physical communication, tenderness, glow, complicity; everything is shared, and we make only one person. At least, we make a couple. I belong to him, I feel I am desired, loved for myself, that he needs me, my presence, my smile to live. At last I am happy, I make plans and think already of our baby. I dream. I dream... Everything is great, beautiful, and I feel there will be no sadness for me, for at least he loves me. This will last one whole month, one month I will never forget.



The crude, hand-drawn forgery of a Thai visa later found in Marie Andrée's passport.

It was Charles's sixth sense again. Just as he used to sniff out the presence of police when he was a little boy stealing from shops — and a hundred times since — so Charles knew that the Nepalese police had been planning that dawn raid. At midnight the two of them had wrapped up their necessities in a bedsheet which they threw out of the window to Ajay, waiting on the grass below. Then they had tiptoed down the back stairs and rushed into a taxi.

Marie Andrée was naturally disinclined to leave on the same passport she had used to fly in to Nepal — Cocky Hemker's — and so a page from the passport of the dead Canadian, Laurent Carrière, which contained an entrance visa to Nepal, was inserted into her own passport. Charles used Hakim's passport and that same day the three of them crossed the border into India.

It was in the holy city of Varanasi a few days later that Charles, who spent hours watching the bodies burn on the boats of the Ganges, met an Israeli tourist. Alan Aaron Jacobs had worked as a crane driver to save for this holiday, and he was persuaded to share a room with Ajay at a small hotel. After burning a batch of incriminating passports; Charles, Marie Andrée, and the Indian moved on to Goa, the druggy overlanders' colony on the west coast of India. Jacobs was found dead in his bed. Later, Charles would say this death was an accident and blame it on Ajay's excess enthusiasm. 'I only wanted his passport,' he would claim, not mentioning Jacobs's considerable savings. 'That Israeli was the only one I felt sorry for, he often used to tell me how hard he had worked.'

In Goa, Charles met a party of Frenchmen at Ajuna Beach feasting on fruit salad. He passed round a bottle of malt whisky and entranced them with talk of gems and his childhood adventures in Asia until the sun rose. One of the travellers, Eric Damour, wrote in his journal of 'A night of excitement without end'. On January 9, Charles, Marie Andrée and Ajay rode south with the French party in their transit van, stopping for the night at a small beach resort. Charles ordered four chickens from the villagers, bought fresh crabs from the fishermen and mixed a whisky cocktail for his new friends, who were sprawled on the beach by a fire. The scene duplicated the style of the original Thugs who, a century before,

had shocked the British newspaper-reading public with their ritualistic slaughters of roadside travellers in India. At 9 p.m., the three Frenchmen passed out. Eric Damour and his two friends were thrown into the back of their van, now stripped of all its valuables, and Charles and Ajay put a rock on the accelerator and jumped out, leaving the drugged occupants to be the apparent victims of a car accident followed by looting. But the travellers were saved by villagers who appeared seemingly from nowhere, and Charles and his friends moved on.

In Madras, Ajay left the other two saying he was returning to Delhi to visit his family. His parents had not seen him since he had left home about six months ago, after an argument. Ajay had grown up in a shabby block of flats near Connaught Circus and his family was neither rich nor poor, by Indian standards. After school, behind barred windows in a scantily furnished room lined with his basket-ball trophies, Ajay developed his muscles and his prowess at maths. 'He was not like the rest of us,' his Hindu father would later say. 'He was handsome, tender hearted and good at his studies.' As a small boy he was remembered for scattering loose rupees among local beggars. Mr Chowdury, whose job as a car salesman required him to appear more successful than he really was, had worked hard to give his oldest boy a good education. Ajay enrolled at Delhi University and in the vacations, carried on the family custom of staying with friends in distant parts of the country. The more Ajay saw of India, the more anxious he became to continue his studies abroad. It was after a holiday stint as a travel agent in Nepal, that Ajay returned home determined to seek his fortune outside India. As he had only one year to go before graduating his father was furious, and the young man ran away. Soon afterwards Ajay linked up with Sobhraj. Whether or not he actually visited his home in New Delhi this time, in January 1976, his family would later weep, shake their heads and deny it. 'How can a man's character change overnight?' his father would ask afterwards.

From Madras, Charles and Marie Andrée flew to Singapore and on January 31 1976 they turned up in Hong Kong. There they met an American school teacher, David Allen Gore, and

invited him back to their room at the Sheraton Hotel, where he was drugged. Charles was excited by the haul of cash, cheques and credit cards, proudly showing Marie Andrée a letter of credit for \$8,000, which he cashed. Charles presented her with a gold Bulova watch and bought a diamond ring for Roong, his new Thai mistress. For himself, he planned to buy a Jaguar and move to a luxury flat in Bangkok. While he could have moved on to any number of cities, Charles saw no reason why he should. His gem business was thriving and he planned to keep up such a show of affluence that he would be above suspicion, or immune from its effects.

Charles did not live in fear of arrest, although he had recently murdered eight people; he was used to being on the Wanted list. Murders did not add much to the complications of his external life, and later he would claim to have no qualms of conscience:

'If some will ask me whether I feel remorse — and many will — I answer: Does a professional soldier feel remorse after having killed a hundred men with a machine gun? Did the American pilots feel remorse after dropping napalm on my homeland? No. Society condoned the soldiers, telling them: You have the right to kill; it is your duty to kill — the more you kill the bigger the promotion — Don't I have the same right? In the interest of my own minority?'

But Charles's minority consisted of one, himself. Morality was a wordgame. 'And I can justify the murders to myself,' he would often say later, 'I never killed good people.'

And so he planned to return to Bangkok. The very boldness of the act would be enough to dispel danger, he believed, and at the worst, the police could be bought. The only problem was Nadine Gires. How much did she know?

Bangkok, February 6 1976

Behind a high wall on Wireless Road, at the end of a long asphalt driveway lined with flowering shrubs, stood the Royal Netherlands Embassy. The white mansion, which had once been the residence of a member of the Thai royal family, now housed the Dutch Ambassador. It was a medium-sized embassy. In the modern L-shaped wing behind the mansion a staff of seven diplomats had their offices. Herman Knippenberg, the Third Secretary and acting head of the consular section, was a tall young man with a serious expression. He sat at his desk in his light grey suit reading the mail that had arrived in the embassy pouch from The Hague.

The Foreign Office had asked him to trace the whereabouts of two Dutch travellers, Henk Bintanja and Cocky Hemker and the photographs of them which were supposedly enclosed with the package were missing. And the xeroxed letter from Cocky Hemker's brother-in-law was incomplete. 'Damned dilettantes,' he muttered. Herman had double his usual workload (a month ago the consular head had been transferred, and a replacement was not due until April) and he could do without such sloppy deskwork from his colleagues.

In the past year 30,000 Dutch tourists had come to Thailand, twice the number of previous years, and requests for help from the embassy like the one Herman had just opened were not unusual. Missing travellers were generally located — meditating in a faraway monastery or shooting up heroin on a beach. And yet this letter from the brother-in-law disturbed Herman with its tone of methodical urgency. He read it again:

In their last letter of 8 December 1975, Cocky and Henk told us that they planned to leave Hong Kong by plane on Wednesday, 10 December at 11 p.m. to Bangkok.

They wanted to stay about one week to renew passports and apply for visas. Afterwards they planned to go to Chiangmai for about two weeks and then travel to South India and Ceylon, and they asked us to send their letters addressed to Poste Restante Chiangmai. To this address we sent four or five letters.

In their letter they also wrote that they had met a Frenchman, a dealer in precious stones between Bangkok and Hong Kong. Cocky and Henk were invited several times by this Frenchman to his hotel, the Hyatt Regency. The Frenchman planned to leave on 8 December for Bangkok where he and his wife lived in a flat.

Cocky and Henk were also invited to go to this flat, and they had to tell him when exactly they were arriving in Bangkok so that the Frenchman's secretary could meet them at the airport. He also promised he would take them to the gem mines.

Putting down the letter, Herman made some notes and asked a Thai-speaking secretary to contact the post office at Chiangmai to see if the Dutch couple's mail had been collected. He told an aide to check the Embassy register to see if their passports had been renewed and he dictated a wire to The Hague requesting the mislaid photographs and the missing page of the letter. Then he went on with his correspondence.

This was his first overseas posting. After a brilliant academic career in Europe, Herman had completed his post-graduate work in international relations at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced Studies in Washington, D.C., where he met his wife, Angela, a German-born graduate of Bryn Mawr. With Angela, he had arrived in Bangkok seven months earlier. His duties at the embassy were varied. Herman processed papers for Dutch couples wishing to adopt Thai babies; he helped administer financial aid to neighbouring Laos; and he prepared reports for the Foreign Office on the Southeast Asian political scene. Heroin was not the only contraband bound for Amsterdam. Another of his more banal tasks was to screen Thai applicants for visas to Holland and weed out any prostitutes.

The office intercom buzzed: Cocky's and Henk's passports

had not been renewed; and, at the Chiangmai Post Office, there was still mail waiting for them. Herman wondered where they were. He lit a cigarette and stared through the window at the swimming pool where the suntanned Ambassador was churning through the water. He could do nothing more until the photos arrived. In his student days he had backpacked around Europe and the Middle East, and he knew at first hand the eagerness of the traveller to pick up mail from home. The family had good reason to be worried, he thought.

In San Pedro, California, on the morning after Herman Knippenberg first heard the names of the missing Dutch couple, Emma Knowlton called on a neighbour who had a typewriter to write a letter to President Gerald Ford. 'I am in desperate need of your help,' she began dictating as the tears ran down her face. Emma had not been reassured by the casual optimism of a letter from a lama at Kopan Monastery suggesting that her grand-daughter, Teresa, had met some of her friends and was having a nice time in Hong Kong.

Emma had already written to the U.S. State Department, the Hong Kong Police, immigration departments, and the U.S. Consulate in Hong Kong for news. She had not heard from Teresa since her grand-daughter arrived in Hong Kong on October 5, and now Christmas had come and gone without even a postcard. 'I have heard nothing from any of these departments,' she wrote. 'Mr President, surely it can't take this long to find out if she left Hong Kong and what her destination was to be. My grand-daughter always wrote to me where she would be going and where I would next hear from her. I am very alarmed, and, as an American, I should have information on what the State Department is doing to locate Teresa. I want to know if she is well and has not met with foul play. Sincerely, Emma Knowlton.'

On Friday, February 13 1976, looking tired, with dark circles under her eyes, Nadine Gires sat in one of the leather-covered banquettes of the Indra Regent's foyer. She was waiting for a girlfriend.

Since Christmas, while Remy was at work, Nadine had been keeping away from Kanit House. She had strolled end-

lessly through shopping arcades, sat alone in cinemas, and whiled away hours at other people's homes. Everyone was trying to help, but nothing was happening. A French engineer, who was a friend of the young couple, had approached a contact from the British Embassy with the story of Alain Gautier. The word came back to Nadine that the British wanted proof. She had persuaded a Kanit House maid to let her into the upstairs flat where she had slipped into her handbag an exercise book written in Dutch. Written on the cover was the name Henk Bintanja. The British made their report, she understood, and had sent it on to the Thai police. Since then, Nadine had heard nothing more.

The news from Paris had added to their fears. Dominique Rennelleau had returned the borrowed air fare with a letter saying he had gone to the French police. 'We can do nothing,' they had told him. Yannick Masy, the ex-detective turned private secretary, had promised to contact Interpol, but, instead, he had disappeared. There were rumours he had gone to live in a monastery. When Nadine and Remy went over the events at Kanit House, they began to wonder about Yannick. At least Dominique and his pipe-smoking friend François were still pressing ahead. They had obtained an interview with Monsieur Mouton-Brady, a high ranking official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Nadine envied Dominique, safely at home in his pretty village with his family. 'We could go, too,' Nadine thought, but her husband's contract as a cook at the Oriental Hotel still had four months to run and Remy refused to resign just because of the man who lived upstairs.

It was all a matter of contacts, Nadine realized. If they kept pushing, it would soon be all right. There would be a police raid on the flat, and all the damning evidence would be discovered. Alain Gautier would be put in jail, and, at last, she would feel safe again. Meanwhile, the killer was still around. Last week he had telephoned her, as usual, friendly and casual.

'Hello, Nadine. Did you have a good Christmas?' he had asked.

At first, her mouth had dried up, and she could hardly talk. So, to make conversation, she told him that she needed the commission she was owed because her brother was in trouble.

It was just a story; she didn't have a brother. But, damn him, she would get her money *and* get him arrested. Alain said he was phoning from Hong Kong, but the connection was so clear, it sounded like next door. And virtually, it was.

Reiner, the German boy, told her that Alain had been back to Bangkok twice since Christmas and had stayed at the Dusit Thani Hotel. He had said he would move back to 504.

Four days after the panic-stricken departure of Dominique, François, and Yannick, Nadine had opened the *Bangkok World* to see the headline: TOURISTS MURDERED IN NEPAL. As soon as she read the story about an American girl and a Canadian man left by the road in Katmandu 'burned badly and difficult to identify', she knew, with a sick feeling in her stomach, that Alain must have gone to Katmandu for his holiday – not to Hong Kong. And where was he now? The question plagued her.

The babble of conversation rose in the Indra foyer. She looked up, hoping to see her girlfriend due in from Paris. A tourist party poured through the revolving doors, clutching their teak carvings of elephants and souvenir shells, browsing like innocent cows around jewellery shops and boutiques of Thai silk. She looked at their soft, kindly faces. They would care, she thought, if they knew. She wondered about the families far away – in America, Canada, Turkey, France, and Holland – for whom a Christmas had passed without their hearing any news from their children.

'Hi, Nadine!'

She turned to find Charles standing behind her.

'We've just flown in from Hong Kong,' he said. 'It's so wonderful to be back.'

She forced a smile. Her heart was beating fast as he kissed her on the cheek. His face seemed cold. She saw him as though for the first time and she felt the force field of power that seemed to surround him. The young businessman on his way up with his endearing confidence, well-cut clothes, gold Omega watch, and crocodile attaché case was smiling quizzically as he spoke to her in his low, amused, insinuating voice.

'I seem to have surprised you. Are you waiting for someone?'

'Yes, I've been waiting for a friend, a stewardess from Air France, but the flight crew doesn't seem to have arrived.'

'How was your Christmas?'

'Fine.'

'And things at Kanit House?'

His questions seemed to have a double meaning.

'Fine.'

'Now, Nadine, tell me about your brother.' He said this urgently with a concerned expression as though it was something that had been bothering him since the phone call.

'That's why I'm waiting for my friend, Alain. She's bringing me news from my family.' Nadine was improvising. 'But ... I have to send him more money.'

'I left in a hurry last time. There was no time to pay your commission, but don't worry.' In a quick, hardly noticeable movement, Charles pulled off the wide black belt around his hips, unzipped it, and took out a bundle of \$100 notes, counting out three of them. 'There, Nadine. Maybe you thought I wouldn't pay?' he said as she folded the notes neatly and put them in her shoulder bag. 'And take this, a bonus. For your brother.' He handed Nadine another \$300.

So, she thought, this means that he knows that I know.

'Well, I should find Monique. When we're settled, you and Remy must come up for a drink. Has anyone been looking for me?'

'Just a few customers. I told them we didn't know when you'd be back.' She tried to smile and said in a neutral voice, 'You were already overdue.'

'Maybe you thought we wouldn't come back?'

'Maybe, Alain. I didn't know.'

'Why shouldn't we? So many customers owe me money. We got held up in Hong Kong. My business there is growing too quickly.' He looked pleased with himself.

'And how's Monique?' Nadine asked.

'Sick of travelling, I think. She'll be pleased to see you.'

They talked for a few more minutes, and Charles waved to a thin woman in dark sunglasses walking across the hotel foyer carrying a white dog. 'Here she comes.'

Watching her cradle the pup, looking tired, Nadine wondered: Had she known what Alain was doing, had she been involved? She still remembered the expression on Marie Andrée's face when she had said, 'I don't like that Turk,' and 'I don't like those Dutch; I want them to go.'

The two women exchanged greetings with a kiss on each cheek. Then Charles said firmly, 'Why not come back with us in the car, Nadine? Your friend wasn't on the plane.'

He was right. While they were talking, she had seen the Air France flight crew check into the hotel, and her friend was not among them.

Nadine climbed into the back seat of the brown Datsun and sat there terrified. It was like the beginning of one of her nightmares. Since Christmas she had often dreamed she was being chased down the echoing corridors of Kanit House and into the tiny lift where Charles was waiting for her, smiling, and Ajay was flicking his knife as she had seen him do so many times, when she thought he was just a silly boy playing tough. But this was really happening. Marie Andrée sat in front beside Charles, stroking the dog's ears and saying little.

Behind the breezy intimacy of his chatter, Nadine could sense him probing for her fear. He must know that I know, she thought. Thank God she was wearing sunglasses. To pay the commission so blatantly the moment he saw me again, he thinks he can do anything with money. He thinks he can make me forget what I know. But he can't, she told herself. The uncanny tug of his charm made him more frightening, almost as though he knew how to lull a conscience into thinking wrong was right. Many moods flashed across his voice as he chatted about his booming business in Hong Kong; he was playful, serious, gentle, or flirtatious.

Charles seemed in no hurry to reach Kanit House. For once he wasn't swearing at the rigid lanes of traffic. He could not be sure how much Yannick had talked before fleeing and he noticed that Nadine was trying hard to conceal her coolness. Damn that *Bangkok Post* with its picture of the 'Australian Couple'! It must have caused the others to panic. To leave them alone had been a mistake. Anyway, what could Nadine do - tell the French Embassy? For Charles they were even less a worry than the Thai police. French diplomats were among his most satisfied customers. Maybe she had already gone to the Thai police, but he guessed that they wouldn't give a damn. As far as he could tell from his little Roong, his new Thai girlfriend, they had nothing in their files against him. Roong's father was a policeman, so were her cousins,

and her family already treated him like their own son. Maybe he would marry her one day; Asian women put their men before everything else. Roong's family had taken care of Franky while he and Marie Andrée had been away, and because the dog had torn some upholstery, he would compensate them with some new furniture. In Thailand, only money mattered. What a pity the problem of Nadine could not be so easily solved.

On the right, as they drove down Ratchadamri Road, they passed the high walls of the Royal Bangkok Sports Club. Yes, wealthy foreigners could live in this city with all the familiar trappings of luxury and the good life. Charles had guessed there might be talk about the strange events at Kanit House at the end of last year, but he wasn't worried. He had plenty of cash. Soon he would move to a better flat and expand his international gem business with the German boy, Reiner. He would put up a bigger front, now, to blind the Thais to any rumours. With the lifestyle he planned, no one would ever believe that he had killed hippies for pocket money.

Charles had already found a replacement for Yannick. Jean Dhuisme was a tall, grim-faced Frenchman he had met one night at the Grace Hotel. Because of a failed property speculation this man was desperate for money, and he had already agreed to fly home to Paris and return to Kanit House with parties of French tourists. Charles had met Jean during one of his furtive reconnaissance trips to Bangkok a few weeks ago. Now he was telling Nadine that he and Marie Andrée had arrived back in Bangkok today, whereas they had already spent a few nights at a nearby hotel under false names. He had even phoned Nadine, pretending he was still in Hong Kong.

Glancing at her now in the rearview mirror, as silent as death behind her sunglasses, Charles wondered whether Nadine had guessed that he and Marie Andrée had spent their Christmas holiday in Katmandu.

When they reached Kanit House and Nadine helped them carry their bags upstairs, she noticed their new, expensive luggage and wondered if the original owner was still alive. Inside Charles opened the windows, letting in the warm afternoon breeze. The air was stale and smelled of medicine and tobacco. The maid had followed them up to clean the

room, the same one who had allowed Nadine to search the flat six weeks ago. Charles ensured courteous service with generous tips.

'Hello, Ton Ton,' he said. 'Here's a present for you.' He picked up Cocky Hemker's transistor radio from the table and gave it to her. Nadine's heart sank.

To persuade the maid to let her into 504 while Alain was away, she had told her — What a fool! — that the police wanted him for murder. Perhaps she hadn't understood. There was nothing in Ton Ton's behaviour to suggest anything unusual.

'Nadine! Come in here a moment.' It was Charles, calling from the adjoining flat. 'There's some business we must finish.'

It was a cat and mouse game being played with the Asian rule of hiding emotion. The Thais called it *Tai Chawn*, cool heart. As Nadine took a deep breath and walked into 503, she hoped that her face and voice would not give her away.

In 504 Marie Andrée supervised the cleaning up. For the past few weeks she had been in a sad, self-pitying mood. In Hong Kong in January she had bought a small silk-bound diary in which she had recorded her daily tribulations. 'I'm tired.' 'Depressed.' 'Can't sleep.' 'We are six months together.' 'He's already made love to her.' 'I'm sick and very tired.' A few days ago she had arrived in Bangkok with Charles, incognito ('We are thought to be on holiday'), and they had gone together to Pattaya ('More fights, we don't understand each other'). Since leaving India, Marie Andrée had been using the passport of Eric Damour, one of the travellers Charles had met on a beach in Goa and drugged.

As usual, Charles left her long hours alone. She was bitter about the loneliness and suffering in her life. Still she wanted to reach him, to break through his exterior. In the anguished letter she would later write, she said: 'It is not to Charles my friend, or my love that I wish to speak, but to Charles the psychologist. I want to know first if we have some chance to recover our balance, to understand each other again, and be happy together.' Page after page the letter would continue, starting with the scene of her arrival in Bangkok and then analysing the succeeding stages of her relationship with

Charles. It would be a record of her emotions. 'Too quickly, Roong sets in our life. I had not been happy long enough to forget the former months, and, therefore, I fall too quickly. Discouraged, depressive, I feel suicidal. I do not feel strong enough to fight. Why must I live without love? He is leaving me and gives her everything I would like to have: happiness, time ... and he is very satisfied with their physical intercourse.'

In the living room of 503 Nadine lit a cigarette as she watched him open his case and shuffle through his papers, wondering what his next move would be.

'You must be very upset about your brother,' he was saying in a caressing tone of voice. 'It's a worry when young boys make big mistakes. If he's in prison, you know, I could do something. I have a good friend who's on all the penal reform committees. He lives in Paris.' As he spoke, he was unlocking a drawer.

'It's okay, Alain. It's a family matter. We can take care of it.' Why did her voice sound so unnatural?

'This is for you,' he said, turning round and handing her another wad of banknotes, 'for your brother.'

She put the money in her handbag, thanked him, and hurried back to her own flat where she locked her door and phoned Remy with the news that Alain Gautier was back.

On that same afternoon, while Charles and Marie Andrée were moving back to Kanit House, Herman Knippenberg, the young Dutch diplomat, was ploughing through paperwork at his embassy. His working day began punctually at 7.30 a.m. and ended at 2 p.m. without a lunch break, but usually he worked late, and this Friday afternoon was no exception. The phone on his desk rang. When he picked it up, the voice of his colleague from the Belgian Embassy boomed through the earpiece.

‘Paul here, Herman. Are you missing any people?’

It was Paul Siemons, the crusty troubleshooter from the Belgian Embassy who was listed officially as an administrative attaché.

‘Why do you ask?’ said Herman. ‘What do you know?’ So far he had told no one outside his staff about his search for Cocky and Henk.

Paul launched into a colourful account of an argument that had happened last October between two men at the Grace Hotel.

Along with most diplomats in Bangkok Herman knew about the incident involving the likeable but haughty Baronet Gilles de Giverney, who had squabbled at the Grace over the price of a bar girl. Ever since, this Frenchman, Albert Goyot, had been making trouble. Recently he had embarrassed Gilles by taking an advertisement in the *Bangkok Post* which advised him to contact a lawyer regarding the incident at the Grace Hotel. Siemons recounted the story with gusto and went on, ‘Gilles came to me for help, and we both started checking on this Albert Goyot. I wanted to find something incriminating against him so we could have the rat booted out of the country. Anyway, we hear certain rumours about a mixed-blood Frenchman living in Soi Saladaeng, not far from me, who lures tourists to his flat and murders them.’

‘You must be joking!’ Herman said. Paul had spent twenty years in the Belgian Congo on undercover operations and

sometimes got carried away. 'Any mention of Dutch tourists?'

'Someone said they saw a whole pile of passports in the safe. Two of them belonged to a Dutch couple who had been seen at the flat.'

'And who lives there? Albert Goyot?'

'Presumably, yes, although there's some confusion. My source who got it from another source said the name was Alain Gautier, but it's probably the same man.'

'Could be. The initials are the same, and you know how European names get bastardized in translation.'

His years as an Intelligence Officer had made Paul cagey about revealing contacts. Actually, the Baronet himself had picked up the rumour from a journalist at Agence Presse. This man had heard it from a French schoolteacher who was a friend of Nadine's and knew the story from her.

Herman's mind flashed to an earlier report in the *Bangkok Post* of two Australians found burned on the roadside. It was so gruesome he had always remembered it. Now he was struck by a fact that had stuck in his mind when he first read the story. The girl was said to be wearing a T-shirt made in Holland.

'Paul, remember the case of those Australian tourists found burned at Ayutthaya? Were they ever positively identified?'

'I'm not sure. Mind you, if the Thai police say they were Australians, it probably means they're Japanese.'

The two men had an easy working relationship and often consulted each other when devising strategies to prevent the smuggling of Thai prostitutes or heroin into their adjoining countries.

Herman told Paul about his missing travellers, Cocky and Henk, and the letter from their relative in Amsterdam, John Zant, who had mentioned a meeting with a gem dealer in Hong Kong, a gem dealer living in a flat in Bangkok who had invited the two to stay with him.

'This Goyot character deals in gems,' Paul said, 'and he's always travelling.'

Herman told his colleague that he would phone him back and he put in a call to the Vice Consul at the Australian Embassy, who was positive that the two bodies had never been identified.

Last December two young Australians had been touring the same area where the burned bodies were found. Nice kids, they had written their names down on pieces of paper for the local children and then just disappeared. No one heard another word. When the burned bodies were found on the road, the police connected the *farang* names. 'So we thought the worst had happened,' the Vice Consul explained to Herman, 'but blow me down, the kids came walking in here just a few days ago, alive and well.'

When Herman put down the phone, he asked his secretary to comb all the English-language newspapers for references to dead or missing Westerners, starting with December 8, the date Cocky and Henk arrived in Bangkok. Then he phoned Paul Siemons with the news and told him that he would pay an official visit of inquiry to the Thai police.

'Pfft!' Paul spat through the phone. His views on corruption and the Thai police were frequently expressed, and he was concerned for the safety of his sources, the young French couple, who still lived in the same block of flats as the suspect.

'You be careful,' he warned Herman. 'I understand that this Gautier has a Thai girlfriend who is a daughter of a high-ranking police officer.'

'Paul, I'm not saying that the whole Thai police force is above reproach, but I do have some contacts with police officials who *are*.' Herman was thinking of Pao Sarasin, the Deputy Director of the Criminal Investigation Bureau. This official was also Chairman of the Central Narcotics Board, and Herman had met him on a field trip to the Golden Triangle. 'Pao Sarasin's cousin is social secretary at our embassy, and she can have a word in his ear ... that's how things work in this country ...'

'Yes, that's why I tell you not to involve the police.'

'But we must involve them, it's their job and their country.'

Paul Siemons remained unconvinced, but agreed to compile a report on the rumours of the mysterious French gem dealer.

Eleven days after posting her letter to the President, Emma Knowlton received a message from another source, one that had more impact on her than any of the official letters which were to follow. In the early morning of February 18, Teresa's birthday, Emma woke up and saw a light in the kitchen.

'I couldn't understand why the light was on,' she would later recount, 'and I got out of bed, picked up my clock, and saw it was 1 a.m. I went to turn off the light. Teresa was sitting at the kitchen table like she usually sat, and she just looked beautiful, her face, everything, all her beautiful colouring. I looked at her, and I screamed.'

'She said, "Oh, Grandma!"'

"Teresa, where have you been! I've been searching all over for you," I said.'

'And she started to cry, and she said, "Grandma, I want to come home. Bring me home, Grandma. I've got to come home."''

'And I found myself at the edge of my bed. I picked up the clock, and it was still 1 a.m., and the light was on in the kitchen. I ran out there, but she wasn't there. And I knew then, she was dead.'

At 11 a.m. Friday morning, February 20, Herman Knippenberg was sitting in an office at Thai police headquarters talking to senior officers. It was hot, the air-conditioning had broken down, and the legs of his lightweight trousers kept sticking to the vinyl-covered armchair.

'Since these two corpses are still not identified there's a possibility they are the missing Dutch couple,' Herman said, concluding his list of reasons for requesting information and the whereabouts of the burned corpses found at Ayutthaya.

Major General Suwit Sothitate, a commander of Crime Suppression, stood up behind the desk and began leafing through a thick file of documents. He was a short man, tubby, with a pleasantly wrinkled face and a receding hairline. Over

his left pocket were layers of rainbow striped decorations. General Suwit told Herman that the files of the Ayutthaya case were still in the possession of the provincial police of Ayutthaya where the bodies had been found, but that Crime Suppression would send for them and assume full responsibility for the case. The other policeman, Major General Pao Sarasin, sat on the edge of the desk in civilian clothes. He was tall and distinguished and reminded Herman more of a diplomat than a policeman. Pao said that the two burned bodies were now in the police mortuary, and when the dental records or photos of the missing Dutch couple arrived from Holland, they could be checked against the bodies.

When Herman left the office that morning, he was reassured. Two top-ranking police officials were personally involved, and Crime Suppression was an élite unit of the Thai police with many of its officers trained by Scotland Yard. He believed that once a positive identification had been made of the bodies, the police would act decisively.

When he returned to his office shortly after noon, he found a thick envelope on his desk marked 'Personal and Confidential'. He told his secretary to keep out any visitors, closed the door, and lit a cigarette. He began reading Paul Siemon's report headed, 'Double Murder on the Road to Ayutthaya: State of Investigation.'

This remarkable document contained a detailed description of an Alain Gautier of 504 Kanit House, 'strong personality, dominates his friends to the point of challenging everybody, megalomaniac, likes to change physical appearance.' It listed as accomplices: Girlfriend No. 1, 'Monique Leclerc, a trained nurse who has drugged several guests with help of syringe,' and Girlfriend No. 2, 'of Thai nationality, daughter of highly placed police official.' The report quoted unnamed sources as claiming to have seen the Dutch couple in the flat and another witness who saw Gautier come back in the early hours of December 16 covered with dirt. It also listed incriminating evidence said to be still in the Kanit House flat: two Dutch passports, belongings of various victims, and a travel diary written in Dutch.

Herman stared through his office window, absently watching the wife of his ambassador feeding the pet geese roaming on the embassy lawn, and decided that it was time he met

Paul's sources for this important lead. Paul was being secretive about their identities. His note stressed that the police should only be called in at the last moment when all the proof was assembled. There must be no danger that the inquiry would collapse, as so often happens in Thailand, leaving the witnesses in a dangerous situation.

Yes, it was a remarkable document, and Herman was filled with renewed admiration for his extroverted colleague even if he sometimes got swept away, as with an improbable allegation in the report that Gautier was somehow linked with a double murder in Katmandu last Christmas.

In a sunny ground-floor flat near the Pigalle in Paris, the mother, brother, and stepfather of Stephanie Parry were eating lunch in silence. At first, after Stephanie had failed to arrive for Christmas, her mother had phoned her sister Sylvie who lived on Ibiza and heard for the first time that her daughter had gone to Bangkok. Now, six weeks had passed and with each day the family meals became increasingly silent, and the colour left the mother's face. Stephanie's brother, a handsome, bearded boy, put his hand on his mother's arm as she sat at the table, looking unseeingly in front of her.

'Come on, Mother. She'll come back.'

'She won't come back,' she said, 'I know that now. She's dead.'

On Saturday morning, February 21, Herman Knippenberg walked down the stairs of his home in a red dressing gown, rubbing his eyes. His Thai maid bowed and said good morning. Herman ordered his breakfast served on the patio.

'Nesty! Out!' he shouted across the lawn at the small black dachshund splashing among the lotus flowers in the large ornamental pond, looking for fish. Sheepishly, Nesty (their friends called him Nasty) padded across the lawn towards his owner while Herman scanned the morning paper.

'Master already work last weekend,' a voice called from the edge of the porch. It was his Thai driver, deviously protesting about the order to work this Saturday morning, usually both his own and Herman's day off. Knippenberg flashed him an irritated glance and drained his coffee. He had no choice. The

investigation into the disappearance of Cocky and Henk was developing its own momentum, and today he would be picking up new evidence.

Herman dressed, said goodbye to his wife, Angela, and got into the car. Traffic down Rama Road was moving slowly as usual on Saturday mornings under the dry heat of a tropical spring. On the brown canals the craft moved faster, and the long wooden skiffs with their outboard motors shot beneath the bridges with cargoes of fruit: rambutans and knobbly durians.

The Australian Embassy had none of the old-world elegance of the Dutch. It occupied a floor of an office building on Silom Road, and its walls were decorated with colour enlargements of orange deserts and pastel eucalyptus forests; koala bears, and portraits of Queen Elizabeth. The Vice Consul was waiting. He had opened the office this morning at Herman's request to provide him with his own files on the Ayutthaya tourist murders.

'How are you going on the case?' the Australian asked, pouring them both a cup of coffee.

Herman summarized the rumours of the murder suspect who drugged and robbed tourists.

'I'll be blowed,' said the Vice Consul. 'We had a case like that a few months ago, but they survived to tell the tale.'

Herman asked for the details, and the Vice Consul produced a four-page statement from the two victims. In it Russell and Vera Laphorne, the Australian college professor and his wife who last September were drugged at the Railway Hotel at Hua Hin, described their encounter with a French psychiatrist who called himself 'Jean Belmont' ('wide mouth, muscular arms and legs, broad chest, thin waist, and otherwise slight') and a woman he introduced as 'Monique' ('very thin, narrow pointed nose, wore green eye make-up, plucked eyebrows, slight build, quite attractive in appearance'). The couple had a white puppy, Franky, which 'Monique' loved to hold in her arms. Paul Siemons's report had mentioned the name Monique.

Herman looked at the photos of the burned bodies found at Ayutthaya and the close-ups of the victims' faces which had been taken at the police hospital. He felt sick and enraged.

The next Tuesday, February 24, Herman combed through the records of the Thai Immigration Department. Five flights had arrived from Hong Kong on December 11, the night Zant said Cocky and Henk came to Thailand. He checked each passenger list. On Air Siam's flight VG 903 which had landed at Don Muang Airport at 1 a.m., he found the names of Bintanja and Hemker. In another departmental cubbyhole he checked through the white cards completed by all arriving passengers.

He found their cards in the Active file. This meant that they had not yet left Thailand. (For once, a bureaucratic bungle worked against Charles's devious plan. When he and Marie Andrée had flown to Katmandu using the identities of their dead house-guests, immigration paperwork would normally have removed Cocky's and Henk's cards from the Active file. But the system had not worked.) As their proposed address in Thailand, the Dutch couple wrote the Hotel Malaysia. The guest register there showed no record of them. It was beginning to look as though the Frenchman mentioned in John Zant's letter had kept his promise and met Cocky and Henk at the airport.

On the same afternoon Herman visited the Vice Consul of the French Embassy to try to sort out the confusion between the identities of 'Albert Goyot' and 'Alain Gautier'. Of the latter there was no record, but Albert Goyot had made a bad impression on the consular staff when he had applied for a new passport, stating that his current one had been stolen in January at Pattaya. When asked why he had not reported the theft earlier, Goyot explained this was unnecessary because he was intimate with high ranking members of the Thai police and immigration departments.

'Don't be suspicious,' he had told them. 'I'm a solid citizen, not a crook.'

As proof of his identity, Goyot handed in an expired passport. The visa stamps revealed a pattern of travel between Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore, India, Nepal, and Japan. Herman was excited. When had Goyot arrived in Bangkok? From the direction of Japan, he was told, Goyot had landed at Don Muang Airport on December 10, one day before Cocky and Henk.

At 2 p.m. on Wednesday, March 3, Herman was sitting in

the back of the air-conditioned limousine, cursing the eternal traffic quagmire. On the pavement an old woman sat impassively by a board of lottery tickets, and some children kicked a rattan ball around. He was fifteen minutes late for his appointment at the mortuary.

Cocky's and Henk's photographs and dental records had arrived from Amsterdam on Monday. His translators at the embassy had tried to match them against the police autopsy report, but the dental techniques in the two countries were at such variance that the Dutch X-rays would have to be checked against the corpses. Outside the mortuary Dr Twijnstra, a warm-hearted, middle-aged dentist, would be waiting to meet him. She was a Dutch missionary at the Adventist Hospital and a friend of Angela's, who had gladly agreed to assist her embassy. Herman worried that she might be shocked by the state of the bodies.

The traffic finally moved again on Ploenchit Road, and the Mercedes pulled up at the police hospital. Where was Dr Twijnstra? He hoped she hadn't left in irritation at his lateness, although traffic conditions in the city rendered all appointments flexible.

The soft sweet smell of Lysol filled his nostrils as Herman followed his Thai driver, a rugged ex-policeman, down the bare corridors of the hospital. Gingerly he opened the swinging doors. Shelves were stacked to the ceiling with bodies in various states of decay. A woman's voice called out excitedly, 'Over here, Mr Knippenberg, we've found them.' The grey head of the dentist was bent over the mouth of the male corpse. She was poking at the teeth with her instruments. 'The bicuspid's gone, and the molar's moved forward. It matches the X-rays from Amsterdam.' Her professional manner was unshaken by the surroundings.

Not only were the naked bodies so charred and shrivelled that it was difficult even to distinguish the sex, but after the autopsy they had been crudely stitched together. A strong smell of burnt flesh merged horribly with the Lysol. Herman's driver fainted and was carried from the room. Knippenberg consulted briefly with Dr Twijnstra and then left her alone to complete her examination while he spoke with the police pathologist. As Herman checked the items of clothing, he saw that the woman's bra was made in Holland.

This was the item that had been wrongly translated in the newspaper as a T-shirt. A Dutch bra was even more suggestive of Dutch nationality than a Dutch T-shirt. Not that Knippenberg had any doubts about the nationality of the corpse, but he wanted to present a water-tight case to the Thai police.

On Friday morning, March 5, the Mercedes Benz from the Dutch Embassy turned off Rama I Road in the heart of Chinatown and pulled up next to a dilapidated complex of wooden barracks. Herman Knippenberg followed his Thai assistant through a maze of corridors and staircases past rooms of policemen hunched over old-fashioned typewriters, slowly tapping keyboards, or sitting around dusty desks playing cards. Herman noticed a few frightened-looking young men in handcuffs were being questioned by the police. His assistant knocked cautiously on a door.

Herman was ushered into a grim office where General Suwit rose from an enormous desk to greet him and, as he had before, patted him on the back, offered him some cigars, and asked him how he was enjoying Thailand.

After these preliminaries, Herman informed his host that the two bodies had been identified as the missing Dutch and handed the Major General a letter which began, 'Dear General Suwit, In the course of your police investigation into the murders of Mr Bintanja and Miss Hemker, the following pieces of information may prove useful to you.' Over the next six pages Herman had meticulously summarized all the evidence he had gathered in the previous weeks including all he knew about the 'strange events at a Bangkok flat occupied by a Frenchman called Alain Gautier or Albert Goyot', and the results of his 'discreet enquiries' into Monique Leclerc and Roong. In conclusion, Herman noted that 'the Dutch Ambassador, His Excellency, Dr Van Dongen, is confident that Crime Suppression will do its utmost to bring the murderer(s) of Mr Bintanja and Miss Hemker to justice.' With the letter were several exhibits including a photocopy of the Air Siam flight manifest showing the arrival of Cocky and Henk; a photograph given to him by the French Embassy of the suspect, Albert Goyot; a copy of the letter from John Zant asking for help in tracking Cocky and Henk; and a copy of

Paul's report from which all derogatory remarks about the Thai police had been eliminated.

After studying the letter and the enclosures, the General told Herman that Crime Suppression would immediately begin investigating Albert Goyot and the Thai girl, Roong.

'My Ambassador believes that the reputation of Thailand will be enhanced if you arrest a killer preying on tourists,' Herman said as he rose from the chair with a peeling sound (his trousers had stuck to the vinyl again).

The General's round face beamed behind his glasses as he walked his visitor to the door and said: 'The timing of your request is unfortunate, Mr Knippenberg. Our best officers are caught up in investigating a whole series of political murders.'

Officially, Herman's task was over. He had cabled The Hague that the bodies in the mortuary had been officially identified as the missing nationals, and he had sent them Dr Twijnstra's dental autopsy reports. But Herman had no intention of dropping his pursuit of the killers until they were locked in a Thai jail. Angela, who was forced to attend to the rounds of diplomatic social obligations without him since he spent most of his spare time on his investigations, was becoming irritated by the sympathetic glances of the other wives who assumed that another marriage was foundering on the shoals of Bangkok's nightlife.

The conclusions of the autopsy reports stayed with Herman as he left police headquarters and hurried out into the steamy heat of Chinatown. 'Cocky Hemker: Cause of death: Cerebral haemorrhage caused by being hit over the head with a hard item. She was set fire to while she was still breathing. Henk Bintanja: Cause of death: This man was strangled so that the blood circulation to the brain was interrupted. He was set fire to when he was still breathing.'

Herman stretched out wearily in the back of the car as it came to a halt on Rama Road near the Giant Swing, a peculiar structure like a giant gibbet. Someone had told him that it had been used in ceremonies and Buddhist novitiates swung from it. The practice had been discontinued only thirty years ago after sixty monks had died. To the Thais death seemed to be of no great consequence. The newspaper pictures of criminals before the firing squad showed them smiling. A Thai friend

had once explained, 'For Buddhists, to die is like getting on a bus and then getting off again at another bus stop.'

Back at the calm oasis of the embassy, Herman phoned Paul Siemons. 'I really want to meet those informants. Take me to Kanit House as soon as you can arrange it. I know you want to protect your witnesses, Paul, I assure you, they'll be quite safe with me.'

'Dear boy, I thought you had dumped the case into the lap of the police.'

'I did. But Suwit said something about political murders taking precedence in their investigation. I got the impression they have bigger fish to fry. He actually suggested I keep working on it.'

'Let's fry our own fish, Herman. We'll see justice done if we have to do it ourselves.'

Herman knew that Paul was only half joking.

On Saturday, March 6, Charles kissed Roong warmly on the lips and told her he would come back to see her soon. From her room on the eighth floor of the Regent Hotel at Pattaya, the pert Thai teenager watched him stroll along the path through the garden. Roong knew he was going to visit the Siam Bay Shore, another of the resort's luxury hotels on the beach, where Monique would be waiting for him. She didn't like it, but how could she ever argue with him?

Roong had met Charles four months ago when she was a waitress at the Indra coffee shop. Actually, it was Monique that she had noticed first. Accustomed to serving plump American matrons in tour groups, Roong had come to the conclusion that all *farang* women were overweight, but this one was thin, with lovely breasts. The two girls had smiled at each other. The next day Charles had come back alone and asked Roong to dinner.

'But your wife?' she asked.

'Oh, that's just my secretary,' he told her.

Charles began seeing Roong almost every day. He was so kind. At seven in the morning he would turn up at her parents' home, a small wooden house on stilts near the airport, and drive her to school. She wanted to be a teacher, so she took a course before working at the hotel.

'Darling, you look so tired,' she would say to him. 'You don't have to do this.'

But Charles said he loved her. 'I want to look after you, my little baby, always.'

Roong's mother would cook him breakfast. She told her daughter she had a dream about Charles in which he was very thin and asked for food.

'What kind of food?' the mother asked him in her dream.

'The same food you cook for my darling Roong,' he said.

Roong's mother and father loved Charles.

But now he was keeping her waiting. She was dressed and made up (she used a lot of make-up), and all ready for a nice

walk with her boyfriend along the beach; they would have a drink, a snack, but she must remember to avoid lobster, which made her skin erupt. Roong phoned the Siam Bay Shore and left a message for him at the desk.

It was only six weeks since she had made love for the first time in her life, to Charles of course, and it was a day she would never forget. He came to her home late one January afternoon. She had been fired from her job in the coffee shop for spending too much time off work.

He drove her and Franky to the Dusit Thani Hotel. She had been minding the puppy while Charles and Marie Andrée went on a Christmas holiday together. Roong stayed with him in the expensive suite and spent the whole day shopping. He wanted her to stop dressing like an old maid and bought her two new pairs of tight jeans, a short yellow dress, three blouses, two pairs of shoes, and then presented her with a beautiful sapphire ring. It was in the afternoon when they were lying around the suite that something happened which convinced Roong that her boyfriend had a heart of pure gold.

Gems and money were spread all over the room. Customers were coming up, and Charles was asking everyone to call him Eric. Franky, still excited at seeing his master again, sprang on to the coffee table, knocking over some of the stones. The puppy sniffed the diamonds and, before she could stop him, swallowed three of them, big ones, expensive ones. She grabbed him and started slapping his nose. Charles stopped her, laughing, 'Haven't you been feeding him, darling?' She tried to force the dog's mouth open. 'Darling, stop it,' he said. 'Franky didn't know what he was doing.' Charles told her they would lock him in the bathroom until he gave them back. What a kind man he was.

Later, Roong had felt tired. When she wanted to sleep, Charles gave her some pills to wake her up, and they did. Then he had made love to her.

It was all right to sleep with him, she told herself as she retouched her eyeliner, still waiting for him to arrive. She planned to marry him, he would be a rich and kind husband. Soon the other girl, Monique, would be leaving. He was with her now, that was why he was late.

There was a knock on the door. Roong opened it, and Charles walked in. He took her in his arms and she could

see that the *farang* woman had been giving him trouble.

'My little wife, don't be angry. In a few days she's going back to her own country.'

'You call me your wife, but you live with her.' Roong wanted to punish him for leaving her alone so long. With his arm around her waist, Charles led her to the mirror.

'Your eyes, darling. See? They're like mine. Monique is not Asian. How can I love her? When you're my wife, we'll have a baby because we both have the same kind of face. Asians should only marry Asians.'

'You are too busy to get married,' she said.

'Darling, let's get married as soon as we can. Do you think your mummy and daddy will allow it?'

'They love you.'

'Let's go and ask their permission.'

'Darling, you make me very happy. When?' He was rich, kind, successful. Her whole world had changed since the day they had met.

'Next week. Friday. I will come to your house and ask your family to allow the engagement. You can explain the Thai customs to me.'

'Darling ...' She took out a diary from her handbag and circled the date, Friday March 12.

That night there was a banging on the door of the room. Charles motioned Roong to keep quiet. The banging grew louder.

'Open up,' a voice shouted. 'I know you're in there.'

The two said nothing and Roong held her breath. Now outside on the landing, Marie Andrée was crying. She had intercepted the message from Roong to Charles at their hotel. She hadn't even known his Thai mistress was in Pattaya.

'All right, Alain. I've had it. It's over now,' she shouted, banging her fists on the door. She was sick of everything. She wanted to go home. She had already cabled her old boyfriend, Jules Dupont, the accountant, and asked him to come and help her, to take her away. She didn't have the strength to do it alone. She felt broken, unbalanced, crazy. She was sick. She felt crushed. Nobody could help her, not even herself. That was the worst, she didn't trust herself any more.

'I'm going to jump,' she yelled through the door. 'I'll kill myself.'

Two Thai men stood on the landing below, watching her. Marie Andrée opened the window.

Inside the room, Charles sighed and got out of bed. 'I must go to her, Roong,' he said, putting on his underpants and jeans and picking up his shirt. 'She's desperate. These girls from Quebec. Never again! They're so stubborn. She might even do it!'

Marie Andrée was standing on the balcony. Charles opened the door. A few tourists were looking up. He grabbed her.

'You fool! Come on.'

He shut the door of Roong's room, lifted up Marie Andrée and carried her down a few steps, waving away the gawking Thais.

'Darling, I've told you why I'm playing this game with Roong,' he said, putting his arm around her shaking shoulders. He talked softly in her ear. Couldn't she understand? Roong was a key to their future security. For a long time they sat together on the stairs. Then he walked her down to the car, and they drove back to the suite at the Siam Bay Shore.

'My darling,' he said, caressing her, 'I've got so much money now. In a few days I'll take you to Paris. We can start again.'

She was sobbing against his shoulder. Paris in the spring with Charles. She cried again. How could she ever leave him?

In his office at 7 a.m. on Monday morning, March 8, Herman Knippenberg spread out the contents of the package on his desk. He had an hour before the phone calls began — time to study the photographs which had just arrived. They were just ordinary holiday snapshots: the girl leaning over the rails of a ferry, the breeze fluttering her long fair hair like a model's in a shampoo commercial; the bearded man posing stolidly at the bottom of ornamental steps, his hands on his hips. There were porcelain Buddhas, rickshaws, paper dragons, Chinese foodstalls, a view from the hills of Macao, a glimpse of the Chinese border. Only days before they were murdered, Cocky and Henk had sent the film home to their relatives in Amsterdam. The prints had just arrived in the embassy pouch. Herman made a note of all clothing, luggage, and accessories which might provide evidence.

'Good morning, Herman.'

He looked up to see the Baronet de Giverney standing in the doorway, a fresh layer of suntan failing to mask his air of decadence. His cravat was tucked neatly into his silk shirt and, indifferent to the heat, he wore brown corduroy trousers.

'You've been busy?' de Giverney asked with a smile. He had just returned from a holiday and wanted to catch up on the dragnet closing around his old foe from the Grace, Albert Goyot. When Herman had finished briefing him, the Baronet mentioned he had an appointment that afternoon with a Doctor Phillippe. Herman handed him a photograph of Albert Goyot he had obtained from the French Embassy.

'Show this to him. He treats all the French in Bangkok. Maybe he will recognise this Goyot.'

Later de Giverney phoned him with news. The doctor did not treat Goyot. He had never heard of him. But he did have another patient, an 'Alain Gautier', who was always bringing women friends to him for treatment.

'Physically speaking,' the doctor had said, 'Alain Gautier is a perfect specimen of the human male.'

Of more relevance, Gautier had a girlfriend called 'Monique'. They lived at Kanit House in Soi Saladaeng.

'Okay. Alert Paul. Tell him it's imperative we meet with his witness tonight.'

The sun was low in the sky; it was early evening, and the dishevelled coconut palms dotted unevenly down Soi Saladaeng were black silhouettes. Paul's white Mercedes with its dark-tinted windows cruised past the baskets of ginger root and hundred-day eggs stacked on the pavement in front of the shops. On the front seat between Herman and Paul was a pistol. Behind the high walls and the rich vegetation that fell over the jagged broken glass on top of them, residents were relaxing at home as servants prepared the evening meal. Apart from the tinkle of the drink-seller's trishaw, the street was deserted. For a moment it seemed like a country town.

The three men in the Mercedes looked up at the top floor of the building and to the end flat which their source had described. A light was on, and the shadows of human movement flickered behind the blinds of 504.

'Don't park too near the building, Paul,' Herman said. 'Someone might notice the consular plates.'

Paul Siemons grumbled about a 'boyscout mentality' as he backed the car down a side street, out of sight of the upstairs flat.

'I don't give a damn if they do see us,' he said. 'Then we can take care of them ourselves.'

The three men laughed, even the Baronet in the back who had been very quiet until now. This wasn't his sort of thing at all. But Paul Siemons was quite serious. He didn't trust the Thai police. After twenty years of active duty in the Belgian Congo and, before that, as an agent for the Maquis in the war, weeding out Belgian traitors, Paul had come to a firm conclusion about justice. It usually worked best when you took it into your own hands.

He picked up his gleaming blue service pistol, a Belgian FM 7-65, from the seat and checked the chamber. 'I say we place Gautier under citizens' arrest.' The two younger men protested. Baronet de Giverney recoiled at the prospect of a fuss, and Herman wanted this one played according to the rules. 'Bah! What an idealist,' Paul moaned, sticking the

pistol inside the band of his trousers where it was hidden by his loose sports shirt.

Herman turned round to the back seat. 'You go, Gilles. You've got the best cover story.'

The Baronet was to go up and knock on the door of Nadine and Remy Gires's flat. They didn't know him, but he could introduce himself as a friend of the journalist from the Agence Presse who had first tipped him off about the strange events in the flat.

'Don't worry if "Gautier" catches you and throws you over the balcony,' Herman said, trying to lighten the atmosphere with his earnest Dutch humour, 'just try to land in the swimming pool.'

As de Giverney climbed out of the car, he looked at his colleague with an expression of disdain which must have taken centuries to perfect.

'And if you miss ...' — there was no stopping Herman — 'Paul and I will personally read your posthumous citation.'

The Baronet slammed the door.

Paul said through the front window, 'If you're not back here in five minutes, we'll come up after you.'

Nadine and Remy walked arm in arm down the corridor of Kanit House to their flat. That afternoon they had both been to the dentist, and they were on their way to a James Bond film when Nadine realized they didn't have any money. She had left her purse back at Kanit House. Since Charles and Marie Andrée had moved back, they had kept away from them as much as possible, making all kinds of excuses. Each night they would think of something different to do, and Nadine often stayed with friends on the nights Remy worked late in the kitchens at the Oriental. As Remy put the key in the lock, they heard footsteps in the corridor behind them. They turned round, terrified. A tall, elegantly dressed man with a worried expression asked if they were Remy and Nadine Gires.

'Why do you ask us?' Remy said, looking up at de Giverney.

'May I come in? I must speak to you. I've heard it's not safe out here.' Inside de Giverney explained. 'We haven't got much time. There's an armed Belgian agent outside and I think he's even more dangerous than the matter I've come to

see you about. There's also a very serious official from the Dutch Embassy. They want to debrief you about Alain Gautier. They're afraid he might spot you with us. If I don't bring you down soon, they'll come up here with guns drawn. It's silly, I know, but we don't know what to expect, you see. We've heard terrible rumours ...'

Paul Siemons's living room was as idiosyncratic as its owner. Two huge red-tailed African parrots squeaked from a corner cage as they looked down on the excited collection of guests and Paul's valuable collection of Buddha statues. (He was often advised in his choice of Thai antiques by Gilles de Giverney -- an expert on the subject.)

Nadine, Remy, and the three diplomats sat around the dining room table. Paul had opened a quart of Black Label Johnny Walker and passed round unfiltered Belgian cigarettes. First, Herman showed Nadine the passport photo of Albert Goyot. She didn't recognize it.

'At last we can get rid of this silly red herring,' Herman said.

'Yes, I could kiss this Goyot,' Paul boomed. 'He put us on the scent!'

'Yes! That's them!' Nadine said. 'That's the couple I met in the flat.' Herman was showing her the holiday snapshots of Cocky and Henk in Hong Kong and Macao.

'Are any of these belongings still in Gautier's flat?'

'Sure,' Nadine said, 'that brown handbag she's carrying.' She smiled at Remy, exuberant that at last someone was going to do something. 'I saw it up there around Christmas when I stole the diary.'

'A diary? You stole a diary?' Herman didn't know about that.

'Yes, a diary in Dutch. I handed it over to the British Embassy.'

'I know nothing about it.'

Nadine told Herman how she had passed an exercise book with Bintanja's name to the British Embassy.

Herman paced up and down the room, his boyish face flushed, smoking distractedly. 'It doesn't make sense,' he said. 'You mean they've had that evidence all along and didn't inform our Ambassador? Outrageous! What happened after that?'

'As usual with embassy people, nothing, if you'll forgive me,' Nadine said.

'She's right! Nothing! Writing reports--' Paul snorted. 'Let's make a move ourselves, Herman. There's no doubt he did it. We can make a citizen's arrest, and if he tries to resist -- bang!' Paul slapped his shoulder holster. Remy jumped.

'Calm down, Paul. We're guests in Thailand. We must move through the proper channels, give the police a full report -- names, dates, witnesses, evidence -- make it watertight! They will be forced to act immediately.'

'Bah! Herman, you're a baby. Bright, but still a baby.' Siemons hauled himself out of the armchair. He was a giant of a man, with pursed lips and slightly bulging eyes. He lit a cigar. 'You're an idealist, Herman, and it's only because of inexperience, so I forgive you. There are two hundred thousand police in this country. What does that add up to? Two hundred thousand crooks! Now, Herman, don't burst into tears, but I'm afraid that's the way it is.'

Ignoring his host's teasing, Herman showed Nadine the report that the Australian Embassy had made on the chocolate milk poisoning case at Hua Hin. Nadine scanned it and laughed. 'That's them,' she said. 'They changed their own names, but not their dog's. That dirty little Franky is still upstairs.'

'How many more has he killed?' asked Paul, suddenly serious.

Nadine told them about the night they opened the safe with François, Dominique, and Yannick. 'We saw so many passports,' she said, 'French, Indonesian, American.'

And so it went on: detail after detail, murder after murder until it was almost dawn. Paul Siemons poured a round of nightcap Cognac. They agreed to meet again the following night.

'We'll organize all this information into an official report for Crime Suppression,' Herman said. 'We'll put a bomb under them.' He was excited.

'Bah!' said Paul pleasantly as he led Nadine and Remy out to the car to drive them home. 'The only bombs that would move Crime Suppression would be nuclear.'

It was almost dawn, and the streets were cool and empty, scented briefly with frangipani. To Remy and Nadine, as they

walked up the stairs together, Kanit House no longer seemed so evil.

Herman was furious when he arrived at his embassy the next morning. He had just come from a row with high-ranking British diplomats. At first they were vague about having any Dutch diary and kept offering him cups of tea. 'I understand you have evidence relating to two Dutch murder victims,' he had said repeatedly. The British had not been forthcoming, and looked blank. Herman threatened to make a fuss at a high level. He was bluffing. He knew his own Ambassador would probably not back him, but it had worked. The bumbling British had suddenly found they did have something, a diary written in Dutch.

'We made a report about this,' the British consular official said. 'Would you like to see it? The Thai police already have a copy.'

Embossed with the British Royal Coat of Arms and labelled confidential, the report that Herman now had on his desk had been in the hands of the Thai police since January 6, eight weeks ago.

Apart from confusing the sex of the bearded ex-house-guest, Dominique Rennelleau, referring to him as Yannick's girlfriend, the British *aide mémoire* was remarkably accurate.

1 A contact, the reliability of whom is unknown, reports that he has two friends of French nationality named Nadine and Remy GIRES. Remy is the Head Chef at the Oriental Hotel. They live in flat 307A Kanit House, Saladaeng Road, off Silom Road, telephone No. 861284 ext. 307.

2 Some weeks ago, because they live in the same block of flats, the GIRES became friendly with the occupants of flat 504 of the same address as above. The flat is occupied by three persons: Alain GAUTIER, believed of Vietnamese race and nationality; his girlfriend Monique, believed to be a French Canadian and a nurse by profession; and a person named AJAY, believed of Indian extraction and nationality who is fond of pointing out that he is armed with a flick knife.



With the compliments of
**HER BRITANNIC MAJESTY'S
CONSUL**

Thank
[Signature]

**BRITISH EMBASSY
CONSULAR SECTION
BANGKOK**

19

CONFIDENTIAL
Aide Mémoire

A contact, the reliability of whom is unknown, reports that he has two friends of French nationality named Nadine and Remy GIRES. Remy is the Head Chef at the Oriental Hotel. They live in apartment 307A Khanit House, Saladong Road, off Silom Road, telephone No. 861284 ext. 307.

2. Some weeks ago, because they live in the same apartment house, the GIRES became friendly with the occupants of apartment 504 of the same address as above, the apartment is occupied by three persons Alain GAUTIER believed of Vietnamese race and nationality, his girlfriend Monique believed to be a French Canadian and a nurse by profession and a person named AJAY believed of Indian extraction and nationality who is fond of pointing out that he is armed with a flick knife.

This British Embassy report named the killers and was not passed on to the Netherlands Embassy until Herman Knippenberg confronted British diplomats.

3 GAUTIER claims to be a stone dealer by trade and to make a legitimate living thereby; however, the GIRES made the acquaintance of a young French couple, mutual friends of the GAUTIERs, their names being Jan Jacques YANNICK and his girlfriend Dominique who were staying with GAUTIER a few weeks ago. According to YANNICK, he informed the GIRES, while staying with GAUTIER, he had seen several passports and documents belonging to persons YANNICK believes to have been murdered recently, including a couple believed at the time to be Australian, who were found in a ditch alongside a highway 58 kilometres south of Ayutthaya, details of which appeared in the *Bangkok Post* dated 18 December 1975. According to YANNICK, this couple were not Australian (in fact the Australian Embassy denies all knowledge of them) and they were, according to GAUTIER, Dutch. The man's name was Henk BINTANJA.

Herman paused and lit another cigarette. He found his hands were shaking. The English had evidence — a diary, witnesses, bodies, names, addresses — and still they did not bother to notify their colleagues at the Dutch Embassy. Even if they could not bring themselves to take action on humanitarian grounds, Herman felt that they should have informed the Dutch as a matter of courtesy — after all, they were both Common Market countries. 'Those bloody British!' Herman fumed and finished reading the report.

YANNICK, after informing the GIRES of this and relating his suspicions that GAUTIER had been responsible for not only these murders but for others including the two European girls found in Pattaya recently, a Turkish murder and possibly the two murders of young Europeans in Nepal, left with his girlfriend suddenly for Europe. Since then the GIRES claim to have sighted in the GAUTIER flat clothes belonging to the Dutch couple, their diary in Dutch, an extract of which has been photostatted, their tape recorder and their passports together with clothes and passports belonging to others, up to 10 in number, kept in GAUTIER's safe.

Herman opened the battered exercise book accompanying the report. It was Cocky's and Henk's travel diary, written in Dutch. The British had not bothered to have it translated. As Herman read the young couple's painstaking account of their meeting in Hong Kong with a French gem dealer, who sold them a ring and promised to collect them at Don Muang Airport in Bangkok, he felt that a message about the murder had been sent from beyond the grave.

It was 3 a.m. on Wednesday morning, and 'the team', as they had begun to call themselves, sat back exhausted at the round table in Paul Siemons's house.

'It's all wrapped up. Names, dates, witnesses' statements — everything. What more could they want?'

'Money,' suggested Paul.

'Be serious.'

'Maybe photographs. If we handed them pictures of each of the suspects, it might stop them from arresting the wrong people. We all look alike to the Thais.'

'I'll try it,' Nadine said. 'From my window I get a good view. Just lend me a camera.'

What a woman! Paul and Herman had come to admire Nadine over the long slogging hours of what they ponderously referred to as 'debriefing sessions'. Her memory was precise. She had honesty, good humour, and daring.

The night sky was lightening and a thick, detailed dossier was laid out across the dining room table. It contained everything Remy and Nadine could remember about Charles and his house-guests.

Herman took the file to General Suwit that morning and was promised that the police would raid Kanit House. That afternoon, with rising excitement, he watched as five unmarked police cars pulled up on the Dutch Embassy's driveway. The staid atmosphere of the compound was disturbed by the crackling of walkie-talkies. Then two Thai police officers were announced to see him.

A model of courtesy, Colonel Withan introduced his deputy, Captain Sawedt Pattanaky, and himself, explaining that General Suwit had handed him the files on the case only a few minutes before he had left Crime Suppression headquarters. Step by step, Knippenberg led the Colonel through the details of the case from Cocky and Henk's first meeting with the gem dealer in Hong Kong in December to their murder in

Thailand eight days later. He gave the Colonel the holiday snapshots and pointed out Cocky's brown handbag. 'Colonel, we believe you will find this in flat 503,' he said.

The crude, fuzzy photos of each suspect taken by Nadine a few hours before were also given to the police. The lab was standing by when Nadine had rushed to Herman's office. 'Here's the camera, Herman,' she had said. 'I don't know how to take the film out.' To assist the police, Nadine had drawn two diagrams; one a cross-section of the building, marking all entrances and exits and a floor plan of flats 503 and 504. Attached to the diagrams was a list of items 'to which special attention should be given', most of them believed to be belongings of Stephanie Parry, the Dutch couple, and Vitali Hakim.

- 1 a safe and its contents, most probably: about 10 French passports and one Indonesian passport
- 2 a rubber or plastic pipe normally used as gas-pipe but possibly with a smell of petrol
- 3 medicine
- 4 syringes
- 5 a brown-coloured handbag
- 6 cheques and travellers' cheques
- 7 travel alarm clock
- 8 about 500 precious stones; sapphires, rubies, diamonds
- 9 seal for imposition of visa from Thai Immigration Office
- 10 postcards with Dutch writing
- 11 attaché case

As a rule, *all* objects within flats 503 and 504 are of the utmost interest since most have been stolen.

Like a student handing in his Ph.D. thesis, Herman Knippenberg presented the file to the Colonel.

'Most thorough, Mr Knippenberg,' the Colonel said, packing the documents in his briefcase.

'But you have forgotten one thing,' said the Colonel's deputy, Captain Sawedt Pattanaky, who spoke English fluently.

'And what is that, Captain?'

'The motive.'

'Motive?'

'You say to us that this man has killed many people, but you do not say why.'

'How should I know? There could be many reasons. Arrest him first. Then you can question him and tell me. When are you going in?'

'Tomorrow morning at six o'clock. Would you care to come along as a guest?'

'I will come if I can.'

At 9.30 p.m. that night Herman Knippenberg called Colonel Withan to say he could not participate in the raid personally but would remain at his office in 'strategic reserve', assisting the police by phone, if necessary. Herman did not mention that his Ambassador had vetoed an active role.

'We have made the decision to postpone the raid,' the Colonel said.

'Why is that?' Herman asked, making no attempt to disguise his dismay.

'To guarantee the safety of your witnesses, Mr and Mrs Gires, we need more time for preparation.'

Herman had been in Thailand long enough to read beneath the Delphic surfaces of official statements. Police pride may have been hurt by being presented with a *fait accompli*. Perhaps they wanted to watch the flat on their own, he thought, to get Gautier on another charge so they could take the credit. Anything was possible. Herman tried to think of a way he could goad them to action.

On Thursday morning, March 11, Marie Andrée phoned Nadine and invited her to come shopping. 'Alain says I can go back to Canada in a day or so,' she said happily. 'Can you come and help me choose some presents?' 'Sure,' Nadine said. In some ways she still felt sorry for this woman, trapped by her love, her weakness, and her lack of initiative. Nadine was still unsure how much the Canadian girl knew about the fate of her house-guests.

They took a taxi to Siam Square, the complex of shopping arcades around the Siam International Hotel. Cars were parked diagonally beside row after row of shops and offices, closely watched by khaki-uniformed policemen. Some shop-fronts were still under construction, and the workmen were cooking their lunches over fires on the pavement and drinking soda from plastic bags. The shops were well stocked with Western goods from Hong Kong, and dresses and shirts with famous Paris labels were displayed in the windows of the boutiques. The two girls, strolling along together window shopping, stopped to look.

'I don't need to pay so much extra for these French clothes. I'll be in Paris soon,' Marie Andrée said.

'You're going to Paris? With Alain?'

'Yes, he's going on business. He's been talking about a trip for months, and I'll fly on to Canada from Europe.'

They stopped in front of an evening-wear boutique, billowing with the pastel lace flounces of full length nylon formal wear. Cream and white, layer upon layer of pink on baby blue, the lace creations almost stood up by themselves. Old Chinese women in their baggy black trousers walked past with their shopping bags and bamboo hats.

'They're like wedding dresses, aren't they?' Nadine said as they walked on. 'So you're not going to marry Alain and settle down?'

'He wants me to have his baby,' she said. 'He's often spoken of it. How could I? It would be a monster.'

Marie Andrée's frankness amazed her. 'What about Roong?' she asked.

'He says he's getting rid of her — with psychology! Who cares? He's always using psychology. You know, sometimes I wonder if he's really human.'

'Mmmm ...' said Nadine noncommittally. She had wondered the same thing herself.

'Anyway, soon I'll be out of all this. Just a few more days... I can't wait to get back to Canada. Do you want lunch?'

'No thanks, Monique,' she looked at her watch, 'in fact I'll have to leave you now. I forgot that I had an appointment.'

At noon Herman sat at his desk and worried about Nadine. She had just left his office, apparently exhausted and tense, and close to breaking down. 'They're about to leave the country for Paris,' she had told him. Her double role was becoming dangerous. Herman telephoned General Suwit Sothitate but was told that both he and Withan were 'busy at a meeting.' Undeterred, he called Pao Sarasin with the information.

'In that case, we must stop them.'

'I agree, absolutely, General.'

One hour later Sarasin called Herman again. 'We will raid this evening. The men are on standby. Colonel Withan has orders. Our cover is a narcotics raid.'

Herman smiled grimly. He would believe it when it happened.

At 4 p.m. Remy opened the front door of his flat and saw his wife standing next to a huge man draped in cameras and accessories, carrying a tripod.

'Paul! You look like a spy!'

'I am one, my dear boy. We have come to try again with the photos.'

'Aren't you nervous?' Remy asked as Paul set up the photographic equipment with its long telescopic lens.

'Bah! This is what I enjoy, the moments before the kill. Action! What do you think I did in the Congo all those years? Write memos?'

The phone rang. Paul picked it up as though it was his own. It was Herman calling from his embassy desk where he was in

contact with the Thai police. 'The raid squad is on its way.'

'How many men?'

'Ten, fully armed, but only one in uniform. They'll be looking for all the evidence but telling Gautier it's a drug raid to keep the heat off Nadine and Remy. They're putting a ring round Kanit House now.' Herman told Paul the police had cars and sharpshooters watching the stairs.

'Hold them off a bit longer, Herman. We think only the girl's upstairs now.' Paul put down the phone. 'Nadine, you'd better get out of here.'

'Sure, I'm going anyway. Enjoy yourselves. This is the moment we've all been waiting for.' Exuberantly, she hugged Remy, who was looking terrified.

From behind the battery of phones on his desk and the police walkie-talkie, Herman co-ordinated the information between Paul and the raiding party. He phoned Nadine and Remy's flat again.

'The Colonel's impatient, Paul. What's happening?'

'Nothing yet. Tell them to wait.'

'They're already in a house next door and raring to go.'

'Pfffff! Schoolchildren. They think it's the cinema. Wait a minute! Here comes someone. It's Gautier and another man.'

'Ajay?'

'No, someone else.'

'His name is Jean,' Remy whispered.

'Ajay's still not here, Herman. Tell the boys to wait. If we don't get the Indian now, we'll never get him!'

Herman put down the phone and lit another cigarette, wishing he was there with Paul. His walkie-talkie crackled to life. It was Captain Sawedt, with his excellent English. The police must move immediately, he said. Under Thai law, they could only enter a home between sunrise and sunset, otherwise a warrant was required.

'Let me check again, Captain. Please, a few more minutes.' He phoned Kanit House again. 'They're coming soon, Paul. I can't stop them.'

'Bah! It's premature ejaculation!' Paul boomed, his cigar smoke suffocating the small flat. 'Wait a minute, Herman. Someone's coming. It's Ajay! Off you go!' He hung up and rushed to his cameras.

Herman shouted the news through his walkie-talkie: 'They're all in the bag, Colonel! Good luck!'

He lit another cigarette and waited.

Paul called an hour later. Everyone from flat 504 had been taken to the headquarters of Crime Suppression. Marie Andrée was overheard complaining to Charles that the neighbours were staring at them.

Herman was elated. He sat at his desk chain-smoking for the next two hours, waiting for the phone call confirming that the suspects had been arrested and charged with multiple murder. When no call came, Herman phoned Captain Sawedt at 7 p.m., and the news astounded him.

Herman had prepared the Thai police force for every possible contingency but one: Charles Sobhraj's spontaneous mastery of almost any human situation.

For once, Charles's inner radar failed to warn him of impending danger, although Ajay, who happened to be passing the window and looked down to see a group of Thai men hurrying purposefully across the courtyard, had said:

'There are some people down there that look like police.'

'Don't say anything to the others yet,' Charles said. 'Stay cool and smile.' Maybe they were the police, but after all, only Thai police.

When ten men burst through the door of flat 504, pushing Ajay aside and brandishing machine guns, Charles was at his desk sorting through gems.

'Where is Alain Gautier?' demanded the officer leading the raid.

'He's in Hong Kong on business,' Charles said, getting up from his desk and greeting them all with a polite smile, as though this was a fresh party of customers. 'Who are you?'

'Police -- narcotics -- and you?'

Charles told them he was David Allen Gore and showed them a U.S. passport in that name which had his own picture inside. It was the one he had stolen in Hong Kong six weeks ago from an American schoolteacher.

'I'm from Puerto Rico, a college professor,' he was saying to the Colonel as the men branched off into other rooms. 'But now I deal in gems -- it makes more money.' Ajay and Jean sat

at the bar stools and Marie Andrée stood near the couch hiding her terror behind an expression of sullen disdain.

They were trapped. She couldn't believe it. Police rummaging through her wardrobe as though she was a common criminal.

'Try to look more relaxed,' Charles whispered to her quickly in French, 'and remember to call me Allen, not Alain! Everything will be okay.'

For the next hour and forty minutes the officers from Crime Suppression searched the flat. As complications arose, Charles smoothed them over.

There was a Canadian passport in the name of Marie Andrée Leclerc and in another passport, one in the name of Eric Damour, the photograph of the same woman was inside. True, it seems like the same woman, Charles pointed out to them, but really, the one wearing sunglasses didn't look at all like the other one. Miss Damour was actually a French girl, a customer of Gautier's who had bought some gems on credit and had left her passport as a deposit. She was in Pattaya now and would be back in a few days.

'Who is this man?' asked one of the men, holding up a passport of the Turk, Vitali Hakim. Another customer who had left his passport as security, Charles explained. When a dress was produced from the bedroom in the adjoining flat (it had belonged to Cocky Hemker), Charles smiled and held it in front of Marie Andrée, 'See — it's hers.' And the pair of handcuffs? They were used as a security measure when Mr Gautier transported diamonds.

But what about the safe? Unfortunately, the key had been lost.

Colonel Withan ordered some of his men to carry the safe to a car and everyone in the flat was led off to the offices of Crime Suppression for further questioning.

Outside the compound in Soi Saladaeng, a fleet of police radio cars manned by armed officers took off behind the car which held the suspects.

Charles grinned at the policeman who sat beside him in the front seat. 'Well, sir, it looks as though you were prepared for a really big show. Do you mind my asking who it was that made a complaint about Alain?'

'I can't say.'

'I'm sure I know. Alain told me that he'd had a fight with some customers over some diamonds he sold them. They accused him of stealing them back, I think. The gem business gets dirty sometimes. Anyway, I'm sure we'll be able to clear this matter up.'

After questioning, the occupants of Kanit House were allowed to return home. All of them agreed to return to Crime Suppression headquarters at 9 a.m. the following day.

When Herman Knippenberg arrived home that night he was pale with fury. He had been told on the phone that 'nothing incriminating' had been found and that the suspect had a valid U.S. passport in the name of David Allen Gore — the visa stamps in his passports showed that Mr Gore was out of the country at the time of the murder of the Dutch couple. On the phone to Captain Sawedt, Herman had lost his diplomatic cool: 'You make a farce of the investigation,' he had blurted out. 'This man has killed in cold blood — for God's sake change your mind. Arrest him!' There was no need to worry, came the soothing voice of the Captain, Gore and the others would certainly return to police headquarters in the morning because their passports had been confiscated. Then technicians would open the safe, and they would be further interrogated.

Herman had found his voice rising out of control — 'Don't you see — they'll only come back tomorrow if there's nothing incriminating in that safe. And that's not the point — we know the man's not David Allen Gore! Are you going to let him pull the wool over your eyes?'

'The instructions for their release were issued by General Suwit. The grounds were lack of evidence.'

Sitting out on the porch later with Angela, he brooded on the conversation.

'I can't believe this is really happening. After everything we've done — the whole of so-called Crime Suppression is going to sit back and be outsmarted!'

Even his own Ambassador had been stumped. When Herman had told him about the fiasco, His Excellency Van Dongen had replied that there was something odd about the case. The police had not acted before when they received the report from the British Embassy. They must have a reason.

Herman went to bed fuming. Sure they had a reason. It had been laziness, inefficiency. And now it was naïvety. How could a French Vietnamese masquerade as an American-born schoolteacher? He jumped out of bed. 'The Americans! That's it!' He telephoned Ralph Nider at the U.S. Embassy and, after filling him in on the background of the case, asked him to send someone to police headquarters in the morning to investigate the passport held by the man claiming to be David Allen Gore. Nider agreed. In addition, two men from the Drug Enforcement Agency — a department already in close contact with Crime Suppression — would be present in the morning to interrogate the suspects.

Herman was relieved, and as he was expressing his thanks, Nider asked whether there could be any connection between the Gautier affair and a missing U.S. national, Teresa Knowlton. The Embassy had received a notice from the State Department to put a trace on her. She had disappeared in Thailand last October. A comparison of photographs had shown that she might be the girl found at Pattaya, whose body had been pictured in the *Bangkok Post*. Herman remembered the picture of a woman in a bikini lying on the sand which he had seen at Crime Suppression one morning and he told Nider that he would ask his informants whether Teresa Knowlton had ever been seen at Kanit House.

He had just got back to bed when the phone rang again. It was the Baronet Gilles de Giverney, who was calling from the Grace Hotel. He had just met a man at the bar. As Herman listened to the tale of a man buying \$3,000 of diamonds from Gautier and then being drugged and robbed, he asked: 'Is he there with you now?'

'Sure,' said de Giverney.

'Okay, Gilles, make sure he turns up at Crime Suppression at 9 a.m. to lodge an official complaint — he can also blow the Gore alias.'

Again, the trap for Gautier was set, and as Herman fell asleep, he was satisfied.

The next day, everything started to work out. At lunchtime, Herman visited Crime Suppression and spoke to Colonel Withan, who told him that the suspects were still being interrogated. Although nothing of interest had been found in the safe, a variety of suspicious drugs had been

removed by police from the flat, and these were now being analysed. Then Colonel Withan showed Herman a photo in a passport belonging to an 'Eric Damour' which looked remarkably like Marie Andrée Leclerc. And although the Colonel did not mention it, Herman had heard already from the American officials that they had asked the Thai police to hold 'Mr Gore' in custody, pending an investigation of his passport. It seemed that the suspect had not been convincing in his role as a teacher from Iowa — he had confused the name of the street with the State, and the passport photo was glued in sideways.

That evening the Baronet phoned to tell Herman that a French Embassy official happened to mention they had a missing person's request to trace a young woman called Stephanie Parry.

There was no way Gautier could escape now, or that was how it looked to Herman and Angela Knippenberg as they sat out on their patio, able to enjoy once again the symphony of crickets and frogs and the night scents of their garden.

It was 9.30 p.m. when the servant called Herman to the phone. 'Isn't it wonderful Nadine?' he said. 'It's all over now. How do you feel?'

Her voice was edgy. She was calling from her flat. 'Herman, there's a light on in 504.'

'Oh don't worry, Nadine' — he was laughing — 'it's all over, I tell you. That's probably Crime Suppression or the DEA, having a poke about for more evidence.'

'Should I go up and see them?' she said, sounding relieved.

'Why not? Well, maybe phone first, just to make sure, maybe you can help them.'

A few minutes later Nadine phoned again and this time her voice sounded terrified.

'Ajay's up there,' she said.

'My God! He's supposed to be in jail with the others.'

'He recognized my voice, Herman, and he asked me to come up now — by myself! He said it was urgent.'

'What did you say?'

'I said Remy was already asleep and I felt tired — but he still wants me to go up.'

'You should,' he told her.

'But why?'

'If you don't it might make him suspicious. He'll know you had something to do with the raid. Listen, Nadine! Just tell him you spent last night with friends and only just got home tonight with Remy after going to the cinema — you saw a light and decided to phone.'

Herman told her he would allow fifteen minutes for the visit, and another five for her to walk downstairs. 'If you haven't called me back by then I'll come over there with Paul.'

His face was white when he put down the phone and, after checking his watch, he called his Belgian colleague to alert him. Herman told Angela what had happened and he instructed his driver to park the car in front of the house and stand by. Then he walked upstairs to his study. From the bottom drawer of his desk, he took out a flat green metal object, which looked like an oversized cigarette lighter. It was a King Cobra, a secret firearm developed by a U.S. Intelligence agency, and he clicked it open and loaded it with three bullets. He put it in his shirt pocket, walked downstairs and began pacing up and down near the phone. As the minutes ticked by, Herman's doubts grew about the wisdom of his instructions to Nadine. He had been thoughtless, swept away by the excitement of the moment like a schoolboy playing spy games. What right had he to send her up to Ajay Chowdury, the Indian whose identifying characteristic was a penchant for flick knives? Throughout the whole investigation he had been so sure about what course of action to take, but now as the minutes ticked slowly past the stupidity of what he had just done dawned on him, and he hated himself.

'If something happened to Nadine —' he began.

'Darling, be reasonable. She's a big girl. She can take care of herself.' Angela was more worried about her husband. She had never seen him so shaken.

Herman was staring at his watch. Already twelve minutes had passed.

That same night a Toyota driven by Tommy, a Thai-born Chinese gem dealer, headed south along Route 4 toward the Malaysian border. Sitting next to Tommy was Charles, an attaché case on his lap. He was sticking a photo of Marie Andrée inside an Italian passport. That afternoon Charles had picked up a bag full of passports from Ann, the Thai girl

from the jewellery boutique. (How glad he was that he had left Ajay in Bangkok on Christmas day to supervise the opening of the safe and deliver its contents to Ann — it was that instinct — it never let him down.) In the back of the car with Marie Andrée, his tall frame crouching uncomfortably, was Jean Dhuisme, the new Yannick, who was now being swept along in an adventure he did not understand.

It was around lunchtime that day when Charles and the others had walked out of the offices of Crime Suppression, leaving Ajay behind to take care of certain details. Later, when the story of this departure from police headquarters became public, the possibility of a bribe was rumoured and various estimates were made of the amounts. Thai reporters and members of the overseas press community were to put the figure at \$15,000.

'Ajay! What's happened here?' Nadine asked with her customary candour as she walked through the door of 504. 'It looks like a bomb dropped!' As he stood among the wreckage of upturned files, strewn clothes, and dirty dishes, the Indian suddenly seemed lost and harmless, more like a penitent schoolboy than the brutal killer she knew he must be. Franky whined, sniffing among the debris. Ajay told Nadine that Charles and Marie Andrée had got into trouble over passports and had left for a short holiday. As he talked, Remy was crouching outside the door checking the scene through the keyhole. Ajay said that the police had raided the flat because a customer had complained Charles had sold him some diamonds and later stolen them back from him. After she returned to her own flat Nadine phoned Herman just in time to stop him rushing round to the flat.

All night, Roong sat at home in her best dress waiting for Charles. He was coming to ask her parents for permission to marry her. A banquet had been prepared, which now lay cold in the kitchen. Where was he? At midnight, she took a taxi to Kanit House. After Ajay told her what had happened, she stayed the night on the sofa. In the morning she was still crying when she left, carrying Franky in her arms.

In the ensuing days, Ajay moved from Kanit House to a small

hotel, taking with him cameras, a television set, cassette players and any other equipment he could sell. Smartly dressed and polite, he consented to be interviewed by Bob Jacobs, a consular official at the U.S. Embassy, where he denied ever having met Teresa Knowlton. A week after the police raid, Ajay and Roong flew from Bangkok to Penang to meet Charles. He, meanwhile, had been creating the usual havoc among overland tourists drugging and robbing three Australians. (He was even picked up by the Malaysian police for trying to cash stolen travellers' cheques at the Hilton, and talked his way out of it.)

On the morning of March 18, Nadine visited the French Embassy and when asked to explain her business, she wrote on the paper provided, 'the Gautier affair'. She was shown into the office of the First Consul, Mr Pittaluga, who told her that 'For the Government of France, Madame, there is no such thing as the Gautier affair.' She said she had seen a passport in the fugitive's safe belonging to a French girl, Stephanie Parry, and the First Consul yawned. 'Can't he be stopped?' Nadine pleaded. 'My husband and I are afraid for our lives.'

'In that case,' the diplomat said as he unceremoniously showed her the door, 'I suggest you leave Thailand.'

Ajay and Roong flew back to Bangkok, and Marie Andrée and Charles, with his Thai business partner Tommy, flew to Karachi where they met Mary Ellen Eather, the Australian nurse, who in April the previous year had helped provide the means of escape from the prison van in Greece. Now Mary rented a beach house and sold jewellery and drugs to tourists as well as helping the local fishing population with medical problems. After a few days with Mary, Charles and Tommy flew on to Europe, leaving Marie Andrée to stay alone with the Australian girl. After ten days Marie Andrée received a ticket to join Charles in Europe. Later she would not be able to explain why she had not used this intervening time to run away from Charles.

At the end of March, Dominique Rennelleau and the ex-detective Francois arrived in Paris for their appointment at

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The high-ranking official listened politely as the two young men poured out their tale, and said at the end of it, 'What an unpleasant story. A pity we can do nothing — Asia is so far away.'

Herman Knippenberg followed up leads, contacted other embassy personnel, and recorded Ajay's movements. At diplomatic soirées, well-meaning friends warned Angela that Herman's obsession with the case was ruining his career. He was instructed by his Ambassador to take at least three weeks holiday and even up to the last hours before boarding the plane, Herman and Angela were preparing an in-depth account of the Gautier investigation. A copy of this document, later to achieve local fame as the Knippenberg report, was delivered to every foreign embassy involved.

'It will give them all something to think about,' the Knippenbergs said to themselves as they set off to soak up the sun in Sumatra.

On April 12, a Reuters correspondent filed a report from Katmandu which linked the death of Cocky and Henk and the two murders in Nepal to a 'heroin trafficking ring'. Headed TROUBLE IN KATMANDU'S FREAK STREET, the report said that: 'Police investigations have made little progress but there is little doubt that the killings were drug related and were carried out by foreigners.' Quoting an unnamed U.S. official, the report said, 'Organized groups were trading hashish for heroin in Bangkok on a courier system and the murders are believed to be linked with this racket.'

The next day Emma Knowlton was informed in a telegram from the U.S. Embassy that the body of her grand-daughter Teresa had been identified, and that she had apparently drowned off Pattaya Beach.

On April 6 Nadine had received a postcard from Switzerland. It was from Charles: 'I didn't forget you and hope to see you again soon. I hope, my dear Nadine, I will be able to show my gratitude — Love, Alain.'

She passed this on to Paul Siemons, who told her he would cable his Interpol contact in Geneva and have him arrested. 'Then we can bring him back here and shoot him ourselves,'

he said, puffing clouds of cigar smoke into the air. A few days later, Nadine was asked to present herself to the French Embassy. The news had finally filtered through that Alain Gautier might be responsible for the disappearance of one of their nationals, Stephanie Parry. This time an official accused Nadine of being in league with the gang at Kanit House. 'Oh, nonsense,' she said, 'haven't you read the Knippenberg report?'

'Yes,' he replied. 'It's in the wastepaper basket.' Nadine had mistakenly recollected the spelling of Parry's name as Paris. 'And so if you can't even get the names right,' the official asked, showing Nadine to the door, 'how can we take you seriously?'

The day after Herman and Angela returned to Bangkok from their holiday Nadine phoned them with the news that the manager of Kanit House was planning to sell the contents of the Gautier apartments to make up the unpaid rent. Oh my God -- the evidence! -- Herman thought to himself. 'Maybe the Thai police have not finished collecting it all.' He was assured by the police that they had no further use for whatever was left at Kanit House, so Herman organized an inspection team of his own. On the afternoon of April 27, eight foreigners, all of them diplomats apart from Remy and Nadine, entered the two adjoining flats rented in the name of Alain Gautier. As soon as Herman turned on the light in the mildewing guest bedroom of 503 he saw the brown handbag Cocky was carrying in the holiday snapshots. In the next few minutes he found a purse full of guilders and cents, a sewing kit and tape measure made in Holland, a hand-painted fan from the Chinese Emporium in Hong Kong which had been mentioned in the couple's diary, and hanging in the wardrobe was the orange jacket he had seen Cocky wearing in the holiday snapshots.

Two men from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency rifled through the desk in the living room. They were looking for clues to connect the occupants of the flat with the heroin trade. In the past weeks, following a tip-off from Paul Siemons, they had been pursuing their own inquiries into the activities of Alain Gautier. One of their key sources in Bangkok had maintained that the suspect was involved in nar-

cotics, and a telex from the DEA's Paris office said that French police believed drugs were the likely motive. The agents from the DEA were shocked by the number of documents, letters and pieces of paper lying around which had once belonged to the hundreds of travellers who had been unlucky enough to come into contact with Sobhraj.

10.9.75

Dear Mummy;

I received a letter today. Well it really wasn't the kind of letter I was hoping for. You all seem to be gathering information about the Middle East and all other places from these from the most awful bunch of idiots.

An unknown victim? When the diplomats searched Sobhraj's flat in Kanit House for clues, they found this unfinished letter.

Paul Siemons wandered around holding up a pair of handcuffs, cracking jokes about how Alain Gautier must use them on his mistresses and then he joined the others in trying to sort through the immense pile of pharmaceuticals.

In the two bathrooms and underneath the cocktail bar was a jumbled arsenal of tubes, capsules, syrups, pills, and powders. Prominent among the fifty-one brand names were drugs to produce diarrhoea, nausea, sleep, hallucinations, euphoria and unconsciousness. Ten packets of itching powder completed the collection, which weighed ten kilograms.

Herman turned his attention to the bookcase, methodically examining each volume until he discovered *Oil Politics*, which, he remembered from their statement, the Australian couple had been reading at Hua Hin on the night they drank

the drugged milk shakes. In another book, *The Foundations of Buddhist Meditation* by Kalu Rinpoche, the name of its former owner was neatly written on the flyleaf: *Teresa*. This was the first hard evidence so far that connected Gautier to Teresa – although Nadine had remembered Monique mentioning an American girl who had talked outrageously about sex.

In the desk among a pile of papers they found a letter written in Turkish. It began *Sigge, Ved* and later when it was translated it turned out to be an introductory letter about Ved's courier, Stephanie Parry, from his partner in Spain, 'You should both leave Bangkok at different times and return to Europe via different routes,' it instructed.

Angela Knippenberg had been sorting through the belongings of Marie Andrée in the bedroom – in a handbag she found the little day book recording the couple's movements since January and its owner's bleak mood. With it, scribbled on several sheets of airmail note paper, was the letter addressed to 'Dear Charles the Psychologist' ... on its last page she had scrawled her feelings during the days before the police raid:

I'm still on my way but I fell in a ditch. I still have hope and this hope is the only thing I have and want to hold on tight. If Charles succeeds in taking me out of this ditch and put me again on the road, I shall live.

If Charles walks on my side and helps me to stay on the road, then I shall go very far on this road and gain my happiness.

He is the only man who can help me for I love him so much that I can only make one being with him. I can only exist because of him, I can only breathe because of him. And my love is increasing.

It was in 'Monique's' handwriting. Nadine recognized it immediately.

Also in the handbag was a pile of photographs, most of them of Charles and Marie Andrée. One of them brought guffaws from Paul Siemons. It showed Charles lying on a bed naked, with an erection. 'Pffft – what's he got to be proud of?' Paul snorted. 'I wonder if he killed to prove his masculinity?'

All sorts of motives were discussed by the group in the room, but no single explanation seemed to fit *all* the murders. Nadine, who could never forget the Vietnamese atrocity photo, showed it to the others, saying that Alain Gautier was 'sick in the head'.

By the end of the afternoon, the search party began stacking all the files and pieces of paper from the desk into cardboard boxes which would, in the following week, be sorted through by the Gires and the Knippenbergs. There were business cards, driving licences, and countless other documents compulsively hoarded. Among these was a travel itinerary for the months of September/October 1975 showing a flight schedule from Paris, Amsterdam, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Copenhagen. It was in the name of André Breugnot, the 'fat Frenchman' Charles would later claim was a heroin operative he had questioned in a Chiangmai hotel room, drugged and then drowned in the bath.

It was nearly dark when the investigating group left the Kanit House flat that afternoon, each one of them carrying a brown paper bag bulging with documents and drugs. A mauve haze hung over the city. Stopping for a moment on the walkway and staring down at the turquoise patch of the swimming pool, Herman wondered how many victims had been led along this path, like Cocky and Henk, to their deaths. He glanced at Paul Siemons, standing beside him his face for once poker-like and his spirits subdued. About Alain Gautier just then there was nothing more anyone wanted to say.

Ten days later, on May 6, *Thai Rath*, a mass circulation Thai newspaper, announced that 'Gautier and his gang had been caught in Singapore'. The source of the story was unclear and there was no byline, but, after giving details of the death of Cocky and Henk, the story said:

Gautier had been ordered by the biggest narcotics smuggling gang in Hong Kong to kill the two young Dutch who were treacherous to the big boss.

The next day a follow-up story appeared. The same newspaper reported Hong Kong police as concluding:

The murder happened because of the double-crossing between the narcotics and diamond smuggling gangs.

The report said that Gautier had confessed to killing the Dutch couple.

These news items set off a frenzy of activity at the *Bangkok Post* which liked to think of itself as the local showpiece of Western investigatory journalism. The *Thai Rath* story could not be confirmed. The Singapore police knew nothing of the arrest of anyone called Gautier or of any confession. In fact, Charles was currently in Europe, setting up appointments with large and prestigious gem firms. The editor of the *Bangkok Post*, Graham Stanton, contacted the Dutch Ambassador and was finally put in touch with Herman Knippenberg.

On May 7 and 8, the story broke. Under the headline WEB OF DEATH, the *Bangkok Post* printed pictures of the five known murder victims and announced that 'a web of murder, robbery and forced druggings has been uncovered by the *Bangkok Post* in extensive investigations'. There was a picture of Charles and Marie Andrée captioned: 'Gautier and Leclerc'. The newspaper's 'extensive investigations' were mainly confined to the Knippenberg's living room floor, where Stanton and Knippenberg had sifted through Herman's copious files and the cartons of evidence. 'The team' — Nadine and Remy and the three diplomats — had decided that a barrage of front-page headlines should force the Thai police to issue an international arrest warrant.

These stories were syndicated all over Asia. One morning a commercial attaché at the French Embassy in Singapore cut out a report of the killings from the local newspaper. He had met 'Gautier' several times and bought gems from him. On Charles's last visit to Singapore, the attaché had introduced him to a high-ranking French police officer, then holidaying in Asia. The commercial attaché put the newspaper cutting in the embassy pouch and addressed it to the policeman in Paris.

In Paris in the spring Charles and Marie Andrée did not know that they had made front page headlines all over Asia. They behaved like any other young couple strolling down the tree-shaded streets past cafés and shops.

Charles was enjoying this profitable business trip. The Thai gem dealer from Chantaburi, Tommy, had come with him, bringing a dazzling collection of sapphires and rubies, the pride of his family's collection. The two men had spent the past weeks in plush offices in the Place de Vendôme and the Champs-Élysées, displaying their exquisite wares and taking orders from the most famous jewellers of Paris.

Selling gems was not all that occupied Charles that April in 1976. He had learned that Chantal, his former wife, was also in Paris. Her mother was dying and she had come from America to be with her. From a parked car, Charles watched her family's house to make sure no one else was at home, just as he had done that morning four years ago when he had kidnapped his daughter Madhu ...

'You can't come in,' Chantal had said as soon as she opened the door.

'Not even for coffee?' he asked, with that smile. She let him in and the two of them talked in the hall.

'I was a fool to lose you,' he said and she blushed and asked him not to interfere now with her new life.

'Madhu, is she all right? Is she going to school?' Playing the role of a concerned father he offered her money from a wallet bulging with 500-franc notes. Chantal noticed he kept glancing through the window. But he behaved like a gentleman, the perfect gentleman, gracious, charming, and as he said good-bye and hurried out to the car, a brand new white Citroen C 2200, she watched him drive away and felt sad. She knew that he was on the run again.

When Alain Benard welcomed Charles and Marie Andrée to

his flat he suspected the police could not be far behind.

'For your mother, Alain — a ruby,' Charles said, opening the satin-lined case which glittered with gems. At last he had made a success of his life, he told Benard, a big success.

'Come on, Alain, pick out a ruby for your mother.'

Benard would have liked to present his mother with a precious stone, but was damned if he was going to reach his hand into the case and choose one himself, like a scavenger. No, that was not the way to be offered a gift. Charles spent most of his time at Benard's using his phone, setting up business appointments, while Marie Andrée — who unnerved Benard — sat around sullenly drinking coffee.

He never lets himself be alone with me, Benard thought to himself during the visit. He never allows me to look at his eyes. It was true. Something had changed inside that boy he had met ten years ago in Poissy Central Jail.

Early in May Charles and Marie Andrée paid a visit to the home of a high-ranking policeman and his wife. They had met Charles in Singapore and had been impressed by his formidable reputation as a gem dealer. But as soon as the Prefect of Police opened his door to them Charles sensed that something was wrong. With Marie Andrée he followed the Prefect through the gloomy hallway into a living room filled with antiques. The man's wife, normally gay and effusive, greeted them both with a chill in her voice and Charles was ushered into the study alone.

The Prefect was embarrassed. Charles had visited him several times since his arrival in Europe — they had spent an afternoon listening to Chopin and Charles had admired the Prefect's collection of rare books. But the man was frowning now as he leaned across his desk: 'Mr Gautier, I must demand an explanation from you.'

'If you think I am going to cheat you ...' Charles said — he knew it couldn't be about the gems, and yet this would be the most innocent response. Already he was laying out a strategy in case the worst had happened. The Prefect had already ordered thousands of dollars worth of necklaces and bracelets from Charles, who had agreed to accept a modest deposit and monthly payments — so he was obviously not upset about that.

'No — it's nothing to do with your business,' the Prefect was saying. He took a newspaper cutting from an envelope — the 'Web of Death' story — and handed it to Charles, who glanced at it a few seconds, gave it back to him and laughed.

'I don't need to read it, it's an old piece of slander.'

'But it only arrived here this morning!' The man was puzzled.

Charles told him that he had made many enemies in Bangkok because of his low prices. The gem business was run like the mafia — he had broken the rules; all the others had banded together to ruin his reputation. They had even sent someone posing as a defrauded customer to complain to the Thai police. They had planted false evidence, leaked libellous stories. It was ridiculous. What could he do? In Asia, people had a slack morality. Five, six, seven murders... how many did they say? When would he have had time to commit them? Why would he kill hippies for a few hundred dollars? And naturally, having done so, would he now spend his time wandering around Paris, visiting policemen? A big joke, huh?

'I can tell you now,' the Prefect said. 'This morning I contacted Interpol — I could have had you arrested in my house, Alain,' he said laughing, 'but, needless to say, your name was not on their files.'

Still not computerised, Interpol had failed to assimilate and properly file the information it had already received on Gautier. Earlier, on May 4, its Paris office had cabled Bangkok seeking further information on him (as a result of Dominique and François's visit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). In the last few days, Stephanie Parry's father had passed on to French police a dossier he had received on 'Gautier' from 'The team' in Bangkok. This even included the name and address of Jean Dhuisme as a possible contact of 'Gautier' — which was where Charles, Marie Andrée and Tommy had been staying since their arrival in France.

The young couple left the policeman's house amid a flurry of smiles and handshakes, and drove south. In Charles's pocket was \$1,000 as a deposit on a necklace of river sapphires as well as a valuable family heirloom — a diamond cut in the old-fashioned manner. Charles had promised to have it re-cut in a contemporary style to add to its value.

At the Credit Municipale in Marseilles, Charles mortgaged the diamond for 10,000 francs and then drove to Villa La Roche, to see Noi, his mother.

The massive report which Herman Knippenberg had delivered to foreign embassies on the eve of his enforced holiday had repercussions beyond the headlines in the Asian press. When the High Commissioner of Canada realized that one of his nationals — Marie Andrée Leclerc — was involved in a murder case, he notified his country's police. Early in May, investigators knocked on the door of the modest house in Levis, Quebec, and questioned Marie Andrée's family. No one realized it at the time, but the Royal Canadian Mounted Police left the house with the key to the riddle of 'Alain Gautier's' true identity.

On May 12, the Interpol office in Ottawa sent a cable informing all member countries, including Paris and Bangkok, that 'in an emergency Leclerc's parents were instructed to contact "Madame Sobhraj" at Villa La Roche,' giving the address of Noi's house in Marseilles — where Charles was now staying.

The daily headlines in the *Bangkok Post* and the previous inquiry from Paris Interpol, asking for information about the death of Stephanie Parry, had finally aroused the attention of Colonel Somphol, the head of Bangkok Interpol. He took statements from Herman Knippenberg, Remy, and Nadine, collecting from them boxes of the evidence found at Kanit House. He interviewed survivors of Charles's earlier drug-muggings in India, including the real Eric Damour, one of the Frenchmen found drugged in a crushed van in Southern India. As yet, there was still no warrant for Charles's arrest on charges of murder.

On May 19, a day when Gilles Carrière visited police in Katmandu and formally identified photographs of a charred and mutilated body as his brother, Laurent Carrière, and a day when Mrs Emma Knowlton wrote another of her desperate (and unanswered) letters to the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, asking for the date and circumstances of her granddaughter's death, Paris Interpol cabled the following message to Bangkok:

THE DISCREET VERIFICATION OF ADDRESS VILLA LA ROCHE SHOWS THAT VAN LONG NOI, EX CONCUBINE OF HOTCHAND SOBHRAJ, IS LIVING THERE. NOI HAD TWO CHILDREN BY SOBHRAJ, ONE OF THEM, A SON, IS RECORDED IN OUR DOCUMENTS UNDER DIVERSE IDENTITIES, ... INCLUDING CHARLES SOBHRAJ. THIS HOSTILE INDIVIDUAL IS KNOWN FOR ESCAPING AND IS UNDER INDICTMENT IN FRANCE ... IT APPEARS THAT CHARLES SOBHRAJ TOOK THE IDENTITY OF GAUTIER ALAIN. THIS IS CONSIDERED AN URGENT AND GRAVE AFFAIR IN FRANCE.

That same night in Bangkok, Herman and Angela, along with Remy and Nadine, assembled at the offices of Interpol. Its urbane chief, Colonel Somphol, sent out for Chinese food as he worked with the *farangs* in compiling a detailed description of the three suspects, a prelude to issuing a formal warrant.

The two couples watched the information being fed into the huge battery of telexes which linked all member countries of Interpol, and felt reassured that at last the rest of the world would become involved in catching the killers.

The next day Bangkok Interpol issued an international warrant of arrest for Alain Gautier, Marie Andrée Leclerc, and Ajay Chowdury, for conspiring to murder Teresa Knowlton, Henk Bintanja, Cocky Hemker, and Vitali Hakim. 'If found inform immediately, extradition will be requested.'

One week later, the bodies of Teresa Knowlton and Vitali Hakim were exhumed from the desolate cemetery near Pattaya and unwound from their sheets of plastic. As Leon Hakim, who had flown from Istanbul to Thailand, watched the charred body of his son being moved, its head fell off. Later he was reportedly seen weeping in his hotel foyer, heartbroken by the attitude of official indifference which had kept him ignorant of his son's death for more than six months.

On an afternoon early in June a scruffy European man wearing patched jeans and a torn singlet sat in Bombay with a bottle of Limca in front of him. From his table at Dipty's House of Pure Drinks, he looked out on to the glare of Ormiston Road and wondered if today, the casting director would come. Jean Huygens, a 45-year-old Belgian who lived in Goa, had taken a bus into Bombay to find work as a film extra. The producers were always scouring overland hang-outs looking for Western faces, usually to play villains, and Huygens could expect \$4 for a day's work or more if he was given a few lines to say.

Until the end of the 1960s he had led a stolid existence in his native Brussels as foreman of a construction company. He divorced his wife in 1967 and his son died a year later. Depressed and disheartened, he fled Europe and drifted awhile. Four years ago he had married an Indian woman and now lived in a hut near the beach in Goa with his wife and two children.

Huygens lit up a cheap Indian cigarette. He was used to them by now. He looked up to see a prosperous Asian-looking man strolling inside. Perhaps he was a producer; he looked like one, with his gold rimmed glasses and crocodile-skin attaché case.

'Hullo,' said the man in French, 'you look as though you might be able to help me.'

'I'm sure I can,' Huygens said, positive now that the man was about to offer him a job.

'Good. My name's Daniel, and I need passports.'

Jean grinned, revealing the fact that he had lost most of his teeth. 'That should be no trouble. I know plenty of travellers who need the bread.'

'Good, then you might also be able to help me find a girl to work for me. I want someone without scruples; she could make good money, carrying gems across borders for me. There could be money in it for you.'

'Sure, I can do that.'

'Okay, I'm in a hurry at the moment. I'll meet you here at the same time tomorrow.'

The Belgian sat finishing his drink, deciding whom he would go and find. There was an English girl he knew who scraped a living on the streets of Bombay. 'A girl without scruples' — what an apt description of Barbara.

The Sikh fortune-teller fell in step behind the young man, who had just left Dipty's and was striding along Ormiston Road to Colaba Causeway.

'Sahib, for only one rupee I can tell you the name of the lady who loves you.'

Street urchins caught up with him on the other side, trying to attract his eye with their tragic looks. Charles, alias 'Daniel', had grown a beard and a thin moustache, and was wearing a monogrammed business shirt and neatly pressed trousers. A man with a dancing monkey and hash sellers swelled the retinue crying for his sympathy, but Charles remained unresponsive behind his sunglasses as he quickened his pace towards the park near the Taj Mahal Hotel.

His days in Asia were dangerous now and so he was making plans for South America, where the police were just as lax and the press, he hoped, was less inquisitive. It had been a shock to open that magazine, as they were driving back to Bombay from Paris, and to read a detailed account of his career in Bangkok. THE BIKINI MURDERS blared the cover of *Asia Week* and he had flicked through the pages where he saw pictures of himself, Marie Andrée and the victims. She had seen it too, before he had time to hide it.

'There's no proof,' he had said, 'just journalists looking for a story.' But it had been very bad for Marie Andrée's psychology. He couldn't trust her any more. He was sure she was trying to get away from him, and he would let her go — when the right time came.

With Marie Andrée and Jean Dhuisme, Charles had left France about two weeks ago, in the brand-new Citroen he had bought. It could do 200 kph — the perfect getaway car for the job he now planned. But he was short of cash. It was that old demon of his, gambling. He had lost \$200,000 at the Rouen Casino while Marie Andrée looked on in misery. He had

much more money, of course, he would later claim, but it was in Thailand, in bank accounts under false names, with the appropriate documents in the hands of another party. But in India, money would not be a problem for long — he had the perfect set-up — in a few more days he'd be rolling again.

In the back streets behind the mock-Gothic pile of the Taj Hotel a few passers-by stopped to watch a man whipping himself with knotted ropes. From the waist up he was naked, and huge weals criss-crossed his shoulders, which he repeatedly lashed in a frenzy. A woman in a tattered pink skirt followed him around, making an eerie sound with a bone and a drum, while Charles, ignoring the scene, climbed into the white CX 2000 Citroen, gleaming like a spaceship in the filthy street.

New Delhi, June 11

Jean Huygens was terrified. The Belgian was sitting on the steps of the International Telephone Exchange while Marie Andrée was inside trying to call her parents in Canada. How had he got himself mixed up with such people? The man he had met at Dipty's in Bombay, 'Daniel', had been pleased with the English girl he had found and had asked Huygens if he wanted to earn money, big money. Sure, he had said.

In the next few days, Huygens, the down-and-out drifter who was hoping for a bit part in a Hindu musical, soon found himself playing the role of a gangster in real life. 'Daniel' was in the gem business, all right, he was planning to clean out all the big jewellery shops of Delhi and Agra. Huygens was instructed to smarten himself up and make a couple with one of the other female accomplices, an Australian girl with long brown hair and freckles and a friendly smile. This was Mary Ellen Eather. Driving back from Paris to India in the white Citroen, Charles had visited Mary again in Karachi. She had joined the car and its occupants and they sped towards India, while Charles planned a gems robbery he intended to be the biggest and the best of his career.

So Mary and Jean Huygens set off together to visit the jewellery shops of Delhi posing as customers and appraising the value of the stock.

'In order to infuse confidence into the mind of the victim

jeweller,' Huygens later told police, 'I was told to pretend to be a foreign diplomat, shopping with my wife.'

Despite his years of hustling for a living on the back-streets of Bombay, Huygens recoiled when he began to grasp the full range of his employer's 'business deals'. Although he had been prepared to help with a gems' robbery, when 'Daniel' ordered everyone to be on the lookout for tourists who could be lured into friendly conversation, then drugged and robbed, he wanted no part in it. Anyway, he had not been paid the money that had been promised.

He had watched Marie Andrée stroll into the State Bank of India and cash stolen travellers' cheques with a fake passport. The Australian woman, Mary, did the same. Once the Belgian casually picked up a camera in the boot of the car.

'Don't touch any of this equipment without my permission,' Charles had said angrily, pointing to a whole range of cameras and travel documents. Huygens learned that they had been taken from three French travellers at the YMCA, who could still be in town and on the look-out. All of them had been poisoned.

So he was waiting for an opportunity to make his getaway. All the group's money, passports, and other valuables were kept in a black bag, usually held by 'Daniel'.

Marie Andrée, too, was hatching plans for escape, but her position was more complicated. This phone call she was trying to make was to hurry her family into sending a lawyer to Delhi. It was the only way she could begin to extricate herself from the nightmare. Inside the bag, she had carefully rolled up three \$100 notes and had hidden them in her lipstick case without telling Charles. Late on that June afternoon she went to check the bag again. It was gone, and the Belgian along with it.

Agra, July 2

It was cool and dark inside the tomb and the students welcomed relief from the sun. With a flourish, the guide pressed the lens of the flashlight against the wall and when he switched it on, the stones blazed. The sapphires, jade, topaz, the pinky red garnets and cornelian came alive in the light-beam revealing an inlaid garden of glowing lotus blossoms.

'It may surprise you much to learn, please,' said the local guide, in the lilting intonation of Indian English, 'that it took over a thousand elephants to carry the marble slabs to build the Taj Mahal.'

The students straggled back along the path to the courtyard outside the main gate, where their buses were waiting, not knowing whether to feel disappointed or exalted by the immortal structure.

While they were milling about the great stone gate a stranger appeared. 'Have you tried looking at it while walking backwards?' he asked.

'It may surprise you very much to know, that were the Taj to be built today, the cost would be a shocking seven hundred million dollars!' the Indian guide was saying, but few of the tourist party were listening. They were watching Charles, who stood at the entrance gate, his arms around a dark-skinned Dutch girl. From the shade of the arch, the couple could see the long path between the lawns, the reflecting pools lined with cypress trees and the famous mausoleum glaring under the sun.

'Now walk with me,' Charles said to the girl, 'but keep looking ahead.' Still holding her waist, he led her backwards, away from the Taj Mahal.

'It's fantastic!' the girl said. 'It's following me.'

Others walked backwards, with the same exclamations of glee. The official guide looked on dourly. His spiel had been interrupted by the stranger who had so casually picked up these young tourists as they got off the bus.

Charles was already saying goodbye to the girl and her friends, promising to meet them later. Yes, he would clean the Dutch group out that afternoon. He had become desperate since that Belgian (they referred to him now as 'the toothless Dracula'), had walked off with Marie Andrée's handbag. Most of the group's passports, cash, and stolen travellers' cheques were inside. Luckily, Charles still had the sapphires and rubies he had stolen in Paris from Tommy, his young Thai business partner. But before he could carry out the biggest jewellery heist of his life — it was all set up — he wanted a new batch of passports to ensure an easy getaway to South America. He took a taxi down the squalid dusty streets to Mahatma Gandhi Road.

'Did you have a good time?' Marie Andrée asked, as Charles walked into their room at the Lauries Hotel. She looked tired and plain; her hair pulled tightly back into a bun and eyes puffy with tears. She was lying on the bed reading a book.

'It's just a job,' Charles said, 'but I should have the stuff by tomorrow.'

'And how is that sweet Elizabeth?' She was aware that Charles had been trying to win the confidence of a Dutch-Indonesian girl: 'She looks like a Thai and I know you like them ...'

Marie Andrée was an emotional wreck. From *Asia Week* she had learned there was a warrant out for her arrest on murder charges. Charles was edgy and she detected cracks in his confidence. He had taken the loss of her handbag as a bad omen.

And she felt guilty. The bag had been stolen while she was trying to phone home. As usual Marie Andrée wanted to escape from Charles and yet she still felt trapped by her love for him. Even more so now, since she had met his mother in Paris. She understood everything. Noi! What a woman! Her own mother was like a mother should be: jolly, roly-poly and friendly to everyone. But Noi — she and Charles had fought from the first moment they had met again in Marseilles — she had accused him of deserting his brother, Guy, who was still in a Greek jail. Then Noi had accompanied her son on a gambling spree. And as they were leaving Villa La Roche, to set off on their amazing drive to India, Noi had said: 'You're almost thirty-three now Charles. Be careful. Christ died when he was thirty-three.'

Charles had replied: 'I'm smarter than Christ and I'll die an old man.'

Marie Andrée had never known much about his past before. Now she understood, and she felt a great surge of pity for him, pity and love.

At least they were fugitives together, and that made it bearable ... sometimes. It was so hot. She sighed and stretched out on the bed, watching Charles's face.

'Darling ...' She reached and touched his face. 'Aren't you frightened a little?'

'Why should I be frightened? Listen, we're in Asia,

don't you understand? We can get away with anything.'

Through the open window they heard the excited babble of French voices. Charles looked out to see a tour coach in the parking lot disgorging scores of young tourists.

'Look,' he said. 'The perfect set-up. If they're booked into this hotel, I can start working on them straight away in the bar or the foyer.' He preferred French passports — it was so easy to loosen and reshuffle their pages so that visas could be transferred from one to another.

'I'll drop the Dutch,' he said to Marie Andrée. 'These are much better.' Yes, he enjoyed preying on the French.

'You never intended to do those Dutch,' she said. 'You just wanted to flirt with the girl...'

And so another fight flared up, with Charles trying to calm her down.

'Oh, I'm fed up with you,' she said. 'God, why do I suffer like this?' Marie Andrée rushed to the door and Charles grabbed her. He didn't trust her to leave the room. Marie Andrée struggled as Charles held her tightly, with his arms around her thin back.

'Damn you! I'm not staying here another minute!' She began shouting and Charles noticed that some of the tourists had stopped near the window, looking up into the room. Marie Andrée was struggling and screaming. Charles dragged her into the bathroom and threw her down in the tub. She lay there a few seconds, dazed, then stood up and started screaming again. Charles slapped her across the face and caught her as she fell.

When she opened her eyes a few seconds later, Charles had lowered her on to the edge of the bathtub and was washing her face with a towel.

He carried her to the bed, bunching the pillows under her head, 'You know, darling, with all these fights we're having, you are making me lose my power over the others.'

Marie Andrée rubbed her eyes sullenly. Since the Belgian had stolen her bag, the tension had been mounting between Charles and the young people who were working for him. His meticulous but often pointless orders had begun to irritate them, and they saw chinks in the armour of his authority. Was it possible that he was less interested in committing the perfect crime than just playing cops and robbers? Now, with-

out money or passports to bribe them with he had to rely totally on his charismatic manipulations; and a hysterical 'wife', constantly overflowing with recriminations and bitter insights into his personality was making his life very difficult.

'It's the publicity,' Marie Andrée said. 'It makes me nervous.'

'Look, we'll soon be out of this country and then — South America! With enough bread to go straight, like I promised.' And he told her that if anything happened before then — well, she could just say that he compelled her to stay with him, that she couldn't escape, that she knew nothing, that he kept everything secret ...

Marie Andrée turned on her side and opened her paperback, *Extra Terrestrials*.

From his shoulder-bag, Charles took out his nunchakai, two silver rods joined by a chain (a Kung Fu weapon popularized by Bruce Lee). He stripped off and stood in front of the mirror, twirling the silver sticks. The Indian police did not carry guns — if there was trouble, he was sure he could control it.

A few days before they had all driven to Agra, Charles had won the friendship of Luke Soloman, a French traveller in Delhi, by offering him a night in bed with Barbara, the English girl. He had drugged Soloman and as he lay in a stupor in his room, Charles had inspected his passport — useless, too many visa stamps — and had stolen his money. The unconscious Soloman was taken to hospital, where today, unknown to Charles, he had died.

That afternoon in the bar Charles struck up conversation with the pair who he guessed, correctly, were in charge of the newly arrived tour group. After a few drinks they were soon enthralled with his tales about India. He talked about the mothers who gouged out the eyes of their children to make them good beggars ... about the Persians in Bombay who buried their dead on top of tall towers, towers of silence, and how the bodies were picked clean by the crows ... and then, of the Hindus, who burned their dead en masse in the holy city of Varanasi, while the priests stood by, plunging sticks into the corpses and folding them over like crepes suzettes. Soon, dozens of students stood around listening to Charles, and the

tour leader invited him to join his party for dinner.

Over the next two days Charles befriended dozens of the young French tourists — engineering graduates from a college in Tarbes in the south of France, on a group tour of Asia. His knowledge of the gem trade fascinated them all and when two of the girls showed him some sapphires they had bought, he told them they had been cheated, accompanied them to a shop in Agra and ordered its owner to refund the girls' money.

In all his conversations with the students, he impressed on them the dangers of Indian drinking water, quietly slipping laxatives in some of their drinks. He wanted to arouse their anger at Indians, so drawing them closer to himself, as they sought his advice, the advice of a fellow Frenchman. On July 4, their bus set off to visit the pink city of Jaipur. The students begged Charles to accompany them but he declined, promising to visit them again in Delhi. Before the group left, he distributed some capsules to his new friends, as a safeguard against polluted water. Most of the drugs were harmless but a few were laced with laxatives. He wanted only a few of them stricken with dysentery, so the rest would think that their good health was due to his medicines. Charles waved to the group in the bus as it pulled out from the Lauries Hotel. That night his room looked like a dispensary, as he and his young accomplices sat round filling up gelatine capsules with a mixture of powdered sleeping pills and laxatives, preparing for the forthcoming reunion in Delhi. Sixty French students! Sixty passports! The jewellery heist and the flight to South America — he could make a fresh start with his life.

'A police officer is a citizen in uniform,' read the sign on the wall in the office of New Delhi's Crime Branch, 'and every citizen is a police officer without a uniform.'

Sitting in a dilapidated office behind an inkstained wooden desk was a man who liked to think of himself as the Sherlock Holmes of Asia. Deputy Superintendent Naranda Nath Tuli was excited. There had been a breakthrough in the Sobhraj case. Tuli had a fine-boned Brahmin face with large, friendly eyes. For thirty years he had been solving crimes for New Delhi's police force, some of them quite celebrated, but now, if he could cap his career with the arrest of Charles Sobhraj!

What a show! He could retire and write his memoirs. Tuli still remembered the fuss caused by Charles's robbery at the Ashoka Hotel five years ago. Questions had been asked about it in Parliament. Charles had kept an American flamenco dancer in her hotel for three days while he tried to drill through the floor to the jewellery shop below. He was a slimy bugger — they had spotted him at the airport but he had vanished. Finally the Bombay Squad caught him outside the Taj Hotel and he was brought to Delhi in chains. Charles outsmarted them again — he had faked an attack of appendicitis and escaped from the hospital after the operation. This time, Tuli was determined to get him. There was a tip-off from Interpol that Sobhraj had entered India. One of his accomplices had been phoning her family from Delhi. Even before this news, Tuli guessed Charles might be around. Three young French travellers had been found drugged at the YMCA in Delhi and all their belongings stolen by a man calling himself Daniel.

Then came the break. On July 2, a Belgian, Jean Huygens, had written to the Canadian Embassy, saying he was in fear of his life and enclosing pictures of a man calling himself Daniel. It looked like Sobhraj, so one morning, not long after Huygens had stolen the handbag from Marie Andrée, Tuli travelled to Anjuna beach in Goa, disguised as a tourist.

It was a strange meeting. Tuli in a loud sports shirt, trying to appear at home in the hippie colony and sipping juice from a coconut, listening to the scared ravings of the haggard dropout. Almost twenty years before, Huygens had taken a detective training course at a night school in Brussels. Tuli's English was basic, the Belgian's was the broken patois of the road, and on the beach all around them overlanders were passing chillums of hashish and strumming guitars as they lay naked in the sun.

Convinced that 'Daniel' was Charles Sobhraj, Tuli flew back to Delhi, alerted his informers, and distributed mug shots of Charles to his men. It was only a matter of time.

Arriving in Delhi for his date with the young engineers from Tarbes, Charles shuffled his three accomplices around each night between cheap hotels where they checked in with false identities, while he and Marie Andrée slept in the car

meeting the others at breakfast to plan the day's activities. Money was running low.

In the dank hotel rooms crammed with luggage and stolen property, fights kept erupting between Charles and Marie Andrée, whose white skin was now covered with bruises. The atmosphere upset the others. That morning Mary walked into the room in time to see her employer slapping the Canadian girl across the face.

'Go on, hit me again,' screamed Marie Andrée. 'I don't feel it any more.'

'If you don't feel the pain, then why should I injure myself? You make me sick with all your whining.' He walked out, slamming the door.

At 2.30 p.m. on July 5 1976 the tourist bus turned off the Ring Road in Delhi and pulled up on the tree-lined driveway of the Vikram Hotel. It was a comfortable establishment in the suburbs, not luxurious, which gave discounts to tour groups. When the sixty graduate engineers filed into the foyer, Charles was waiting for them.

'Bonjour, Daniel,' several of them called out to their friend from Agra. As they dispersed to their rooms, some students stopped to talk to him. Charles was leaning against the bar and he asked the engineers how they had enjoyed Jaipur. Next to him lounged Jean Dhuisme, looking grave and uncomfortable. The night before he left Paris his wife had burst into tears in the bedroom and begged him not to go. She had a bad feeling about Charles, she said, and Dhuisme was beginning to understand. But he had needed the money.

In a few minutes the subject shifted to dysentery, as it so often did among travellers in India. Charles shook his head sadly as he listened to the tales of woe. That same night the group was planning to fly from Delhi to Bangkok and Charles warned them that after their last meal in Jaipur the whole group could be subject to severe stomach cramps on the plane. 'Have you got any more tablets?' the students asked urgently. Not really, Charles said, but he had a doctor friend in the city, who could perhaps arrange an emergency supply. The students thanked him effusively as he and Jean left the hotel, promising to do their best.

At 8.45 p.m. the Tarbes engineers met for dinner in the

Samrat restaurant in the Vikram Hotel. Charles walked through the door followed by Jean, carrying a doctor's black bag and looking like a stage undertaker. The group leader, Frederick, stood up and shook Charles by the hand.

'Sad to be leaving India?' Charles asked. 'No one else has fallen sick, I hope. Here are the anti-bacterial drugs I promised you. Hand them out now. Take one before dinner and two after.'

Some of the students distributed the tablets to each person in the group. The tour leader and his wife were sitting at a table with the group's treasurer, Charles noticed, and the two men had taken out a precious bottle of duty-free vodka. Some of the students swallowed the capsules immediately, others put them on the table.

'The sooner the better,' Charles was saying to the cautious ones. 'The medicine must have time to build up resistance to the amoeba.' He wanted most of the students to feel sleepy soon after dinner and go to their rooms where they would pass out. He could get inside and steal their belongings. Also, he was discreetly watching the treasurer — maybe the case near his feet contained the passports — all sixty of them! Suddenly, Frederick's wife screamed and fell to the floor.

This reaction was as much a surprise to Charles as it was to everyone else in the group. It must be the vodka! The woman looked unconscious; her body was twitching.

Frederick knelt beside his wife: 'Darling, darling, oh God, what's happened? Is she going to die? Darling, answer me ... get a doctor, someone.' He was frantic. Waiters and students gathered around and the treasurer looked at Charles and said:

'Maybe it was the tablets you gave her.'

'Impossible,' Charles replied 'they are quite harmless — quick! — let's carry her to the couch in the foyer.'

Other students began complaining of dizziness and two more fell to the floor. An angry group of students was gathered around Charles.

'Have any of you been taking quinine against malaria?' he asked.

A few nodded their heads.

'Yes.'

'It must be a reaction — it's only temporary.'

They seemed reassured. Jean's facial expressions pleaded

desperately with Charles, who said quickly under his breath: 'Don't worry -- relax -- the situation can still be controlled.'

By now about a dozen students had succumbed to the medicine. Their friends were dragging the unconscious ones from the dining room to the foyer, and lying them on the floor. More students began to accuse Charles. A young woman said she began to feel dizzy -- 'but I didn't take any of the tablets.'

'Did you take quinine this morning?' Charles asked.

She had.

'You see?' Charles said to those looking on. Again, his accusers calmed down.

But still more students kept collapsing. At least ten of them were lying in the lobby, now, unconscious or moaning. Charles advised the friends of those who were sick to take them to the lavatories in the basement and induce them to vomit. He had seriously misjudged the dosage. Strange, he had tested a capsule on the English girl, Barbara, and it took her half an hour before she felt tired -- even so, he had reduced the amount of powder in the capsules.

The hotel receptionist was trying to telephone a doctor. Ever since the first woman fell on the floor, she had been frantically dialling phone numbers -- a procedure often without effect in Delhi. The manager of the Vikram was now kneeling by the side of Frederick's wife, who was still lying on a couch in the foyer, and he put a glass of water to her lips using his fingers to prize open her mouth. The woman convulsed and bit down on his thumb, almost cutting it off. He screamed. There was blood everywhere.

Supervised by Charles, students carried their sick friends to the lavatories. Charles had told Jean to go to the car -- he would remain in the foyer, still intent on nabbing the treasurer's bag. It was obsessive -- his desire to stay at the scene.

Some of the students were telephoning the French Embassy. But no one answered. Charles looked on solicitously at the chaos in the foyer -- now twenty students were laid out on the floor or the furniture, moaning, vomiting, or unconscious. Really, he couldn't help smiling to himself. It was ridiculous. It was like a street in Saigon after a bomb had exploded. The

Indian waiters were still panicking, yelling and screaming at each other, and putting their faith in the telephone. Charles could still slip away now, but he stayed. Perhaps his gambling instinct and the bag of sixty passports compelled him to stay. Or an irrational desire to court danger – after all, why did he really need those passports? Three of the students, who had not taken the tablets, began following him and Charles pretended not to notice.

As Charles was walking up the stairs from the toilets in the basement, helping a groaning student, two policemen approached and asked him to come with them into the management's office.

'Of course, officer,' he said. 'What a dreadful thing to happen on their last night in India.'

He explained that he had bought the pills that afternoon from a European doctor called Jean, in Connaught Circus, and he could take them to him now – yes, he agreed there was obviously something fishy about the tablets.

Charles walked to the door with the two young policemen, feeling relieved: they would unwittingly assist his getaway. But the French students who had been keeping him under surveillance stood at the door. No, they insisted to the police. They had finally contacted someone from the French Embassy who said that on no account was the man who had given out the pills to be allowed out of the hotel. The French Consul was on his way.

Charles shrugged and sat down in the foyer with the police. (*Be cool, stay calm, plan ahead.*) The stones? What if he was searched? He took the packet of sapphires and rubies from his bag and, while pretending to scratch an itchy toe, hid them inside his socks.

In the nearby hospital of Greater Kalish, the students started arriving in taxis. Dr Ved Gupta adopted procedures for a mass emergency. It was terrible. Some students were shouting hysterically, others were involuntarily relieving themselves, some were unconscious ... there were only six beds. What could she do? As more bodies arrived, they were stretched out in rows in the corridors.

Superintendent Tuli walked briskly into the lobby. It smelt of vomit. He pushed his way through the mêlée of angry

students and shocked hotel staff. He saw a smiling man sitting between two policemen and surrounded by tourists. Tuli appraised the bearded, dark-eyed suspect. The Interpol photo showed a clean-shaven fugitive but Tuli was riveted by the eyes — the eyes of a man of prey. 'So it is you again,' Tuli said. 'You are behind this disaster.' 'Not a disaster,' the suspect replied, rising politely to his feet, 'just a mix up over some medicines. I can take you to the doctor who did it.' He introduced himself as Daniel.

Tuli was excited. You really are a bloody dangerous criminal, he thought, and now I've got you cornered. Charles kept talking, trying to exonerate himself, but Tuli already knew that making this arrest would crown his career. All those bodies burnt and mutilated, Tuli thought. This man is a monster.

'Put him in handcuffs,' he said

Smiling, Tuli loosened the suspect's belt and lifted his shirt. Five years ago this man had escaped from a hospital in Delhi after an appendix operation. He had been clutching the wound when they caught him.

'You are Charles Sobhraj,' Tuli said, after examining the scar. 'And you're under arrest for murder.'

On an old fishing boat moored in Pattaya Bay, Herman Knippenberg sat in a deck chair in the shade, holding a fibreglass fishing rod. He was not a fisherman, and had only gone along on the tournament out of politeness.

Hot and bored, he stared out over the water and worried about the Sobhraj case. It was uncanny. The man had managed to outwit so many police in so many countries. What a tragic misuse of such a gifted mind, he thought, still puzzled by the motives for the murders and the lazy trail of evidence left behind. At least Nadine and Remy were safely out of the way, now back home in France.

A sharp tug at his line brought him back to the real world. Astonished, Herman watched his fishing line sizzling away while the reel clicked fast.

'Quick, come here. Give me a hand,' he yelled to his companions. But they told him it was against the rules of the tournament, and he struggled for fifteen minutes until, triumphant, he landed a 7½-pound Jack Crevelle.

The following day he drove back with his friends to Bangkok, his record-breaking Jack Crevelle in the icebox. Reaching home, he had just stepped out of the shower when the phone rang.

'We've been trying to contact you,' said an official of the Canadian Embassy.

'I was out of town on a fishing trip.'

'Yes. So were the police in Delhi. They've caught Sobhraj.'

'Well, that's wonderful,' was all Herman could think of to say.

Over the next few days the four other accomplices were picked up. Marie Andrée, whose shoulders and arms were covered in bruises and bites, seemed glad it was over. She wrote out her own statement by hand, much of it implicating Charles and Ajay in the Kanit House murders. Marie Andrée stated that she had not seen Ajay since March, after which, she suggested, 'Charles could have killed him.'

At the hospital of Greater Kalish, the students recovered and were told about the arrest of the man who had given them the tablets. Several of them shook their heads in dismay. 'Oh no. Not him,' they said, 'we will go to the police. He must be set free - he's our friend.'

The news of Charles's and Marie Andrée's arrest was announced in the French daily newspaper *France Soir*, the same week that the *Paris Match* cover with its photograph of the 'diabolic' duo stopped Alain Benard in his tracks on the way home from work.

Benard cut out the news story and added it to his voluminous files - the neat green boxes on his living room bookshelves that contained all the documents relating to Charles Sobhraj.

Not long after, Charles wrote to him from Tihar Jail.

Alain, perhaps you can understand when I tell you that throughout all this, I have been searching only for a way to live. And that although I was often engaged in illegal activities and sometimes lost my principles, I had a certain respect for the human state. I tell you, Alain, I

promise you, I did not *kill*. I am not a liar. During the few years that Chantal spent with me, she will tell you that she *never* saw me do any physical harm to anyone. So they are wrong who say that I have committed all those murders for a few hundred or a few thousand dollars. As you know, I have never been short of illegal ways to make money. Why, during a whole year, I didn't commit a murder, and then, in three months ... nine or ten ... murders, all in one blow, in which the profit didn't total more than five thousand dollars? If that were the case, it means I did it not for the money, but simply to kill. So Alain, above all, despite these stupid accusations, I tell you it is not true. They are all liars and now I risk the loss of my head.

So I have said to myself ... 'My little Charlie, this is serious. It is necessary to play a dangerous game. You can't weaken, you can't let yourself cry, or they will hear you and think you are becoming soft. It is necessary to FIGHT!'

Yes, Alain, I remain Asiatic above all. I am obliged to accept the rules of this new game, and to smile, and to go forward. Whoever will live, will see. Isn't that so? So I prefer to live, and to see.

A hot summer breeze blew through the open window of Benard's flat in Paris, carrying up the sounds of the street. Charles's letter, fifteen pages long, was lying on the long cedar table, where in happier days he had so often sat with Benard and talked the night away. Whether or not Charles had committed these murders (and Benard thought it likely — there was no reason for newspapers to invent the crimes) he would still stand by, ready to help if he was needed. The promise he had made in Poissy Jail ten years ago, when Charles was a petty criminal, had not been erased by the magnitude of the allegations.

Benard was no longer a prison visitor. He had seen an inmate being beaten by the guards and had complained to the governor. When nothing was done, he resigned. Yet Benard still honoured his commitment to Charles — he was not a hobby, to be dropped when things went wrong. Benard was not like Hotchand Sobhraj, who had abandoned his son when

he had fled with Chantal to Asia six years ago, leaving a wreckage of bounced cheques and unpaid bills.

Then Hotchand had written to Benard:

Once a blind boy was sitting on a stone near a pond. All the other boys were swimming, chatting, and laughing. A priest passed by and saw this boy sitting alone. He saw he was blind and took pity on him. The priest prayed to the mighty God to give him eyes so he could swim too. God agreed and gave the boy light.

The boy jumped in the pond for a swim and began to beat the other boys. 'He's dangerous,' they all said and ran away. The boy came out of the pond and began to beat the priest, who asked God to make the boy like he was before. God did so and said to the priest, 'I saw this boy was dangerous to humans so I took away his light.'

Dear Benard, you have done the same thing with this boy. Let him be in prison rather than let him be freed. This was your great mistake. You thought he would do good when he will be freed. He begged you, and you took pity on him. This is the result of your mercy.

No, the charge is false, Benard thought. All criminals are entitled to their full legal rights, even Charles. Blame? Who? Hotchand — for fathering the child? God — for allowing him to be born? Alain Benard would remain the prisoner's friend, and he sent to the Indian jail the same little red Bible that he had presented to Charles ten years before. Every human being, Benard believed, including this ill-fated man, had the right to one friend standing by to the end. His own role was merely to accompany Charles in his fate. Benard could not explain *why* he did what he did — it was an act of faith — and the act itself was its own explanation.

In the compound of Old Delhi's Tishasari courthouse, a battered jungle-green bus pulled up. Two dozen men in berets and military fatigues clambered out, engulfing the five Europeans in their custody.

Brandishing .303 rifles, the party looked like a firing squad as it straggled across the courtyard past water-sellers and turbanned lawyers at tables beneath black umbrellas, gazing

at the scene from across their antique typewriters. It was July 5, 1977, one year after Charles Sobhraj's arrest at the Vikram Hotel.

In the corridors which honeycombed the courthouse, the crowds moved back against the walls as the soldiers and prisoners passed by. It began as a whisper, but others soon picked up the cry and repeated it louder: 'It's Mr Charles! It's Mr Charles!' Thin brown boys in ragged white clothes ran along behind; women in chains on the floor looked up with frightened eyes as he moved down the corridor, like a maharaja.

He wore a beige T-shirt crudely cut to a V at the neck, blue trousers, tennis shoes, and a gold Omega watch. Rumours flew: a fortune in gems was hidden in his teeth and the tarnished charm he wore round his neck was said to be a cachet of rubies; he was a karate black belt who could jump twelve feet in the air; guns were hidden in his cell; and he could read minds and hypnotise a man in an instant. All these myths Charles encouraged; he also hinted at the existence of bank accounts in various countries under false names, and in the days that followed he was to display casually to his captors and onlookers a telegram from Bangkok which read '180 thousand dollars transferred as requested. Bob.'

Charles walked oddly, like a lithe cripple, shackled and graceful. Thick steel cuffs circled his ankles and these were attached to an iron bar twenty inches long, which locked onto the belt of his trousers. His left wrist was cuffed and connected by a long chain to the belt of one of the soldiers, who was being dragged behind his prisoner like a dog being walked in a downpour.

At Charles's side, wearing a red shirt-dress with epaulets and carrying her sharp chin in the air, Marie Andrée scowled at the ogling bystanders. She was pale, and very thin now after a hunger strike to protest against her prison conditions. Her face had been twisted by the experience. While in old photographs she looked bright and serene; now her lips knotted into weird shapes and her expressions were sudden and violent as though the soul within was in torment, yet trying hard to make the correct human faces.

Behind them, under separate guard, her long brown hair down to her waist, was Mary, the freckle-faced Australian

girl, who was giggling with Barbara, the English woman 'without scruples' who wore a spray of jasmine in her hair and a loose cotton shirt. The eyes of most of the soldiers focused on the outline of her bra.

As witnesses for the prosecution, Mary and Barbara were not allowed any contact with Charles Sobhraj and Marie Andrée Leclerc, but Charles's ability to function in jail meant that letters passed between him and the rest of the gang. A few weeks before today's court appearance after giving State's evidence at the opening of the trial, the two women were found unconscious in their cells. Both had overdosed themselves with sleeping pills and insecticide. Soon after that, a false beard, moustache, twenty thousand rupees and a guard's uniform had been found hidden in Charles's cell.

At the rear of the medieval procession, also chained to a soldier, was Jean Dhuisme, his high forehead creased in despair and his tall frame hunched.

The third-floor courtroom was packed. An elderly lawyer with silver hair and a high, starched collar, a type not often seen in a lowly magistrate's court, stood up to speak and his impeccable Etonian accent rang out above the hubbub.

'A scurrilous item in the *Times of India* has stated that my client was a member of a notorious gang of international criminals,' the lawyer was saying to the judge. 'It is an outrage and I intend to file an objection in the High Court.'

In the dock, pressed close to Marie Andrée and surrounded by soldiers, Charles whispered to a Sikh, a short, plump criminal lawyer with a scar on his face. The lawyer whispered to other dignitaries and the opening of the day's proceedings was postponed while the magistrate sat fiddling with his pen looking vaguely at the ceiling. Charles walked to the back of the court. 'Don't be fooled by all these chains,' he said to the two new visitors to the courtroom, smiling and extending his hand. 'It was much worse in Greece.' He sat down on the bench and rifled through his shoulder bag for some papers, fragments of an autobiography he had written in jail.

'Just ignore these children,' Charles was saying now to his visitors, shrugging at the soldiers lining the bench each side of him, 'Indians are all quantity and no quality.'

'In some ways my life has been a protest against the French legal system which stole so many years of my youth,' he

continued to the visitors, his eyes burning, defiant, like those of a political martyr. 'All I wanted was to win them back.' There were more interruptions and whisperings of courtroom strategy, while Charles surreptitiously handed out notes to his criminal friends – haggard young French and Americans, recently released from Tihar Jail, who loitered within earshot ready to do his bidding, perhaps slip him a file inside a box of felt pens or to post the message to his younger brother, Guy, who had been released from jail, that it was time to fly to Delhi and help him escape.

Reporters from the international news services, Reuters, UPI, and Agence France were covering the trials. The publicity had made Charles a world-famous criminal. Writers from foreign capitals had visited him in Tihar offering book contracts and one of them had been quoted in the local press discussing the story's suitability for Hollywood: 'Warren Beatty or Robert de Niro would be perfect to play the Gautier role,' he said, 'and as for Monique, Jane Fonda would fit the bill.'

When the court formally convened, Mary Ellen Eather, the Australian, was led through her statement by the prosecution lawyer. After a year in jail she now spoke with an Indian accent and the two voices murmured on, accompanied by the clatter of the court typewriter. Sometimes, when the stenographer asked her to repeat what she had said, Charles would prompt her from the dock.

When Mary's testimony reached a crucial stage, she recanted. She wept, she shouted, and she claimed that she did not actually see Charles pour a sleeping draught in the Frenchman's chicken curry and that the police had blackmailed her to incriminate the defendant. 'A beautiful story,' Charles whispered under his breath while the prosecution lawyers huddled in disarray.

'Now you can see why I'm not so worried, eh? In the end they will have to acquit me. And the judge – he is on my side.'

The two visitors smiled politely. Surely this was a cheap boast? A tall Sikh with a long, black beard walked up to Charles and offered his congratulations. 'We have finished drafting your petition. It is a wonderful argument. I will take it to the highest court in the land.'

'It is to get my shackles removed,' Charles explained.

'Yes. They are barbaric,' the Indian said glancing at the leg-irons. 'And so bad for his health.'

Two policemen from Crime Branch stopped and one of them asked: 'How are you, Charles?'

'Always the best,' he replied, and it seemed to be so. In fetters he had found himself again.

Listen, you judges! There is another madness as well; and it comes *before* the deed. Ah, you have not crept deep enough into this soul!

Thus says the scarlet judge: 'Why did this criminal murder? He wanted to steal.' But I tell you: his soul wanted blood not booty: he thirsted for the joy of the knife!

But his simple mind did not understand this madness and it persuaded him otherwise. 'What is the good of blood?' it said. 'Will you not at least commit a theft too? Take a revenge?'

And he hearkened to his simple mind: its words lay like lead upon him — then he robbed as he murdered. He did not want to be ashamed of his madness.

Frederick Nietzsche
Thus Spake Zarathustra

When the authors had finished talking with Sobhraj in Delhi, they went to see his mother in Marseilles. She wept when she was shown a photo of her son in chains and she passionately pressed his image to her lips.

'Was he smiling when you last saw him?' she asked. 'Was he happy?'

Yes, she was assured.

'In that case, he must surely have done it,' she said. 'Don't you see? He gets his strength from the spirits of the people he killed.'

Sobbing, she gazed again at the photo and said 'My son — he has gone to the devil.'

Supper with the Devil

Richard Neville ... A Personal Epilogue

The authors first met Charles in Delhi on July 5 1977, while he was in custody, and they talked with him at erratic intervals, often several hours a day, for a month. On September 13, after side trips to Thailand and Nepal, the authors resumed contact with Charles and remained in Delhi conducting interviews with him for another four weeks.

I went to Delhi wanting to establish rapport and maintain objectivity in my relations with Charles Sobhraj but soon realized that this was impossible. His talent lay in making the two aims contradictory. From the first meeting, Charles was charming, urbane, self-assured and, despite the rigours of his incarceration, undaunted. He would tell the truth, he said, and not gloss over the crimes. As for his motive, 'A mystery must always remain.' Many of his personal qualities — will-power, intelligence, charisma — were those which normally command respect and so I was placed in a dilemma. Could I loathe the crimes and still like the criminal? As much as I struggled against being beguiled by Charles, the special circumstances of our meeting in Delhi, my quest for rapport, and my own past, all tugged me towards Charles and his bait of friendship.

The interviews took place in a small stone cell on the edge of the court buildings, while languid guards sat on each side of the bench toying with obsolete rifles. Outside the window another group of uniformed men were ready, apparently, to catch Charles if he hurtled through the iron bars. Outside we could see a huge fig tree which had sprouted signs advertising legal services. Under its shade stenographers in plastic sandals sat pecking out affidavits on rickety typewriters. During the first few days of the interviews, Charles skirted the subject of the murders and reminisced about his early buccaneering days; the great escapes, the search for his father, the mad

dashes across Asia with his first wife, Chantal, and his adored child, Madhu. As he talked, often touching me with his hands to make a point, cajoling, confiding, rounding off an anecdote with a poetic turn of phrase, wisecracking about India, gloating at the venial weaknesses of those around him, I sometimes felt myself losing contact with the real world – the world in which Charles was 'evil'.

In Delhi a topsy-turvy morality seemed to reign – former prisoners became prime ministers and the flash of a few rupees could open any door, perhaps the door of Tihar Jail. From our first meetings with the top security prisoner, the police began tracking our movements, which seemed an understandable precaution. They probably wanted to eavesdrop on any escape attempt plans, we thought, or to supplement their prosecution dossier with incriminating information Charles might be giving us. 'No, they will just ask you for money,' Charles said, and, as so often with his predictions about human behaviour, he was right. The peeling sign on the wall read, 'Report instances of corruption to the officer on duty,' as a senior policeman tried to sell us documents relating to Charles for \$7,000 plus a percentage of book royalties.

During the time I spent with him, I could sense Charles probing for a foothold in my trust. 'As long as I can talk to people, I can manipulate them,' he would say in the soothing voice of an old and close friend, implying that our own relationship was immune to tricks. He mounted a siege against my detachment by trying to discredit everyone else, keying his observations to match what he guessed were my own prejudices. Drawing from psychoanalysis, global politics, and Buddhism, Charles created for himself a cosy world of rationalization and extenuating circumstances which justified his criminal career. Sensing that he had softened me up he became more open about his past acts. His more murderous atrocities still not discussed, I began to wonder if there was something wrong with me, a bandit's groupie, smiling and nodding in complicity with the self-glorifying tales of his past. Had I no conscience? In chains, surrounded by soldiers, his future bleak, I could almost sympathize with the prisoner in those first few days.

His claims that his life was a protest against the French legal

system or that his love for Vietnam and Asia motivated his criminal career are absurd, but as tools of psychological manipulation they were very effective. Having once stood myself in the dock on trifling charges of possessing a speck of marijuana and publishing an allegedly obscene magazine, I was not put off by his anti-authoritarian diatribes. The more I nodded and smiled and took notes, the more Charles began, with the air of a war hero reliving old skirmishes, to pour forth stories of his traps, frauds, and poisonings. Afterwards, almost without pausing for breath, Charles would issue offhand requests for pens, notebooks, pop records, and biscuits. He confided his worry about the prison diet of lentils, then asked me to bring him some vitamins. 'Vitamins!' my co-author fumed at the end of the day, 'Give him laxatives!'

Julie Clarke had recoiled from Charles and concentrated on the detectives, diplomats and the relatives of victims. Watching Charles from the sidelines, she found his charm easily resistible in the face of the evidence that described his cruelty.

At the end of July, three handsome young men landed in Delhi, having accepted a contract from Charles to break him out of Tihar Jail. In their own minds they had come to do a noble and daring deed. Guy Roussel had not seen his elder brother since sharing a cell in Koridalos Jail, Greece, before Charles was transferred to Aegina Island from which he later escaped. Accompanying Guy on this trip was another ex-inmate of a Greek jail, Christian, the young Corsican who had last looked at Charles from the floor of a police van in Piraeus as he was rolling around groaning and nursing his appendectomy wound. There was a third man, Tuti, a tough, comical ex-inmate of Tihar who, like the other two, had been spell-bound by Charles's role of the invincible desperado. The three men had brought steel cutters and false passports; all they needed now was a getaway car and the right opportunity. Charles had set aside their fee of \$5,000. In order not to arouse the curiosity of the Indian police, Guy decided not to say he was Charles's half-brother and to turn up to speak to Charles in court incognito, posing as a writer from Paris.

'Charles decided to become a criminal when he was twelve,' Guy told us earnestly, 'so, to a great extent he has

succeeded in life.' None of these men believed Charles was a murderer. 'Charles often told me it was crazy to kill,' Guy said. 'Anyway, he was so good with drugs, he didn't need to.' We listened to them while they passed joints around, discussing crime as a career, distinguishing, for our sakes, acts against society from acts against man. It was evident that they were all in love with Charles, in love with his glamorous myth of social defiance and obsessed by the man of a thousand faces. To Guy and his friends, Charles was a man of great self-control, an indomitable musketeer, who celebrated a life of criminal adventure. The gang's devotion to Charles was mirrored by scruffier ex-cons we saw hanging around the courts, waiting to do his bidding, post his letters and bring him books.

'He is a man who shows by example how much it is possible for one man to do,' Christian said wistfully, watching the blue rings of smoke entwine with the ceiling fan, 'a man who is his own goal.'

In court the morning after he arrived in Delhi, Guy Roussel appeared, sleek and grim, ostentatiously carrying cameras and reporter's notebooks, all ready to launch the next stage of a plan to pluck their hero from the midst of what seemed like the entire Indian army. But Charles, who always has a tight rein on his emotions, took one look at his solemn brother, and his face flooded with joy. He rushed to embrace him, dragging the chained guard behind. Kissing Guy, he shouted to the court, 'My brother! Look! My brother has come from Paris.' And he and Guy sat down to talk, Charles was so unashamedly emotional that all the people in the courtroom, either from courtesy or embarrassment, averted their eyes.

Even Marie Andrée was beaming. Charles was happy, so she was too. Thin and pale, wearing a pearl crucifix, her face showed her bitterness. She was strong, determined, and still in love with Charles. 'This year in jail with him has been better than the two outside,' she told me. Charles had already passed on to us a bundle of the letters she had written him in jail. Passionate, masochistic, she wrote about missing his body and wanting to give him children. Sometimes, at the end of the day after seeing him in court, she would pour out her feelings. 'Just a few minutes with you have transformed my

day, my week. There is sun in my heart ... I pray to God that we have more time together, and I don't give a damn that all the world knows that I love you and want to live with you.'

But Marie Andrée did give a damn. In interviews she maintained that her only true love was God. She had sympathizers back home in Canada following the case in the daily newspapers. She was getting hundreds of comforting letters, and a journalist from Quebec was writing a book about her plight. As for the events at Kanit House in the previous year, her mind was a blank, she knew nothing. 'A child of ten would not believe her,' Charles whispered one day in exasperation.

Roong flew in from Bangkok. The policeman's young and coquettish daughter sat next to Charles cuddling and kissing him in the guardhouse, as Marie Andrée sobbed on the other end of the bench. An elderly nun was comforting her. 'I'm glad Roong has come,' Marie Andrée hissed through her tears. 'It will prove I am not as close to Charles as people think.' Her secret letters to Charles, which he later passed on to me, became a litany of self-laceration:

Roong is twelve years younger than I, and fresher. You need a woman who can live under any conditions, any climate. As for me, I'm old, tired, rarely dynamic or smiling, with a bitter character that can't adapt due to my advanced age ... Roong must remain with you. The important thing is that you don't find yourself alone, that you have someone who loves you.

Her concern for Charles was redundant as the courtroom swelled with visitors who wanted to interview Charles, to photograph, rescue, or marry him. The trials ground on in their own ponderous pace and were scrupulously fair to the accused. Compared with the startling confessions Charles was making on tape, the proceedings seemed lame and irrelevant. But I admired the prosecutors who rose from desks cluttered with the dust-caked exhibits of ancient jewellery thefts and tried to bring the majesty of the law to bear on Charles's crimes. There were occasional highlights, as when a silver-haired barrister cross-examined Barbara Sheryl Smith: 'I put it to you that you are a hot and sexy girl,' he boomed.

She stood placidly in green baggy trousers, sipping a soda.

'And you know all about Mandrax?' the barrister said.

A lawyer's objection was overruled.

'Of course she knows what Mandrax is — she would be a disgrace to her tribe if she didn't. Is it not true, Miss Smith, that young people in Western countries use them as aphrodisiacs?'

And so on, as the junior lawyers stroked their trousers and listened with glee. In a city where women are invisible, Charles's girlfriends and accomplices added to his aura of glamour and power.

After almost a month in Delhi, Charles had still not directly answered my questions about the brutal murders of travellers in Thailand and Nepal. 'If I have ever killed,' he would reply with his cryptic smile, 'or have ordered killings, then it was purely for reasons of business, just a job, like a general in the army.'

'But the mutilations, Charles, the burnings?' I inquired.

'Either it is sadism,' he would say, still keeping the discussion abstract, 'or it is an advertisement. You know, a warning to other parties in the heroin business.'

But Charles had contracted with Bill Heinecke, a man who lived in Bangkok and had sold the story to our publishers, to disclose fully his role in the killings. I was becoming impatient. The legal situation was unusual. Charles had undertaken to implicate himself in murders for which he had still not been brought to trial. The local authorities had stated publicly that he would only be turned over to the Thai police after he had served all sentences imposed on him in India, which could take ten or twenty years. 'By then Thailand will be communist, and they'll burn the records,' Charles said. Finally, on August 3 he announced, 'I have taken the decision to speak to you about the cleanings, Richard, but on one condition.' His voice was soft, tense and intimate. 'You must never give evidence against me in a court of law.'

'But it will all be in the book, Charles.'

'Your book won't stand up alone in court, not even a Thai court.'

Believing that with all the judicial uncertainties ahead a book in the public domain could well turn out to be the

strongest evidence against him, and anxious for 'the story', I agreed and flicked on the switch of my concealed cassette recorder. Unlike the guards, Charles had detected its presence but made no objection as long as I guaranteed to keep the tapes from the police.

Listening to Charles recall his conversations with Teresa Knowlton, from her last drive to Pattaya to how he made her drink the drug-laced coffee, I felt like a conspirator and hoped that he could not read the shock and amazement on my face. It must be true I thought, although at that time Teresa Knowlton meant nothing more than a name on an autopsy report. His remembered dialogue flowed so smoothly, and was interspersed with cruel asides. 'It's funny, Richard, Teresa didn't like to drink coffee, but I told her that this time she must make an exception.'

When Charles had finished confessing, he reminded me of my commitment, 'And so I put my trust in you, Richard,' as though he had chosen me for a responsible job. Standing up, ready to be led from the room to the police bus, he laughed and said, 'I hope all this won't hang me one day.'

Outside the courts the cracked pavement of Parliament Street was oozing mud from the monsoon rains. Sikhs on motor scooters wore plastic shower caps to keep their turbans dry. The dirt-streaked buses were still painted with the faded slogans of Indira Gandhi's Emergency, 'Less talk, more work'. On the pavement an old man in a loin cloth lay dying as the rush hour crowds stepped over his body. Charles strolled down the corridor of guards to the jail bus, mounted the steps, and waved. I felt sick at heart, excited, confused. Local lives seemed so cheap, and yet thousands of dollars were being spent to bring Charles to justice, other thousands to send the authors to Delhi to bring home the story. The old man twitched on the ground, but I cared more about the tape in my shoulder bag.

Late that night Charles smuggled a message to our hotel room from Tihar Jail:

Just coming back from the Court after I spoke with you and I must say that I'm very disturbed. I have really to fight with myself to speak the truth about my illegal life.

I feel I am betraying not only others, but also myself, and my rules. Like today, as soon as you left me, I was feeling bad, like I am unfaithful to myself.

What is happening between you and me, it is like the surgeon and the patient.

Yes, but I wondered, which one of us is which?

In the ensuing days, Charles confessed to the five known murders in Thailand and two in Nepal, often dropping such helpful hints as how to stop petrol evaporating from a body before setting it alight or giving me a demonstration of how he broke Vitali Hakim's neck.

'But how do you feel about what you did, Charles?' I would ask as my horror increased. 'What if I showed you now the photographs of the bodies of your two Dutch house-guests?' The close-ups of the charred remains of Cocky and Henk seemed to haunt everyone who saw them. Did Charles ever have nightmares? I was looking at his strong, sinewy hands, which had cracked necks, as he answered.

'You ask such a question from the point of view of a man of one culture who has seen little. I have travelled a lot and seen a lot. I am a Vietnamese, and my heart is hardened.'

As for my own heart, it still thumped when he recounted the slow cat and mouse deaths of his victims, but I felt sure there was a rational explanation. Charles exalted logic, and he once echoed my own search for his motives. 'Clack! Clack! Clack! All these deaths in a row.' He asked rhetorically: 'Suddenly, in just a few months. Why?'

Why? That is what Julie and I desperately asked ourselves, and we now sought our answer from Charles.

He was a businessman, not a criminal, he maintained, and none of his victims was innocent of crime. Most of them were 'heroin junkies' Charles claimed, or involved at some level in the international drug trade. By so lumping his victims together, Charles minimized his crimes and purified his intentions. In his own mind, he portrayed himself as a man with a mission. He said he was acting on behalf of a syndicate of Chinese businessmen in Hong Kong who wanted to take control of the heroin trade. His story went that his bosses wanted to flood the Western market with heroin 'just like the Japanese did with transistor radios', lower the price, and

increase their profits. But that wasn't all, Charles had something else to say, 'much too important to put in the book'. Like a politician briefing a select group of journalists with an 'off the record' background, Charles told me that his syndicate in Hong Kong was financed from Peking. 'We Asians have long memories, Richard, and the Chinese do not forget the Opium War. It's like slow-motion ping-pong, and pushing heroin on the West is the Chinese counter-attack.' Charles said the syndicate had paid him \$200,000 for his services.

In the world of Hong Kong heroin Triads anything is possible, I thought. On the other hand, Charles Sobhraj seemed to operate flamboyantly alone. He seemed an unlikely choice for an undercover hit man.

'Most people will still think you killed for the passports and the money,' I told him.

'In that case,' he replied, 'compare all the travellers' cheques I stole with all the money I was spending at Kanit House — impossible. You know by now that I don't need to kill to rob.' He pointed out that he had stolen much more money from the Frenchmen he had drugged than from the ones he had killed. Accounting procedures were of no help in trying to unravel the mystery of Charles's life in Bangkok since no records were kept of his gambling losses in Asia.

If Charles had really been commanded to kill the young travellers in Thailand and Nepal, then, how did he find out their names? I wondered. A man he had questioned and killed before he killed Teresa, a man who was an earlier link in the death chain, had given him a list of couriers, he claimed. It was with great relish that he described the murder of the middle-aged Frenchman, André Breugnot, whom, he said, he had drowned in a bathtub in Chiangmai. In this account, although we did not include it all in the book, Charles gave blow by blow details of his interrogation of André Breugnot. Our subsequent investigation in Thailand confirmed the essential facts of this death. Then the question arose: who had first told Charles about André Breugnot, if, in fact, anyone had. Perhaps Breugnot was merely an innocent tourist.

'To reveal any more would cost me my life,' he said, 'but there was even one other cleaning job before Breugnot, the first link in the chain, the one who told me about the next

three.' This was a man who had supposedly told Charles about the impending arrival in Bangkok of André Breugnot, Teresa Knowlton, and Vitali Hakim. Breugnot, allegedly, also knew about the other two. Although I would have preferred more verifiable evidence than mysterious bodies, I kept pushing for the details of the so-called 'first link'.

Even then, the grand motives of Charles's claims did not ring true. He was an unlikely company man. At that time, neither Charles nor we knew of the existence of the Dutch couple's travel journal which later seemed to exonerate them from Charles's claim that they were heroin traffickers. After many months of investigation, Teresa Knowlton, despite her adventurous youth, seemed to us to be a genuine Buddhist novice on her way to a monastery.

Charles boasted of his lack of remorse and presented such a picture of bubbling self-confidence that we tried to find a question which would expose his own shaky morality to himself. In the guard-house I asked Charles how he would feel if Madhu, his daughter, grew up and married someone like him. There was silence.

'I would not like it,' he said finally. Then came the rationalization; 'I have been in this business only because of the circumstances of my life. If they had been different ...' he smiled and shrugged, 'You see, basically, I'm honest, but this environment oppresses me.' The stifling of his feelings over the years had unbalanced him, he said, and that was why he was now cultivating his love for Roong, whom he wanted to marry. He wanted to will himself to have feelings.

'With feelings, you might look back at your past in a different light?' I suggested.

'No, I will just block it out, just like I close one door and open another.' Was this an admission that he was not happy with his deeds?

'No, to go back would be sordid or masochistic. I have already taken from the past what is best for me, what helps me live in the present and prepare for the future. If I play back a murder, it will be to see what I have learned from the method. I won't even notice the body.'

'And what makes a man a murderer?'

'Either they have too much feeling and cannot control

themselves, or they have no feelings. It is one of the two.'

Roong, who was sitting to Charles's right, would tug at his hand to draw his attention to any insolence from one of the guards crowded around them. These men suddenly stood to attention, saluting the fine featured Brahmin who had just walked into the room.

'Hello, Charles,' he said, extending his hand. 'So Roong is here, just like a faithful wife. Heh, heh, heh. How are you?'

'The same as I was in the lock-up,' Charles said. 'I'm always the same, always smiling. Are you impatient to get my head?'

Superintendent Tuli was somewhat embarrassed by the question, a question which did not suit his jovial mood. 'To get your head? Oh, no! Heh, heh, heh.'

'As I already told you, Mr Tuli, we should deal in business terms, not in feelings. I already think you have put your feelings into my case, huh, some personal feeling?'

'Some personal feeling?'

Both men's smiles were broad and false.

'You know, Mr Tuli, everyone in life has to play a game, and we go by its rules. But you, I think, you have used unfair rules against me,' Charles said, glancing down at the iron bars on his leg and then at me to ensure that I was listening.

'Not at all. Not one! Why do you say that?' With the mild dignity of a Brahmin, Tuli smiled again, unruffled.

'What I like about you, Mr Tuli, is that you can lie as well as I can and still stay smiling.'

'Heh, heh, heh,' he chortled.

After Tuli had left, Charles said to me, 'Tuli tries to keep me in jail, but he knows one day I will go. It is amusing.'

'And you will be hunted.'

'I always was.'

'And in the end you get caught. Your history shows a pattern of capture.'

'That's because as soon as I get out I work again.'

'Why would it be different if there's a next time?'

'Different? Yes. Because I have my capital, the stake that I always wanted from the first, when I left France with Chantal. All the business I was doing in Thailand, all the cleanings, I will never have to work again. When I get out, I will just spend money to change my face, lie low, and run some busi-

nesses. After fifteen years I can emerge and say to the world, "Hello, everyone, I'm Charles Sobhraj."

For the moment, however, Charles was not to speed off in his getaway car. The breakout gang, Guy and his two friends, had over-indulged on the local hashish with the consequent loss of efficiency. The whole operation had begun badly when Charles had blown Guy's cover. After that first embrace in the court, the Indian press had publicized the arrival of the 'gang from Paris', and the sleepy guards with their unloaded 303s were replaced by karate experts and sharpshooters with Russian machine guns. To be on the safe side, the Immigration Department confiscated the passports of the three dashing rescuers -- more Stooges than Musketeers -- and put them in jail. Once out on bail, Charles insisted that they go ahead with the breakout; but squabbles erupted over money, then recriminations, threats, and the three young men slunk out of Delhi under a barrage of Charles's curses.

Sobhraj was held under regulations which banned prison visits. On our last day in Delhi a lawyer had managed to arrange for us to see him in the visitors' room at Tihar Jail. He looked as jaunty then as he did on the first day we arrived. His tactics to persuade us to prolong our visit made me suspicious that he had become dependent on our attention.

Above the sound of weeping visitors, I asked him again about the mysterious American, supposedly the first link in the chain of his victims. In dribs and drabs, a story emerged about a bearded young man he had taken to Pattaya in September 1975. Near the spot where he claimed to have drowned Teresa, Charles questioned the American who allegedly told him about André Breugnot, Teresa Knowlton, and Vitali Hakim.

'Under my shirt I had a gun, a flat gun, not a revolver, and I took it out and shot him four times, three in the heart, and one in the head.'

'Did you say anything to him first?'

'Yes, that I was sorry, but I had to do it.' He laughed. 'After, I put him in a blanket, the hole was ready for him. In fact, there were two holes. The first one was too close to the sea, so we dug another. I was with a Chinese. You can still find

M
a brief about
M

M

XIV

Bangkok

1) I sent to her airline ticket Montreal - Bangkok by telex - I paid it - (about 1000 dollars)

2) During about 25 days before her coming, I used to ~~call~~ phone her every day from Hongkong - Singapore then Bangkok -

3) When she came in Bangkok, I told her on the first show (in Rajah Hotel) of her coming, that to every body she would say her name was Monique and to those she would be my wife and to others she would be my secretary. And that she would have to listen to me as with the business I was in I had to take care of my security - she agreed -

4) She has been helping fully in taking the passports of the couple of Australians LOPIHORA -

5) in none of her letters to her family did she ever mention anything about the illegal activities -

A page from one of Charles's many letters to the authors from Tihar Jail. This begins a detailed account of his relations with Marie Andrée, whom he still calls Monique. Charles sets out to prove that she was aware of his 'illegal activities' from the start and that she had plenty of opportunities to leave him.

it there, the old hole with the shovel inside, even after all the rains. I will show you.'

As the guards stood by having given up attempting to follow the rapid flow of English, Charles leaned over and drew a crude map of a strip of Pattaya beach in my notebook and indicated approximately where the American was buried. The map has since been passed on to Thai Interpol.

When our visit was over, Charles accompanied us, like a gracious host, as we walked from Tihar's visitors' room to the courtyard. The front gate of the jail suddenly swung open for a truck to enter. 'See how easy it would be,' Charles said, looking out at the dry road across the plains where children waited in resignation for something to happen. 'All I need is a car outside. Inside there's already a gun.'

Julie said goodbye to him. He looked deeply into her eyes and asked, 'Why are you so paranoid about me?'

During the following year, while we were writing this book, Charles kept in touch with us. He sent the report of an investigator he had hired to shadow Roong. It said she had been spending his money on another man. Charles was furious and their betrothal collapsed.

Charles posted us three pages of evidence in a long, tedious code, which incriminated Marie Andrée, the most telling of which was the date and place that Marie Andrée had posed as Teresa Knowlton and cashed \$810.00 of Teresa's cheques. This information matched the bank stamps on the cheques retrieved from American Express. He warned afterwards, 'But I will deny under oath that I ever told you about this.'

And so no one is safe from his savage machinations. His world hatred is not like the slash of a knife in a moment of fury, but a constant accretion of schemes and betrayals. As Hazlitt said of Iago, Charles is 'a man with the most perfect indifference to moral good or evil, or rather with a decided preference for the latter, because it falls more readily in with his favourite propensity, gives greater zest to his thoughts and scope to his actions.'

I had come to Delhi with a crude theory of Charles as a child of colonialism revenging himself on the counter-culture. Instead, I was dazzled by a brilliant psychopath.

Charles is still behind bars in Delhi, but if his past is any indication, his game is not played out. It will be on one of those lazy tropical afternoons when interest in the case has waned, and the flies buzz and the guards doze in the heat, that Charles Sobhraj will make his move.

Ten years later: an update

The conquest of Tihar Jail

'Lord, what will be my next karma? Give me a break. I have suffered enough' — Charles Sobhraj, when asked for his epitaph.

'I read the book three times and felt sorry for Charles' — Carol K, one of several women who visited Sobhraj in jail and tried to marry him.

'He will never get out of jail' — Superintendent Tuli.

'I can escape any day I want' — Charles Sobhraj.

In March 1986, in a corner of Tihar Jail, Delhi, the warders found a sick cat. It was unconscious and still breathing. The men nursed the animal, and in three days it had fully recovered.

A few days later, in the early afternoon of Sunday, March 17, a white Ambassador car drove to the main gate of Tihar. One of its passengers was David Hall, a suave young Englishman who had briefly resided at Tihar, and was now out on bail on charges of heroin smuggling. Like many other prisoners, David Hall had formed a close relationship with Tihar's most celebrated inmate, Charles Sobhraj, and since his release, Hall had continued to run errands for Sobhraj.

'Today is a special day,' Hall told the two Tamil guards at the gate as he slipped them a one-hundred rupee note, 'it is Charles Sahib's birthday.'

With Hall was Raju Bhatnagar, another former cellmate of Sobhraj, who remained unrecognised despite his notoriety as an abductor of the rich. Bhatnagar had been 'accidentally' released from Tihar two months before, despite thirty-six charges against him, including seven murders and nineteen abductions.

Piled on the car's back-seat was the 'birthday feast': apples, chocolates, custard puddings, local delicacies and five kilos of grapes. The guards accepted an offer of fruit. Although visits were prohibited on Sunday afternoons, the Ambassador was allowed to proceed through the outer gate and along a narrow perimeter road to the precincts of Jail Number Three.

Minutes later, Hall and Bhatnagar carried the boxes of fruit and sweets into the office of the Assistant Superintendent, Mr S.R. Yadev. Sitting on the desk in animated conversation with Yadev was Sobhraj, still lean and fit after ten years inside, but now balding. The loud exchange of birthday greetings attracted six other warders into the room, as well as two 'on duty' prisoners. The treats were unpacked and passed around. Charles ate some cakes (later thought to have been marked), and left the room. 'I'll get my friends,' he said.

Gatherings of this kind were against prison rules, but Charles' soirees had become legendary, and were a regular and welcome respite from drab custodial Sundays. By the time Charles and his guests had returned, Yadev and the others were already suffering the groggy effects of the chloral hydrate and medazepam which had been injected into the food.

Watched over by a smiling Sobhraj, the prisoners tied up the guards and sealed their mouths with tape. One of the warders, Anand Prakash, was taken as a decoy, and the rest were padlocked inside the office. Four of the prisoners joined Sobhraj and his two accomplices as they headed for the car. When they reached the towering steel gate of the courtyard, Charles barked an order in Hindi to a stray and frightened inmate: 'Stay in your cell and shut up!' He then slammed the gate of the courtyard and turned the key. His forty-second birthday was going according to plan, even though the official date — April 6 — was still three weeks away.

The captured warder was positioned in the front seat of the Ambassador, and his uniformed arm was left dangling out of the window to avert suspicion from the watch-tower. The white car was unchallenged at the main gate. The guards who had sampled the feast were now lying oblivious beside their rifles.

As the crowded Ambassador passed the prison gardens, the warder — bound, gagged and unconscious — was dumped on the road. The seven criminals let out an almighty cheer.

As he had done so many times before, Charles Sobhraj moved serenely out of the precincts of the jail and into the headlines of the world.

Thousands of miles away on an Australian mountain range, the phone rang in the morning as I was making tea.

'Charles Sobhraj has escaped,' announced a brisk female voice. 'Where do you think he'll head for?' It was ABC Radio.

This was the news I had always expected, and even predicted yet it was still a surprise. 'Where will he go?' persisted the voice, as though I was privy to Sobhraj's plan. South America had always been his dream, I said (he had been brushing up on his Spanish), but considering the extent of border surveillance this escape would unleash, it seemed too risky. Anyway, would he want to... would he really want to leave the land which had become, at last, his mother country, and which, like a mother, had forgiven him?

Technically, he was a free man. All his sentences in India had been served, or overthrown in higher courts. There was just this matter of extradition. Much to his shock and surprise, a Delhi magistrate had recently ruled that there was a prima facie case against him in Thailand. 'It's hell over there,' he told one reporter. 'Thailand is well known for its black laws and its violation of human rights. If I go there, I will be shot with machine guns made in Germany.' Sobhraj appealed the ruling in the High Court.

Outside Tihar, it took fifteen minutes for a rickshaw driver to find the warder's bound and comatose body and sound the alarm. Roadblocks were set up at major intersections; airports, bus stands, railway stations and luxury hotels were put under watch. Delhi's Lieutenant Governor, H.K.L. Kapoor, posted a reward of 25,000 rupees and angrily suspended the jail officials, six of whom were admitted to hospital at the end of the day, still unconscious. Later, warders remembered the cat.

On other occasions, when Sobhraj had miscalculated the dose of soporifics, the result had been disastrous. His arrest at the Vikram Hotel, ten years before, had been sparked off by the premature nausea of a busload of French tourists. The ailing cat, it seemed, had been used as a guinea pig.

In the case of the Vikram, where dozens were drugged and no-one had died, Sobhraj had been sentenced to two years

jail; but in the case of Alan Aaron Jacobs, the Israeli crane-driver found dead in Benares, Sobhraj and Marie Andrée Leclerc had been sentenced to life. The evidence seemed strong: Sobhraj had stolen the dead man's passport and cashed his traveller's cheques. But this conviction was overturned in the High Court in 1983. Sobhraj's reaction was widely quoted: 'Indian law favours the accused'. Even in the case of Luke Solomon, the Frenchman who had been poisoned with chicken curry in Connaught Place — allegedly witnessed by the Australian, Mary Ellen Eather — the wheels of Indian justice finally turned in favour of the defendants, exonerating Sobhraj and Leclerc from an earlier conviction in a lower court. Events seemed to be confirming Sobhraj's boast that he would free himself from India's jails by legal means.

But what about the case of the three Frenchmen picked up on a beach near Goa, drugged, and robbed of their van? We once had a strange meeting in Paris with one of the victims, Eric Damour, who told us of the 'thrilling' night he had spent talking with his assailant. Along with a graphic account of the mugging, he gave us a holiday snap of himself walking on the sand with Sobhraj (photo 18). 'What was funny,' Charles wrote to me later, while he was fighting this case, 'was though their photo had been published in the book, they could not introduce it into evidence, for they didn't have the negative with them. The court just refused to look at it. Indian law really has its own logic, doesn't it?'

Sobhraj despised India, and he used it to his advantage. Soon after publication of our book in 1979, he successfully petitioned the High Court for the removal of the shackles from his leg. These he replaced with a tape recorder strapped to his thigh, and then lulled jail officials to chat about their illegal activities — everything from canteen skimming to petty theft and supplying opium. He took the tape to the Superintendent, put it on his desk and said: 'I am a criminal and you are a criminal, so we should co-operate'. The man agreed.

From then on, it was wine, women and song, with Sobhraj reputed to receive forty per cent commission on all illegal takings. A fee was also extracted whenever Sobhraj referred new prisoners to one of his battery of lawyers. As a disgruntled guard was later to testify, Sobhraj and Marie Andrée Leclerc

had sex twice a week in the Superintendent's office. More recently, he enjoyed 'conjugal visits' from visiting fans.

Sobhraj spoke to the Bangkok Post about our book: 'It wasn't very sympathetic to me, but many of the letters said they thought the authors didn't like me, and I couldn't be as bad as the book said'. Of several proposals of marriage, Sobhraj accepted two. One was from a woman in Perth, the mother of a six year old girl, who said she felt sorry for Charles and wanted to change him. 'I sent a copy of the book to my father,' she told a reporter in Delhi after seeing Sobhraj, 'and asked how he would like this man as a son-in-law.' His answer is not recorded, but the romance eventually faded. The other woman was a Psychology graduate from UCLA, who succumbed to an 'urge to understand him' and even tried to formalise her betrothal with an esoteric Protestant ceremony in Benares, when he was there on trial. She was expelled from India.

In October 1981, the scandal broke of his opulent lifestyle at Tihar; the Superintendent was sacked and Sobhraj sent the incriminating tapes to the High Court. The jail was reorganised, and Sobhraj wrote to me that 'due to my incessant complaints against corruption, the situation has become better for other prisoners'.

In July 1983, the Supreme Court ruled that the unfortunate Marie Andrée Leclerc, his co-accused, should be 'allowed to die in peace in her own country'. Leclerc had contracted ovarian cancer. 'I am innocent, but nobody wants to believe it,' she told reporters before flying home to Quebec. And as for Sobhraj? 'I never saw him kill anyone,' she said, 'but he is sick.' Marie Andrée died in April 1984.

In the years following the publication of the book, Sobhraj wrote me an occasional letter. He was angry with Bill Heinecke, the American businessman based in Bangkok, who had first flown to Delhi and purchased the rights to his story. Sobhraj said he had not received a penny from Heinecke since publication and wanted me to become involved, which of course I wouldn't. Heinecke confirms that his company has not paid any funds to Sobhraj since publication, on legal advice that the contract was breached by the latter's dealings with another writer.

In 1985, Charles asked me to write another book, one focusing on his life since his arrest in Delhi, which I declined. Two years with Sobhraj had been long enough. By now, Julie and I were married with a baby daughter, and wanted to pursue the more positive dimensions of human potential, rather than its darker, tragic side. Looking back, we saw that in our professional involvement with Sobhraj and his world, we had ourselves come dangerously close to being polarised into victim and accomplice, and our personal relationship threatened. To explore this, we prepared an outline for a movie, originally entitled *The Delhi Assignment*. ('What began as a tropical adventure,' we wrote, 'soon threatened everything they had — their love, their integrity, their lives' — which was only a mild exaggeration.) This outline has since been produced as a four-hour TV mini-series, *Shadow of the Cobra*.

Meanwhile Sobhraj had another shadow to contend with — the shadow of the Thai police, who kept pressing for his extradition. Until 1985, Charles had remained confident of legal victory. 'I don't worry much about Thailand,' he wrote to me. 'If I didn't opt for a 'Greece' (his code for a jailbreak), it's because I'm certain to get my freedom by the Indian court.' But in December 1985, two High Court judges upheld the magistrate's decision to allow his extradition. Charles revised his strategy. 'The Greek stuff has always been at my reach,' he wrote, 'but I pushed the idea aside. Now it is really being forced on me. Not that I'm going to take it with pleasure.'

The Thais legal strategy concentrated on two cases. The first was the non-fatal poisoning of the Australian couple at the Railway Hotel in Hua Hin in September 1975. The victims, Russell and Vera Laphorne, had agreed to return to Bangkok and give evidence against Sobhraj. The second case, the murder of the Dutch couple, Cornelia 'Cocky' Hemker and Henricus 'Henk' Bintanja, had already been investigated by the Dutch consul, Herman Knippenberg, who had assembled a mountain of evidence. A key witness, Nadine Gires, was also willing to testify against her former neighbour. When our book was published, he told reporters it was 'ninety per cent accurate', but, as the spectre of Thailand drew near, he gave interviews which distanced himself from the murders and played down the significance of the taped confessions. But we had never

—SOBHRAJ ON BHOPAL—

In 1984, over 3000 people lost their lives in an accident at the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, and thousands more suffered injuries. Soon afterwards, Charles Sobhraj wrote to the authors:

'Have you followed the Bhopal tragedy? Knowing how Indians are negligent and careless (it's a way of life here), I think it's quite unfair to blame the American company. You can't really expect an Indian to respect safety measures. Major accidents are almost a daily affair in India, with hundreds of people killed at a time, but because Union Carbide's an American company, everyone shout on house top.

In India, when you read in the paper that 300 persons have been killed in a train accident, it is not sensational news — it is boring news. And the awards given would be in the range of 2000 rupees for the families of the dead and 500 for the injured. I think everyone knowing India must be laughing at the news of Union Carbide being sued for billions on behalf of Indian families! Take for example an Indian driver, even if his car's tyre has become as thin as a sheet of paper, he won't replace it — no, he would wait till it blows up.

relied exclusively on his word, preferring to use the confessions as a guide to our own investigation.

'I'll be free very soon,' he wrote to me in April 1985. 'Wherever I'll be — I'll contact you. Keep reading the news.' Part of me believed him, and part of me put it down to bravado. Had I known of the extent to which he had been able to re-

establish his control of Tihar Jail, any doubts would have evaporated.

Sobhraj's strategy was the same, his arsenal upgraded. This time, two micro-recorders were strapped to his leg for the purpose of blackmail, and he continued to siphon money from besotted foreign criminals. Inside Tihar, he had forged alliances with key Indian gangsters, some of whom continued to work for him after their release. Women were drawn to his cell: plump divorcees, naive help-mates, ambitious journalists. One young lawyer, Sneh Sengar, visited the jail over sixty times for private consultations. She supplied him with tuna, chocolates and an imported wardrobe of shirts and jeans. Sobhraj was regularly profiled in the press as 'the man who really runs Tihar'.

In his cell was a colour television and other luxuries beyond the reach of successful, law-abiding Indians. He had acquired a Cannon portable typewriter with an extensive memory, on which he printed reams of reports at the touch of a button, to impress the warders. He had begun to negotiate the rent of a house with a telephone, not too far from the jail. The plan was to use a cordless extension to talk to people all over the world. Not long before his escape, I was phoned from Delhi by his new biographer, Kum Kum Chadha, who wanted to 'clarify' my number.

By March 1986, Sobhraj was renowned in Tihar for his 'noisy weekend parties', but outside the jail, he was content to be forgotten. 'I don't want to be in the press,' he uncharacteristically told the *Illustrated Weekly* of India, 'I don't want to say what I'm doing.' Sobhraj preferred to lie low and be seen, merely, as he put it, to be 'eating and sleeping in the jail'. It was during one of these lazy afternoons, with the flies buzzing and the guards in a stupor, that Charles Sobhraj took flight.

The world's media seized on the event, continually re-hashing Sobhraj's life and crimes, and taunting the authorities. The Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, was furious; and the nations of Asia mounted a full-scale manhunt.

Early in April, detectives in Bombay received a tip that Charles was hiding in Goa, the former Portuguese colony on the south west coast. An elite task force of twenty-one police, all posing as tourists, was sent to search the beaches and bars of this famous resort. The operation was so secret that colleagues

were not told of their whereabouts. Even the police in Goa were not alerted. In Panaji, the capital, on Sunday April 6, the task force laid a trap at the seafood restaurant 'O Coquero' — 'The Coconut Tree'.

Two police in sarongs served drinks at the bar, which was crowded with revellers from an afternoon wedding. Two men, one tall and elegantly dressed; the other, shorter, bearded and carrying a briefcase, pushed through the crowd. Sobhraj and his English accomplice, David Hall, had come to book phone calls to Beirut and Paris.

While waiting for the calls, they ordered two beers and sat down. They were watched from the next table by Inspector Madhukar Zende, who had arrested Sobhraj fourteen years before after a drug-mugging at Bombay's Taj Mahal Hotel. Zende, who was dressed as a tourist, instantly recognised his quarry. What happened next sounds like a B-grade thriller, but in Indian police circles, such dialogue is usually a sign of authenticity...

'There you are, Charles. How are you?' shouted Zende from his table, signalling his men to close in.

'Is this the way you treat innocent foreigners?' came an indignant reply from Sobhraj, who said he was Nepalese.

'I call your bluff,' Zende announced. 'You are under arrest.'

'Don't be crazy!' Charles shouted, as pandemonium broke out among the wedding guests and police grabbed the revolver from his briefcase. The two criminals were trussed up with ropes and bundled from 'O Coquero'. Sobhraj was back in custody again — on his forty-second birthday.

Sobhraj's life of luxury in Tihar Jail has since come to an end. He is made to wear fetters and a prominent red uniform. All non-judicial visits have been refused, including those of journalists, who have taken legal measures to challenge this ruling. In court, where he now faces charges of escaping from custody, he still appears relaxed and impeccably dressed. Sobhraj insists that his jailbreak was solely designed to foil his extradition: 'I already told a few guys in the jail before escaping,' he says, 'that I would be seeing them again soon.' The maximum penalty is ten years. On this occasion, it is unlikely that he will be pleading for leniency.

As the story of Charles Sobhraj continues to unfold, the force of his personality has not been diminished by the detailed

analysis it has undergone. Although his *modus operandi* is now well-known, his power to attract accomplices, suitors, victims and biographers is seemingly unstoppable. Perhaps it is today's obsession with human potential and 'exceptional functioning' that makes the black character of Sobhraj such an endless source of fascination for so many people.

Richard Neville
Sydney, March, 1989.

**'I consider myself a businessman,
not a criminal, and I know I never
killed good people.'**

Brilliant and psychotic, Charles Sobhraj left a trail of violence and crime from Saigon to Paris, Beirut to New Delhi, Hong Kong to Kathmandu. In the mid-70s his flat in Bangkok became a popular meeting place for young tourists, all travelling over-land on the hippie trail through Asia. In October 1975, the bodies began to appear. No one knew who they were or who was responsible for their deaths, until one man began to piece the grisly puzzle together.

What emerges is a haunting portrait of one of the twentieth century's most charismatic and diabolical murderers; the people he used, discarded and destroyed: wives, mistresses, accomplices and victims. It is a painstakingly detailed, totally absorbing odyssey of crime and multiple murder unparalleled in modern times.

ZENITH in association with BEN GANNON

present

RACHEL WARD, MICHAEL WOODS and
ART MALIK as Charles Sobhraj

in

SHADOW OF THE COBRA

Based on a story by RICHARD NEVILLE & JULIE CLARKE
Screenplay by MICHAEL LAURENCE and SCOTT ROBERTS

Produced by Ben Gannon

Directed by Mark Joffe

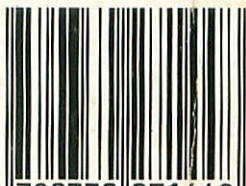
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BIOGRAPHY

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recommended

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