

THE KEEPER OF THE SOUTHERN GATE

A Synopsis

for

an occult spy thriller

by

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BACKGROUND: JAMES ELROY MERTON arrives in Rome from Richmond Va. after an absence of nearly twenty years. He was last in Rome at the age of about eighteen and fell in love with an English girl called Laura. They broke up after a short scene together but no other woman---including his wife with whom he lived in various parts of Virginia for over twelve years---meant as much to him as Laura. In fact she became his secret obsession over the years which occult practices served to strengthen. He was determined to see her again. His wife knew nothing about this. Nor did his friends. He never once wrote a letter to Laura, never once referred to her except in his secret incantations, never once received news of her. As the years went on he became convinced that she was still living in Rome, or had perhaps returned there after an absence. He swore to himself that he would one day look for her there. To this end he opened a special bank account in New York. His savings went into it over a period of at least ten years: he searched for fair means and foul to make easy money. His line was real estate and he found himself (to his satisfaction) in a racket which involved selling and reselling the same area of industrial land with increasing rake-offs, while the land itself remained unexploited. He also found himself suddenly faced by a possible malpractices indictment and was advised by those for whom he was the front-man to get as far from the USA as he could.

But before this happened his wife filed a divorce suit for neglect. For some time now he had been bestowing no sexual attentions on her, being increasingly fixed on Laura. He kept to his room for hours together, slept alone. He would recite an old Indian prayer to awaken a woman's love sometimes thirty or forty times in a day, waking up at intervals in the night to recite it in a whisper. His wife found him increasingly strange. They remained friends. You had to remain friends with James El, as everyone called him. He was a generous, big-shouldered, healthy looking man with cheerful alert eyes. In his mid-thirties he had the robust authority of a much older man, with the vigour of a younger. He had a habit of running the palm of his hand over his belly when he was particularly contented. You couldn't help but like James El. He ate and drank well, played tennis and swam. For ten years he and his wife Betty enjoyed a comfortable though not always exciting life together. They had two children,

neither of whom turned out delinquents. The house was large and comfortable. Betty knew he didn't consider himself above a crooked deal now and then. That was all right. She admired his coolness, his tact and sheer damned courage. He was used to money anyway, he'd always find a way out of a tricky situation. What she did mind was his growing aloofness, his hours alone in his room, his weekends alone at their shack in Maine. She would have preferred him to have an affair. Not that he changed outwardly. But he stopped petting her. When she asked him what had gone wrong he said, 'It's going right for the first time.' It was just like the wily bastard to say that.

Betty had married a very different James Elroy. For one thing he was the son of reasonably wealthy parents who were expected to leave him a lot of money. But they didn't die, and increasingly disapproved of their son. They urged him to abandon his shady deals to no avail. Real estate was his father's business too since he'd emigrated from Sussex, England, at the age of thirty and bought some land on speculation in Florida. In 1940 James Elroy was born--and given the Christian names of his father's favourite poet, James Elroy Flecker. His father possibly wanted him to turn out some kind of hero, and gave him as outdoor an education as possible. James El could ride and ski and glide and high-dive so well that by the age of twenty-five he was bored by all of them and started a paunch instead. Tricky real-estate deals weren't father's idea of heroism. When he taxed James El with this he replied, 'Listen, I like an element of risk in my life. If I didn't have that I'd die. Shit, I'm not going to sit around making a thousand bucks when with a bit of cunning I can make ten times as much. Anyway all business is crooked, you know that. They're going to ruin the land they buy for the next thousand years so why shouldn't they pay a price?'

His father laughed. But he stopped laughing when his son gambled away a good part of his fortune. He cut him off from his inheritance during his lifetime, which meant that his wife, or whomever James El elected to leave it to, would pick up the considerable remains of the fortune on his (James El's) death. As James El said when he heard the news, 'My dad's not so much hard as pig-headed.'

So the young James El with such brilliant prospects as an heir whom Betty married was all of a sudden no longer there. In his place was a well-to-do crook.

And a bit of an idealist---which was, if anything, worse. In his teenage Roman days he had been a communist. Italian communism in the Fifties was

quite different from the later militant, trade-union oriented variety. There was a lot of poverty still, and a group of ardent teenagers, most of them Italian, gradually influenced James El to believe that more injections of American capital into the country would throw it eventually into civil war and thus ruin Europe's 'little garden' once and for all. The industrialisation of the country, at that time in its early stages, should not be left in the corrupt and venal hands of DC politicians but proceed slowly and rationally on the basis of five- and ten-year plans. James El began to go to PCI meetings, and was frequently at the communist headquarters by the Palazzo Colonna.

At that time he was picking up good pocket money translating treatises and documents into English, and had a small apartment in the Via Margutta, its windows looking down into the courtyard of RAI headquarters. Here he gave small parties from time to time and came to know a good many ministry officials, partly through his translation work and partly because, being a potentially wealthy young American, he attracted a lot of social attention anyway. He found himself at most of the important vernissages and mixed with the artists of Via Margutta. He came to know a minister or two. The war had given the Anglo-Saxon a certain aura of authority and desirability in Italian eyes which still hadn't worn off. Italy was insular, law-abiding. Italians had not yet begun to travel. Smarting from feelings of inferiority due partly to the failure of fascism and partly to the survival of an agricultural system which had changed little since mediaeval times, the Italian looked on the foreign world (minus Germany) as entirely desirable and even wise. Combined with contempt for his fellow-Italians, this idealisation created a serious psychological imbalance which communism helped to breach.

James El had a good time in Rome. It was a life so unexpected, so different from anything he'd even dared to dream that he never wanted to leave. It saddened him to see that Italians wanted to become like everybody else and have 'gas stations along the Via Appia' rather than stay poor and bored in a little garden. And communism seemed to him the only way of giving Italy wealth while preserving the garden. He had discussions (even with the ministers, who listened only because he was American). They went on far into the night. His head was full of ideas. Rome was like a voluptuous village. Terrorism was unheard of. He strolled down to the little bar each morning to take his coffee with the RAI people. In those days a scuffle in the street would collect a crowd. Rome had its thieves but they were disciplined under known leaders, like

The Giant in the Campo dei Fiori. On the terrace of James El's apartment you could smell the fields outside the city when the wind was favourable. Later Rome's air pollution became as bad as Chicago's.

RALPH MARRIOT was one of his closest buddies in the old days. They were the same age and a day rarely went by without them seeing each other. Not that James El ever felt close to him. No one knew anything for certain about Ralph. He was supposedly English but never went near England. Where his money came from was anybody's guess but he never seemed short of it. In the night-long discussions he usually kept quiet, watching and listening amiably.

The discussions were brusquely cut off one day by a telephone call from the dreaded Questura, Mussolini's internal security police who were retained under the new constitution. Even James El's heart did a jump. He was told to go to headquarters at once and announce himself. He took a taxi, still unshaven, and to his astonishment was ushered into the office of the Questore himself. It wasn't the Questore himself but a high-ranking official: the point had been made though---he was considered important. For two hours the genial, lazily smiling official sat talking to him on the other side of a vast desk. Occasionally he put a question to him and at once cut short the answer with a casual, half-heard remark about its irrelevance. The gist of it was that James El had been trailed everywhere during the previous six months. He'd been seen visiting PCI headquarters several times, so had his girl (he was living with a student called Luciana---this at a time when you could still be fined L1000 for kissing a girl in the street). Now what was an American of his social status doing mixed up in all this? the official wanted to know. One could understand about the girl Luciana, she was Italian and therefore knew no better, and anyway she was a woman (any female driving a car or wearing trousers caused mirth in the streets of Rome). Wasn't James El a little young to get himself into what might be a very dangerous way of life? Shouldn't he return to the States and go to Harvard as his father wished him to? Did he understand that being a minor he could be sent back to the States at any time? Did he want that?

"We know all your movements," the official kept repeating.

At the end of the two hours James El heard the official say, "Now wouldn't you like to help your country?"

"How?"

"Well, you know a lot of our communists, I mean the top ones. You know the sympathisers who'd join

the party if ever it became powerful. They include a number of our civil servants, as you know. You speak fluent Italian. All useful stuff." Here he leaned forward. "Has it occurred to you that you could supply us with useful information? I can give you the name of someone at your embassy you could go and see."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"You could earn a bit of money too---more than translations bring you."

"I told you, it's out of the question."

The result of this interview was that his soggiorno was cancelled and he was given 72 hours to get out of the country. The police told him his father wanted him back.

Just a month before this he'd met Laura, the blonde English girl. They started an affair---and as suddenly it went wrong. She denied she felt anything for him. They had a series of incomprehensible rows. There was trouble with Luciana, the girl he was living with, when she found out. He was perplexed, confused, especially as Laura was a quite different woman in bed. Only years later did it occur to him that someone was pulling his character down behind his back.

He left his apartment in Luciana's hands, furniture and all, and flew from Ciampino airport intending never to return and believing he might forget Laura. His last week in Rome had been a turmoil of people turning their backs on him, and inexplicable rebuffs, even in his own bar on the Via Margutta. He felt like a child all over again---needed the large cool parental house in Colonial Heights with its wire netting over the windows and a swimming pool behind the trees.

All his father said was, "Get yourself into a bit of trouble?"---then a chuckle and a proud shake of his head.

It was being trailed at the age of nineteen, and the espionage offer by a high-ranking official, that gave James El his first taste of the sweetness of danger. It never left his system. Back in Virginia he enjoyed long days at the pool with his new girlfriend Betty, who was in her first year at Sarah Laurence, and he even thought he was in love with her. And he was bitterly angry with Laura, which helped him believe he was finished with her. Another couple of years and he married Betty, now out of college. He tried to forget that he'd enjoyed a life in Rome of a quality he'd never dreamed about before. Little nostalgic scenes kept coming to mind. Only one thing reconciled him to a marriage largely organised by his parents, and a home and a job: his secret determination to lead a dangerous life, somehow, somewhere. He looked around for risk all the time. And when he started up in real estate with an office of his

own he soon saw the possibilities. The shadier the client the better he liked him. And the clients were quick to realise this. He enjoyed clandestine meetings at roadside coffee houses. It excited him to employ investigation agencies. He began making money so fast that his father became alarmed. But Betty loved it. She persuaded him to buy a bigger house, and felt safe enough to get pregnant. They holidayed twice a year.

Only when the second child came along did he realise that he intended to return to Laura however many years it took him. He heard from Ralph occasionally, the slack, amiable, newsless letters you'd expect him to write. Nothing about Laura. He thought of flying to Rome to see her. But what was the use? You can't make a woman love you. At least this is what he thought for a long time. His crooked deals and countless girlfriends began to take precedence.

But then he met an interesting woman twenty years his senior who was said to have clairvoyant powers. They'd hardly been introduced when she told him he was in love with a woman far away with whom he'd been incarnated in many previous lives. He would one day return to her and realise a happiness with her which he'd never experienced with another woman.

"But she doesn't love me."

"She doesn't know she loves you. That's different."

It was she who gave James El his Indian love-incantation to recite. After that came hand-reading, the Tarot, various techniques of divination and finally magic itself, when he'd known her a year or more and shown himself an ardent pupil. He took to it like a duck to water. The secretiveness, the sense of a growing inner power that was quite invisible to the outside world was if anything more exciting than the crooked real-estate deals. It seemed to have just as much to do with danger. His personality changed. He was less irritable with Betty. He gave fewer parties. His marriage started going down, though it took a further five years to get to the bottom. Never once did Laura overhear him reciting the love-incantation, though she frequently stood outside his door listening. He could feel her approach. He performed lengthy ceremonies with magical accoutrements and vessels, within a circle chalked on his pinewood floor. He began to receive 'information' in a mediumistic way and increasingly foresaw future events. The confirmation of these flashes by later events gave him increasing confidence. He 'saw' that Laura was with another man but that the man wouldn't last long: and she wasn't in love with him.

He began planning his return trip to Rome. Breaking with Betty and even the kids wasn't going to be difficult because really it had already happened.

He'd saved up enough money to buy himself a lucrative business once he'd settled in Rome again. By no means a communist now, he informed himself about the American companies and subsidiaries in Italy, including the real-estate activities. Laura by this time had become his obsessive concern, haunting him day and night, and replacing all sexual activity. He had been warned too that celibacy was a powerful aid to the efficacy of magic.

He was sure that the incantation was working on Laura. About six months before he left the USA he began 'working' on her man so that she would be separated from him by the time he reached Rome.

And providence helped him get away even faster by tipping the police off about some of his crooked dealings. Recently he'd been sailing perilously close to the law in an effort to make ever bigger profits. Now he had to get out whether Betty liked it or not. The police investigations deteriorated the marriage even further so that (providence was very kind) getting out looked like the only sensible thing to do even to her. It was all going so nicely---until she plonked a legal injunction on him and got a nice fat settlement which absorbed most of his savings. Legal fees to protect him against an indictment, and generous 'gifts' to keep key people quiet, took care of the rest.

By the time he left for Rome he had just enough to keep him alive for six months---if he was careful.

### THE STORY:

1. He found a cheap room on a monthly basis in a hotel behind the Pantheon, a noisy district he'd never liked very much. By now Rome had become Italy's crime-city No 2 after Milan. Physically the centre of Rome hadn't changed but everything else had. The road to Frascati he had so often used in the old days was clogged with jerry-built tenement blocks. The weather seemed to have collapsed. It rained incessantly. People said you didn't get the old heat any more. It was just like any other European city now.

But he found his favourite Trastevere trattoria much as it had always been, only cleaner and the food better. There were many of the old faces, including Ralph's. Not that James El had any sense of homecoming. He was nervous, sometimes distraught, without knowing why. He hadn't written to Ralph to say he was coming. He strolled in unannounced and walked to the old table for ten places. Ralph looked astonished but within five minutes it seemed they'd been together all these twenty years. He had the sickening sensation that

these years had just been lost---useless and pointless. The only excitement he found was in the thought that he was in the same city as Laura at last. As always Ralph was the perfect information-desk. After a lifetime of dolce far niente he was a dossier on everyone of importance in the city, its underworld too. Only he didn't know about Laura, or so he said. He'd lost touch with her. But he promised to find out all he could.

"For all I know she's married to a raisin merchant in Smyrna," he said.

"But she isn't."

"How do you know?"

"I just know."

Ralph shrugged and it seemed to James El that he looked foxy.

One evening he told Ralph he needed money and noticed an immediate change of expression on Ralph's face. His mind had begun to work fast. His eyes narrowed with calculation, gazing at James El across the table.

"What kind of work are you after?"

"Something with danger in it."

He felt uncomfortable with Ralph but then he always had. Over the intervening years he'd begun to suspect that it had been Ralph principally who had trailed him in the old days, and tipped off the Questura. Why hadn't the Questura warned Ralph too, why hadn't he been thrown out of the country like James El? After all he'd nearly always accompanied James El to communist headquarters. It all seemed to make sense, and fit in with Ralph's life-style.

Now he began to suspect that it had been Ralph who'd pulled down his character behind his back. Strangely, he didn't mind. All it meant for him was that in the old days Ralph had been the abler man, and that he himself had lost. Now he was going to win. More and more James El looked on life as a matter of magical or clairvoyant technique. In the old days he'd had no power of this order. Now he had. So in the old days he'd deserved to lose. In the old days Ralph had been his master. Now he was going to be his servant.

James El got a lot of information about Ralph mediumistically. He 'saw' a man who'd become as valuable as a walking Switzerland to the various combatant groups in Rome. He was needed less for direct information than for the contacts which could lead to the information: also as a mediator between two sides which found it difficult to meet openly. When there was an assassination or 'top' murder, a bomb outrage or a major kidnapping (nearly every week these days) Ralph was suddenly a more important man than before, proportionately to the political significance of the crime.

CHAPTER SAMPLE.

He could see the half-dead fig tree in the darkness, just as it had been twenty years before. And the fountain made the same tinkling noise, echoing across the courtyard. But there was something different this time. He could hear soft footsteps and yet no one was there. At first he thought they were his own as he stepped lightly across the cobbles. He stood still to make sure. But they went on, slower than his own, and uncannily soft, hardly like human footsteps at all. In the old days the apartment windows above, on all sides of the courtyard, had been brightly lit and festive but now they were mute behind closed shutters. Of course it was winter and still cold. But in the old days you could open your window in March and feel a hint of the sweltering summer months ahead. Not now. Rome was hidden under heavy mists that stank of car-exhaust.

Why hadn't he told the porter he was here? He'd slipped past the tiny lighted office with his head averted. These days you had to be careful about being found in dark places unidentified. People were scared. They carried guns under their jackets---lawyers, business men and shopkeepers, whoever had money to lose. But somehow he couldn't face that porter. All he asked was to be able to stand in the courtyard looking up at his old apartment windows, just for a nostalgic minute. These days you didn't do such things. The porter wouldn't have believed him for a start.

To his horror the steps started close by him, perhaps a foot away. And no one was there. The barren fig tree, spiky and leafless, hung over the fountain-bowl like a stag's horns. The wall behind was mouldy and chipped. He looked round in the shadows. Were the steps inside his head? Had he brought something sinister with him from that sticky,

nervous afternoon in Richmond when he'd been told behind a gas station on the highway to Colonial Heights to get out of the USA as fast as he could? He slipped past the office into the narrow Via Margutta again.

It was half past nine and most of the city was at dinner. He'd never seen the street look so deserted. The daily murders, thefts, muggings and assassinations had enforced an unofficial curfew on this most earthy and voluptuously sceptical city.

He had an unpleasant sensation that he was being trailed everywhere. This was more than possible now that he'd contacted Ralph. He was on his way to meet him now: the evening date at Gino's trattoria had once more established itself. Most of the other regulars from the old days had died or moved out of Rome or become too important to be seen there any more. Ralph fascinated him. He could see the lies flickering across his face like tiny silver fish as he talked and waved his long hands.

James El crossed the Garibaldi bridge into the brash and popular district he'd always loved best with its noisy narrow lanes. But this time all he could think of as he stepped into the vine-covered terrace with its strip lighting was that Gino the proprietor hadn't once stepped out of the kitchen to shake him by the hand since his return. The fact that Gino was possibly dying and not even in Rome, being in his mid-eighties, occurred to him but didn't alter his feeling that because of his association with Ralph he was being avoided by the respectable.

You could never be sure what lay behind Ralph's glances, casual as they invariably were. He flashed you little glances when he thought you weren't looking. Besides a weak mouth he had a broad unlined brow as if thought and care were unknown to him. He went in for windjackets summer and winter, and tight Italian slacks and highheeled shoes that were unsuitable for his age and out of date anyway.

Ralph was alone at a table for two. They shook

hands and as he sat down he felt a sudden yearning for the heady effects of the trattoria's home-grown frascati. A litre carafe of it was put before him almost at once and he downed a glass in a few gulps.

"Worried?" Ralph asked him. Then, without waiting for an answer, "I talked to a friend of mine called Johnny Lucubrese. He was probably still in nappies when you were living on the Via Margutta. He'd like to see you. Tomorrow at the Flora, about midday, in the bar downstairs."

"How will I recognise him?"

"He'll recognise you."

Next day it was just like the old Rome, bright and warm with something buoyant in the air. He took a taxi to the Via Veneto and sat in a traffic jam for twenty minutes cursing himself for not having walked.

"What's the hold up?" he asked the driver.

"Another murder. It was on the radio just now." Very laconic and flat. "Some minister. They tried to kidnap him but it didn't come off, three of the kidnappers were wounded, but they got him first."

"What a mess."

The driver made no response to such an obvious remark.

He got to the Flora ten minutes late and Johnny was already there, an easy-going, well-dressed type with long black hair and manicured fingers. They went upstairs and sat outside in the stink of the slow-moving traffic.

"I've seen you around with Ralph," Johnny told him.

When they'd drunk their coffee in silence they walked to the top of the hill into the Borghese Gardens. He remembered how the summer sun had scorched the grass brown in the old days. And the annual horse jumping competitions. He was surprised to find that Johnny was nervous too.

"This evening somebody's going to phone you. Hang about your hotel room between eight and nine."

"There's no phone in my room."

"She'll call you downstairs won't she?" Johnny said with a trace of disgust at his simplicity. "All you do on the phone is just listen and say yes and no and fine and things like that. Don't ask questions or make comments."

"OK."

"We'll meet here again tomorrow, same place and time. Now before you come I want you to call at the Banco di Roma and have a look at your balance."

"You know I have an account there?"

Johnny said nothing to this, only gave him a look of slight contempt. "I'm doing this to oblige Ralph. I'm only passing messages. I don't know any more about it than you do."

Next morning James El found that his account had been credited a thousand dollars. He just nodded to the clerk and handed back the statement without enquiring where the credit came from. Then he strolled up the Via Veneto and waited for Johnny a second time. But he didn't come. James El gave him an hour and then returned to his hotel.

As for the phonecall the previous evening, it hadn't come either. But now, just ten minutes after he got in from the Flora, the woman at the desk downstairs knocked at his door and said, "Telephone."

The man at the other end spoke in English with a slight Italian accent. "This is Mike. I'm glad to find you at home. How are you?"

"Fine."

"I shall be leaving for Genoa round two o'clock on Wednesday, so we could meet at the station. We only need a couple of minutes together. It'll be nice to see you again after so many years."

"Yes."

"I hope you'll be free to join me in about a month's time at my country place. I'll let you know."

"Fine."

The phone went dead. For the first time since his arrival James El felt like laughing. He went downstairs and drank a coffee at a little bar across the road and stroked his belly with his hand, smiling to himself. They put a thousand good bucks in your account for playing kid's games these days! Well, well, he wasn't going to stop them.

And all of a sudden he felt at home. He listened to the shrill sound of the children playing outside, and the clock of the nearby English Jesuit college striking two. He felt the first warmth of the spring sun as it invaded the damp of the bar and cars roared past outside not a foot from the entrance. Yes, he was back in Rome! And he meant to spend that thousand bucks because it was the first of many instalments. He'd hire a car and take a day off at the sea, maybe Anzio, and have a fish dinner there with a nice white wine from Nettuno, just like old times.

Then would come stage two: finding Laura. Or rather, getting Ralph to do so. James El breathed a sigh of relief that at last his life was in risk again. They'd have to trail him to the coast that day. It made his blood go round a little bit faster.

2. Ralph professed himself completely mystified by the phonecall, and even by Johnny's behaviour. As for the sudden appearance of a thousand dollars in James El's account, he thought it amusing.

"Are you sure it wasn't a draft from the States?" he asked with an easy laugh.

James El knew well enough that he was becoming involved in espionage. But his evening divinatory exercises, and the mediumistic messages he was getting with unfailing regularity, seemed to assure him that all was well, he would somehow keep his hands clean and emerge master of the situation after all. But more than this, he was ready to sacrifice anything in order to reach Laura. He believed that the work would be a perfect means to achieve this. And he was right.

Ralph explained what he 'thought' the work involved.

"They need a good front man for these operations, not that I know what the operations are. Probably something to do with real estate, since you've always

been involved in that." When James El looked sceptical he added, "I'm only guessing. You see your value is that you're a personality, you've got the right background, you know how to host people and influence them, you're well travelled---whoever these people are want you up front for some operation."

He knew Ralph was giving him real information.

"And what about the phonecall?" James El asked him again. "What did all that mean?"

"Ah there I can't help you."

And Ralph looked away.

The next few weeks were quiet. He received another thousand dollars but no more phonecalls. He knew he was being trailed and observed. Ralph kept a pretty close line on him too, and they were together most days of the week. Laura had been traced. She was married but living alone in the 'ghetto' area. Her husband was called Marco Petrucci and quite wealthy. They'd been together five years or more but were now separated, though still close friends and at all the same parties. James El asked anxiously if there'd been children. To his everlasting relief Ralph said "No." He slipped Laura's address across the table to him, and at that moment James El felt he would go to the gates of hell with Ralph for that service.

Every evening after that he made a point of passing through the little square where she lived and looking up at what he guessed to be her window. Standing below, he concentrated all his 'forces' on her, sometimes for an hour or more. In his hotel room he concentrated his magic on her too, primitive though his ceremonies had to be in the tiny room.

He avoided getting to know other women. He met several at the trattoria, friends of Ralph mostly, among them several attractive American girls, but he didn't make dates. He wanted no flies in the ointment when the time came for him to meet Laura. He remembered a brothel in the Via Monserrato from the old days where there had often been lunchtime queues of men from the nearby markets. Now, with the abolition of brothels, it had become a small hotel much like the one he was staying at near the Pantheon. You took a girl in from the street, or you booked one at the desk. James El preferred the latter way of doing things and found a sweet Neapolitan kid who curled softly all round him and worked him hard, so that he would stumble back to his own hotel feeling contentedly debauched as dawn came through. In this way sex desire was appeased, attachments avoided. He became one of her steady clients and sometimes he had her over at his own hotel. He was beginning to feel that the old Rome was still alive after all.

After a month like this Johnny met him in the gardens again and told him he must go to Switzerland the following day. He would fly to Zürich.

"Book a room at the Bau au Lac, do it by phone from your hotel lobby. Talk as loud as you like. When you get to Zürich take a taxi there direct from the airport. Walk into the lobby and through into the lounge. Order some coffee. Go to the hotel desk and look as if you're confirming your room: but instead you can invent a name and ask them if the gentleman has arrived yet. When you've drunk your coffee order a taxi at the desk and then go to the Hotel Excelsior where you'll find a room already booked in your name. By the way, travel light, just one piece of hand luggage. Stay in your room between six and seven every evening until a man knocks on your door and introduces himself with the following question: 'You are the American gentleman I met on the plane aren't you?'. Your answer will be, 'How nice of you to look me up. I'm just on my way out to dinner. Won't you join me?'"

"Isn't that rather corny dialogue?" James El asked, marvelling again at the childishness of it all.

"I didn't write it," Johnny said with a suggestion of disgust.

"And do we go out to dinner?"

"He'll take you along the lake towards Zollikon. I mean walking. It's quiet there."

"And what's he going to talk about?"

This time Johnny simply gave him a long hard look. "When he's told you everything you go back to your hotel and dine there. And you leave as early as possible the next morning, returning to Rome via Milan."

The man who came to see him in the Zürich hotel seemed to be Swiss. He talked in a mutter, as if he'd learned it all by heart. He explained the code of the 'Mike' phonecall James El had received, and taught him how proper names were formed. James El was astonished at the ingenuity. All had to be committed to memory, nothing must be on paper except a certain phone number. They strolled along the path by the lake for at least two hours. The man told him that he must wait at least an hour after each phonecall he received: if a confirming call had not come through within an hour he must get out of Rome at once and call the number which the man wrote down for him.

"If you call that number you'll be given another number, only you have to say who you are."

"Who am I?"

"The keeper of the southern gate."

"What?" He jumped out of his skin at this reference to one of the four 'gates' in the magic he practised. It was the one thing in his life no one knew a thing about! No one!

"Only in an emergency is that your name," the other man said.

"And who do I ask for?"

"Lord Michael."

"But that is the keeper of the southern gate!" James El shouted.

It was the other man's turn to look astonished. He was clearly doing no more than passing on instructions.

"He'll call himself Michael or Mike," the agent went on. "But if he refers to himself as Lord Michael it means you're in great danger, be very careful about being observed."

Only back in Rome did James El remember the sweet little Neapolitan girl asking about the gaudy robe she found in his wardrobe, and his paternal explanation of the 'magic circle'. Damned fool! From now on he'd got to be cleverer than that.

James El knew that the terrorist systems operated largely without direct personal contact between leaders and the actual work groups. This made it very difficult for the police to break them open. Those terrorists the police did catch genuinely knew nothing about their superiors or fellows. Often they didn't know what group they were working for until the newspapers told them after an operation, and even then they couldn't be certain. Of course there had to be contact men like Johnny, to handle the recruits, but these slipped anchor fairly early in the game so that nothing could be pinned on them. As for where the money came from ---East or West--- even the leaders didn't know that. Not even Lord Michael himself.

There was a rumour that General della Volta was back in his job as director of anti-terrorist operations. He had resigned some years before when, under communist pressure, the DC government had abolished the criminal and political dossiers at the Questura. These traced a man back for many years. The effect was to rob the police of their only line to the terrorist groups, and as a result terrorism had escalated. With the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro, which represented the climax of this period, even the communists took fright, and back came General della Volta (some said with the dossiers miraculously resuscitated). Thus the chances of being caught were now much greater than before. Any politicians or policemen who had received large sums of money for exposing to contact men the security arrangements surrounding important ministers were having considerably less sleep now.

James El knew what he was getting himself into but he also knew that he'd never meet Laura again in the way he wished unless he was on the same social level and going to the same parties. It blinded him to the fact that he might be working for the wrong side. Ralph calmed him down about this:

"You're protecting a lot of threatened people---it's as simple as that. I'm only repeating what I've heard of course."

He knew too that once you embarked on this sort of life you could never discover who your enemies were--- how many and how strong. You could be run over accidentally by a car, poisoned in a restaurant. From the moment you entered the circle you never knew who might be trailing you, and how essential your death might be to them.

But these considerations only added to his pleasure. He wasn't afraid to die: which gave him twice the courage of the average man. For years now James El had studied and discussed death with himself. He had collected a shelf-full of books about 'clinical death'. The literature wasn't all that extensive but every few months a new book on the subject emerged, even if it was just a rehash of data served up in previous books. He got enormous happiness from reading account after account of the experience of dying by those who had been revived: 'I felt myself rise and so to speak emerge from my own body. I could look down on it, quite dispassionately, and hear what the nurses were saying. My feeling was one of unbelievable release and happiness, a floating sensation so perfect that nothing in my life before or since has matched it. It was a feeling too of peace and I may say total self-fulfilment as if all my life had been an endeavour to reach this point. I resented bitterly being brought back to life. I wanted to cry. For days, weeks I yearned for that experience again. I never forgot it. Gradually I have realised I must wait for my due time to die. Any fear of death I might have had before is unknown to me now. I look forward to that experience again with all my heart."

Wherever he went James El took these accounts with him. When feeling apprehensive he simply read one or two of them and they calmed him. What need he fear in life if death was no longer fearful? 'Thank God,' he often heard himself saying, 'thank God we die! Thank God life isn't all there is!'

His first assignment was a sophisticated trailing job. He was first to observe, then by hook or by crook get to know personally a minister by the name of Lucchino Pietrafinò. He was given this name by Michael enclosed in a series of apparently chatty and harmless sentences which were in fact codes. Within a month he must be on personal terms with the minister, within two in a position of entire confidence, so that he might be invited to the man's house without fear. He was ordered to take an apartment on the choice Aventine hill: he would sign the contract the following day, paying six months rent in advance. He would be receiving a special draft for this. The apartment was waiting for him. Here he must give parties and become known as a desirable social contact. As for his sex life, this was entirely his own affair, since he alone would be the sufferer

from any indiscretions. James El sat deciphering the coded sentences for days, as one phonecall followed another with fresh instructions. Each call was followed by a confirming one an hour later, as the Swiss agent had promised.

It wasn't a difficult assignment for a man of his background. He found himself back in the old restaurants in Parioli and along the Via Veneto--- and less and less at the Trastevere trattoria where he felt most at home. Ralph joined him in his new life, indeed he made him feel that his presence was part of the bargain. Certainly James El felt safer with him around: one never knew when one might want a dirty trick or two to save oneself.

James El's apartment was vast, its tall, arched reception room giving out on to the mellow walls of S. Abbadia. He soon had a steady stream of visitors.

Access to the minister Pietrafinio became easy. James El was back in circulation---it went round Rome, among all those old enough to remember his 'wild' days twenty years back, about which they now laughed. With a middle-aged spread, a cook from the Trento and a lot of anecdotes to tell James El was excellent company. One evening, at a party composed largely of DC people, he met Laura. It was difficult to hide their astonishment from the others but they both tried, perhaps because they knew what was going to happen later: her husband and his friends were there, and in Rome one had to be discreet even today. They found each other more attractive than before, they laughed a great deal, planned an evening alone together. Again he had the giddy sensation that the twenty years in between had been swallowed up and lost.

The two of them dined alone at his place the following week and made love afterwards. They were awake all night. At dawn they walked round the square to the terrace and watched as the sun began to light up the cupola of St Peter's in the valley, then trace the Tiber and the Farnese roofs. They were in love.

He didn't attempt to hide this from Ralph. One evening she joined them at Gino's. James El dismissed his suspicion that she and Ralph had had an affair from his mind. But a sense of discomfort remained.

At a later party he met Marco Petrucci, her husband, a genial quiet man with rather stunning good looks, very masculine and steady.

"You're a fool for leaving him," James El teased her.

"It was only a few months ago. Something suddenly snapped."

When he heard this James El felt both a tinge of regret that he'd hurt her in his magical concentrations to get rid of her man, and triumph that his powers had been adequate to the task.

3. Just before the two months of his assignment were up the minister he was trailing, Lucchino Pietrafino, was shot dead in his car on his way to the Quirinale. There were press photos of him hanging from the driver's seat. James El had provided detailed accounts of his daily movements in a series of reports, consigned to a black plastic sack in a rubbish dump among the tenement blocks of Monte Mario.

James El, his face swollen with anger, rushed to the phone and called Ralph. They met in the Piazza del Teatro Marcello, where in the old days you got the best coffee in Rome. Ralph almost ran towards him, red in the face, frowning, and grabbed his arm, pulling him towards the tiny bar.

"So the bastards got him after all!" he said.

"What bastards?" James El asked, marvelling at his cunning.

"Well, the ones we were protecting him against of course!"

"Protecting him?"

Ralph stopped and lowered his voice: "But did you never realise, I'm in with one of the protection groups? We tip people off when they're high in the lists! We tipped him off! Somebody was doing a beautiful trailing job for us---knew every movement---penetrated his home life---you see, people never will learn not to do the same things every day!"

That evening they dined alone outside Rome. When he got back to his apartment at two in the morning James El couldn't for the life of him say for certain that Ralph hadn't been spoofing. What was happening to his judgement? A hot flush of guilt suffused his face as he accused himself of Pietrafino's murder (a particularly nice man...). Yet what Ralph had said made a kind of sense. Since Ralph could in this way protect him against unpleasant feelings, he believed Ralph...

James El had a feeling that his apartment had been visited. He questioned the cook but drew a blank. One morning he was almost knocked down by a fast car along the narrow Via Pellegrino: but then the driver might have been a fugitive from some theft (it was the right kind of street for that).

He looked into his account at the Banco di Roma each month and found it replenished right on time. He bought a car at a big discount from one of his regular visitors, a car salesman from Turin, and drove Laura out to Ostia Antica, Frascati, Palestrina, and for weekends to Felice in Circeo, Sorrento, all

the old places. It was like coming back to life after a twenty-year anaesthesia. He was deliriously happy to find that Laura felt the same.

"Did you think of me at all in those years?" he asked.

"Only as part of a scene that couldn't be repeated. Something that went wrong, and which I didn't understand. You see I fell in love with you this time as if you were a new person."

"A completely new person?"

"Not really. Not quite new I suppose."

And with this she gave him to understand, in a woman's way, that the past twenty years had been a loss for her too.

They planned to get away. He knew a man back in the States, in Florida to be exact, who needed a partner. He told Laura about the difficulties he'd got himself into in the States but said he hoped the fuss had died down now.

"But why do you want to leave?" Laura asked him.

"I just don't feel good here like I used to."

She gave him a quiet look and he added, "Italy's changed so much."

This time, he told himself, he'd be in the States with a woman he felt it a privilege to be with, and who only had to speak in order to command his attention and thrill and excite him. Just her voice sent him wild with happiness. You couldn't have said that for Betty, though he had nothing against Betty. The thing with Laura was that his old feelings for her didn't abate however much sex they had.

Then came an unexpected phonecall from Michael. It was a new assignment. James El knew better than to answer back over the phone. The confirming phonecall came precisely an hour later. It found James El trembling violently. For his next assignment was Marco Petrucci, Laura's husband.

He spent the rest of the day decoding the message again and again to see if he'd made an error over the name. But, apart from the fact that he'd made no mistake, the identity-features he'd been given fitted Marco and no one else in Rome. He called at Ralph's flat at one in the morning and they strolled round and round the great Roman baths in the Piazza Farnese, talking in whispers. James El broke the most sacred rule of his new job, namely to reveal an assignment to living mortal. He could feel a tremor of white-hot terror go through Ralph as he did so. You could after all get killed just for knowing something you shouldn't know. In this world the matter of innocence counted for little. But James El quite deliberately burdened him with it. It turned Ralph into a fellow-conspirator with as much to lose as he had.

He urged Ralph to tell him what he knew of Laura's husband. A wealthy and influential man, close to high-ranking DC ministers---that he knew. But he was also known to have left-wing sympathies, and to have helped architect the famous compromesso storico or 'historical compromise' between the Christian Democrats and the communists which Aldo Moro and Pope Paul crowned with respectability. This was news.

"And whose side is he on now?" James El asked.

"His own. He's fighting for his survival like the rest of us."

There also seemed a possibility that Marco was involved, though at some distance, with forms of espionage. He made frequent unexplained visits to Switzerland: some said he was involved in certain financial operations which had a terrorist role.

"And all I can suggest," Ralph said in a frightened whisper, "is that once again you've been roped in to protect someone."

"Well," James El said quite loudly, "I hope he ~~don't~~ get protected like Lucchino Pietrafino was protected."

Ralph simply shrugged.

James El wanted to tip Laura off in some way, above all share his predicament with her, explain why he wouldn't be able to leave Italy just yet. He was jumpy, which she noticed at once. On his side he thought he saw something apprehensive in her eyes, especially when Ralph was with them.

He took the dangerous step of telling her to warn Marco to change his daily routines, and to continue varying them each day.

"Because nobody that busy should have a regular timetable," he said. "Of course it's only an opinion."

Next day he asked her casually, "Did you speak to Marco like I said?"

"He'd never do it. He'd laugh." And she gave him a sudden look: "He'd think I knew something."

He switched the subject at once, taking the hint.

"Yes, you're probably right."

Alone in bed that night he asked himself why he hadn't taken her lead and revealed the whole thing to her---taken her to that little fish restaurant along the coast near Civitavecchia and talked all the way in the unbugged safety of his car. Feeling cold while sweating profusely, he realised he was frightened to do that because she might betray him. What had he sunk to?

He obeyed instructions, and his account at the Banco di Roma continued to benefit. In the old days, when he'd entered the bank's domed foyer, with the sunlight glittering from the tall windows on to the brass grilles all round, he'd felt a strange elation. Now he felt distraught.

Marco Petrucci began coming to his apartment quite frequently. Clearly he knew about James El's affair with Laura and didn't seem to mind (he was living with another woman himself). He liked James El a lot. He invited him without Laura sometimes. They went 'hunting' together in the Pisan hills, though James El refused to fire at young wild boar which were so domesticated that they almost came up to you for a scratch. When they were alone together in one of the chalets, sipping Cointreau, in candle-light, he tried to tip Marco off but it didn't work.

"A man in your position should vary his daily routines."

"I'm not important enough for them, don't worry."

He gave James El a look that suggested he knew what he was doing. So James El felt absolved of responsibility from that time on. After all, if Marco was in some form of espionage he must take the cookie whichever way it crumbled...

Marco was in the habit of flying to Palermo on business in the company helicopter about once a month. One evening he told James El over the phone that he was going down there the following day. James El made sure not to include this piece of information in his report that same night.

The helicopter crashed with Marco in it. There was no explosion. The story going around was that the pilot had heart failure. It seemed that neither the police nor the medicos liked to investigate a thing like this too deeply. Marco was killed instantaneously.

The moment he got the news James El rushed in a panic to the phone to call Ralph. But he stopped and forced himself to wait. At this point you didn't make impulsive moves: things had got too dangerous. Laura came to him with the news that Marco had left her everything, his lawyers had just phoned her: the family would contest it but as she was still Marco's wife and they hadn't even legally separated the family hadn't a chance.

The look in her eyes told James El that she knew more than he thought. That night, strolling up and down a deserted lane outside Frascati, he told her everything. She said she'd had a 'brief and unpleasant' affair with Ralph some years back, and that indeed it had been Ralph who had attacked him most viciously behind his back when he was in trouble with the Questura. He'd invented all kinds of stories, such as certain cynical remarks made by James El about their love affair, which had corrupted her young judgement. They resolved not to show signs of having shared this information to Ralph.

ELI (L'Esercito della Liberazione Italiana, or the Italian liberation army) claimed the murder, as they had claimed that of Pietrafino. James El wanted

to kill Ralph but Laura calmed him down.

"You have to protect yourself," she said.  
"Forget Ralph. He'll always find a way of hurting you if you try to hurt him."

She told him that Ralph had reappeared in her life after she'd married Marco. This had aroused her suspicions at the time.

They planned to leave Italy secretly. It would take some time. There was the question of money. It would be quite impossible for her to take her fortune out of Italy, because of the blocked-currency regulations. But they could both take as much cash as they could handle and slip across the Austrian border north of Udine. From Salzburg they would fly to Munich, then on to the States. But for the next few weeks they must go on with their own lives as if nothing had happened. They must behave normally with Ralph: and James El was even to take on another assignment if given one. Indeed, that would make a getaway easier.

He was worried by Ralph's silence and one morning decided to call on him. The apartment was closed up and the porter downstairs said that Ralph had gone away suddenly. The phone had been disconnected.

No new instructions came from Michael. James El became increasingly nervous. One day he went to the Banco di Roma and to his horror saw that his account had not been credited as usual. This meant either that the police had got nearer to the organisation than was safe, or that he was now regarded as having fulfilled his role and thus expendable.

He decided to let two more months go by. During this time he and Laura made several experimental trips to Udine for ski-ing, so that their getaway trip wouldn't look unusual. He worked hard at his secret concentration ceremonies, now as always before. He 'isolated' himself and Laura from danger. In one of his divinatory sessions he found out that Ralph was back in Malta, or at least somewhere south of Italy. He had been ordered to go there. But he would certainly come back. They were watching James El closely. They trailed him everywhere. He warned Laura to the utmost caution. They talked only trivialities together unless they were in the car and walking in a deserted place outside Rome.

Finally it was time to make the getaway attempt. They planned to leave for Udine the following day. The only suspicious thing they had done was to draw large sums of cash out of their accounts the previous week but then something had to be risked.

4. That night Ralph phoned. James El's heart sank into his bowels.

"Think I'd deserted you? What about dinner tonight?"

They met without Laura at Gino's and to his immense relief he found Ralph as distraught and clearly on the run as he himself was. They drank a lot of frascati. Ralph said he'd got himself into a bit of a fix and didn't know how to get out of it.

"I tried a bunk to Malta but it didn't work."

When they were sipping their coffee Ralph said quietly, "They think you'll try a bunk too---tomorrow---is that true?"

James El simply shrugged, feeling a tremor of fear but only on Laura's account.

"You've got to get away tonight," Ralph added. "And take me with you."

"Take you?"

"I've got it all worked out. There's no danger."

"Isn't it unwise talking here?"

"Shit man, I know every bugging device in the city---this is the only safe place within fifty miles! Why, did you think you were safe in a lonely lane outside Frascati?"

James El showed such astonishment that Ralph burst out laughing.

"They've got you by the short and curlies," Ralph went on. "Don't look so worried---they only trailed you there, they didn't pick up the conversation. All they needed for that was a bit of imagination."

Leaning forward Ralph told him what to do: "Go to that little church by the Santa Lucia market. Today's Santa Lucia, did you know that? So there'll be candles alight all over the church and lots of people. Go there straight from here. Go to the little chapel of the madonna at the side of the high altar, and kneel and start praying. Stay like that until I get there. I've got to organise the car. It'll be waiting outside with me and Laura in it. This is the number on the licence plate." He passed James El a scrap of paper. "If I haven't turned up by ten o'clock go without me, just you and Laura. She'll be sitting in the car alone, outside the church. You'll never hear from me again."

"I hope that doesn't happen," James El said in a moment of sentimentality.

"You hope?" He went on, "Get hold of Laura now. Tell her to go straight to your apartment and wait there. Can she get in?"

"No."

"Shit! You'll have to give her the keys before you go to church."

"All right."

"And tell her to bring all her money. What she drew out. You and I are going to need that."

As he rushed over to Laura's place James El went through several divinatory procedures, trying as best he could to concentrate while driving the car. He received the word 'ecstasy' many times, and thought this referred to the experience he and Laura would have once they were across the border. He didn't trust Ralph of course. But when he put questions about Ralph's reliability the answers were enigmatic: Ralph was a 'viper', which he knew, but he 'blocked the path'. What did that mean? Was he blocking the path of the organisation, stopping them from trailing them to the border? Anyway there was no way of avoiding Ralph's help at this point. He couldn't dare drive with Laura to Udine right now, without Ralph, though it occurred to him to risk it. Ralph knew far too much. Even now he was being trailed, he was sure. The chances were that Ralph had enclosed his plan inside some cover which was acceptable to the organisation: so Ralph meant safety. He became surer and surer of this as he drove along.

He told Laura what to do and gave her his keys. She begged him not to trust Ralph. There was a long tearful scene and at one point he agreed that it had to be one more of Ralph's dirty deals.

"But he's our only chance," he said. "They know far more about you and me than I thought possible. The one thing on our side is that he wants to get away himself. And that's why I told him all about my Marco assignment in the first place, in case a situation like this arose. I reckon he has to help us."

The crowded church was brilliant with lighted candles, hundreds of them on all sides, and as James El stepped inside a feeling of extraordinary happiness came over him. As he took the holy water on the tips of his fingers and made the sign of the cross a sentence came into his mind with some clarity: 'And now you meet the keeper of the southern gate.' What did it mean? He took it as a good omen and walked down the side-aisle to the little chapel. He knelt close to the madonna and found himself genuinely praying, his eyes closed. He stayed like this for at least five minutes. He heard a soft step behind him, much like those mysterious steps he had heard in his mind during his first days in Rome, and he guessed it to be Ralph. He remained where he was for a moment. He felt a pricking sensation at the elbow and was just about to turn to find out what had happened when he felt a great weakness and slowly fell sideways.

Not until the following day was he found, already dead for several hours. According to the priest who found him he had a quite unbelievable look of joy on his face.

It hadn't entered James El's mind, when that

sentence came to him on his entering the church, that Michael, keeper of the southern gate, was also the Lord of Death.

5. Laura waited in James El's apartment at the appointed time. There were two letters from him on the table, both marked 'To be opened later'.

The car was waiting downstairs with Ralph at the wheel.

"We'll have to be quick about this," he said and drove off at once.

After a time she realised they were driving towards the coast.

"What about James El?" she asked him.

"Something went wrong. Hopefully he's meeting us at the airport."

"What went wrong?" She was shivering.

"I'll tell you on the plane."

"Where are we going?"

"London. If the worst comes to the worst he'll meet us there. We worked out a whole lot of fall-back plans."

Ralph had air tickets ready. He was trembling, she noticed, which made her feel safer because it meant that he was genuinely on the run, as James El had said.

Only after take-off did he relax. He turned to her with a smile and said enigmatically, "Well, I wasn't worried for you but I was for me!"

At London airport two security men came forward at the passport desk and asked them to follow them. They went to a room behind the customs area. Ralph was placed under arrest and Laura advised to find a London hotel for several days as she would be needed for questioning.

As they walked together in front of the security men Ralph told her in a normal voice, not at all shaken, "I knew somebody was trailing us---thank God it was the police!" He added, "I'll get five years and by that time ELI and all its brothers and sisters won't exist. I hope."

Laura was interrogated at her hotel several times during the next few days. In the second interview, before either she or the police had mentioned James El, they showed her a photograph of him and asked if she knew him. When she said yes they told her he'd been found dead. And where.

She opened the two letters from James El. One contained the cash he'd drawn from his account, the other was a copy of his will leaving her his inheritance which he'd never been able to touch. It comprised in great part areas of land in Florida. The following week she flew there.

Perhaps he hadn't forgotten after all, as he walked into the church of Santa Lucia, that Michael keeper of the southern gate was also Lord of Death.

Length: 80,000 words.

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