

THE ASSASSIN

Although Maloney never saw much more than a fleeting glimpse of the woman, her image was indelibly impressed on his memory. She was unavoidable as she materialised, ghost-like, from nowhere, out of the dense, dark, bushes that lurked beneath the grim trees lining the light-less road. For an instance the headlights spotlighted her astonished, terrified, features as she paused, motionless, before him. Then she was gone, in a dull, jarring, crunch, lost from his sight. The car had careered on down the road for a further hundred yards before he brought it to a rest.

Once the engine was still the heavy guilty silence unnerved him. He stood on the damp grass and stared back into the darkness, but there was no sign of anything stirring except the ghostly creak of the branches overhead, caught in the limp summer breeze. Trembling he restarted the engine and slowly reversed.

It took several minutes to locate her body. He found her lying, crumpled and shrouded by one of the bushes, A single glance told him she was dead. There was no question of that. Maloney knew Death when he saw it. He knelt and slid his arm under her shoulder, lifting her, but her head hung unnaturally limp, loose from an irreparable neck. As he studied the handsome features and the blood-stained auburn hair, nausea swelled inside him. Yes, he knew death. He had killed, but until now it had always been intentionally. This was an accident and it sickened him.

A noise made him stir. From the trees came the report of twigs breaking underfoot and branches snapping, the sound of someone approaching on foot; it was the sound of several people approaching, calling to one another. Maloney caught the flash of torches and concluded that it was time that he moved. He could do nothing for the woman; no-one could help her. And he was late for his appointment. That was why he had been hurrying. All the same, he thought as he drove away, seeing the torches reach the roadside and flash in his direction, she had run out in front of him. It had been an accident.

Two miles on he came to the tall, wrought iron, gates of the sanatorium. They were closed but the uniformed porter approached and asked him his business. Maloney handed him the envelope he had received summoning him and, silently, watched the ported examine it before handing him a card on which were fresh instructions. "A last minute change, sir," muttered the porter, signalling the direction he should follow. "Family problems," he added. Maloney did not understand the comment, wondering why a porter might say such a thing, but then no-one seemed to be exactly who they appeared to be now-a-days.

The rendez-vous was situated in the wood generally in the direction from which Maloney had come. He arrived at the spot, stopped the car and, as he opened the door, a second car drew quietly up a short distance away. "You are late," said a man's voice. "Later than I anticipated. I am displeased with that." Maloney stared by dazzled by the headlights he could not make out the man's features except he appeared to be corpulent and bald.

"I'm sorry," he started. "I had a spot of trouble on the way here. I ran over"

"I am not the least interested in your travelogue," the man snapped. "I brought you here because I insist on seeing the kind of man that's working for me. I am informed that you are one of the best."

"That's right, sir," said Maloney, shielding his eyes. "I've worked all over the world, America, Spain, the Middle East, Northern Ireland. You can rely on me. I have not missed a target yet!"

"Good. I trust that you will keep up that standard when working for me. I require absolute reliability. As you know I have a contract for you. The terms are five thousand now and an equal sum on delivery. You will receive your final instructions in two days. Pay him!"

A figure appeared from the darkness behind the headlights and thrust a packet into Maloney's hands. As he took it, he noticed two other men appear out of the gloom and go into a conference with the speaker. Maloney could not hear what was said but it was evident that the fat

man was both angry and distressed. "A matter of a personal crisis has occurred," he said suddenly. "I must attend to it. Good evening, Mr Maloney."

"Good evening to you," muttered Maloney under his breath as the doors of the car slammed shut and it drove briskly away.

As he drove back to London, Maloney fingered the packet which rested on the seat beside him. There was no need to check the sum, but the thought of the five thousand pounds reassured him, yet he was unable to eliminate the memory of the unfortunate woman earlier that night. Time after time, that brief glimpse of her wretched figure in front of him, trapped in the beams of the headlamps, flashed through his mind. It was as if she had been trapped in the sights of his rifle. The vision of her white, startled, face preyed upon and tormented him. He was glad to lock the car in the hired garage and take the lift up to the flat.

Moira was there. He could hear her humming as he opened the door and the sense of security allowed him to relax slightly. "You look quite pale, darling," she said, seemingly concerned. "Did something go wrong?"

"Not in the way you mean," he replied, drawing her closely to him and placing his hands at the top of her legs. "I have half the cash and the balance is due when the job is done."

"Ten thousand in all?" cried Moira, totally unable to conceal her excitement. "Where shall we go this time?" Maloney shrugged. Over a candlelit supper, well wined, he related the earlier events of the evening. As he told it now, the account of the accident, pangs of fear and dread seized him, sensations and emotions he had hardly experienced before. "It was an accident," she said. "I can't see why it worried you so. Do you think the police will trace the car? You could get Trevor to respray it. He'll do it tomorrow if I ask him!"

"It's not that. I don't know what it is. I just feel uneasy. I think it is time that I got out of this business. We've got a fair sum put aside." Moira looked over her glass, intently studying her lover's face.

"You are obviously shaken up by it," she said soothingly. "You'll feel quite differently in the morning. You'll see!"

"Perhaps," he said.

"Of course you will," she insisted, screwing up her nose. "Now, come to bed. We'll leave this lot until the morning. I've no engagements so we can have a lie in, then spend the day together. Would you like to go out? We could go up the river, or to the Zoo!" She laughed and blew out her candle. Maloney, in remembrance, left his flickering poignantly until, exhausted, it died in the early dawn, and took his anxieties to bed.

The anticipated instructions came two days later, on the Wednesday. Maloney came back to find a hand-delivered letter lodged with the caretaker. There was no indication of the sender and he was puzzled as he had expected a telephone call which would have given him a name and location at which to collect the letter poste-restante. His puzzlement changed to bewilderment when he opened the envelope. Inside was a photograph of a large department store with a cross drawn in one of the entrances. He also found a key to a Mayfair flat with a label on which was a simple description:

"Female. Bright orange hat. Matching gloves. Light blue dress. White Pekinese dog.
Friday next at 12.15. In entrance."

So it was to be a woman this time. He wondered how they could be so precise in the description, and what she had done. But it never paid to question the motives of his clients or the misdeeds of his victims. It was a job which if he did not take it, someone else would. He

followed his normal procedure and told no-one, not even Moira, but he did tell her that she should be packed and ready to leave on the Friday afternoon.

"Friday?" she said in dismay. "Oh, what time? I've a special on Friday morning. The Agency 'phoned yesterday. Its all straight fashion, in Kensington. I'm seeing them tomorrow. It sounds most promising! Have you heard about the contract?" Maloney nodded absently.

"One strange thing," he said. "There's no mention of the balance of the cash. I suppose they will make contact once the job is done."

"Where is it, and when?"

"Never mind that. Just be ready to leave Friday afternoon."

It was midday, next day, when Maloney was accosted by a man who was waiting for him outside the flat, blocking his path to the door. "You don't have to tell me who you are," Maloney grunted, eyeing the man from his head to his large feet. The stranger found his credentials and waved them in Maloney's face.

"I would like a few words with you, in private!" he said. Unperturbed, Maloney ushered the detective into the luxuriously appointed flat.

"You are fortunate my wife is not here," he joked. "She has this thing about the police. Drink?"

"No, not just now," said the detective, staying close to the door. Suddenly Maloney's confidence evaporated as, into his mind, gripping and paralysing his guts, came the haunting memory of the accident and the dead woman. Was this why this man was calling? Had they actually tracked him down? Someone might have seen the car at Trevor's and talked. If that was the case, he was ruined! He would never be allowed bail and would probably end up being deported. Yet, if he was going to be arrested, why had the detective come alone?

"I want a quiet chat with you Maloney. I'll not beat about the bush, either. We know who you are. We know what you do. The word's out and around that there's a contract out and that you've picked it up. We know who the purchaser is. We know you are the deliverer. It is only a matter of time before we know who is the goods."

"You must be mistaken," said Maloney, sitting down and smiling with relief. "I'm about to go on vacation."

"So it's a foreign job is it? Don't worry, we will alert Interpol. You'll be watched every yard of the way."

"Every metre, you mean."

"You can cut out the funny stuff. That's not all that is out. We hear on the grapevine, if the underworld rumours are to be believed, and they're not often wrong, that you've really crossed someone, someone big, and that they are out to get you. We could stand back and see who gets to you first. Unfortunately we can't touch you at the moment, but if you were to co-operate....."

"I think you must be mistaken. As I said, I'm going on holiday, with my wife, tomorrow."

"Look, Maloney, I'm warning"

"Warning?"

"Informing you, then, that the best thing you can do is pack your bags and take yourself and that lady of yours out of the country and back to where ever it was the two of you crawled out from. Go whilst you are still free and in one piece!"

"I think you must be completely mistaken, sir," said Maloney, frowning. "As I said, we are going, on holiday." He opened the door and the detective stepped out into the hall.

"Don't ignore what I said. It's in your own interest. And don't try anything. We'll be watching you all the time and we'll have you if you as much as breath in the wrong place!"

Maloney did not tell Moira what had happened that evening when she arrived home at the flat. She was tired, but she was also bubbling with enthusiasm about the coming modelling

session. "It's with a very good studio and he's a well established photographer. It could be the best opening yet and could lead to all sorts of things! It could be the very one that I've been waiting for, and it came right out of the blue!"

"Things sometimes happen that way," said Maloney, brooding. He normally paid little attention to her fringe modelling activities. It had kept her out of one sort of sort of mischief during the eight, happy, years of their relationship. Moira had a ship-launching face but a figure that might be described as too ample for fashion modelling. Amongst everything, she was the sole precious thing that Maloney possessed. It worried him now to hear her speaking that way, seriously, as if her stay in London could be permanent. "I've got the plane tickets," he mused. "Heathrow at three-thirty." Moira did not answer, which worried him all the more.

Next morning he stood with an air of melancholy and, from the window of the flat, watched her happily cross the road and climb into a waiting taxi. With an unfamiliar unease he unpacked the rifle, checked it, assembled it, and checked it again before replacing the dismantled parts in the case. It had been an unsettling week. First the accident and the woman, then the visit from the police. Now he had to face Moira's attitude to her modelling. An unwelcomed voice informed him that this might be the end of their relationship, of their life together. At the very least, it might mean a break, with her staying and him having to go abroad. Who knew what might happen then? He had never felt like this before. This might be his last job. As he shut the door to the flat, he knew he would never return again. The luggage was packed and en-route to the airport. He was en-route to his contract. At half-past one Moira was due to meet him at the Victoria Air Terminal. It was all arranged.

It was not difficult to lose the inept policeman whose task it was to follow him. A combination of taxi and Underground trips resulted in Maloney being able to cautiously and methodically approach the Mayfair location, alone. The bell listing in the lobby of the block informed him that the flat was, apparently, vacant. He took the antiquated lift to the second floor and climbed the following two flights of stairs. On the penultimate floor he thought he caught the sound of a radio, but the top floor was silent.

The door yielded to the key. Maloney allowed it to swing back, wide, until it struck the flanking wall and exposed the extent of the sparsely furnished room. He locked the door behind him. The room was bright and sunny which was not the way he liked working as it meant his target would be in the shade and he would not. From the window he could just see the Post Office tower although that was not the view he was seeking.

A distant clock was striking noon as he looked down from the sun-drenched window onto Regent Street and the department store opposite. He took out the photograph. He was in the precise spot. He took off his wrist watch and laid it beside him on the cill. Gently he eased the sash open, upwards, just enough. Having placed the rifle case on a nearby table he repeated his ritual of checking, assembly, rechecking and loading. He was thorough, they all said that, and he had done it countless times before. He really did not have to think about any part of it. It was automatic.

Loaded and primed, he sat by the window, studying his watch, waiting for the hands to move to the appointed time. Time passed imperceptibly. Twice he picked it up to ensure that it had not stopped as it would never do to miss his last target, but it was ticking resolutely on. There would not be much time. There never was. Sometimes the window of opportunity lasted the briefest of seconds.

He watched the shoppers come and go from the store and then, like the distant call of a hunter's horn, he heard the police sirens. They grew closer and louder as the approaching vehicles carved a path through the midday traffic. Maloney had no doubt of their destination. It would have been easy to escape now, but he stayed at the window. He had never yet failed.

Below him two cars screeched to a halt. A third swung across the road to his right. Another appeared on his left. On the pavements people stopped where they had been, frozen still,

and the hands of his watch closed over the time he had waited for. Maloney studied the scene below him and the comings and goings. Uniformed police appeared, running towards the pockets of onlookers. One, brandishing a loud hailer, addressed the rapidly swelling crowd. Maloney could not distinguish the words, but he guessed that he was the object of their attention. Another minute passed and Maloney raised the rifle, fixing the telescopic sight on the store entrance. If only she would appear, this woman. Then it could be done and he could be out of there, across the roofs, and in the direction of Victoria. Where on earth was she? Where?

A knot of people poured out of the store's entrance, drawn by the sensational magnetism of the sirens and the megaphone. And there, inset like a jewel amongst the throng of bowlers and bare heads bobbed the orange hat. It was large and masked the features of the wearer, but he glimpsed a blue dress and the head of a small dog nestling in the woman's arms. Instinctively he centred the cross-hairs on the hat. "Come on, darling," he whispered. "Look up!" The megaphone was still going and suddenly everyone, including the woman, was looking up in his direction. In that instant he squeezed the trigger. As he did so he gasped. In his horror, he seemed to see the face of the woman he had run down several days before. Then she was gone, out of side, sinking, drowning, swallowed up in the depths of a sea of people.

A loud thumping on the door diverted his attention from the scene below him. "Maloney? Give yourself up! You are surrounded! There's no escape!" He did not answer, but stared blankly at the door with the disbelief of a man who has just lost his life's savings on a one-horse race.

"You're a fool Maloney!" said a new voice. He recognised it as that of the detective he had seen the day before. "Get wise! You've been set up! That woman you knocked down the other night - do you know who she was? She was the wife of your client! She'd absconded from a nearby sanatorium where they'd been trying to dry her out. Don't you get it, Maloney? Maloney? We know you're in there!"

Maloney slumped against the wall and remained silent, hardly understanding the words as a new spectre shaped itself in his head. The thought was unbearable. "Maloney!" said one of the voices from behind the door. "If you don't believe me, look out of the window. Go on, look!"

He stared at the door. He heard a scuffle and someone proclaim that he was dangerous. How far from the truth could they be? Look out of the window? It could be a trap. They could have marksmen on the roof opposite waiting to pick him off. Yet there was something he had to check. He had to know, to eliminate that last, hopeful, pleading voice of doubt. He had to know. He had to take the risk.

The street outside the store was virtually deserted, the crowds having dispersed or moved to what the police had determined to be a safe distance, but there, lying pathetically in the entrance to the store, was the blue-clad, frail figure of a woman. A large orange hat lay, upturned, a few feet away. He knew she was dead. He never failed.

Maloney slowly and precisely removed the telescopic sight from the rifle and focused on the lifeless, upturned, face. His worst fears were confirmed and, as tears gathered, he took the rifle and slumped in the corner of the room facing the locked door. This siege could last for eternity.

THE END