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GIFFORD

Writing as
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The Saberdene Variations

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

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Looking for more suspense?

About the Book

A powerful lawyer’s most famous opponent comes back to kill him.

On his first day at Harvard, working-class student Charlie Nichols is instantly charmed by the debonair rake Victor Saberdene. While Nichols earns tuition playing football, Saberdene’s wealth and charm rocket him to the top of Harvard’s impenetrable social pyramid and beyond - to become the most feared defense lawyer in the country, a man who uses his charisma to manipulate juries.

Nichols becomes an international crime reporter. He hasn’t thought of his old friend Saberdene in years when he reads of the Anna Thorne killing. A beautiful young Massachusetts stagehand disappears after a fling with the handsome, dangerous Carl Varada - who might have escaped had Anna not been Saberdene’s sister-in-law. Saberdene puts Varada behind bars, but years later the killer earns early release. When Varada sets his sights on the great lawyer’s family, no amount of charisma can stop him.

Review Quote:

> *“A powerful story.” - Newsday*

About the Author

Thomas Gifford (1937–2000) was a bestselling author of thriller novels. Born in Dubuque, Iowa, he moved to Minnesota after graduating from Harvard. After eight years as a traveling textbook salesman, he wrote *Benchwarmer Bob* (1974), a biography of Minnesota Vikings defensive end Bob Lurtsema. *The Wind Chill Factor* (1975), a novel about dark dealings among ex-Nazis, introduced John Cooper, a character Gifford would revisit in *The First Sacrifice* (1994). *The Wind Chill Factor* was one of several books Gifford set in and around Minneapolis.

Gifford won an Edgar Award nomination for *The Cavanaugh Quest* (1976). *The Glendower Legacy* (1978), a story about an academic who discovers that George Washington may have been a British spy, was adapted for the film *Dirty Tricks* (1981), starring Elliott Gould. In the 1980s Gifford wrote suspense novels under the pen names Thomas Maxwell and Dana Clarins. In 1996 he moved back to Dubuque to renovate his childhood home. He died of cancer in 2000.

The Saberdene Variations

Thomas Maxwell

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

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For Elizabeth

Prologue

ONE

VICTOR SABERDENE USED TO SAY that everything always looked innocent at the beginning. But nothing ever turned out that way. The endings were never innocent.

He used to say that when you started looking closely the illusion of innocence began to disintegrate, scrutiny destroyed it, and the truth—which was almost always even worse than you'd imagined—was revealed. It wasn't a particularly appealing attitude but Victor was young then, full of youthful cynicism, a budding tough guy. And, too, you might say he was on the other side of the law in those days. By that I mean that he was a prosecutor, an assistant D.A. up in Massachusetts. Like everything else, the job was part of his plan.

Victor always had plans, of course. Growing old as an underpaid guardian of the public weal was not one of them. Prosecuting the bad guys was only the first step. He said it was just like learning to be a good tax man. You always wanted to hire a guy who'd worked for the IRS at the start of his career. Those were the guys with the two key qualifications. First, they were killer sons of bitches or the Feds wouldn't have signed them on to begin with. Second, they'd been on the inside, they knew perfectly well how the IRS tried to fuck, maim, and murder every living soul it could get its hands on. Those guys, Victor would say, were absolutely even-handed: they'd torture and squash a little old lady who'd muddled her return with every bit of the merciless zeal they'd once brought to bear on Al Capone.

They were equal-opportunity bastards. The thing was, you wanted one of those sociopaths on *your* side when the sky fell on you.

The same principle came into play in the law. Victor knew that the big rewards—money, fame, power, sexy women—lay in defending rich and powerful citizens against a variety of charges, most of which doubtless fit like elastic gloves. But no matter how villainous his clients might be, and occasionally they weren't villainous at all, Victor swore they were saints compared to the system that plucked them out of the hat and ticketed them for destruction.

Victor hated the system just the way he hated the IRS. "They're all criminal bastards out there but some of them have got the law on their side," he'd say. "The point is, Charlie, it really is a jungle. Civilization is a membrane stretched pretty thin, trying to hold in the pus, trying to keep the evil under control. And it's springing leaks. Everybody's a bad guy at heart. Some guys just never get the chance to prove it. The ones I hate are the guys who've got licenses to be bad."

Victor really did hate the system, so, naturally, he went to work for it as a prosecutor, finding out exactly how it worked so that later on, in the name of justice for all, he could blow it to pieces. He became a defense attorney, one of the very best, because he'd spent his time in hell being a prosecutor.

As it happened, I wasn't a cynic. Morally, I thought Victor was either a poseur or simply full of shit. On the other hand, if I were ever accused of murder—and more important if I were ever *guilty* of murder—I'd want Victor setting fire to the system for me. Anyway, he thought I was naive and I thought he enjoyed playing the role of amoral cynic and it didn't make any difference to either of us. We were friends. We went way back together. I was glad to see his plan working for him. I really was.

TWO

There was something else Victor Saberdene was fond of saying which always stuck in my mind. I'm not sure what lay behind it but he was a great student of the patterns of the lives of his clients and their alleged victims. Maybe he was just offering me the result of his observations when he said: "Charlie, there is no immutable law of human behavior that you as a writer ought always to keep in mind. We all have only one life to live and the trouble is we have to keep living it again and again until the final variation kills us. Maybe you could call it fate. I call it Saberdene's Law." When I recorded that conversation in my diary I gave it a name of my own. Saberdene's Variations.

While it sounds like glib phrasemaking at first, I don't think it was. He meant what he said. He was not given to the sort of banter that a man uses to try out his passing ideas. When he said things, they'd passed well beyond the banter stage. In that sense, he was a serious man. And, really, wasn't he just saying that we all keep making the same mistakes throughout our lives, that we never seem to learn much from them?

I've always thought that my own mistakes had served the useful purpose of frightening me into a state of cowardice, but that's another story and runs contrary to the conventional wisdom—namely that mankind is in the regrettable habit of just never learning. Victor saw us all like nothing so much as the Bourbon kings, forever struggling in the grip of history, condemned to repeat our follies until we repeated them once too often.

THREE

All these recollections came back to me in slapdash fashion while I was recovering from the wounds that just about did me in. It had taken a year for my memory to get itself in working order following the events up at the lake. The doctors had told me not to worry about all the blanks, that they would fill in sooner or later. One of these medicine men likened the remains of my memory, or rather the demolition of it, to a bad wound. The bullet had not only blown a hole in what had always been a perfectly serviceable head: it had also lacerated the bits of my brain that had contained large chunks of my memory bank. This was not irreversible damage, he had told me with a cheery smile, or at least not necessarily so. He said my memory had been badly bloodied and then grown a kind of thick scab. When it had recovered, rejuvenated itself, the scab would flake away and fall off. And there would be my memory perfectly healthy again. Probably.

Probably, I yelled at him. *Probably?* What kind of shit was that? Still, as it turned out, he knew what he was talking about. The scab analogy was a pretty good one. All my recollections of Victor Saberdene were, I suppose, equivalent to the itching you feel beneath the scab when the healing process reaches a certain point.

And when it started to return it came back with a rush, the memories tumbling over one another like drunks trying to get out of a burning flophouse. It took a while to sort them out, get them into the proper order. I had to make sure the turning points were all in place, those pivots on which the story turned so delicately. I thought about the shotgun at Purdey in London, and poor Abe Braverman, and the man standing in the rain under the streetlight just across Seventy-third Street … and I remembered how important it had seemed that I wasn’t an insomniac like Victor …

It’s funny how most of the stories which make up our lives tend so often to hinge on little things. For instance, the whole lamentable saga of the Saberdenes might have turned out differently if I, like Victor, had been a chronic insomniac. But I sleep like the dead. Two minutes after my head's on the pillow, it's curtains. I was once married to an insomniac and even she couldn't keep me awake, which was little short of miraculous. She hated me for my easy repose. She impulsively tried to shoot me once while we were grouse hunting in Scotland. Victor saved my life by pushing me out of the way, knocking me down actually, as my wife, Lady Hilary, blazed away in my direction. She couldn't believe that I'd been in the slightest danger at all, an attitude not shared by a beater standing next to me who was dusted with passing buckshot. The way life works, seldom does anyone save your life. But Victor had saved mine. And that was one more bond between us that the mere passage of time could never lessen … Anyway, the fact is I'm a sound sleeper and there might not be a story about the Saberdenes if I weren't. Though maybe that's wishful thinking on my part.

Why am I telling the story now?

Because I'm sure it's finally over. And I'd better tell it while I can.

But why tell it at all?

I suppose, for one thing, it's because I'm the only one left who can tell it. And for another, it's an interesting story. At least it is for anyone curious about women. And men, too, of course. And marriage. And anyone interested in passion and, let's face it, anyone interested in murder.

So why not pull up a chair, throw another log on the fire, fasten down that banging storm window, settle in for the long night. Top off your glass with the good twelve-year-old single malt. Light up, if you've a mind to. Caution to the winds. Who wants to live forever?

My name's Charlie Nichols.

Let me tell you a story.

Let me tell you about the Saberdenes.

PART ONE

Chapter One

ONE

HE CAME OUT OF LOCK like an advertisement for the goods within, stood in the fresh damp glow of watery sunshine adjusting a straw boater on his massive square head. They must have had the very hell of a time fitting it to him, perfect oval on that block of granite. But he settled it firmly with the palms of his hands on the brim's edge, tilted it rakishly. He'd chosen the green and purple band of Wimbledon. He was wearing a pale tan linen suit, a purple-and-white-striped shirt, tan reversed calf wing-tips. I recognized the shirt because I'd had Turnbull and Asser make up a couple for me years before at the height of the sixties. He was tall as ever and had put on a bit of bulk since I'd last seen him, gaining weight and fame simultaneously. He stood there satisfied with his new hat, lighting a thin cheroot while the traffic purred by in St. James's. I didn't even consider passing him by: he was the closest friend I'd ever had. I was heading upstream toward the Burlington Arcade and the Royal Academy and pulled the absurd but nonetheless magnificent little car over to the curb. The top was folded down and I gave him a wave above the windscreen.

"Victor," I called, shaking my head. "Stop posing. The jury has long since retired to its deliberations."

He smiled with the bottom part of his long, large-featured face. His eyes never smiled. He said it was simple heredity. "Coincidence is the mother of probity and providence, Charlie."

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Who cares?” He shrugged. He gave the XK-140 a long, quizzical look. “Jaguar never intended this sky-blue shade—”

“More of a robin’s egg according to the man in Devon who did the paintwork—”

“Leave it to you to find a blind painter, Charlie. I weep.” He opened the low padded door with its lip of fresh tan leather. “I’m too tall to fit—”

“Just put your legs in back—”

“Droll as ever,” he said, squeezing his knees up against the polished walnut dashboard. “Drive on.”

“Well, probity’s mother aside, it is a hell of a coincidence running into you like this—”

“Not at all. I came to London to see you, Charlie.”

We’d moved off into traffic. Summer rainclouds had scudded from out of nowhere, whispering across the sun.

“What for?”

“Need a hack to write my book for me. I’m too busy, of course, to do it myself. You’re the man.” He laughed immoderately. I hit a bump and mashed his knee against the dashboard. “You still drive like the revenuers are after you—”

“You live in a dream world, Victor. I don’t do jobs like that—”

“Bullshit. It’s always a question of money. Everything is.”

“In that case you can buy me lunch while I turn you down.”

“Ha! You haven’t a prayer. You’ve already capitulated.” I felt his huge hand descend on my shoulders. “Damn, it’s good to see you, Charlie.”

He was right. It was good. It had been too long. A soft rain began pattering on the long blue Jag bonnet. Drops puckered on the narrow strip of glass before me.

“Came to pick up a shotgun, too,” he said. “Buy me a shotgun and hire Charlie Nichols.” He laughed. The rain made little hollow reports when it struck his hard straw hat, like tiny criminals banging at his door in search of salvation.

TWO

It was early summer of 1978. We were both on the verge of forty and I hadn’t seen Victor in over a year. We’d graduated from Harvard together at the beginning of the sixties, had met that first day of freshman year when we’d arrived at Matthews, the great dark red pile in the corner of the Yard, and found we were living next door to each other. I hadn’t known a soul and he’d been surrounded by prep school friends who were always blond and wore garters but we’d hit it off anyway, who knows why? Maybe as the products of two contrasting backgrounds, we shared a certain curiosity about one another.

We played tennis together, got loaded on beer, and stayed up all night talking about girls and Adlai Stevenson and Eisenhower and Jack Kennedy and Chuck Berry. All deep, deep stuff, at least the way we treated it. We moved on to Eliot House as roommates but our social lives inevitably diverged dramatically as time passed. It was simple. He had money, I didn’t. He was courted by Porcellian and wore a cute little pig, a gift from his mother, on his watch chain. I played football. I saw less and less of him and when I did catch a glimpse he always seemed to be in dinner clothes, like a dream of *Brideshead Revisited* which a lot of us were reading in those days. I picked up a hell of a concussion and a compressed vertebra in the goddamn Yale Bowl. I caught the ball, yes, sandwiched between two beetlebrowed Yalies and the goalpost, scored the touchdown, yes, but it was small comfort in the ambulance when I discovered I couldn’t quite seem to move. I recovered quickly but that was it for football. Victor kept going to balls and cotillions and was always tottering off to Newport or New York or Philadelphia. I always assumed he was getting laid by the snappiest girls fluttering about the bright and shiny flames of Harvard clubland. I was a lowborn foot soldier who’d been carried off on his shield after beating Yale. I carried a green bookbag full of Hemingway and Faulkner and Fitzgerald. I had my share of Radcliffe girls, Citifies, serious creatures in black sweaters with grubby nails and gray necks and tired eyes and perpetual-motion libidos. Victor always claimed that he hardly ever got laid, envied my weekends at the Kirkland Hotel Annex or the Bradford downtown across the street from, or at least nearby if memory serves, the Shubert.

Victor used to say that a gentleman never talked about his women unless, of course, he screwed them and then he was honor-bound to tell everyone he knew. He said his relative silence was proof that I was getting all the quail—look, it was a long time ago and that was how we talked—while he was doing all the dancing. He could, he pointed out, rumba. My back, thank God for silver linings, kept me from having to learn. Victor said it was a million-dollar wound. He hated dancing. But he was a game son of a gun. By the time we were seniors, he’d moved into an apartment and was hanging around with the Aga Khan and rich South Americans who used to sail long-playing records out of their windows onto passing pedestrians and motorists below. I mean these guys knew how to have fun. They would all go off skiing on winter weekends. Not up the road to Mad River Glen or Sugar Bush, of course. Gstaad and Klosters and St. Moritz. I got a job working the night shift toasting English muffins at the Hayes Bickford, now long gone from Harvard Square. I figured I was learning more about life than Victor Saberdene. Real life. The catch was that real life, on the whole, was for the birds.

Victor went on to Harvard Law. I went to work for a newspaper in Wheaton, Illinois, did a brief but educative stretch at *Playboy*, did six months with the Associated Press, and then landed at the *Tribune* covering crime. Chicago was a good place to cover crime. Next, standing in for a pal, I got momentarily famous when Mayor Daley's men in blue, on national television, kicked the shit out of me during the '68 Democratic convention. That led to reporting on the campaign that followed, which concluded with the election of the Nixxer himself. At about that time I discovered that the public was indeed an ass. Democracy had just flunked out. The idea of even a figurehead monarchy appealed to me with a new intensity. I went to England for the waters, working for the CBS-TV bureau, writing the stuff that the rich and famous correspondents said, thereby making them—not me—increasingly rich and famous. I wrote a book about the campaign of '68, a worm's-eye view, which some pals reviewed well. Then another book about the choice to leave my homeland behind—it was funny, not bitter, which stood it in good stead when it got to the serious stuff. Then I wrote *Abatoire,* the story of a serial killer who cut—I use the word advisedly since he favored a meat cleaver for his lonely hobby and was in fact a butcher—a considerable swath through the English midlands. Best-seller, magazine and newspaper serialization, Book-of-the-Month Club and Book Society, large paperback sale, la-di-da. *The Today Show,* Merv Griffin's shocked stamp of approval, movie deal, jokes from Carson. And finally the real thing—profiled in an airline in-flight magazine.

Victor did his time as a prosecutor, then got into defense work with a hotshot firm in Boston. In time New York called, a partnership, a highly visible career with the perqs he'd never doubted for an instant would be his. Regular table in the Pool Room at the Four Seasons, a couple of good clubs, a Turtle Bay brownstone. From his garden he could lift his glass to Kate Hepburn and she would nod to his dinner guests. He must have gone through tuxedos like I went through socks. Jackie Onassis asked him to help her save old churches and things. Ah, happy the man …

I married the English woman, Lady Hilary, who lured me out among the grouse. Salmon fishing would not have served her purpose, presumably because it's easier to murder a husband with a shotgun than a fishhook, though drowning might have crossed her mind since my back won't allow me to swim. Victor, well aware professionally of just which gender is the deadlier of the species, remained a bachelor. His letters assured me, however, that his spare time—limited though it was—was far from barren of women. Like the true gentleman he was, he wrote a damn fine letter when it came to recounting his amours. Though true love, he happily confessed, he saved for the chap he saw in the mirror. He said it was his nature. And it was until later on, when he'd met the woman and moved on from Turtle Bay to Seventy-third.

So when he materialized outside Lock fondling his boater, we took up right where we had left off.

THREE

One moment the rain was dimpling the surface of the dirty river, the next it had stopped and the sunshine was nudging at the purple-rimmed clouds again. We were standing outside a Thamesside pub. The wooden slatted benches were drying in the summery breeze and the fringed awnings flapped lazily. Shepherd's pie, sausage rolls, mustard, heavy mugs of bitter. Waves lapped and sucked at the rotting pilings which dated from Shakespeare's boyhood.

Victor licked mustard from his fingertips and drank deeply. “The idea is this,” he said, running his tongue around his teeth. “Four or five of my most important cases. All involving what we shall call, for lack of a better word, murder. Other things, too, but murder—death, anyway, sudden and violent—at the core. Two of the perpetrators I got off completely, two drew considerably lighter sentences than they no doubt deserved, and a child molester—well, I say I saved him from being dragged into the street and strung up from a lamppost. But,” he waved a finger at me, “it won’t be a book about law. Or justice, whatever that is. People. It’s a book about people. And mainly me, of course. And doing people is your strength, Charlie. The point is this. I want to do a book about the need for cynicism in dealing with an unfeeling, unfair, corrupt *system.* You following the bouncing ball, Charlie?” I nodded. “Then don’t look so unhappy. We’re talking about another best-seller, Charlie. The hero as a new kind of villain … the necessary villain our legal system requires. Make a good title, *Necessary Villain.* For instance, I had this fellow Hawthorne … civil disobedience—”

“What did he do?”

“Wasted an IRS man with a service revolver. It was like this.” He tucked into some shepherd’s pie, washed it down with more beer. “Hawthorne comes home from a day of looking for work, he sees an alarming sight in his suburban driveway. Two men with sledgehammers are demolishing his seven-year-old Honda … while his wife is inside cowering. It’s scary as hell. Hawthorne ducks behind a hedge, sneaks in the back door, gets his old forty-five automatic, loads it, and comes out the front door. Unidentified men still beating hell out of his car. Wife having a nervous breakdown inside. Hawthorne tells these clowns to stop with the hammers. They tell him to fuck himself. One waves his hammer at Hawthorne. Hawthorne sends him off to join the Choir Invisible with one shot. The other guy drops his hammer and begs for mercy. Wife sobbing, tearing her hair, Hawthorne blows most of the guy's leg off to be on the safe side and calls the cops. Turns out they were IRS black-shirts trying to collect on thirty-two hundred dollars in back taxes. Which, it turned out, the guy didn't owe after all. The wife has to be institutionalized for six months, loses the baby she's pregnant with … and the D.A. calls it murder. Do you love it, Charlie? I call Hawthorne a goddamned hero of the people. Jury agrees with me. Now we sue the shit out of the Feds. How could you keep from loving this story? And there'll be three or four more just like it. Guy murders his rich wife, poisoned her over about three years, patient guy … yeah, he did it, I suppose, but I found some holes in the case against him … and he's got all the money in the world as well as a young girlfriend—hell, he can afford me and he's got everything to live for. Tells me he only wants justice. I tell him justice is the last thing he wants—what he wants is to get off so he can live the rest of his life with this girl. You don't pay me for justice, I tell him, 'cause it's gone the way of the great bustard. It's barely a memory. You pay me to get you off—now we've got to figure out how much your freedom is worth to you. I got him off and he figured his freedom was worth about two million bucks on which he pays the taxes. Seems reasonable to me." He shrugged and munched on a sausage roll. "Make a hell of a book, Charlie. And it's a sweetheart deal—you get all the money. Because I got all the money I want … and I want my name on a book! I want my name on the best-seller list. Like Bailey. Like Nizer. That's why I'm making you an offer you just can't refuse."

Victor warmed to his subject throughout the remainder of lunch. I listened with an interest I couldn't deny. He was a compelling talker and since that was what the book would be it was bound to be compelling. The stories he told were colorful, pungent, driven by engines of real suspense and the spirit of voracious inquiry. As he talked, the question was always present: how would he find his way out of this situation, how would he work his magic? He spoke about a family murder for money, the killing of a small-time hood by a hit man hired by his abused wife's lover—a big-time hood, the mercy killing of a dying, cancer-ridden wife of fifty years by "the most entirely decent man" Victor had ever met. "Naturally the state wanted to cram this man into a cell for the rest of his life," he sighed, indignant, "and let him rot away. I fixed that, by God. Fortunately he was rich. Made my job harder, of course, because I had to convince a jury that a rich man could also be a good man. I was equal to the task, I'm happy to report."

What his character came down to, simply, was that he instinctively sided with the underdog, preferably the rich underdog but, still, any underdog. And everyone filled that bill when the state was brought to bear on them. That was how he saw it. He liked to play it tough. He liked to claim he was the necessary villain. But it wasn't true. He was just a born defender. For all his bluster and bullshit, you had to love the guy. Anyway, I did.

"You're not half the scoundrel you claim to be," I said, smiling at him. "Softie."

"Keep a civil tongue in your head." He lit a cigarette and looked out across the river. "So how does it sound to you, Charlie?"

"Interesting. I'd have to come back to the States to work on it; I'd hate leaving London. I like my life here. I'm working on a book now, a Title poisons his wife, leaves her paralyzed, he's discovered to be having an affair with her sister … the wife dies … the Title and the sister just vanish from the face of the earth. And it's been four years. Good story, Victor."

"I got a dozen like that," he said dismissively. "Think about it. Boils down to interviewing me, getting me to open a vein and let it drip into your tape recorder. What it would be, laddie, is a damn good time for both of us." He turned to me with a crooked grin on his huge, beefy face. I wondered if he had a blood pressure problem. “Just think about it. Be fun having you around New York. We can catch some Yankee games, I keep season tickets—you could go every night …”

He was making it sound like a vacation and I knew it wouldn’t be.

FOUR

The shotgun.

The shotgun had brought Victor Saberdene to London, had been commissioned by him long before he’d connected me to the idea of the book he wanted to bear his name. Before he’d dreamed of a book at all.

The shotgun was really where the story I’m telling you had its true beginning.

I pulled up and parked outside Audley House in Mayfair. The destination was of course Purdey, the gunmaker.

“Big moment for me, Charlie,” he said as we stood outside the door. “It’s an over-and-under, fifteen grand, ordered it damn near three years ago.” He nervously adjusted his boater like a boy presenting himself before his prom date. “Finest guns in the world. They build it to your specs, measure you like they were going to run up a suit or two. Center of your back to the point of your shoulder, shoulder to the crook of your elbow, elbow to your trigger finger, on and on. It’s like being in the middle of a gavotte. They make the stock from seasoned walnut, from the Dordogne yet … When they get it all assembled, stock and barrel and action, the chairman and the managing director personally test it at the shooting ground in West London. Whatever you’re shooting at—if you can’t hit it with a Purdey, you just can’t hit it. Each gun has a number, running consecutively since 1814. All told they’ve built about twenty-five thousand guns. Darwin took his on *Beagle.* Khrushchev had four. Bing Crosby. Edward VII was a Purdey fanatic. When he died in 1910, nine kings attended the funeral. Every one of them was a Purdey customer." He grinned, the great long solemn face transformed with the joy of acquisition. "Today Victor Saberdene takes delivery, Charlie."

We waited in the Long Room, which doubles as the boardroom and the showroom. A deep baronial table dominated the room, eight chairs drawn up. The dark walls were decked out with portraits. Among them all the Royals. Victor led me to inspect one while we waited for the gun to be escorted in. "The nine kings," he said. "Haakon VII of Norway, Ferdinand of Bulgaria, Manuel II of Portugal, William II of Germany, George I of Greece, Albert of Belgium, Alfonso XIII of Spain, George V of England, Frederick VIII of Denmark." He winked at me. "Good company, Charlie."

The gun nestled in its case was brought in, revealed like a gigantic jewel beyond price. He hefted it gently, sighted, stroked the engraving. "Wonder how many murders have been committed by men and their Purdeys?" he mused.

The representative of the firm demurred, stroked his Guards mustache, wouldn't take the bait, said: "None, I should hope, sir. But back in the days when we built dueling pistols … well, who can say?"

When we left, Victor cradled the case as if he were playing a cello in the front seat of the little Jag. The sun sprayed like gold through the green crowns of the trees.

"Halcyon days," he said. "Salad days."

"We're lucky men," I said. "Things have gone right for us."

"I'm happier than I have ever been," Victor said. "But I'm afraid."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Afraid I'll never be this happy again."

That night we dined at the Ritz, then went for a stroll, found ourselves in Berkeley Square listening, I suppose, for the long-ago nightingale. Staring at the shadowy outline of the Chinese roof on the little pump house at the center of the garden.

"It's a night for romance," he said a trifle lugubriously. The breeze rustled the leaves in the darkness above us, a summer sound. Someone once told me they were the thirty finest examples of the English plane tree. Planted on the very spot in 1789.

"You need a girl. A real girl. One to love and marry."

"Ha! You're a great advertisement. You know what the sage said—marriage is the death of happiness."

"I'm serious," I said. "You need to complete yourself. The animus requires the anima—"

"I think you've just struck Jung a glancing blow. I haven't the time for a wife—"

"Sure. And that's what we men say right up until we find the right girl—"

"Do you believe in love, Charlie?"

"Love and work, that's all there is to life—"

"Do you believe in love at first sight?"

"I think maybe it's the best, truest kind—"

"I've never been in love. I don't have enough faith in women."

"That usually means you haven't got enough faith in yourself, doesn't it? You've got to have some faith when it comes to love. You've got to have more faith than distrust—too much of what people call love is built on a fine frightened foundation of distrust. If you don't have faith, then there's little reason for going on with it—"

"Well, I have faith in my Purdey. It'll do as it's told."

"But," I said, "you've got to watch who's giving it orders."

"And I have faith in myself, Charlie. I have faith in you, if it comes to that."

"It's not enough," I said. We'd drunk a great deal of champagne. I sat down on the grass, leaned back against a tree, and wondered if it was one of those that had been there since 1789. "If you don't have faith in a woman, poof, nothing else really matters, life's in ashes …"

He sank down beside me, legs out before him on the grass, huge feet jutting up far away like gravestones. "I wonder if you're right, Charlie. Women. Are they so goddamned important? Why are they so … so—"

"Why do we breathe air? Why is gravity? Why do little replicas of ourselves enter the world from between their legs? Why did I buy the Jag knowing it wouldn't start half the time?"

He laughed. "Listen, you're beginning to sound like a writer. All this life-is-ashes stuff—"

"Listen to me, Victor," I said. "I may never be so wise again. Mark my words. Tonight I am a prophet. *Cherchez la femme.*" I waggled a finger in his face. It was like Harvard again. We'd be talking about Chuck Berry anytime now. "And happiness will be yours. You will be complete."

He sighed. "Balls, Charlie."

FIVE

Victor spent the weekend with some shooting chums and his Purdey somewhere on Salisbury Plain but when he called Monday afternoon, instead of bragging about his marksmanship, he said he had to come round to my flat in Draycott Place that evening. He sounded harried and said it had to be then, couldn't be put off, because he'd been called back to the States unexpectedly and urgently. He was leaving first thing in the morning. I told him I'd be waiting.

The windows were open, a light rain was pattering in the courtyard, and I was listening to an old Bunny Berrigan