

1. The Watcher Watched

It was a wet evening in Paris. On the slate roofs of the big boulevards and on the small mansards of the Latin quarter, the rain kept up a ceaseless patter. Outside the Crillon and the George V, the doormen were whistling taxis out of the darkness, then running with umbrellas to hold over the fur-clad guests as they climbed in. The huge open space of the place de la Concorde was glimmering black and silver in the downpour.

In Sarcelles, on the far northern outskirts of the city, Yusuf Hashim was sheltered by the walkway above him. This was not the gracious arch of the Pont Neuf where lovers huddled to keep dry, but a long, cantilevered piece of concrete from which cheap doors with many bolts opened into grimy three-room *appartements*. It overlooked a busy section

of the noisy N1 and was attached to an eighteen-storey tower block. Christened L'Arc en Ciel, the Rainbow, by its architect, the block was viewed, even in this infamous district, with apprehension.

After six years of fighting the French in Algeria, Yusuf Hashim had finally cut and run. He had fled to Paris and found a place in the Arc en Ciel, where he was joined in due course by his three brothers. People said that only those born in the forbidding tower could walk its airborne streets without glancing round, but Hashim feared nobody. He had been fifteen years old when, working for the Algerian nationalist movement, the FLN, he took his first life in a fire-bomb attack on a post office. No one he had ever met, in North Africa or in Paris, placed much value on a single life. The race was to the strong, and time had proved Hashim as strong as any.

He stepped out into the rain, looking rapidly back and forth beneath the sodium light. His face was a greyish brown, pocked and wary, with a large, curved nose jutting out between black brows. He tapped the back pocket of his blue *ouvrier's* trousers, where, wrapped in a polythene bag, he carried twenty-five thousand new francs. It was the largest amount he had ever had to deal with, and even a man of his experience was right to be apprehensive.

Ducking into the shadows, he glanced down for the fifth or sixth time at his watch. He never knew who he was looking out for because it was never the same man twice. That was part of the excellence of the scheme: the cut-out at each end, the endless supply of new runners. Hashim tried to keep it equally secure when he shipped the goods on. He insisted on different locations and asked for fresh contacts, but it wasn't always possible. Precautions cost money, and although Hashim's buyers were desperate, they knew the street value of what they dealt in. No one in the chain made enough money to be able to act in absolute safety: no one, that is, except some ultimate, all-powerful controller thousands of miles away from the stench of the stairwell where Hashim was now standing.

Sticking a soft blue pack of Gauloises to his mouth, he wrapped his lips round a single cigarette and drew it out. As he fired his cheap disposable lighter, a voice spoke in the darkness. Hashim leaped back into the shadow, angry with himself that he'd allowed someone to observe him. His hand went to the side pocket of his trousers, where it felt the outline of the knife that had been his constant companion since his childhood in the slums of Algiers.

A short figure in an army greatcoat came into the

sodium light. The hat he wore looked like an old kepi of the Foreign Legion, and water ran from its peak. Hashim couldn't see the face. The man spoke in English, softly, in a rasping voice. 'In Flanders fields,' he said, 'the poppies blow.'

Hashim repeated the syllables he had learned by sound alone, with no idea of what they meant: 'Between de crosses, row on row.'

'*Combien?*' Even that one word showed that the dealer was not French.

'*Vingt-cinq mille.*'

The runner laid down a brown canvas bag on the bottom step of the stairs and stood back. He had both hands in the pockets of his coat, and Hashim had no doubt that one would be claspng a gun. From the back pocket of his blue trousers, Hashim took out the polythene-wrapped money, then stepped back. This was how it was always done: no touching, and a safe distance maintained. The man bent down and took the money. He didn't pause to count it, merely inclined his head as he stowed the package inside his coat. Then he in turn stood back and waited for Hashim to move.

Hashim bent down to the step and lifted the bag. The weight felt good, heavier than he had known before, but not so heavy as to make him suspect

it was bulked out with sand. He shook it up and down once and felt the contents move soundlessly, with the satisfying heft of packed dry powder. The business was concluded, and he waited for the other man to move off. That was the routine: it was safer if the supplier didn't see which way the receiver even started his onward journey, because in ignorance was security.

Reluctant to move first, Hashim faced the other man. He suddenly became aware of the noise around them – the roar of the traffic, the sound of rain dripping from the walkway on to the ground.

Something wasn't right. Hashim began to move along the wall, furtive, like a lizard, edging towards the freedom of the night. In two strides the man was on him, his arm across Hashim's throat. Then the unpainted wall smashed into his face, flattening the curved nose into a formless pulp. Hashim felt himself thrown face down on the concrete floor, and heard the click of a safety catch being released as a gun barrel pressed behind his ear. With his free hand, and with practised dexterity, the man pulled Hashim's arms behind his back and handcuffed them together. Police, thought Hashim. But how could they . . .

Next, he was on his back, and the man dragged him to the foot of the stairwell, where he propped

him up. From his coat pocket, he drew out a wooden wedge, about four inches at its deepest. He smacked it into Hashim's mouth with the heel of his hand, then hammered it home with the stock of his gun, to the sound of breaking teeth. From his coat pocket, he took out a large pair of pliers.

He leaned over Hashim, and his yellowish face became momentarily visible. 'This,' he said, in his bad French, 'is what we do to people who talk.'

He thrust the pliers into Hashim's mouth, and clamped them on his tongue.

René Mathis was having dinner with his mistress in a small restaurant near the place des Vosges. The net curtains on their brass rail obscured the lower half of the view from the window, but through the upper light Mathis could see a corner of the square with its red brick above the colonnades, and the rain still running from the eaves.

It was Friday, and he was following a much-loved routine. After leaving work at the Deuxième, he took the Métro to St Paul and made for his mistress's small apartment in the Marais. He walked past the kosher butchers and the bookshops with their scriptures and seven-branched candelabra, till he came to a battered blue *porte-cochère* where, after instinctively checking

that he had not been followed, he tugged the ancient bell-pull.

How easy it was for a secret agent to be a successful adulterer, he reflected happily, as he glanced up and down the street. He heard footsteps on the other side of the door. Madame Bouin, the stocky concierge, opened up and let him in. Behind her thick glasses, her eyes gave their usual mixed signal of conspiracy and distaste. It was time he gave her another box of those violet-scented chocolates, thought Mathis, as he crossed the courtyard and climbed to Sylvie's door.

Sylvie took his wet coat and shook it out. She had prepared, as usual, a bottle of Ricard, two glasses, a carafe of water and a plate of small *toasts* from a packet, spread with tinned *foie gras*. First, they made love in her bedroom, a hot bower of floral curtains, floral cushion-covers and flower prints on the walls. Sylvie was a good-looking widow in her forties, with dyed blonde hair, who had kept her figure well. In the bedroom, she was skilful and accommodating, a real *poule de luxe*, as Mathis sometimes affectionately called her. Next – following the bathroom, a change of clothes for her and the *apéritif* for him – it was out to dinner.

It always amused Mathis that so soon after the abandon of the bedroom, Sylvie liked a proper

conversation, about her family in Clermont-Ferrand, her sons and daughter, or about President de Gaulle, whom she idolized. Dinner was almost over, and Sylvie was finishing a fruity *clafoutis*, when Pierre, the slim head waiter, came regretfully to the table.

‘Monsieur, I’m sorry to disturb you. The telephone.’

Mathis always left numbers at his office, but people knew that Friday nights were, if possible, sacrosanct. He wiped his mouth and apologized to Sylvie, then crossed the crowded restaurant to the wooden bar and the little lobby beyond, next to the door marked WC. The phone was off the hook.

‘Yes.’ His eyes travelled up and down over the printed notice concerning public drunkenness. *Répression de l’Ivresse Publique. Protection des Mineurs.*

No names were exchanged in the course of the conversation, but Mathis recognized the voice as that of the deputy section head.

‘A killing in the *banlieue*,’ he said.

‘What are the police for?’ said Mathis.

‘I know. But there are some . . . worrying aspects.’

‘Are the police there?’

‘Yes. They’re concerned. There’s been a spate of these killings.’

‘I know.’

‘You’re going to have to take a look.’

‘Now?’

‘Yes. I’m sending a car.’

‘Tell the driver to come to the St Paul Métro.’

Oh, well, thought Mathis, as he gathered his damp raincoat and hat from the hook, it could have been worse. The call could have come two hours earlier.

A black Citroën DS21 was waiting on the rue de Rivoli beside the entrance to the station with its engine running. The drivers never switched off because they didn’t want to wait while the hydropneumatic suspension pumped the car up again from cold. Mathis sank into the deeply sprung back seat as the driver engaged the column shift and moved off with an unrepentant squeal of rubber.

Mathis lit an American cigarette and watched the shop fronts of the big boulevards go by, the Galeries Lafayette, the Monoprix and the other characterless giants that occupied the bland Haussmann thoroughfares. After the Gare du Nord, the driver switched into smaller streets as they climbed through Pigalle. Here were the yellow and scarlet awnings of Indo-Chinese restaurants, the single lights of second-hand-furniture shops or the occasional red bulb of an *hôtel de passe* with a plump and bare-legged *poule* standing beneath an umbrella on the corner.

Beyond the canals and criss-cross traffic systems of the old city boundaries, they went through the Porte de Clignancourt and St Denis on to an elevated stretch of road that nosed between the upper floors of the tower blocks. It was here that Paris shunted off those for whom there was no house in the City of Light, only an airless room in the looming cities of dark.

The driver swung off the N1 down a smaller road and, after two or three minutes' intricate pathfinding, pulled up alongside the Arc en Ciel.

'Stop,' said Mathis. 'Look over there.'

The Citroën's directional headlights, turned by the steering, picked out the foot of a stairwell, where a single uniformed policeman stood guard.

Mathis looked about the desolate estate. Stuck to the walls at what appeared to be random intervals were 'artistic' wooden shapes, like something from a Cubist painting. They had perhaps been meant to give the buildings colour and character, like the rainbow they were named after. Almost all had now been pulled down or defaced, and those that were left made the façades look grotesque, like an old crone with badly rouged lips.

Mathis walked across and showed the policeman a card. 'Where's the body?'

'In the morgue, Monsieur.'

'Do we know who he was?'

The policeman took out his notebook.

'Yusuf Hashim. Thirty-seven. *Métis, pied-noir* – I don't know.'

'Record?'

'No, Monsieur. But that doesn't mean anything. Not many people here have records – even though most of them are criminals. We seldom come to these places.'

'You mean they're self-policing.'

'It's a ghetto.'

'How did he die?'

'He was shot at close range.'

'I'm going to look up there.'

'Very well, Monsieur.' The policeman lifted the rope used to close off the stairwell.

Mathis had to hold his breath as he climbed the pungent steps. He went along the walkway, noting the chains and padlocks with which the residents had tried to reinforce their flimsy front doors. From behind one or two came the sounds of radio and television, or of voices raised. In addition to the foul stairway smell there was the occasional whiff of couscous or merguez.

What a hell this was, thought Mathis, the life of the *métis*, the half-caste or the *pied-noir*, the French

of Algerian birth. They were like animals, not fenced in but fenced out of the city. It wasn't his job to set right the inequalities of the world. It was his business to see if this Hashim was anything more than a cheap one-shot killing and, if so, what it might have to do with the Deuxième.

The head of his section would require a written report, so he had better at least get a feel for the Arc en Ciel and what went on there. Back in the office, he would look up the files on similar killings, check with Immigration and see if there was a pattern, or a reason for disquiet. An entire section of the Deuxième was devoted to the fallout of the French colonial wars. The eight-year struggle for Algerian independence had brutally divided not only Algeria but France itself and caused one political upheaval after another, finding a resolution only with the astonishing return to power of the wartime leader, General de Gaulle. Mathis smiled for a moment as he thought of Sylvie's reverent look when she mentioned the great man's name. And at the same time, even more shaming in an international sense, had been the defeat of the French army in Indo-China – or what now called itself Vietnam. The humiliation of the battle of Dien Bien Phu had burned itself into the soul of France, leaving a scar that had been hastily covered over.

The only consolation, thought Mathis, was that the Americans now seemed hell-bent on meeting the same catastrophe. For him and his colleagues, however, Algeria and Indo-China had meant uncountable thousands of immigrants, embittered, violent and excluded, many of them criminals and some of them committed enemies of the Republic.

Mathis methodically noted the layout of the block and the angle at which the killer might have approached the stairwell. He made other rudimentary observations more suited in his mind to the procedure of a local gendarme.

He lit another cigarette, and went back down the stairs. He thanked the policeman and walked across the wasteground to where the Citroën's engine was still idling. 'Take me to the morgue.'

As the big car turned slowly, its headlights for a moment picked out a single figure in a ground-floor doorway. He wore a Foreign Legion kepi, and as the Citroën rejoined the road, he moved off swiftly, as though he'd now seen all he needed.

At the morgue, Mathis waited for the attendant to gain authorization to show him in. He told the impassive driver to wait.

'Monsieur,' the man grunted, and returned to the car.

The attendant came back with a pathologist, a senior-looking man with gold glasses and a neat black moustache. He shook hands with Mathis and introduced himself as Dumont.

Checking and rechecking the numbers on the attendant's sheet against those on the fridge drawers, Dumont eventually found what he wanted and hauled with both hands on the thick metal handle.

It was a moment that had never ceased to give Mathis a frisson of excitement. The cadaver was already greyish, cold, and although it had been cleaned up, the face was a mess.

Hashim looked like thousands of young Algerians who had come to a bad end. And yet . . .

'Cause of death?' said Mathis.

'Single bullet, fired up through the roof of the mouth.'

'But why the damage to the nose?'

'He must have been beaten up first,' said Dumont. 'But it's not just the nose. Look at his right hand.'

Mathis lifted Hashim's clenched fist. There was a bloody piece of meat sticking out of it. 'What the —'

'It's his tongue,' said Dumont.

Mathis lowered Hashim's arm. 'Why mutilate him when he's dead? Some code or signal, do you think?'

'They didn't do it when he was dead,' said

Dumont. 'I'm almost certain they did it when he was alive. Must have ripped it out with pliers or something.'

'God.'

'I've never seen anything like it.'

'Haven't you?' said Mathis. 'I have. It rings a bell. I've come across it somewhere . . . Somewhere. Anyway, thank you, Doctor. You can put him back now. I have work to do.'

He strode down the corridor, through the lobby of the building and out into the rain. 'Turn that awful Piaf racket off,' he said, as he climbed into the car, 'and take me to the office.'

The driver said nothing, but switched off the radio, pushed the gear lever up into first and moved off with the inevitable squeal. It was just past two a.m.