

## FOREIGN CLIMBS

So there I was lying on the roof, seeing through my ears and taking in the sounds of the night, my face pressed against the damp soot-covered tiles, yellowy-grey wisps of fog folding about me like cast-off mortuary shrouds. And me, all kitted out for business in my black screwing clothes: woollen balaclava, wind-cheater, cavalry twill trousers, web belt, and rubber-soled canvas plimsolls, and of course my turtles, my lovely, hand-tailored, black leather gloves. Not, I admit, everyone's idea of the glamorous world of the cat burglar and jewel thief, but much more practical than a dinner jacket and cricket whites, or a striped jersey and a bag of loot marked "swag."

I was well hidden behind the balustrade that ran along the front of the house, and I couldn't be seen from the pavement below or from the windows across the street. And if some nosy bugger had happened to stumble upon me up there in all the misty darkness, I'd have simply helped him fall five storeys onto the iron railings below. No, I'm only kidding; I'd have coshed him senseless.

Stillness has got to be learned, it takes years to get the proper hang of it, and however good you were at thieving, there were always times when the waiting could get you down. But you had no choice; you just had to lie there and do your level best to fade into the shadowy world of London's not-always-deserted rooftops. So even when all my senses were on full alert, I took to losing myself in thought so as to keep myself relaxed. Time ceased to matter then, and in that respect, it was a bit like the feeling I got when I was doing a creep inside someone's house; everything in and around me seemed to slow right down. I swear there were times when whole hours went by between each tick of the clock.

The craft of burglary as I was taught it was essentially non-violent—the art was always making sure it remained so—which is why I never carried a shooter when I was creeping. In fact, the only piece in my burglary kit that remotely resembled a weapon was an old army knife that I kept in a long leather sheath strapped across my back. It was perfectly balanced and incredibly strong, and the ideal tool for a whole variety of jobs. And it was a pure coincidence that those two British Army Captains, Fairbairn and Sykes, had originally designed it as a close-combat knife. The story was they'd dreamed it up while serving with the police out in Shanghai. It seems only appropriate then if I tell you I got it from an ex-Royal Marine sergeant down Limehouse way. It cost me a fair bit—six bottles of black-market Irish whiskey, if you must know—but it was well worth it.

So, apart from the knife, all I had with me was a set of skeleton keys, a small jemmy, two lengths of black silk rope with fold-out grappling hooks, a small pair of needle-nosed pliers, a glim—that's a torch to you—and one or two other little bits and pieces hardly worth mentioning. I had nothing else, nothing, not even the home-made device I used for dealing with rows of coiled barbed wire. I don't even remember me carrying a rabbit's foot or a four-leaf clover. So you really must believe me when I say I never went looking for violence, and I really did try and avoid bother whenever I could, honest. And the bloke who died that night was definitely not my fault, it was his; he should never have used a gun, and he should definitely have had a better head for heights.

The house was in the heart of Belgravia, part of a beautiful Georgian terrace built for the aristocracy by Thomas Cubitt, one of London's very first property developers. And just like every one of the neighbouring houses, terraces, and adjoining squares, it was leased from the Grosvenor Estate; the richest of the rich, of course, being the only acceptable landlords for England's moneyed and powerful. The area became fashionable after a young Queen Victoria rented No. 36 Belgrave Square for her mother to live in, since when of course the place has never looked back. All of which I knew, because I'd gone and looked it up in the public library on the Marylebone Road. I'm not just a pretty face, you know; I've had help.

Old Cubitt built with quality in mind, and even after a hundred years all of his houses still had that unmistakable air of richness, class, and respectability; the doors were solid, the windows wide, and the locks very impressive looking. All the things, of course, that drew me and so many others to the area like ducks to a pond. The linens all referred to the place as an "El Dorado" for cat burglars, and who was I to disagree?

The truth was, few families could afford to lease an entire house to themselves anymore, let alone staff one of them, and so a lot of the houses got split up into apartments. However, with Belgravia being one of London's better addresses, a lot of buildings got taken over by well-to-do clubs and societies and wealthy American companies. Mostly, though, it was foreign embassies and legations. And my destination that night just happened to be a fourth-floor corridor in one of those embassies, where in two of the master bedrooms I knew I'd find a couple of wall safes brimming over with top-class jewellery.

Now the odd thing about wall safes was that most people with jewellery worth stealing hardly ever used them, and they were saved for special occasions. And that was the only reason I had to be up on that particular roof on that particular night. You see, even though most jewellery that got stolen was covered by insurance, most of what was replaced was promptly stolen again. All of which tended to get very monotonous for everybody except the jewel thief. So, the smarter ladies about town started wearing imitation sets around the house and started keeping their finest pieces of jewellery in bank vaults and safe-deposit boxes. On the day of this glittering first night or that gala charity ball, they would send some minion off to the bank to collect whatever precious pieces they'd decided to wear that evening. Then, after the lovely things had flashed their adorable selves in front of all the right people, they'd only have to spend one night slumming it at home before they could be safely returned to the bank the following morning.

It was the frequency of those fancy occasions that limited the opportunities for burglary, as those were the only times that all the best jewellery was ever guaranteed to be safe inside someone's wall safe, safe inside someone's house. Those were the nights you waited months for, those were the nights you prayed and prepared for. And just like the rest of London society, the criminal fraternity called it the Season, and as with any shooting party, success depended on how well you knew the habits of your intended quarry. Which was why all the better creepers always took all the better newspapers, studied the social and gossip columns, and read court circulars and society magazines such as the *Tatler* from cover to cover, and from top to bottom. In fact, it was in one of their photo-spreads that I first saw the diamonds I was intent on nicking that night. The pictures showed the ambassador's wife and daughter at a banquet looking double luscious in their long ball gowns. And the jewels didn't look too bad, either. I spied them again on a couple

of other occasions. Once, larger than life, in a newsreel at the pictures—which I sat through three times just to make certain—and another time, when I acted as a waiter at a posh do the ladies were attending in the West End. It always paid to get a close look if you could manage it, but when I saw them in the flesh, I could tell in an instant the lovely things were one hundred per cent kosher.

It was the windows, oddly enough, that'd given me most pause; the main floors looked to be newly glazed, even at the rear, which probably meant new window locks as well. Not overly troublesome, I admit, but I didn't want the added bother, as they might have also been newly alarmed. So, I'd decided to go in through the skylights, which of course meant me going up the outside of the house. Now, you learned at a very early age to only put your trust in soil-pipes, because they were the ones fixed to walls with two-and-a-half-inch masonry nails. Standard-size drainpipes, on the other hand, secured with nails no bigger than drawing pins, had a very nasty tendency to bend under a man's weight, so they were the very last things you ever wanted to find yourself hanging from sixty feet above the ground. The great thing about skylights was that even in the poshest of houses, the skylights were always the very last things people ever remembered to remember. It's an odd thing about human nature, people generally look out or down, yet hardly anyone ever remembers to look up. Funny that.

The little line of cottages in the mews at the back of a terrace of grand houses was originally accommodation and stable yard for the grooms, horses, and carriages. But over the years, in all the better parts of London, they'd become a terrific little leg-up for many of the better carriage-trade creeping jobs. So, needless to say, I climbed up with no trouble at all, and keeping to the shadows I moved quickly across the shallow incline of the cottage roofs to where they abutted the back of the terrace. I went hand over hand up the main fall-pipe to the fourth floor, reached over to a branch pipe that angled up towards one of the bathrooms on the next level and got a foot up onto it. Then I groped my way upright, all the while feeling for the crevices between the bricks with my fingertips and whispering a silent prayer of thanks that it was only the street-facing walls that Cubitt had ever thought to stucco.

The noise from down in the street ended my train of thought and it disappeared back into the tunnel of night in a puff of invisible smoke. I'd seen the ambassador, his wife, his debutante daughter, and some poncey-looking bloke leave earlier in the evening for some posh do at the Guildhall to welcome the new Yank ambassador, Lewis Douglas, to London. The newspapers had been full of it for days, though why any of the editors thought that anyone who worked for a living would have any interest in the proceedings beats me.

Anyway, ever since the ambassador and his party had gone out on the town, I'd been waiting on tenterhooks for a certain someone to leave the Embassy. I'd seen him a number of times, and familiarity had bred nothing but uneasiness. He was a thickset bald-headed geezer with big bushy eyebrows that looked like two furry caterpillars queuing for a bus. And you could tell by the way he carried himself that he thought he was someone to be reckoned with. He had policeman stamped all over him: a scowling face, a humourless mouth, and sharp, beady little eyes that even in daylight looked like two piss-holes in the snow.

I'd first set eyes on him a couple of months earlier when I'd borrowed an Harrods van and uniform and tried to deliver some packages to the Embassy. He was in one of the side rooms and, moments before the door got closed in my face, I heard him barking at a pretty woman with glasses, a secretary probably. I remember thinking at the time that the look on the woman's face didn't appear very dutiful; it was more like naked fear. I'm almost certain I heard a slap and a cry of pain afterwards, but as I was being shouted at by some low-grade nerk and was myself busily mumbling serf-like 'so-sorry-to-have-bothered-you-sirs,' I couldn't be sure.

I rolled onto my side and sneaked a peek through a gap in the balustrade with my little periscope. It's a handy bit of creeping kit that's really nothing more than a narrow, collapsible cardboard box with two tiny mirrors set at an angle at each end. And sure enough, reflected and framed in the mirror was Baldy himself just about to get into the back of a long black car; the light from the street lamps reflecting dully on the polished skin of his big square head. I stopped breathing for fear that the slightest tremble of the reflecting mirror might flash the secret of my hiding place. And at that very moment he stopped and looked up and down the street, taking in all the dimly lit porches, and the rows upon rows of heavy-draped windows and dark, empty rooms. And as he turned his head slowly from side to side the watery lamplight seemed to eat at his features like acid, turning his face into a grotesque lump of granite. He looked scary, like Boris Karloff getting ready to tear your head off, and before I could help myself, I began swallowing hard. "You could knock yourself senseless trying to head-butt that," I said to myself. Then in the blink of an eye both Baldy and the car were gone into the fog and the night.

I let out a long, deep breath and found I was shivering, but I swear it was only from the cold. And I warmed myself knowing that if he kept to his usual routine, he'd be gone until the early hours of the morning, which gave me all the time I needed. I couldn't get on with the job proper, though, until the ladies of the house returned with their jewels hidden beneath their mink coats. But with Baldy now safely out of the way I had work to do. The skylight I'd planned on going in through had been wired and alarmed, but even a kid on his first creep wouldn't have had too much trouble with it. Diamond cuts through glass like a knife through flesh, dead easy, and a rubber suction cup on the end of a piece of string was always a very handy little item for stopping glass from falling inside and shattering its own alarm.

Anyway, I did the necessary with the hidden wires, and pleasingly, no alarm bells started peeling out into the night. I used my glim—my torch—to peek down inside and gauge the length of rope I'd need to reach the landing below. Then after gently closing the skylight I settled down to wait for the Embassy's old Rolls-Royce to arrive. For once the ladies were safely home, the lovely sparklers were as safe as houses and as good as mine.

I almost missed the Roller as it purred up out of the mist. I tell you, those posh motors could be a right nuisance sometimes, they were so bleedin' quiet. But you couldn't miss the cut-glass tinkling of the women's laughter as whole villages of serfs rushed to open up the doors for them. By the sound of it, the ladies had had quite a night. It was a happy little band, and I remember hearing the ambassador laugh long and hard at something the young bloke had said. Not an earth-shattering event in itself, true, but for some reason or other it struck me as odd. I knew from my time in the Merch—Merchant Navy—that it was far more usual for a junior officer to laugh at his captain's jokes. I mean, that's just the way things are in the world, aren't they?

Anyway, as you do with silly things like that, I just filed it away somewhere in the back of my head and forgot about it.

The entire Embassy came alive to receive them with, I imagine, all the proper tugging of forelocks and proffering of warm nightcaps and bedpans. Meanwhile, I was friggin' freezing and I had to try and keep myself warm so I didn't stiffen up, but there's only so much arm flapping you can do on top of someone else's roof before you bring the entire house down. So, I just settled to the task of tying double overhand knots, every eighteen inches or so, into the two lengths of black silk rope I'd brought with me.

I pulled back the edge of my turtle—turtledove, glove—and looked at the luminous hands of my watch as they pointed to eleven o'clock exactly. I'd given the house an hour to settle down to sleep, and given myself another full hour to complete the creep. I'd planned on taking no more than twenty or thirty minutes to get in and out, but I'd allowed the extra time in case I needed the cushion to fall back on.

I'd observed the house and its day-and night-time habits a dozen times over the previous weeks and months. And as well as a few casual walks-by and the one fake parcel delivery, I'd spent time sketching around the area, changing my style of drawing and my disguise on each occasion. Well, you can't be too careful, can you? The way you draw and paint is as distinctive as your handwriting, and people remember the oddest things. Spend a lunch-time walking round the National Gallery if you don't believe me. Even if you don't know the first thing about art, just follow your nose and before long you'll be able to tell the artists apart even if you don't have the foggiest idea who they are. What's more, the memory of some of those paintings you stop and look at will stay with you for life.

Now if you could do it, so could any nosy copper with half a brain, which is why it always paid to take the necessary precautions. But I never minded working out in the open; it was all part of the challenge. "Hiding in plain sight," my old mate, Ray—a lot more about him later—called it. Anyway, you'd be surprised how much people will leave you alone if they see you working away at a little painting easel or drawing board. And whether capturing the acres of purple willow herbs that covered the bomb ruins around London Wall or standing in a busy street off Sloane Square made no difference. Kids, of course, would come up and ask to see what I was doing, and occasionally a thin-lipped, tweedy-looking matron up in town for the day would poke her long, pointed, heavily powdered nose in. British phlegm being what it is, though, the rest of the populace usually kept a respectful distance.

There was nothing better for scoping out a place properly, and afterwards, when doing the actual creep, I usually found I was never more than a few feet out in my reckoning of distance or dimensions. And as odd as it may seem, there was many a time my mind worked out exactly how to pull off a job while I was busy, lost in my sketching. It was my good luck, I suppose, that I was born with the knack; but I learned to imitate different drawing and painting styles in the same way I learned to imitate different types of people, by looking and trying very hard to see what I was looking at. In the end I got three or four good pen-and-ink studies and a nice couple of watercolours of the square, the terrace, and the mews at the back. None of them, admittedly,

## The Smoke by Tony Broadbent

as expressive as John Piper's pictures of buildings or worthy of the Royal Academy, but they all earned a place on the walls of my memory, I can tell you.

I looked at my watch again. It was only ten minutes past, and it wasn't at all like me to be so fidgety. I'd planned the job for months and prepared as fully as ever I'd done, and I'd always been successful. I even asked myself whether it was a sign I should abandon the creep. And in the end, to quieten my chattering mind, I decided to wait until the chimes of midnight to see what materialised. So I gave myself up again to London, and just let my mind wander up and out and over the dark rooftops to become one with "the Smoke."

As I imagined the city spread out beneath me, it struck me that London was like a huge stage-set being managed by the night. I smiled and whispered, "All the world's a stage." The exits and the entrances; the noises-off, real or imaginary; the acts about to be enacted; the many parts yet to be played; it all rang so true. It did then, it still does, and I think it always will. Old Bill Shakespeare really did know a thing or two about life, didn't he? How he came to know so much, though, I don't know, and neither do I care, I'm just very glad he put it all down for us to see and enjoy. Ray used to tell me of the fisticuffs they got up to at times down the British Museum tearooms, arguing about whether it was William Shakespeare, or Marlowe, or Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, who wrote all the plays. They even used to divide themselves up into teams, Stratfordians versus Oxfordians, the silly sods. All I know is, it was Londoners that loved him first, and we should all just be bloody grateful the plays got written as they did. One mind or many, there's a single truth that runs through them all.

Then I heard the chimes ring out, and with tools in hand, midnight stole upon me like a thief. And that decided it. And for good or ill, I committed myself to the creep.

## PORTS OF CALL

I looked down through the skylight to the floor below, looked away, blinked twice, and looked down again. It's always best to check you're not expected when you drop in unannounced. I pulled the skylight open, uncoiled the knotted silk rope, waited a full minute, and then began to ease my way head first down through the tiny gap. That may seem an arse-about-face way of doing it, but I've found that the sooner I get my eyes accustomed to the netherworld the better. And unless you find yourself in a windowless room, there's always a little bit of light quietly tip-toeing about somewhere to help you see, but at the start of any job your eyes have got to work overtime.

I counted to ten, took a deep breath and pulled my body through the gap, swinging my legs down in a perfect arc, all the while taking care not to tangle them in the lengthy adjustments I'd made to the alarm-circuit wire. "Good enough for Henger's Circus," I said to myself. I hooked my ankles around the rope, then reached up and closed the skylight behind me, leaving a tiny boxwood wedge to hold it clear of the rope and open for my return. Then I climbed down.

You feel houses. Some creepers even like to think of them as women; I don't, though, it'd be much too distracting. But in a way love does come into it. Love, joy, and warmth do something to a house, all the feelings get absorbed into the walls and floors, and settle into the carpets and furniture. I tell you, when you break into a house like that, one that feels warm, as if the whole house is unsettled by the invasion and everything in it tries to put you off your stroke and raise the alarm. I suppose it's the difference between a house and a home—sounds corny, I know, but a house that's empty of love is indifferent to your creeping. Even a hotel room, so often misused, holds some vestige of loving behind its striped wallpaper, however tired or torn, and will try and gather its secrets around itself like an old dowager in a threadbare dressing gown. But that night in the Embassy, I felt nothing but cold. It was a building that people merely spent time in. They arrived, did whatever work was required of them and went away again. Whole regiments of people must've passed through its big front door in its time, without one of them ever leaving anything of themselves behind. No wonder the house felt as it did.

Hanging in mid-air, gently swinging to and fro in the darkness, I took stock of my situation. To my left was the wooden banister at the top of the back stairwell, and below, a short corridor, more a half-landing really, that led on the right to a door of a tiny attic or a box-room. A lot of Georgian houses had little apartments built into the attic or on top of the roof as rooms for servants. But other than what was behind the door on the landing, there were no additional structures to the house that I could see, just the original, twin-hipped, grey-slatted roofs with sloped ends. All of which meant there were no handy dormer windows at the front or the back for me to climb through. However, the two runs of skylights set into the two roof slopes facing away from the street were more than good enough for me to be getting on with.

My toes gingerly kissed the floor, and I was down onto the balls of my feet and ready to jump back up and out again at the slightest noise. My eyes and ears strained themselves probing the dark, searching out the immediate area, while the tiny hairs on the back of my neck waved backwards and forwards feeling for things in the air that clever people will tell you can't be felt.

I stood for a moment like a stag nosing the wind. Then I took a deep breath and once again felt that old, black-magic feeling of time slowing down and billowing out all around me like a cloak. I can't explain it—it's as if I become part of the darkness itself and move within its shadows as one of them. I'm here at the same time as I'm over there, and I think I become invisible, because I'm not what people ever expect to see. When I move in the dark, I sometimes feel that my toes and feet have developed some peculiar set of senses, and over the years it's a marvel what they've not stepped in, if you get my meaning. The trick is to time your movements to the natural sounds of the house. Placing one foot down with the tick from the long-case clock, moving the other in time with the settling of the hot-water pipes or the wind pushing against the windowpanes.

I crept over towards the wooden railing, testing each foot before putting my full weight down onto the floorboards, and I felt rather than saw a worn carpet runner that stretched off into the darkness at the top of the stairs. It meant there was regular foot traffic, so I edged my cardboard periscope over the wooden banister for a look down into the stairwell. There was a faint light coming up from below, but one or two night staff were a normal feature of most legations and embassies, so that didn't worry me. And they usually spent most of their time with their heads buried in a book or guarding the front door to make sure no one got in or out. And the very last thing they wanted to do was disturb the very important people upstairs all tucked up in their beds fast asleep.

I folded the scope flat, slipped it back into the black canvas satchel strapped across my chest, and with my crepe-rubber-soled plimsolls not making a sound, I padded back to the door of the box-room. I could tell by touch alone it wasn't what Thomas Cubitt originally had in mind, as it was made of steel. I listened, my ear pressed against the door, and ever so slowly turned the handle. There were no sounds of sleeping, no dream-laden grunts, only the tinny silence of emptiness. I chanced the glim again, and in its pencil-thin beam I saw a short stairway of about five or six steps that led up into a long, low, windowless room that'd been squeezed in under the roofline. I shone the torch up the walls and across the low ceiling. And it wasn't a box-room at all, it was a bedroom of some sort, yet one as bleak and as spare as any abandoned barracks room in some far-flung and forgotten outpost of empire.

There was a single foldaway cot with a stained, striped mattress, a thin blanket and a pillow, and it all looked like it could've done with a good dusting of bug powder. Other than that, there was a washstand with a jug and basin, a chamber pot, and a tiny lamp on a tiny table. I could feel a slight draft coming from somewhere inside the room, so I knew there had to be ventilation of some kind. It was more like a prison cell than a bedroom, and unashamed of its purpose it blankly returned my stare, quite indifferent to my thoughts on the matter.

I stepped back and ran the glim over the door. There were two big bolts, both well oiled, one at the top and one at the bottom, and a lock without a key. "Who in hell do they stick inside here?" I said to myself. I closed the door, turned, and crossed the landing. Then, keeping close to the wall, I slipped down the short flight of stairs to the floor below. The corridor that opened up to my right led to ten or twelve small bedrooms, but as there were no strips of light visible under any of the doors, I took it that the occupants were all sound asleep. Under normal circumstances, those upper rooms, being so near the roof, would've drawn me like a magnet; easy in and easy



out. But that night I only had time for the floor below, where I knew I'd find the master bedrooms and the mistress's jewels. And I crept down those stairs as silently as a dark thought steals into a lonely spinster's worst imaginings.

I came to the main bedroom corridor and stopped dead, and with my feet firmly planted in the thickening stillness, I took a moment to nose the air again. There was no shaded electric light ready to throw its shadows at an unwary night creeper, no night-light candle waiting to point a flickering finger from behind its smoke-blackened glass, but there was light of sorts. Only the very faintest inkling, but enough for me to tell one thing from another. I was always told that the best way to see in the dark was never to look at anything directly, but my eyes just seemed to absorb whatever light there was anyway. "Cat's eyes," my dad used to call it. And as I moved my head slowly from side to side, the source of the additional light became clear.

A thin sliver of light showed underneath the door of the nearest guest-room. I hadn't intended on doing that particular room on the creep, but now, with that light on, any second thoughts I might've had about turning it over quickly exited stage-left. Light shed in the wrong place and at the wrong time tends to have that effect on me. In fact, it's the only thing creepers fear. If there's a shared bathroom at the end of a bedroom corridor, a strip of light like that is just like waiting for the pin to drop out of a hand grenade. But as I knew there were six main bedrooms on that floor, each with its own separate dressing room and bathroom, I wasn't too concerned about being caught short.

I blessed again the powerful Afrikakorps binoculars I'd acquired down Bermondsey Market soon after VE Day. Thanks to them I'd managed to pick out many a secret from the vast expanse of London's rooftop desert, especially in the dead of night when every light shone with the promise of an unknown oasis. Hardly anyone used blackout curtains anymore, too many memories of the Blitz, I suppose, so the unconfined glow of an electric light bulb was one of the few ways many people could display their new-won freedom.

That's how I knew there were two master-bedroom suites at the front, one for the ambassador and his wife, one for their daughter, and four large bedrooms at the back reserved for important visitors. The guest rooms had been empty for most of the time I'd been keeping tabs on the house, or at least no light had ever shown in the windows. The regular night-time pattern had changed, however, when the Flash Harry I'd seen hobnobbing around town with the ambassador's wife and daughter had first taken up residence that September. Sometime between the open-season on partridges and the one for shooting pheasants.

Now, even though I was making for the bedrooms at the front, it had crossed my mind that anyone important enough to be a guest on that floor would very likely have one or two very expensive knickknacks lying around his room. Solid-gold lighter and cigarette case, monogrammed cuff-links, nice wristwatch, that sort of thing. But as I was so dead set on lifting the ladies' jewellery and slipping in and out as quickly as I could, I decided I really didn't need the bother of any further distraction. The other thing was, the light underneath the guest-room door couldn't have been on for very long. No more than five minutes at the most. I was certain of that, because I'd made one last final check down the front and back of the house with my

periscope just before I'd started the creep. Everything had looked clear then, by which I mean everything had been nice and dark, and as quiet as the grave.

I drifted over towards Flash Harry's door, but there was no sound coming from inside, no gentle cough or clearing of the throat, no sipping of water, no pouring of whisky, no crackling fire or crackle of pages being turned. I breathed in, my nostrils flaring, but felt nothing, nothing at all, no threat, nothing. Perhaps he was frightened of the dark and needed to sleep with the lights on. Perhaps he'd fallen asleep reading. Yes, and perhaps I needed my head examined.

I blinked sleepily, but not because I was tired—it's just one of the things that happens to me during a creep when everything around me seems to slow down like a clock losing time. And holding the unbroken stillness of Flash Harry's room in my mind, I turned and crossed the corridor as no more than a fleeting shadow, and began to sense the room opposite. I can see inside a room just by touching the door to it, and it's the same with picking locks. I just imagine them in my mind, and through my fingertips they become as real and as solid for me as if I was standing inside the room itself or I had the lock in question standing on a work-bench in front of me. I can't honestly explain how it works, it just does. It's a gift, I suppose, and one I'm very grateful for. Time and again it's meant the difference between success and failure, and I know very well I'd have ended up in the clink without it. Call it a sixth sense if you like. I do. Most people take their natural abilities for granted and are truly amazed when other people have difficulty doing what they themselves do so very easily. Me? I kiss the ground I creep on, and say, "Thanks ever so much."

And so with my sixth sense going ten to the dozen, I stood cloaked in darkness caressing the door to the bedroom suite of the ambassador and his wife, and with my turtles tingling their readiness, I was about to make my first port of call for the night.