

THE CONE

There were three of us up on the rooftop, fifteen storeys above the city, and it would take a computer several valuable seconds to work out the odds against it. Each of us, for an instant, was motionless: me, against the fire-door; Hammersham, half-way across the expanse of white gravel, and the man in the boiler suit, ten feet from the edge, hunched over a white plastic cone, the wind filling his boiler suit as though someone was inflating it. It was a February day, the sky was black, and the wind came at us every thirty seconds or so, slapping like a big wet tarpaulin.

In those few seconds the nuclear pile went critical. Just as a certain combination of atomic units can turn a nuclear power station into a bomb, so the combination of those three figures, under a winter sky high above London, tipped the balance of our reaction away from control. And when that happened, all hell broke loose.

None of us should have been up there. I shouldn't have been up there because I'm not on the staff of Amalgamated National Newspapers, and I'm not even sure the staff are allowed on the roof anyway. I'd gone up to the fourth floor to see the news editor and I'd seen him and handed in my copy and signed an expenses claim, and as far as Amalgamated National Newspapers was concerned that was that until they wanted me again.

Actually, they would probably want me again fairly soon, because I worked for them regularly, and some of them even regarded me as one of the staff, but I wasn't.

I was freelance, and not because I made more money that way. I freelanced for Hammersham's papers to keep afloat a small community news service I operate from a basement in North Kensington in a street they've been planning to knock down for a long time, and haven't got around to.

The stories my news service gathers are about things like that, and the editors of the sort of papers that print those stories never have any money to pay for them, and the result is I spend around forty per cent of my time working for Amalgamated National and all it stands for and the rest of the time working against it. To be fair, I like working for them; I like the people, I like the atmosphere. I just don't like the editorials.

So usually, when I've completed my stint, I relieve my feelings by stepping into the lift, riding up to the fifteenth floor, opening the fire-door, and stepping out on to the gravel to look at the view. And on this occasion I had company.

The view from the top of Amalgamated House is always dramatic, and on that dark February day it was even more impressive than usual. To the south St Paul's floated grey against the darkness of the sky like a huge balloon, ready at any moment to tear its anchor ropes and drift unsteadily off across the city on some long-pondered errand. To the east the Wren spires gleamed unnaturally, bone-white against the dull office-buildings around them. The Barbican tower blocks loomed to the north, storey after storey of balconies silhouetted like the teeth of a saw. Cloud covered most of the distant skyline of Parliament Hill, and from there a tide of slate-grey roofs and chimney pots flowed down to Holborn, bobbing with red domes and copper-green towers, swirling through Clerkenwell and over Saffron Hill along the streets where

Oliver met Fagin, past Booth's Gin factory.

Hammersham wasn't looking at the view at all. His entire attention was concentrated on the man in the boiler suit, and from thirty feet away I could see that he was tense with fury.

Hammersham is a Lord and he owns Amalgamated Newspapers. He is a big man, born fifty years ago, with a face like an American eagle, heavy with good living, but not fat. His hair is black and thinning and his eyes are grey and hard. He inherited his newspaper empire, but keeping it has been a long fierce battle and he has fought that battle with ferocity and gusto. It sounds as though I knew him, but of course I didn't. I had contributed to quite a number of papers in his empire, and doubtless he had never read any of those contributions and certainly he had never heard of me. The only thing that brought us together was the random chance that he had decided to leave his fifteenth-floor office and smoke a cigar on the roof about sixty seconds before I stepped out through that fire-door.

What had brought him up short was the man in the boiler suit, because the man in the boiler suit was very obviously bugging the building. He might have been a workman but he wasn't. The white plastic cone in his hand might have been the cover of one of the dozens of ventilator shafts which sprouted through the gravel like orderly mushrooms. But it wasn't. Ventilator covers do not contain mechanisms requiring delicate attention with a screwdriver, and to fit them you do not need to have an earphone in your ear. Hammersham saw this and it made him angry. Because the bug was being installed directly above his own office.

It was only an instant during which we were all motionless, but it seemed longer. I was frozen, held by

the tension like a microscopic specimen between two pieces of glass. Hammersham's stillness was that which immediately precedes swift and decisive action. And the man in the boiler suit, kneeling over the white plastic cone, was still because he was totally unaware that he had been discovered.

Then the instant was over. Hammersham took a long stride towards the intruder. His foot crunched on the stones and the man in the boiler suit heard him at last, turning and rising from his knees in one movement. The earphone fell out of his ear and dangled against his chest like a plastic medal.

He was about thirty years old with a college-boy haircut and fashionable aviator-shaped glasses. He was handsome in the way people in film advertisements are handsome, and he had a suntan. He reminded me of one of the Beach Boys in the early sixties.

His mouth opened but he didn't get any words out.

Hammersham raised his hand and I knew immediately afterwards that he had intended nothing more than to grab the intruder by the shoulder. But as he did it I was convinced that he was going to hit him, and so was the man in the boiler suit.

He was younger and fitter and somebody had trained him. His hand shot up and he had grasped Hammersham's wrist before it got anywhere near him. That was his mistake. The circle of misunderstanding was complete. Someone had struck Hammersham on his own territory and he was furious. All the restraint of years of board-room battles, where the only blows were words and figures in a cheque-book, dropped away from him very suddenly, and instead of one of the most influential people in Britain, he was just a man who has been attacked and is going to defend himself.

He lashed out with his other fist and caught the younger man a powerful unscientific blow on the chest. All this happened for me as though I was watching a film. It was totally unexpected and I did not realize, for a long moment, that I had any relation to what was going on at all. It was partly the fact that you simply do not think of yourself as having any influence on the lives of the great and powerful, but there was something else too. I had spent too much time writing about the things other people were doing and not enough doing things myself. That was going to change, and it was going to change more drastically than I could have imagined. But it hadn't changed yet.

I did nothing for about ten seconds. And then the man in the boiler suit was going over backwards, and taking Hammersham with him. He fell because he was tripped, as he staggered from Hammersham's blow, by the tracks which run around the edge of the roof of Amalgamated House. The tracks support a crane from which is lowered a six-foot box for the window-cleaners, and as I watched both men came down heavily on the rails and I heard a deep grunt of pain.

And then I began to move. It took me a very short time to get to the edge of the roof, but by the time I got there it was almost too late. They were locked together, struggling to rise from the wet metal, and inches away each of them knew that there were two hundred feet of tastefully tinted glass and a long drop to ten square yards of concrete solid with ornamental pebbles.

There was no finesse in what I did. I grasped both men by the collar and hauled them away from the drop. It was only a matter of feet, but it was enough. They tore apart, and the younger man swung around on me like a cat and smashed me hard across the face. It was not a

particularly forceful blow, but it hurt, it bloodied my nose, it brought tears to my eyes and it gave him the moment he needed. He twisted away and took off across the gravel as if it had been a sprint track.

He had reached the fire-door almost before my eyes had cleared, but I can sprint too and I was up with him before he closed it, and would have had him. But then I turned to glance back at Hammersham, and when I did so I stopped dead. He was kneeling by the rails, trying to get up, and his face was grey, slate grey. I could hear the rasp of his breath from where I stood. I let go of the door and went over to him, fast.

CHAPTER II

PAPER CHASE

There were several nasty moments then, but there were some pills, and we got them out of his pocket and he swallowed them and finally we got down off the roof and into the deep-carpeted world of his office suite, and the secretary appeared. She was very calm and capable and I think she knew him better than he knew himself. She took over. All the right procedures were set in motion and all the right people called. The doctor appeared within three minutes, and I turned to go. I was in the hall when Hammersham's secretary caught up with me. She said: 'Would you say nothing about this to anyone, please? Lord Hammersham will be in contact.'

And that was that.

I got into the lift again and went down to the ground floor and left, and as I did so the sky opened and the rain

began to hurl itself down. I turned my collar up around my neck and ran for the bus.

North Kensington is not a salubrious area at the best of times, and in that bleak, dripping winter it was at its worst. The streets were full of sodden rubbish and the dogs slunk into the doorways of boarded-up shops, waiting. The old people clustered together in the laundrettes. At the end of my street the tower block rose into the rain like a giant tombstone. There was a trail of spray-paint across the door to my basement. When I opened the door it was like walking into a refrigerator. I went down the stairs fast and unlocked my flat.

I like the rooms I have down there. They have the right womb-like feel to them, and for some reason there is a light shaft that goes four storeys up to the roof. I have the bed beneath it, and when I lie there I can look straight up into the sky. Sometimes I can see the stars in daytime.

It's a very functional flat. There is no distinguishing where the office ends and the living space begins. The furniture is all junk and the communications equipment is all pretty good. The telephone on the desk might catch your eye. Instead of a handpiece there are headphones and a mike. I tried the headsets the Post Office puts out and hated them. This way I talk and listen and type and record in comfort when I'm on the telephone. I spend quite a lot of time on the telephone. It's my job. Next to the phone is the tape deck and on shelves above that the amp and the tuner and the turntable and next to them all the television, on the filing cabinet. There's a little console on the wall by the bed, so I can turn them all on and off and change stations and things like that, without moving.