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THE CHUNNEL SYNDROME

by

Bob Mendes

Part I: INVISIBLE EMPIRES

You can fool all the people
some of the time,
and some of the people
all of the time,
but you can't fool all the people
all the time.

Abraham Lincoln, 1858

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Author's Preface

The idea for this book came while reading a report in the *Financial Times* on the building of the channel tunnel. According to the article the question of safety was central in the campaign being waged by its opponents, among whom the ferry companies, in their efforts to thwart the whole project.

While I have carefully researched my story, so as to place it as convincingly as possible within the present social and economic climate, it remains a story, and all the characters, companies, and ships are imaginary.

I should like to thank all those who have helped me in my research by providing me with with advice and documentation: Paul Goris, chief of salvaging operations at United Rescue and Towing Services at Antwerp and Zeebrugge, Leo 's Heeren, adjunct director-general of the Port of Antwerp, numerous journalists, and many others besides.

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The German Shepherd smelt the danger. His hackles rose up and his hind-quarters sank a fraction lower. But he continued to walk at heel as he had been taught, shoulder blade level with David's left knee.

"Virtus, stay," said David. Virtus had all the qualities of a champion, but this time he'd got it completely wrong. David knew for certain that the attacker was lurking behind the rhododendron bushes, some two hundred meters further on.

As a sign of obedience Virtus allowed one of his ears to fall flat against his neck, while the other remained on the alert like a satellite dish receiver on the look out for suspicious noises. As they passed a hunting screen the dog growled in warning, but David ignored him. The shot was totally unexpected and so close it must surely have burst his eardrums. With a lot of shouting, the assailant appeared from behind the screen.

"Go, Virtus," ordered David, and Virtus went for him like a flash.

"Stop!" shouted the villain, levelling his revolver at the oncoming animal. But before he could pull the trigger a second time Virtus' jaws clamped round his arm and the man sank to his knees.

Meanwhile, David had come nearer: "Loose!"

The dog let the man go, and - tongue hanging from its chaps - came and sat down by his master's left leg.

"Turn round with your hands above your head," ordered David, taking a step forward to search the man. That was a mistake. The villain kicked his legs from under him and ran off.

"Go, boy!"

Virtus shot after him. In full flight, the man aimed a vicious blow at the dog's head with the butt of the pistol, but Virtus dodged it and floored him with a sharp tug on his trouser leg.

"Stop!" There was a touch of panic in the man's voice.

"Loose!"

The dog came and sat once again at his left side. David gave him a pat of approval: "Good dog, Virtus."

The kennel trainer picked himself up off the ground.

"Plenty of character," he said with a tone of respect. "Should turn into a real prizewinner."

A ring of applause broke out from the spectators behind the fencing.

The organizer walked onto the course: "Bravo, David. Absolutely splendid," he said with an almost self-congratulatory air. The dog was, after all, from his kennel, so his reputation as a breeder had been at stake.

"*Vicit vim Virtus*," said David proudly. "As the coat of arms of Haarlem says. Courage overcomes violence." He scratched the dog between the ears. "Plucky fellow." In fact Virtus was a large bitch with a dark outer coat above a light brown undercoat, but David always thought and spoke of her as though she were a male.

He put the dog on the lead and was about to leave the course, when the breeder called after him:

"Oh, by the way, David. There's someone wants to speak to you. He's waiting in his car." His voice took on a note of reverence: "A silver coloured Rolls-Royce, at that."

"Must be a mistake." David could not imagine who would come looking for him in this back of beyond.

He put Virtus in his kennel and went to have a look. In front of the dilapidated barn stood a Silver Shadow with the familiar winged angel on the radiator. The shining limousine was as much in place on this rural cobbled road in Pulderbos as a manure cart would have been on the Champs Elysées. The dark plate glass windows, which prevented one from seeing inside, made him think of oil sheikhs and veiled harem women.

David walked up to it and tried to look in, but saw only his own reflection. Then one of the rear windows slid silently down. "Good morning David," said the Baron.

David stared speechlessly into the shadowy interior. It was a mystery to him why Baron Léon Montagne-Jonson should come looking for him here in Pulderbos, not so much because the man was extremely rich - he had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth and all he touched seemed to turn to gold - but because the Baron usually requested people to come to *him*, he did not go looking for them.

"Get in, would you. I want to talk to you."

David hesitated. Even a request from the Baron sounded like an order.

"Allow me, sir."

In a single motion the liveried chauffeur came round the car and politely opened the door for him. Almost against his will David got in and sank back into the opulent cushioned seats. You could have held a board meeting on the back seat, there was so much room.

"How did you find me here?"

It was a silly question. Léon Montagne-Jonson never had the slightest difficulty finding anyone anywhere. Nor losing them again, if it suited him.

The Baron pointed to a computer terminal built into the back of the front seat.

"Nothing could be easier," he said coolly. He was wearing a grey pin-striped jacket with a diamond pin in the button-hole representing the logo of the ferry company: two intertwining letter J's. "One has only to mention a name and that thing starts churning out more information than one can handle. It even knows when you last went to your hairdresser."

David's eyebrows rose in annoyance.

Montagne-Jonson gave him a sideways look: "Or the address of the woman you last slept with."

After all these years the Baron clearly found it hard to swallow the fact that David had quit J & J, not to mention Monique Montagne-Jonson, his daughter. David could not resist asking after her: "How is she?"

The Baron stared cheerlessly through the windscreen. He was a tall, gaunt man, with a conspicuously thin swan-neck. It struck David that he was not getting any younger. He would be well into his seventies now.

"She's married to Simon Stevens," said the Baron. "The playboy. Didn't you know?"

David shrugged his shoulders. Of course he knew. The newspapers had made almost as much fuss over it as they had over the Royal Wedding. The Baron opened the door to the built-in bar.

"Whisky?"

Without waiting for an answer he poured a generous amount of Chivas Regal into two cut-glass tumblers:

"You could call it a modern marriage," he said wistfully. "Each goes his own way." He raised the glass to his lips and David followed the movement of the Adam's apple in his long neck with interest.

"Fortunately her husband does know a bit about shipping," he went on in a quiet voice. "So I let him amuse himself with the Belgian branch of Jonson & Jonson. He's managing rather less badly than I had feared. But he's always so damn'd cheerful..."

For Léon Montagne-Jonson a cheerful character cut no ice. Cheerfulness was a feeling completely alien to him.

"You didn't come here to talk with me about the family, surely?" said David pointedly.

The Baron ignored his interruption. "I've packed it in," he said.

David kept silent.

The Baron took another sip: "The concern is now being run by Anthony."

"What, the entire company?" said David in disbelief. "The main office in London?" Jonson & Jonson was the second most important ferry company in Britain. "Why the sudden change? You always said your son had never grown up."

"Anthony is forty-two," snapped the Baron. "I'd made my first million pounds by the time I was thirty."

"Times have..."

"Times don't change. They merely come and go. Like the seasons. It's people that change." The Baron looked quizically at David: "Like you."

David was not going to be drawn. "You're getting old," he said flatly.

Montagne-Jonson pulled a long face: "That's what we all hope to become. But no-one likes being it."

David couldn't help laughing.

The Baron looked at him with disapproval. "I need your assistance." He sounded in earnest.

David was unaccustomed to any such admission from the Iron Baron. His attention wandered to the barking of his dog - probably spectators coming too close to his kennel.

"I sometimes wonder whether it might not be better to call it a day," said the Baron. "Now Nicky is married to Simon Stevens, who works hand in glove with Anthony, I seem to have lost touch rather." He swallowed and once again his Adam's apple bobbed around. "Maybe I've got a touch of Channel fever, as well."

"Channel fever?"

"Means nothing to you? Since work on the Chunnel started, half the British transport sector has been living on tenterhooks."

"Chunnel?" asked David, blankly. He had hardly opened a newspaper since beginning on his new novel.

"The Channel tunnel," the Baron said impatiently. "You're behind the times, David." He pulled out the keyboard of the built-in computer and tapped out a few instructions with his long fingers.

"Look what Maxwell wrote me," he mumbled.

The screen lit up, and with astonishment David started reading.

In spite of a deep-seated reluctance to see the tunnel completed - part of the British psyche - it represents the biggest shift in the economic power structure since the Industrial Revolution. Some are predicting that the ferry companies will all go bankrupt and that Dover will become a ghost town. It is not a matter of the sixteen thousand jobs which will be lost in the neighbourhood of Dover and Folkestone - these will be replaced by many new jobs - it is a matter of economic power. Those behind the Chunnel see this permanent link with the continent as part of a vast new plan. Tunnels for their high speed trains linking the continent with Copenhagen and Sweden in one direction, and through the Pyrenees and on under the Straits of Gibraltar in the other. Their real aim is to gain control of all passenger and goods traffic in Europe. We, the ferry companies, port authorities, airline companies, and unions, the traditional seats of power, are threatened in our very existence, so we must ally to form a pressure group. In this way two invisible empires will come into...

Montagne-Jonson suddenly switched the thing off. "Seems a bit far-fetched, I know..." His face grew even longer. "Channel fever or not, it sometimes seems as though a massive conspiracy is building up against me."

David glanced sideways: "You're usually the one who's conspiring."

Montagne-Jonson put a bony hand on David's arm. "That's why I asked the board of directors yesterday to appoint you as special commissioner, so that you can investigate what's going on. No-one else is up to it."

David removed the hand. It felt cold. "And what makes you think I shall accept the job?"

The Baron turned slowly towards him with a quiet, self-confident expression on his face. "Because I am offering you one hundred thousand dollars. Paid into a Swiss bank account. Tax free."

There was a brief silence. Then David said, "You're right. I have changed."

He got out of the car and turned round. He had not touched the whisky. "You see," he said in a neutral voice. "I can no longer be bought. Neither by you, nor by the devil." He grinned. "Sometimes I even doubt whether there's much difference between the two of you."

Léon Montagne-Jonson stared at him without batting an eyelid.

David slammed the car door and walked resolutely away in the direction of the kennels. In a short while the tracking competition would be starting, and Virtus was a born master at that.

As he reached the top of the stairs he heard his phone going behind the closed door of his penthouse flat. He didn't bother to hurry. All too often he had scrambled towards a phone only to find he was just too late. First he took off his muddy shoes and opened the hatch in the door leading to the patio. He was just about to pick up the phone, when the stupid thing stopped buzzing.

"Blast," he said and went into the kitchen. He put a rasher of bacon in the frying pan and broke three eggs over it. Virtus followed each movement.

David said strictly: "You know it's your weekly fast-day." The brown dog eyes looked back sadly. David was not able to withstand such a plea. He gave in and filled Virtus' bowl: "It's no good winning a competition if you have to go hungry, is it?"

Virtus gobbled up a kilo of meat in three mouthfuls.

After his meal David took a cup of coffee out onto the patio. He lived in a penthouse of the 'Golden Real' a renovated building on the Jordaens Quay in Antwerp, from where he had a splendid view over the river Scheldt and the Steen - a tenth century fort which now housed the maritime museum. The pontoon bridge next to the Steen was full of cars; on board La Pérouse - a luxury yacht moored to the quay - there was a reception in full swing. Through the portholes he could see the shadowy figures moving about. Time seemed to roll back ten years...

The day he first met Nicky there had been a blanket of wet, grey cloud over the river, just like today. He had felt shivery, but it had gone the moment he set foot on La Pérouse. On board it was warm and cosy; it smelt of leather, wood, and perfume - an expensive smell and he liked it.

Anthony came towards him with outstretched hand. He was tall and thin, just like his father. But the protruding Adam's apple and the swan-neck were rather less pronounced.

"At last," he said nervously, "I was beginning to think you were not coming."

David shook hands and looked around him. "I wouldn't miss this for anything," he said. "It looks as though the Crown Jewels are on exhibition." The banquet was being held in honour of the new British Consul-General to Belgium.

Anthony said, "Father will be arriving shortly, with the Consul." David nodded and studied the other guests. They all seemed to be rolling in money.

Anthony cleared his throat. "I hope you make a good impression on him."

"I always make a good impression," David laughed. "It takes a while for people to realise what an absolute bastard I really am."

But Anthony insisted. "It's important for me. He's got to help finance the project. And you're the one to persuade him."

"Stop worrying, Anthony. You can count on me." He had got to know Anthony when he was an articled clerk in the City. Even then he was always having to help Anthony out. He didn't know why he bothered; maybe it flattered his ego to know that a rich man's son needed him.

"Here he is."

Anthony pushed his way through the guests, shepherding David along. It was the first time that David had seen Baron Léon Montagne-Jonson in person. His neck looked even longer than in the newspaper photographs.

"This is David Marcke," said Anthony, introducing him to his father. "The man who came up with the Albegas idea."

The small head with the broad forehead wobbled in David's direction and the grey eyes seemed to make an X-ray of him.

"So you believe in Algerian natural gas, do you?" the Baron said, not mincing his words.

"I prefer to believe in myself," David answered.

The hard eyes narrowed just a fraction.

"Good."

"It's a matter of price," David added casually.

The Baron waited for him to go on.

"Albegas. The Algerian-Belgian natural gas project," David explained.

"Oh that," said the Baron snappily, "I thought you were talking about yourself."

David smiled. "No, for myself..."

He did not get the opportunity to push up his personal credit with the Baron, for the latter had shifted his attention to the man standing next to him and David was pushed aside in the wake of the pallbearers.

Pondering, he made for the cocktail bar and ordered a drink.

As he brought the glass to his lips, he saw her for the first time. She was standing hardly a meter away, looking at him with a fixed gaze. Her eyes were a strange light-brown, with small golden specks in them. She was thin and tall - at least a couple of inches taller than himself.

"How's the Montagne Syndrome?" she asked. He judged her to be about twenty-five. The chestnut colour of her hair perfectly matched her eyes.

He wasn't sure what she was getting at. "Syndrome?"

She took the glass from him and drank half of it:

"A complex pattern of symptoms. Condition after sickness or unexpected event." She handed back the glass. "Order me a Scotch. Port sticks to the tongue so."

He beckoned the waiter and ordered two whiskies.

"You mean my introduction to Baron Montagne-Jonson?"

"I mean the way you were given the brush-off."

"That wasn't my impression," he said with a degree of aloofness.

She regarded him with compassion. "Funny how it hurts less when the person kicking your backside is a millionaire."

"You might change your tune if this poor fellow for one were to kick your backside," he replied somewhat testily, and made as if to go.

She laughed and grabbed him by the arm. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

He checked himself.

She picked up her drink from the bar and raised her glass. "Shall we drink to your future fortune?"

He responded, laughing.

"Gladly."

She was wearing a tightly fitting black dress, open at the shoulders, probably designed in Paris. The gold brooch, studded with diamonds, must have cost more than his annual salary. Well his present salary. "My name is Monique. Nicky to friends." She inspected him: "Black hair. Grey eyes." With her index finger she turned his head: "Classical profile. Heavy eyebrows, curved nose."

The tip of her finger touched his moustache: "I like you," she said without a trace of shyness. "I think we're going to get on."

A butt from Virtus' muzzle brought him back to reality. The telephone was buzzing. He went into the living room and picked up the receiver.

"David Marcke speaking."

"David?"

He recognized instantly the high voice of Peter, one of the partners to whom he had handed over his management consultants bureau the year before. Virtus gave a short bark to register his presence.

"That means hello," said David.

Peter laughed nervously. "How did the trial go?"

"Top of the form. Rating: excellent."

"Congratulations. So Virtus is a champion now?"

"Yes indeed. Guard dog class II. From now on he can compete in the top class."

"Best of luck, old man." Peter hesitated. "I had a call from Karel De Woeste, chairman of the Institute of Accountants."

"Did you, now," said David suspiciously.

"He wanted to know whether there was a special reason for turning down the Jonson & Jonson job."

"Good God, what a nerve!" said David. "And what if I simply don't feel like doing it?"

"Won't do David. You know that as well as I do. There's got to be some valid reason. Anyhow the assignment arrived here in writing this afternoon. It's not made out under your name, but under the firm's."

David struggled to keep calm. "I shall invoke special circumstances, Peter. I'm not going to be mucked about."

Peter's voice took on a more accomodating tone. "I see your point, David. I really do. But we badly want this assignment. It's good for our image. Think it over, would you?"

"H'm," was all David could reply.

"By the way, how's life in the tax haven progressing?" Peter asked, trying to relieve the tension.

"Oh the book, you mean. So so. But I'm in no hurry."

"That's the right idea. Well, let me know what you decide about Jonson & Jonson tomorrow, would you?"

"Goodbye."

It was all David could do to stop himself slamming down the receiver. A year ago, he had passed on his practice to two accountants. There was a clause in the agreement which said that he would continue to work on special assignments if the client so wished. Typical of the Baron to have fished that one out.

Virtus was waiting by the door and with a low growl he reminded him that it was about time for his evening walk.

David put on his windcheater: "Right, Virtus. Let's go."

Together they went down by the stairs of the seven storey building. They never went in the lift, for it would have scared some of the neighbours out of their wits to have been confronted by the German shepherd in the lift.

It had started to rain, but that didn't bother either of them. They walked along the quay of the Scheldt, and as they passed the pontoon bridge, he heard the elated tones of the guests leaving *La Pérouse*. Once again it made him think back to that first evening with Nicky...

During the dinner they had been sitting opposite each other. Nicky spent the whole time talking to the man next to her, a naval commander in uniform, and her bubbling laughter grew ever more gay as the evening progressed. Although David tried now and again to catch her eye, she continued to ignore him. All of a sudden she had thrust a long, amber cigarette-holder under his nose:

"Well, fortune-seeker. Could you give me a light?"

He produced his cigarette-lighter. She grabbed his hand and directed the flame towards the cigarette. Then with an intimate squeeze she let go and seemed to forget that he existed.

When he left the yacht after dinner, she was standing at the end of the gangway chatting to a group of people. She was wearing a white fur coat over her black dress, with the collar turned up.

"Well, little David. You're here at last," she said, as if they'd been together for years. She took his arm and they walked off in the direction of his car, leaving behind the amazed looks on her friend's faces.

She pressed up close to him in the car. "Where are we sleeping," she asked, "your place or mine?"

He looked at her and thought it over. "I'm married," he lied.

"Right," she said. "It had better be my flat then."

The next morning he could hear Nicky occupying herself in the kitchen. The smell of toast and coffee made his mouth water. The evening before they had drunk champagne and talked and talked. He couldn't quite remember what about, but he remembered clearly that afterwards, when they were lying quietly in bed, Nicky had nestled up closely to him with a tenderness that went beyond sexual passion.

Nicky came out of the kitchen and set the coffee pot and scrambled egg on toast in front of him.

"Help yourself," she said. "In the morning all I need is a cigarette."

She watched him as he got stuck in. Then she asked: "What are you going to tell your wife?"

He didn't reply immediately, looking instead around him at the expensive surroundings. A beggar might think he had landed in heaven. "It's not the first time I haven't slept at home since working for Anthony Montagne-Jonson."

"Other women?" she asked in an indifferent tone.

He tried to read from her eyes whether her indifference was genuine, but she was giving nothing away. "No, I'm trying to get an important project off the ground. Has to do with natural gas."

She smiled: "Of course. The fortune-seeker."

He gestured towards a painting by Chagall. "Not something you need to seek, by the look of things. Were you born rich or did you marry money?"

Again she smiled. "Born," she said. "The rest is none of your business." She observed him closely. "You know, the person who wants to marry me will have to come up with more than projects for a baron's son."

He felt unsure of himself. "Wasn't it good last night?"

She bent over and kissed him on the mouth. "Yes it was," she laughed. "You came through with flying colours."

A little later he was on his way to Brussels. The offices of Albegas were in the World Trade Center. The work he did for Anthony was not a proper job. He had put the idea of Algerian natural gas to him chiefly because he saw it as a way of making his own fortune.

Anthony had grabbed at the opportunity. After ten years in his father's shipping company, during which time he had been shifted around from one branch to the next, it was time he went his own way. And so Albegas Limited was established with a capital of one billion Belgian francs, of which 200 million had been put up by Anthony and included 2 million for shares bought in David's name. In this way David owned a one per cent stake in a giant enterprise without risking a franc. Anthony on the other hand was risking the entire fortune which he had inherited on the death of his mother, Melina Jonson.

It was ten o'clock before David got to the office. There were two thick reports on his desk. He got down to work. At half past eleven he had Anthony on the phone:

"I think I've got it all sewn up," he said excitedly. "Minister Ben Abbès wants..."

"Not over the phone, Anthony."

"No, you're right. Let's meet at twelve in the Angus Steak House."

Anthony was already there, and David hardly got the chance to sit down.

"I've done it," he said triumphantly.

David tried to calm him down: "I'm hungry. Let's order first."

"Ben Abbès, the Algerian Energy Minister, wants to sign a contract for 10 billion cubic meters of gas annually at a fixed price. That's enough for the entire national industrial consumption."

David's face blanched. He didn't like the fixed price. "Is it negotiable?"

"No. Its for fifteen years. With a tacit agreement that it can be renewed for a further five years at a time."

The waiter served the apéritifs. David drank from his glass.

"Aren't you forgetting to congratulate me," Anthony laughed.

"Congratulations," said David flatly. "Have you signed anything yet?"

Anthony cast a defiant look in his direction: "Not yet. But I shall as soon as the papers are drawn up."

"How is the price to be fixed?"

"On the basis of the average price of oil over the past nine months."

David groaned. "It's too risky, Anthony. Now consumer gas prices have been linked to petroleum prices, we would be sunk if oil were to fall again."

Anthony gesticulated with his fork as though he were about to stick it in David. He tried to justify himself: "It's a simple calculation. Energy consumption goes up, so the world's reserves go down. Prices have got to go up." With a forced laugh he added: "We're going to get disgustingly rich, man!"

David had lost his appetite.

"I suggest that we talk to the Baron about it," he said. "He knows about these sort of things."

Anthony shoved back his chair. He had never been so self-assertive: "God forbid that father finds out about this before the deal is signed," he said theatrically. Then he grinned. "I'll have the first million pounds profit delivered to him in person. Wrapped as a gift."

The Baron put down the phone and gazed at a point somewhere behind David's head.

"You did the right thing in telling me," he said. "It's as you thought." The corners of his mouth were drawn downwards in what was meant to be a smile. "Anthony signed an letter of intention this morning in the presence of the Algerian minister and paid a deposit of 200 million."

David leaned back wearily, but said nothing. The Baron was bound to have something up his sleeve.

"How were you planning to get the gas here?" Montagne-Jonson asked.

"Via the gas terminal at Saint-Nazaire in France."

The Baron frowned thoughtfully. "Not bad. That would by-pass the LNG-terminal at Zeebrugge."

David didn't reply.

The Baron observed him for a while with that small head perched on its long neck.

Then, cantankerous as ever he said: "I've already taken the necessary precautions. I cannot allow my son to ruin himself."

"How are you going to prevent that?" asked David.

"I've struck a deal with our Minister of Economic Affairs."

David's eyebrows rose inquiringly.

"A company is to be set up with the state as major shareholder. It is to have a monopoly on the import of natural gas."

"Isn't that rather like throwing your son to the lions?"

Léon Montagne-Jonson went on grimly: "The state holding will take over the rights and obligations of Albegas."

David realized that there was no other way out. "What about Anthony's inheritance. The two hundred million he's put into the project?"

"He can forget it," the Baron said, face a mile long. "It will just about cover the usual secret commission. You don't imagine that ministers and oil sheikhs are in it for the love, do you?"

David pondered. "What's in it for me?"

"So you do have a price." The Baron slowly nodded. "That's what I like to hear. None of this loyalty crap. Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander." He picked up a decorative wooden paperknife and pointed it at David.

"You've got a deal. Ten million for you, so long as you make sure Anthony never finds out how I've pulled him out of this mess."

David decided quickly: "Agreed. On condition that Anthony gets at least half of his money back."

"No-one imposes conditions on me," Léon Montagne-Jonson retorted.

"Then I'm afraid I shall have to forget the ten million," said David with genuine regret.

The Baron held his head at an angle. He closely scrutinized David. Then he said:

"Agreed."

"Thank God," David said in relief. A worried look came to his face. "Let's hope I can persuade Anthony."

The Baron got up, signalling that the meeting was over.

"Tell him that there are secret discussions going on between the Soviet Union and West Germany over a natural gas pipeline. The Russians are virtually dumping the stuff when you compare it with the Algerian price."

David was taken aback: "Impossible."

The Baron smiled sardonically: "Tell Anthony to pray that nothing leaks out until the Minister has swallowed the Albegas pill."

It was still raining when David returned home. It was a devil of a job getting Virtus dry enough to go into the flat. The whole time his thoughts were jumping back and forth between the past and the present. One thing was sure; the unexpected appearance of Montagne-Jonson in Pulderbos meant an end to the becalmed period in which he had eventually landed.

The main office of Jonson & Jonson in London was situated in an imposing twelve floor block at the top end of Regent Street. Anthony Montagne-Jonson, president of the Board of Directors, had his office on the top floor, overlooking Oxford Circus and the BBC building in Langham place.

When Anthony came into his office at nine o'clock he found Ronald Custers, vice-chairman and general manager of Jonson & Jonson waiting for him.

"Good morning, Anthony," he greeted him politely. Custers was a tall man, with short light-brown hair and brown eyes. As usual he had on a three-piece pin-stripe suit. He put a file on his desk.

"Have you had a chance to read the annual report?"

Anthony sat down at his desk.

"Yes," he mumbled. "Not as bad as anticipated. At least we're still making a profit."

"True," said Custers, "but as soon as the Baron Léon comes into service..."

"For God's sake, Ronald," said Anthony impatiently. "You're not worried about that, are you?"

"We shan't be able to lease it out under another flag to Hong Kong and then sell it."

"And why not?"

Custers hesitated. "Well, er... the ship was financed by government money. One of the conditions was that it should sail under the British flag."

"Don't give me that, Ronald. Half the British fleet sails under tax-friendly flags. What's the real reason?"

Ronald Custers looked out of the window at busy Oxford Circus below. "Your father reckons that the shipping surplus is only temporary. He intends to use his veto in the shareholders meeting."

"Good luck to his veto! I lay down the rules here," Anthony said forcibly. "After all, I am Chairman of the Board."

"Come, come," said Custers trying to calm things. "Why not let him have his way?" and he gave Anthony a knowing look: "After all... er... if our restructuring plans go through, it doesn't really matter what happens to the Baron Léon, does it?"

But Anthony wasn't having any of it: "Father can..." and then he caught himself and blushed... "Your right," he said. "I hadn't thought of it like that."

There was a buzz on the intercom. "Baron Montagne-Jonson on the phone, sir," said one of the secretaries. Anthony gestured the other to leave him alone. Then he pressed the switch.

"Good morning, father," he said quietly.

The Baron ignored his greeting. "Meeting of the British Society is the day after tomorrow," his voice crackled over the phone. "At Braemar in Scotland. We might even manage to watch some of the Games. Make sure you're at Heathrow by half-past nine."

"Right father," he said submissively. "Oh... about the Baron Léon..."

Léon Montagne-Jonson cut him short. "You know my point of view. In the last three years not a single company has built a new ship. But mark me, at

any moment the surplus in shipping can become a shortage and cargo prices will rocket sky-high."

"I know, father," Anthony protested, "but in the meantime we run the risk of losing a lot of money."

"Not necessarily." The Baron's voice was so cold he might have been talking to a total stranger. "It's a marvellous opportunity to show what you're made of. Till day after tomorrow, then." The line went dead.

Anthony put down the phone and lit a cigarette. He could feel the pain coming on in his left arm. Stress, the doctor had said. And too much smoking and alcohol. But why had the pain always got something to do with father? He went over to the bar and poured out a Scotch. In two gulps the glass was empty. The pressure in his arm lessened. He refilled the glass and went back to his desk. He stared at the glass pensively. Not yet ten o'clock and already on his second whisky. It was high time he learnt to face up to mental stress. He'd been groomed for this, after all. Especially in the last few years, when his father had seen to it that he had been present at every important meeting. As observer of course, not as partner, for father got his own way. He would never have acted like that with Adam. No way. Adam had been father's favourite. Though he never said as much, father managed to make him feel that it was the wrong son who had died in the powerboat accident. And yet he was determined to show father...

His train of thought was interrupted by the intercom: "I've got Captain Eugène Erikson on the line again from Ostend," his secretary said.

"Erikson? From the ISA?"

"That's the one, sir. He threatens to contact the press, if he gets no reply soon."

Anthony sighed. "Put him through. Oh, and send Custers in first."

He lit another cigarette and waited. Good job he had someone like Custers to fall back on. He was smart and with him at his side he'd go a long way. Father would be surprised.

Custers came in, carrying a tray and two coffees. Anthony pressed the switch.

"Anthony Montagne-Jonson speaking."

A rough sounding voice with a foreign accent came over the loudspeaker: "At last! Have you read my report on the Messenger of Freedom yet?"

Anthony took a sip from his coffee and looked for advice from Custers, who signalled to keep him at bay.

"No," he said, "I wasn't aware you'd sent it."

"Oh come off it! I sent it a month ago. Registered mail."

"You must be having me on, Captain."

"Having you on? You've got a nerve. I never joke about the safety of seamen."

The rough voice took on a threatening tone. "And if you don't start taking me seriously, there could be unpleasant consequences in store for you."

"What do you mean by that, Captain? Strike action?"

"The hell I do. The International Seamen's Association is not to be trifled with."

Anthony was taken aback. "Don't do anything stupid, Captain," he said, and appealed to Custers, who indicated he would take over.

"Our general-manager is here. He wants a word with you," Anthony said, passing the microphone to Custers.

"Listen to me, Captain Erikson." Custers deliberately lowered his voice. "The construction plans for our ferries are given prior approval by the Ministry of Transport. And that goes for safety precautions."

"That's bullshit, and you know it!" The Captain retorted. "Even the lavatory attendants know that the Messenger lists to port. Has done ever since it was launched in '80."

Custers became more aggressive: "You don't expect us to dock a ferry on the strength of seaman's gossip."

"Not you," Erikson cut in. "You're an even harder nut than that son of Montagne-Jonson. But mark my words. If the J & J ferries stay in port a little longer than usual from now on, just put it down to seaman's gossip."

Custers tried to lower the temperature. "It needn't come to that. Let's talk things over, but not over the phone."

"That's up to you. You name the place and date."

"Dover. Next Friday. My secretary will contact you. Kirk Jones, the superintendant of the Messenger, will be there too. He says that we shouldn't get carried away with all this talk about safety precautions."

"Then he's talking shit."

"We won't get far with insults."

"Okay, okay," growled Erikson and rang off.

Custers put down the microphone, switched off and pondered.

"What are we to do with the man?" Anthony asked naively.

"Don't worry yourself about him," answered Custers. "There are many ways of skinning a cat."

David was awoken by the telephone. Till late into the night he had been unable to sleep, thinking back to the past, to his failed marriage with Monique, his father-in-law, and Anthony her brother. In the end he had had to take a sleeping pill. Now he lay there feeling groggy, wondering why on earth his ex-father-in-law should have come to the dog-trials at Pulderbos. Léon Montagne-Jonson was hardly the man to expose himself, certainly not when there was a risk of refusal.

The phone continued to buzz. David lifted the receiver and held it at arm's length. He could hear a thin, piping voice on the other end.

"Hello? Mr.Marcke? Hello?"

David recognised the voice of Jerry, secretary of the golf club. He sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed:

"Hello, Jerry."

"Mr.Marcke? Thank God. I thought you were out. You haven't forgotten that the Veteran's Challenge Cup starts today?"

"No. But I'm only down to play tomorrow."

"The playing order has had to be changed. You're due to play this morning, at ten. Sorry about that."

David glanced at the radio-clock. He could just about make it. "Who am I playing?"

Jerry hesitated. "Sorry, I don't have the line-up here."

"Not to worry. See you later."

David parked the car under a tree, leaving two windows just a fraction open. Dogs were strictly out-of-bounds at the golfclub. Virtus knew the protocol and lay down resignedly on the back seat.

Jerry wasn't in his office at the club-house.

"He's gone with your opponent up to the first hole." The chief caddie informed him.

David set off in the direction of the first tee. Through the trees he could see his opponent standing next to Jerry in the distance. The swan-neck showing up against the green of the fairway like the Eiffel Tower against the Paris skyline. David quickened his pace, his nerves on edge. "What's he doing here?" he asked Jerry, almost impolitely.

The Baron himself answered arrogantly: "It's an open tournament. Jerry will mark up the score."

On the alert, David answered. "Gentlemen don't need a marker. Since when have you taken up golf? "

The Baron's face was unperturbed. "It's a while ago," he said in a haughty tone, "but I've had twenty practice strokes on the driving range, and that should suffice to beat you. You're not afraid to play me, are you?"

David knew that the challenge was a trick. Still he fell for it. "I suppose you know I'm a scratch-player?"

"The Baron has a stroke play 10-handicap," said Jerry, obviously ill at ease.

There was a strict etiquette in golf, so David kept his opinion about Montagne-Jonson's handicap to himself.

"You have the honour," he said sullenly, leaving the first strike to the guest player as etiquette prescribed.

Montagne-Jonson gestured to his caddie, who quickly came up with the clubs. "Driver," he ordered in a supercilious fashion, and was handed the traditional number one wood. He calmly walked up to the tee for the first hole - a long one of par 5 - and nonchalantly placed the ball on the tee which the caddie had pressed into the ground for him. David had hoped to get a glimpse of the Baron's style from his practice drive. But Montagne-Jonson went straight into his stroke with a full swing. The ball landed at a great distance right in the middle of the fairway. The Baron took a step backwards and gave his opponent a defiant look. David knew there was more at stake than a game of golf. The rules of servants and masters were being spelled out anew.

He shut off the outside world and concentrated on the small white ball. He imagined it flying away, light as a feather, as he followed through in his powerful drive. It worked. It was a beauty, carrying the ball ten meters beyond his opponent's. But when he looked up at the Baron's face, he was left feeling that he was after all only a simple woodcutter.

David led till the eighth hole. Then it all started to go wrong. It was one of the shorter holes, with a lot of rough to the side of the fairway.

"If your ball lands in that..." mused the Baron. The remark seemed to unnerve David. His ball indeed landed in the hazardous rough and his first attempt to lift it out was defeated by the long blades of grass. The Baron stood there, only a few paces distant, determined to miss nothing of his demise.

David took a number 10 iron, intending to execute a half chop- shot.

"Start your inquiry at Jonson-Antwerp, the shipping agency," the Baron said. "I want to know more about my son-in-law, Simon Stevens. That constant smile of his gives me the creeps."

This gross breach of etiquette put David completely off his stroke. He looked up angrily.

"Rule number one states quite clearly that you stay silent while your opponent is playing."

The Baron gave him a dirty look. "Wrong. To win you have to hit below the belt. Preferably when your opponent is not looking."

David was just about to give him his opinion about this lack of Olympic spirit, when they heard the loud cry from the caddie:

"Fore!" The traditional warning.

There was a loud 'plop' as something struck the trunk of one of the fir trees in their neighbourhood. The golf ball rebounded and landed at the feet of Montagne-Jonson.

Shaken, David tried to see where the ball had come from, and was just in time to see a man ducking behind a sand dune. He was holding something which bore little resemblance to a golf club.

Iron in hand, David scrambled up the loose sand. Halfway up, he saw he had no chance. Out of breath he retraced his footsteps.

"Could you recognise him?" he asked the caddie.

"No... not really. I had my eye on the ball. It came like a bullet...a low drive can get up to two hundred miles an hour," Jerry added over-enthusiastically.

The caddie peered towards the top of the dune. "He was dressed in checked trousers and a windcheater."

They gave him a crushing look. That was more or less the standard golfer's garb.

"I would report it to the police if I were you," David said to the Baron.

There was a silence.

"Why all the fuss?" said Montagne-Jonson. "It's not the first time that a ball has been struck in the wrong direction."

"Not with a golf club, true. But with a catapult?"

Montagne-Jonson looked at him in disbelief.

"You're talking nonsense."

David shrugged his shoulders.

"Think so? It's plain to me that someone was trying to knock your head off."

There was an oppressive silence.

David turned his back and announced, "Game over."

Just as he was about to walk off in the direction of the club house, the Baron's voice halted him:

"Why my head? Why not yours?"

Before going into the club house David let Virtus out of the car and walked with him to the eighth hole. He searched till he found the ball and let the dog sniff it. Then he went to the place where the man with the catapult had disappeared.

"Go search, boy!"

In the sand dune itself it was hopeless, but the dog picked up the scent on the grassy verge. It was only half an hour old, and although there was a stiff breeze, Virtus followed the footsteps nose to the ground.

"Well done, Virtus." David trotted along with him, over the bunkers, through the rough and the fir trees - the hazards surrounding the eternal golf course, which make the 'easiest' holes difficult. For quarter of an hour they followed the trail until it ended up in the member's car park. Virtus searched about desperately among all the overlapping trails of men and cars.

"Leave it, boy. Not even a champion sniffer like you will make much sense of this," David sighed.

They went up the paved pathway to the club house, Virtus halting every so often, alert and sniffing, as if to show he was not yet beaten.

As David pushed open the door, he was met by an indignant Jerry. "Mr.Marcke! The dog!"

Bringing a dog into the club house was an act of sacrilege - even if it were trailing wrongdoers - so Virtus was banished once more to the car.

When David returned, Montagne-Jonson looked at him closely.

"Any luck?"

David shook his head. Standing next to the Baron was a man whose appearance was enough to make any woman's heart miss a beat. He was tall, broad-shouldered, with narrow hips. He had dark, wavy hair and a strong, handsome face. A shade too handsome, thought David.

The man smiled and held out a hand. "Hello, David."

David shook hands without enthusiasm. Although they had never met in person, he had no difficulty in recognising him as Simon Stevens. His presence here at the golf club was just as much a mystery as the appearance

of Montagne-Jonson at the dog trials the day before. Stevens correctly read what was going through David's mind.

"My wife told me," he smiled. If he were ever in financial straits Stevens could make a living as a model for toothpaste adverts.

"Told you what?" asked David, feigning ignorance.

"That the two of you would be playing golf today. The Baron informed her."

The Baron was irritated. "I did nothing of the sort."

"Indeed you did," Stevens went on. He came closer to David. "You see, my father-in-law wants me to help bring you back to the fold." He gave David a friendly pat on the shoulder. "To get you back on board, as it were." Stevens was dressed in the latest golfing gear which suited him to a T.

"Pay no attention," said Montagne-Jonson. "He's just putting on airs."

"That's as maybe," said David vexed, "but has anyone contacted the police yet?"

"For heaven's sake," Montagne-Jonson butted in. "Is that really necessary. After all, you're going to investigate the whole affair, aren't you?"

"Certainly not," David replied angrily. "What do you take me for, a personal bodyguard?"

"Don't get so worked up, old man," grinned Stevens, and in a juvenile way he showed the biceps of his right arm. "What do we need bodyguards for? I'll see he comes to no harm."

The Baron sniffed in disgust.

David turned on his heels and walked off. Stevens went in pursuit and caught him up by the car.

"Are you going to take it on?" he asked.

"David regarded him with suspicion. "Take what on?"

Stevens smiled disarmingly: "The assignment. Investigate Jonson & Jonson."

"Maybe," David said coolly. "But I wouldn't be so keen if I were you.. It might be less pleasant than you think."

The other stiffened and then smiled again. "Who knows? But then for other reasons than you imagine." He produced his card.

"My telephone number," he said. "It's ex-directory."

David made no move to take the card. "No need. I know it by heart."

Virtus, who was sniffing loudly at the split in the window, began to bark loudly.

Stevens' face showed uncertainty. "That animal doesn't seem to like me."

He turned to go, and then he glanced back with a faint smile: "I hear he's a champion tracker."

David simply looked at him.

The smile broadened. "Then you'll know as well as I do that there are false trails to trap the unwary. But you'll find out anyway once the inquiry begins. I shouldn't be surprised if you started with me."

David got into his car and drove off. The whole way home he kept wondering what he had meant by false trails to trap the unwary. Stevens was

a smooth operator, and with a pang of resentment he wondered how such a sensitive woman as Monique Montagne-Jonson could have married such a slippery customer.

He recognised her by her legs. She was sitting at the top of the stairs, presenting them unashamedly to view from below, as he climbed wearily up those last seven steps. Virtus too was deeply impressed, and he sniffed at her, his tail wagging.

David said: "You still have the most beautiful legs in the land."

Monique said: "I know."

He smiled: "And as modest as ever."

She yawned: "Do you always get home this late? I've been sitting here for more than two hours. I could do with a drink."

He opened the apartment door: "Not worried about your reputation?"

She glided past him. The scent of her expensive perfume stretched out its tactile appeal towards the barrier which he had built to hide away their past.

"I lost that the first time you made love to me," she replied.

He took a bottle of champagne from the fridge. "Why this sudden family interest in me? First your father. Then Stevens. Now you."

She frowned at the bubbles in the glass. "Simon? At the golf club? What was he doing there?"

"How should I know? Catapulting golf balls if you ask me." He shook his head. "It's about time someone told me what's going on."

"In a moment."

She took a cigarette from her handbag. He said nothing and gave her a light. The flame lit up the golden specks in her eyes.

"Father needs you to rescue his company," she said. "I need you because I'm in danger."

He spluttered as the champagne went down the wrong way.

"Wrong address, I'm afraid. I think you should try the police. Or a private detective."

"No," she replied. "He'd find out. Then he'd be on his guard."

"Who?"

"Simon."

"Beg you pardon?"

"My husband," she said through tight lips. "He wants to murder me."

Champagne was not strong enough to cope with this news. He poured himself a whisky.

"But you're the ideal couple. The millionaire's daughter and the playboy."

"Only in the press," she said bitterly. "In bed it's as though he's drawing up a balance sheet. Not a thrust too many."

It soothed his ego to hear this.

"Come now. You're exaggerating." He grinned. "Don't tell me he's threatening your life on account of a tiff in bed."

"Not him. He's too smart for that."

David could not follow.

"He lets others do that. For the last three months I've been getting these incessant phone calls. Someone with a foreign accent and the charm of a navy, who tells me I shall die by drowning. Each time he describes my death throes in more detail."

"For Christ's sake," said David shocked. "What has that to do with Stevens? Most probably some maniac who has got hold of your phone number by chance. Why don't you change your number?"

She watched as he refilled her glass. She went with the tip of her finger around the rim.

"I did. He phoned me the very next day and advised me to spare myself the expense in future."

"Perhaps he works for the telephone company."

She shook her head adamantly.

"Don't joke. As a child I watched my eldest brother drown. The memory still haunts me. Simon is the only one I've ever told about it."

David pondered for a while. Somewhere she had got it wrong. Besides, she had told him once about this phobia.

"No motive," he said emphatically. "Simon's got everything. Money. Looks. Health." He stood up and pointed to her. "And a beautiful wife."

Her eyes shone.

She sipped from her champagne. "Everything except power," she said. "In father's empire he's a mere lackey."

David sat down again. "Aren't we all?"

She ignored the insinuation. "Until recently he had voting right on the shares I inherited from mother in Jonson & Jonson. I've transferred it to Anthony. And I've had a will made out in which Anthony is the sole beneficiary."

"And why, might I ask?"

She hesitated. "Because...oh David! How do I know? So that Simon will not stand to gain by my death. Maybe I did it just to hurt him. Maybe because Anthony asked me to. In any case its made me a lot the wiser."

"In what way?"

She inhaled deeply on her cigarette. "When I informed Simon, he made no attempt to cover up. He was seething with rage and told me I'd regret it. That it would be the end of me if I didn't change my mind."

She fell silent.

David wondered what he could say. It was like the script of a soap-opera. Then he said in measured tones: "Are you sure you're not misjudging him?"

"What, Simon?" She laughed scornfully. "Absolutely not. Besides, we have nothing more in common. He's having an affair with his secretary, and the whole thing leaves me cold."

David wished to hear no more about her marital problems, so he tried a different tack. "You're father tells me he's doing well in the shipping world."

Monique sniffed contemptuously: "He's primarily interested in getting my brother into his boat, which is pretty leaky at that."

Although he wasn't keen on Stevens, David couldn't help feeling she was somehow biased against him.

"Why don't you take the Baron into your confidence?"

She smiled. "Father? Why do you imagine he came to see you?"

David carefully poured the remaining champagne into her glass. He was on his third whisky himself. His brain was somewhat numbed, but in a flash he realised that this was the moment he had been waiting for all these years. He looked at her for a while and wondered.

"Tell me why you really came here." he said.

She came and sat next to him on the sofa and rested her head on his shoulder.

"I thought I came to get you to accept father's offer," she said in a hushed tone, "but now I'm not so sure any more."

He closed his eyes and paused.

"Where are we sleeping?" he said, deliberately echoing the words of their first meeting.

"Listen," she whispered, "I'm married, so it had better be your place."

When he awoke, Monique was no longer lying next to him. He was amazed that she had managed to get up without waking him. He was a light sleeper - almost as light as Virtus. Then he heard the water running in the bathroom.

He lay there thinking of the renewed passion between them. There had been differences between them, true, but not in bed.

He sat up and dialled the number of the office. Peter was on the other end.

"We're going to clean the place out," he said getting straight to the point. "Bring at least two assistants with you. We'll be cutting a few corners this time. EMP. Meet me at ten o'clock at Jonson Shipping Agency."

"We'll be there," said Peter brightly. "Er...what's this EMP?"

"Evasive method procedure. To see who's been fiddling the books.

There are some checklists and computer programmes which you can pick up from my ex-secretary."

He hung up and dialled Jonson Shipping.

"David Marcke speaking. Would you put me through to Simon Stevens?"

As he was waiting, Monique appeared in the doorway with a bathtowel wound around her which scarcely covered anything.

"Hello Simon," said David, gazing at the satin flesh of Stevens'wife.

"I'll be at your office at ten. Does that suit you?"

He heard Stevens chuckle. "Fine by me. I've as little to hide as you have."

David put down the receiver and stared at Monique Montagne- Jonson. She wanted to say something but he signalled her not to.

"Now do you want to know why I'm doing it?" He shook his head. "Curiosity? Love?"

She bent over him and let the bathtowel slip to the floor. He felt her nipples harden in his lips. A quest for myself, he thought for an instant. But then he felt himself being sucked into a whirlpool of excitement which blotted out other thoughts.

It was ten o'clock precisely when Colin O'Kyle entered the office of Ronald Custers. He stood there hesitantly in front of the desk of the vice-chairman of Jonson & Jonson, while the latter quickly put his signature to a letter and handed it back to his secretary.

"Would you leave us alone for a few minutes. I'll sign the rest later." He waited until she had closed the door behind her.

"Sit down, please."

He opened a file and thumbed through the contents in silence. "So, you were First Officer on one of our smaller ferries," he said.

O'Kyle nodded. "Yes, sir. The Ionic."

Custers removed a document from the file and put it on one side. "I see you're due to appear before the Commission of Inquiry in Belfast next week."

O'Kyle looked straight ahead of him.

"Tell me what happened," said Custers.

O'Kyle began: "There was dense fog. We were on the daily crossing from Stranraer to Larne. Approaching port off the coast of Northern Ireland we ran onto a sandbank, so I requested a tugboat to come to our assistance. At high tide we were afloat again. That was all."

"I asked for what happened," said Custers. "Not what is here in the report."

"The ferry was never in danger," said O'Kyle defensively. "The insurance paid the damage, which was minimal."

Custers cut in sharply: "I'm not asking you to count the cost. I just want to know what caused it."

O'Kyle went on reluctantly: "The radar was not functioning properly."

Custers gave him a searching look: "I see. Then why didn't you reduce speed?"

"We were behind schedule, sir."

Custer's face remained motionless. "That's no excuse."

O'Kyle sat staring at his feet. He would have liked to have replied that at the time the Captain and the Second Officer were both blind-drunk in the officer's mess. But instead he went on: "I was alone on the bridge. The other officers..."

Custers did not let him finish. "Alone on the bridge means you were solely responsible. Were you drunk or something?"

O'Kyle did not answer at once.

"Well?"

"Er...no, sir."

They were both silent. Custers pushed his spectacles up with his index finger. His tone was abrasive: "The quartermaster reports that you forcibly removed him from the bridge a quarter of an hour before the event. That sounds as though you were drunk, doesn't it?"

O'Kyle was incensed. "The quartermaster is lying," he said angrily. "I kicked him out because he was so drunk he couldn't read a compass. When the ship ran aground, it turned out that he had tuned in both radar scanners to the same distance."

Custers commented dryly: "The Captain confirms what the quartermaster says."

O'Kyle looked him straight in the eye. "There were other witnesses. The chief steward, the..."

But he was interrupted. "I doubt whether the Commission of Inquiry will summon them."

Custers picked up the document lying next to him.

"A report from our local Superintendent. He says that in the past year he has twice caught you not filling in the log book correctly. On both occasions you were under the influence." He gave him a hard look. "You're a has-been."

O'Kyle stared at the floor with drawn face. He knew the other officers were making him the scapegoat. It would mean dismissal by the Commission of Inquiry and then unemployment.

Custers got up, walked towards the window, hands behind his back, and stood there staring out. At last he broke the silence:

"I'm going to offer you a way out."

His voice was deceptively friendly. "Perhaps I could have you transferred as First Officer to one of our Channel ferries. We need a man we can trust. What do you say?"

It took a while for O'Kyle to grasp the fact that if he accepted the offer, something would be expected of him in return. But he hadn't much option, and he quickly made up his mind. In a neutral voice, he said:

"Very good, sir. You can count on me."

The vice-chairman turned round. His brown eyes fixed upon the seaman.

"You're quite sure? "

"Quite sure," said O'Kyle.

"Done," said Custers with an air of triumph in his voice, and he sat down at his desk again.

"I shall take care of the Commission. You report to personnel manager at Dover tomorrow."

O'Kyle stood up. "Right sir. Er...which ferry boat did you have in mind?"

Custers put the file back in the drawer. "The Messenger of Freedom", he replied casually.

"Right, sir. As you wish."

O'Kyle saluted and made to leave. Just as he was about to open the door Anthony Montagne-Jonson breezed in. O'Kyle stepped aside to let him pass. Then with a brief touch of his cap he walked out. Anthony's gaze followed him:

"Who on earth was that?" he asked.

"The new First Officer on the Messenger," said Custers contentedly. "Given the course we shall be sailing in future, we could do with someone of his reputation on board. Even if he is Irish."

Anthony was still staring at the door. "Okay by me. If your quite sure he's to be trusted."

The Belgian branch of Jonson Shipping, where Simon Stevens, the husband of David's ex-wife, was in charge, had its headquarters at the Jonson Building on the Noorderlaan in Antwerp.

David first called on Hans Verlucht, finance manager. The man got out of his chair as soon as David entered the room. He was flushed and visibly agitated.

"What's all this about?" he demanded, pointing to Peter and his two assistants. "We've just had the books checked. Now this. I suppose you guys think we've got nothing better to do."

"Complain to Mr. Montagne-Jonson," David replied, pointedly.

"The Baron..." Verlucht looked confused. "I thought he had stepped down from the throne."

"Kings sometimes give up their crowns, but not their thrones."

Verlucht looked worried. "What are you looking for anyhow? Lost ships?"

"No," answered David. "Trouble!"