## Giulia Lazzari

W. Somerset Maugham

The train started at eight. When he had disposed of his bag Ashenden walked along the platform. He found the carriage in which Giulia Lazzari was, but she sat in a corner, looking away from the light, so that he could not see her face. She was in charge of two detectives who had taken her over from English police at Boulogne. One of them worked with Ashenden on the French side of the Lake Geneva, and as Ashenden came up he nodded to him.

‘I’ve asked the lady if she will dine in the restaurant-car, but she prefers to have dinner in the carriage, so I’ve ordered a basket. Is that quite correct?’

‘Quite,’ said Ashenden.

‘My companion and I will go into the diner in turn so that she will not remain alone.’

‘That is very considerate of you. I will come along when we’ve started and have a chat with her.’

‘She’s not disposed to be very talkative,’ said the detective.

‘One could hardly expect it,’ replied Ashenden.

He walked on to get his ticket for the second service and then returned to his own carriage. Giulia Lazzari was just finishing her meal when he went back to her. From a glance at the basket he judged that she had not eaten with too poor an appetite. The detective who was guarding her opened the door when Ashenden appeared and at Ashenden’s suggestion left them alone.

Giulia Lazzari gave him a sullen look.

‘I hope you’ve had what you wanted for dinner,’ he said as he sat down in front of her.

She bowed slightly, but did not speak. He took out his case.

‘Will you have a cigarette?’

She gave him a glance, seemed to hesitate, and then, still without a word, took one. He struck a match, and lighting it, looked at her. He was surprised. For some reason he had expected her to be fair, perhaps from some notion that an Oriental would be more likely to fall for a blonde; but she was almost swarthy. Her hair was hidden by a close-fitting hat, but her eyes were coal-black. She was far from young, she might have been thirty-five, and her skin was lined and sallow. She had at the moment no make-up on and she looked haggard. There was nothing beautiful about her but her magnificent eyes. She was big, and Ashenden thought she must be too big to dance gracefully; it might be that in Spanish costume she was a bold and flaunting figure, but there in the train, shabbily dressed, there was nothing to explain the Indian’s infatuation. She gave Ashenden a long, appraising stare. She wondered evidently what sort of man he was. She blew a cloud of smoke through her nostrils and gave it a glance, then looked back at Ashenden. He could see that her sullenness was only a mask, she was nervous and frightened. She spoke in French with an Italian accent.

‘Who are you?’

‘My name would mean nothing to you, madame. I am going to Thonon. I have taken a room for you at the Hotel de la Place. It is the only one open now. I think you will find it quite comfortable.’

‘Ah, it is you the Colonel spoke to me of. You are my jailer.’

‘Only as a matter of form. I shall not intrude upon you.’

‘All the same you are my jailer.’

‘I hope not for very long. I have in my pocket your passport with all the formalities completed to permit you to go to Spain.’

She threw herself back into the corner of the carriage. White, with those great black eyes, in the poor light, her face was suddenly a mask of despair.

‘It’s infamous. Oh, I think I could die happy if I could only kill that old Colonel. He has no heart. I’m so unhappy.’

‘I am afraid you have got yourself into a very unfortunate situation. Did you not know that espionage was a dangerous game?’

‘I never sold any of the secrets. I did no harm.’

‘Surely only because you had no opportunity. I understand that you signed a full confession.’

Ashenden spoke to her as amiably as he could, a little as though he were talking to a sick person, and there was no harshness in his voice.

‘Oh, yes, I made a fool of myself. I wrote the letter the Colonel said I was to write. Why isn’t that enough? What is to happen to me if he does not answer? I cannot force him to come if he does not want to.’

‘He has answered,’ said Ashenden. ‘I have the answer with me.’

She gave a gasp and her voice broke.

‘Oh, show it to me, I beseech you to let me see it.’

‘I have no objection to doing that. But you must return it to me.’

He took Chandra’s letter from his pocket and gave it to her. She snatched it from his hand. She devoured it with her eyes, there were eight pages of it, and as she read the tears streamed down her cheeks. Between her sobs she gave little exclamations of love, calling the writer by pet names French and Italian. This was the letter that Chandra had written in reply to hers telling him, on R.’s instructions, that she would meet him in Switzerland. He was mad with joy at the prospect. He told her in passionate phrases how long the time had seemed to him since they were parted, and how he had yearned for her, and now that he was to see her again so soon he did not know how he was going to bear his impatience. She finished it and let it drop to the floor.

‘You can see he loves me, can’t you? There’s no doubt about that. I know something about it, believe me.’

‘Do you really love him?’ asked Ashenden.

‘He’s the only man who’s ever been kind to me. It’s not very gay the life one leads in these musichalls, all over Europe, never resting, and men – they are not much the men who haunt those places. At first I thought he was just like the rest of them.’

Ashenden picked up the letter and replaced it in his pocket-book.

‘A telegram was sent in your name to the address in Holland to say that you would be at the Hôtel Gibbons at Lausanne on the 14th.’

‘That is to-morrow.’

‘Yes.’

She threw up her head and her eyes flashed.

‘Oh, it is an infamous thing that you are forcing me to do. It is shameful.’

‘You are not obliged to do it,’ said Ashenden.

‘And if I don’t?’

‘I’m afraid you must take the consequences.’

‘I can’t go to prison,’ she cried out suddenly, ‘I can’t, I can’t; I have such a short time before me; he said ten years. Is it possible I could be sentenced to ten years?’

‘If the Colonel told you so it is very possible.’

‘Oh, I know him. That cruel face. He would have no mercy. And what should I be in ten years? Oh, no no.’

At that moment the train stopped at a station and the detective waiting in the corridor tapped on the window. Ashenden opened the door and the man gave him a picture-postcard. It was a dull little view of Pontarlier, the frontier station between France and Switzerland, and showed a dusty place with a statue in the middle and a few plane trees. Ashenden handed her a pencil.

‘Will you write this postcard to your lover? It will be posted at Pontarlier. Address it to the hotel at Lausanne.’

She gave him a glance, but without answering took it and wrote as he directed.

‘Now on the other side write: “Delayed at frontier but everything all right. Wait at Lausanne.” Then add whatever you like, tendresses, if you like.’

He took the postcard from her, read it to see that she had done as he directed and then reached for his hat.

‘Well, I shall leave you now, I hope you will have a sleep. I will fetch you in the morning when we arrive at Thonon.’

The second detective had now returned from his dinner and as Ashenden came out of the carriage the two men went in. Giulia Lazzari huddled back into her corner. Ashenden gave the postcard to an agent who was waiting to take it to Pontarlier and then made his way along the crowded train to his sleeping-car.

It was bright and sunny, though cold, next morning when they reached their destination. Ashenden, having given his bags to a porter, walked along the platform to where Giulia Lazzari and the two detectives were standing. Ashenden nodded to them.

‘Well, good morning. You need not trouble to wait.’

They touched their hats, gave a word of farewell to the woman, and walked away.

‘Where are they going?’ she asked.

‘Off. You will not be bothered with them any more.’

‘Am I in your custody then?’

‘You’re in nobody’s custody. I’m going to permit myself to take you to your hotel and then I shall leave you. You must try to get a good rest.’

Ashenden’s porter took her hand-luggage and she gave him the ticket for her trunk. They walked out of the station. A cab was waiting for them and Ashenden begged her to get in. It was a longish drive to the hotel and now and then Ashenden felt that she gave him a sidelong glance. She was perplexed. He sat without a word. When they reached the hotel the proprietor – it was a small hotel, prettily situated at the corner of a little promenade and it had a charming view – showed them the room that had been prepared for Madame Lazzari. Ashenden turned to him.

‘That’ll do very nicely, I think. I shall come down in a minute.’

The proprietor bowed and withdrew.

‘I shall do my best to see that you are comfortable, Madame,’ said Ashenden. ‘You are here absolutely your own mistress and you may order pretty well anything you like. To the proprietor you are just a guest of the hotel like any other. You are absolutely free.’

‘Free to go out?’ she asked quickly.

‘Of course.’

‘With a policeman on either side of me, I suppose.’

‘Not at all. You are as free in the hotel as though you were in your own house and you are free to go out and come in when you choose. I should like an assurance from you that you will not write any letters without my knowledge or attempt to leave Thonon without my permission.’

She gave Ashenden a long stare. She could not make it out at all. She looked as though she thought it a dream.

‘I am in a position that forces me to give you any assurance you ask. I give you my word of honour that I will not write a letter without showing it to you or attempt to leave this place.’

‘Thank you. Now I will leave you. I will do myself the pleasure of coming to see you to-morrow morning.’

Ashenden nodded and went out. He stopped for five minutes at the police-station to see that everything was in order and then took the cab up the hill to a little secluded house on the outskirts of the town at which on his periodical visits to this place he stayed. It was pleasant to have a bath and a shave and get into slippers. He felt lazy and spent the rest of the morning reading a novel.

Soon after dark – for even at Thonon, though it was in France, it was thought desirable to attract attention to Ashenden as little as possible – an agent from the police-station came to see him. His name was Félix. He was a little dark Frenchman with sharp eyes and an unshaven chin, dressed in a shabby grey suit and rather down at heel, so that he looked like a lawyer’s clerk out of work. Ashenden offered him a glass of wine and they sat down by the fire.

‘Well, your lady lost no time,’ he said. ‘Within a quarter of an hour of her arrival she was out of the hotel with a bundle of clothes and trinkets that she sold in a shop near the market. When the afternoon boat came in she went down to the quay and bought a ticket to Evian.’

Evian, it should be explained, was the next place along the lake in France and from there, crossing over, the boat went to Switzerland.

‘Of course she hadn’t a passport, so permission to embark was denied her.’

‘How did she explain that she had no passport?’

‘She said she’d forgotten it. She said she had an appointment to see friends in Evian and tried to persuade the official in charge to let her go. She attempted to slip a hundred francs into his hand.’

‘She must be a stupider woman than I thought,’ said Ashenden.

But when next day he went about eleven in the morning to see her he made no reference to her attempt to escape. She had had time to arrange herself, and now, her hair elaborately done, her lips and cheeks painted, she looked less haggard than when he had first seen her.

‘I’ve brought you some books,’ said Ashenden. ‘I’m afraid the time hangs heavy on your hands.’

‘What does that matter to you?’

‘I have no wish that you should suffer anything that can be avoided. Anyhow, I will leave them and you can read them or not as you choose.’

‘If you only knew how I hated you.’

‘It would doubtless make me very uncomfortable. But I really don’t know why you should. I am only doing what I have been ordered to do.’

‘What do you want of me now? I do not suppose you have come only to ask after my health.’

Ashenden smiled.

‘I want you to write a letter to your lover telling him that owing to some irregularity in your passport the Swiss authorities would not let you cross the frontier, so you have come here, where it is very nice and quiet, so quiet that one can hardly realise there is a war, and you propose that Chandra should join you.’

‘Do you think he is a fool? He will refuse.’

‘Then you must do your best to persuade him.’

She looked at Ashenden a long time before she answered. He suspected that she was debating within herself whether by writing the letter and so seeming docile she could not gain time.

‘Well, dictate and I will write what you say.’

‘I should prefer you to put it in your own words.’

‘Give me half an hour and the letter shall be ready.’

‘I will wait here,’ said Ashenden.

‘Why?’

‘Because I prefer to.’

Her eyes flashed angrily, but controlling herself she said nothing. On the chest of drawers were writing materials. She sat down at the dressing-table and began to write. When she handed Ashenden the letter he saw that even through her rouge she was very pale. It was the letter of a person not much used to expressing herself by means of pen and ink, but it was well enough, and when towards the end, starting to say how much she loved the man, she had been carried away and wrote with all her heart, it had really a certain passion.

‘Now add: “The man who is bringing this is Swiss, you can trust him absolutely. I didn’t want the censor to see it.’”

She hesitated an instant, but then wrote as he directed.

‘How do you spell “absolutely”?’

‘As you like. Now address an envelope and I will relieve you of my unwelcome presence.’

He gave the letter to the agent who was waiting to take it across the lake. Ashenden brought her the reply the same evening. She snatched it from his hands and for a moment pressed it to her heart. When she read it she uttered a little cry of relief.

‘He won’t come.’

The letter, in the Indian’s flowery, stilted English, expressed his bitter disappointment. He told her how intensely he had looked forward to seeing her and implored her to do everything in the world to smooth the difficulties that prevented her from crossing the frontier. He said that it was impossible for him to come, impossible; there was a price on his head, and it would be madness for him to think of risking it. He attempted to be jocular, she did not want her little fat lover to be shot, did she?

‘He won’t come,’ she repeated, ‘he won’t come.’

‘You must write and tell him that there is no risk. You must say that if there were you would not dream of asking him. You must say that if he loves you he will not hesitate.’

‘I won’t. I won’t.’

‘Don’t be a fool. You can’t help yourself.’

She burst into a sudden flood of tears. She flung herself on the floor and seizing Ashenden’s knees implored him to have mercy on her.

‘I will do anything in the world for you if you will let me go.’

‘Don’t be absurd,’ said Ashenden. ‘Do you think I want to become your lover? Come, come, you must be serious. You know the alternative.’

She raised herself to her feet and changing on a sudden to fury flung at Ashenden one foul name after another.

‘I like you much better like that,’ he said. ‘Now will you write or shall I send for the police?’

‘He will not come. It is useless.’

‘It is very much to your interest to make him come.’

‘What do you mean by that? Do you mean that if I do everything in my power and fail, that . . .’

She looked at Ashenden with wild eyes.

‘Yes, it means either you or him.’

She staggered. She put her hand to her heart. Then without a word she reached for pen and paper. But the letter was not to Ashenden’s liking and he made her write it again. When she had finished she flung herself on the bed and burst once more into passionate weeping. Her grief was real, but there was something theatrical in the expression of it that prevented it from being peculiarly moving to Ashenden. He felt his relation to her as impersonal as a doctor’s in the presence of a pain that he cannot alleviate. He saw now why R. had given him this peculiar task; it needed a cool head and an emotion well under control.

He did not see her next day. The answer to the letter was not delivered to him till after dinner, when it was brought to Ashenden’s little house by Félix.

‘Well, what news have you?’

‘Our friend is getting desperate,’ smiled the Frenchman. ‘This afternoon she walked up to the station just as a train was about to start for Lyons. She was looking up and down uncertainly, so I went to her and asked if there was anything I could do. I introduced myself as an agent of the Sûreté. If looks could kill I should not be standing here now.’

‘Sit down, mon ami,’ said Ashenden.

‘Merci. She walked away, she evidently thought it was no use to try to get on the train, but I have something more interesting to tell you. She has offered a boatman on the lake a thousand francs to take her across to Lausanne.’

‘What did he say to her?’

‘He said he couldn’t risk it.’

‘Yes?’

The little agent gave his shoulders a slight shrug and smiled.

‘She’s asked him to meet her on the road that leads to Evian at ten o’clock to-night so that they can talk of it again, and she’s given him to understand that she will not repulse too fiercely the advances of a lover. I have told him to do what he likes so long as he comes and tells me everything that is of importance.’

‘Are you sure you can trust him?’ asked Ashenden.

‘Oh, quite. He knows nothing, of course, but that she is under surveillance. You need have no fear about him. He is a good boy. I have known him all his life.’

Ashenden read Chandra’s letter. It was eager and passionate. It throbbed strangely with the painful yearning of his heart. Love? Yes, if Ashenden knew anything of it there was the real thing. He told her how he spent the long, long hours walking by the lakeside and looking towards the coast of France. How near they were and yet so desperately parted! He repeated again and again that he could not come, and begged her not to ask him; he would do everything in the world for her, but that he dared not do, and yet if she insisted how could he resist her? He besought her to have mercy on him. And then he broke into a long wail at the thought that he must go away without seeing her, he asked her if there were not some means by which she could slip over, he swore that if he could ever hold her in his arms again he would never let her go. Even the forced and elaborate language in which it was written could not dim the hot fire that burned the pages; it was the letter of a madman.

‘When will you hear the result of her interview with the boatman?’ asked Ashenden.

‘I have arranged to meet him at the landing-stage between eleven and twelve.’

Ashenden looked at his watch.

‘I will come with you.’

They walked down the hill and reaching the quay for shelter from the cold wind stood in the lea of the custom-house. At last they saw a man approaching and Félix stepped out of the shadow that hid them.

‘Antoine.’

‘Monsieur Félix? I have a letter for you; I promised to take it to Lausanne by the first boat to-morrow.’

Ashenden gave the man a brief glance, but did not ask what had passed between him and Giulia Lazzari. He took the letter and by the light of Félix’s electric torch read it. it was in faulty German.

‘On no account come. Pay no attention to my letters. Danger. I love you. Sweetheart. Don’t come.’

He put it in his pocket, gave the boatman fifty francs, and went home to bed. But the next day when he went to see Giulia Lazzari he found her door locked. He knocked for some time, there was no answer. He called her.

‘Madame Lazzari, you must open the door. I want to speak to you.’

‘I am in bed. I am ill and can see no one.’

‘I am sorry, but you must open the door. If you are ill I will send for a doctor.’

‘No, go away. I will see no one.’

‘If you do not open the door I shall send for a locksmith and have it broken open.’

There was a silence and then he heard the key turned in the lock. He went in. She was in a dressing-gown and her hair was dishevelled. She had evidently just got out of bed.

‘I am at the end of my strength. I can do nothing more. You have only to look at me to see that I am ill. I have been sick all night.’

‘I shall not keep you long. Would you like to see a doctor?’

‘What good can a doctor do me?’

He took out of his pocket the letter she had given the boatman and handed it to her.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ he asked.

She gave a gasp at the sight of it and her sallow face went green.

‘You gave me your word that you would neither attempt to escape nor write a letter without my knowledge.’

‘Did you think I would keep my word?’ she cried her voice ringing with scorn.

‘No. To tell you the truth it was not entirely for your convenience that you were placed in a comfortable hotel rather than in the local jail, but I think I should tell you that though you have your freedom to go in and out as you like you have no more chance of getting away from Thonon than if you were chained by the leg in a prison cell. It is silly to waste your time writing letters that will never be delivered.’

‘Cochon.’

She flung the opprobrious word at him with all the violence that was in her.

‘But you must sit down and write a letter that will be delivered.’

‘Never. I will do nothing more. I will not write another word.’

‘You came here on the understanding that you would do certain things.’

‘I will not do them. It is finished.’

‘You had better reflect a little.’

‘Reflect! I have reflected. You can do what you like; I don’t care.’

‘Very well, I will give you five minutes to change your mind.’

Ashenden took out his watch and looked at it. He sat down on the edge of the unmade bed.

‘Oh, it has got on my nerves, this hotel. Why did you not put me in the prison? Why, why? Everywhere I went I felt that spies were on my heels. It is infamous what you are making me do. Infamous! What is my crime? I ask you, what have I done? Am I not a woman? It is infamous what you are asking me to do. Infamous.’

She spoke in a high shrill voice. She went on and on. At last the five minutes were up. Ashenden had not said a word. He rose.

‘Yes, go, go,’ she shrieked at him.

She flung foul names at him.

‘I shall come back,’ said Ashenden.

He took the key out of the door as he went out of the room and locked it behind him. Going downstairs he hurriedly scribbled a note, called the boots and dispatched him with it to the police-station. Then he went up again. Giulia Lazzari had thrown herself on her bed and turned her face to the wall. Her body was shaken with hysterical sobs. She gave no sign that she heard him come in. Ashenden sat down on the chair in front of the dressing-table and looked idly at the odds and ends that littered it. The toilet things were cheap and tawdry and none too clean. There were little shabby pots of rouge and cold-cream and little bottles of black for the eyebrows and eyelashes. The hairpins were horrid and greasy. The room was untidy and the air was heavy with the smell of cheap scent. Ashenden thought of the hundreds of rooms she must have occupied in third-rate hotels in the course of her wandering life from provincial town to provincial town in one country after another. He wondered what had been her origins. She was a coarse and vulgar woman, but what had she been when young? She was not the type he would have expected to adopt that career, for she seemed to have no advantages that could help her, and he asked himself whether she came of a family of entertainers (there are all over the world families in which for generations the members have become dancers or acrobats or comic singers) or whether she had fallen into the life accidentally through some lover in the business who had for a time made her his partner. And what men must she have known in all these years, the comrades of the shows she was in, the agents and managers who looked upon it as a perquisite of their position that they should enjoy her favours, the merchants or well-to-do tradesmen, the young sparks of the various towns she played in, who were attracted for the moment by the glamour of the dancer or the blatant sensuality of the woman! To her they were the paying customers and she accepted them indifferently as the recognised and admitted supplement to her miserable salary, but to them perhaps she was romance. In her bought arms they caught sight for a moment of the brilliant world of the capitals, and ever so distantly and however shoddily of the adventure and the glamour of a more spacious life.

There was a sudden knock at the door and Ashenden immediately cried out:

‘Entrez.’

Giulia Lazzari sprang up in bed to a sitting posture.

‘Who is it?’ she called.

She gave a gasp as she saw the two detectives who had brought her from Boulogne and handed her over to Ashenden at Thonon.

‘You! What do you want?’ she shrieked.

‘Allons, levez-vous,’ said one of them, and his voice had a sharp abruptness that suggested that he would put up with no nonsense.

‘I’m afraid you must get up, Madame Lazzari,’ said Ashenden. ‘I am delivering you once more to the care of these gentlemen.’

‘How can I get up! I’m ill, I tell you. I cannot stand. Do you want to kill me?’

‘If you won’t dress yourself, we shall have to dress you, and I’m afraid we shouldn’t do it very cleverly. Come, come, it’s no good making a scene.’

‘Where are you going to take me?’

‘They’re going to take you back to England.’

One of the detectives took hold of her arm.

‘Don’t touch me, don’t come near me,’ she screamed furiously.

‘Let her be,’ said Ashenden. ‘I’m sure she’ll see the necessity of making as little trouble as possible.’

‘I’ll dress myself.’

Ashenden watched her as she took off her dressing-gown and slipped a dress over her head. She forced her feet into shoes obviously too small for her. She arranged her hair. Every now and then she gave the detectives a hurried, sullen glance. Ashenden wondered if she would have the nerve to go through with it. R. would call him a damned fool, but he almost wished she would. She went up to the dressing-table and Ashenden stood up in order to let her sit down. She greased her face quickly and then rubbed off the grease with a dirty towel, she powdered herself and made up her eyes. But her hand shook. The three men watched her in silence. She rubbed the rouge on her cheeks and painted her mouth. Then she crammed a hat down on her head. Ashenden made a gesture to the first detective and he took a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket and advanced towards her.

At the sight of them she started back violently and flung her arms wide.

‘Non, non, non. Je ne veux pas. No, not them. No. No.’

‘Come, ma fille, don’t be silly,’ said the detective roughly.

As though for protection (very much to his surprise) she flung her arms round Ashenden.

‘Don’t let them take me, have mercy on me, I can’t, I can’t.’

Ashenden extricated himself as best he could.

‘I can do nothing more for you.’

The detective seized her wrists and was about to affix the handcuffs when with a great cry she threw herself down on the floor.

‘I will do what you wish. I will do everything.’

On a sign from Ashenden the detectives left the room. He waited for a little till she had regained a certain calm. She was lying on the floor, sobbing passionately. He raised her to her feet and made her sit down.

‘What do you want me to do?’ she gasped.

‘I want you to write another letter to Chandra.’

‘My head is in a whirl. I could not put two phrases together. You must give me time.’

But Ashenden felt that it was better to get her to write a letter while she was under the effect of her terror. He did not want to give her time to collect herself.

‘I will dictate the letter to you. All you have to do is to write exactly what I tell you.’

She gave a deep sigh, but took the pen and the paper and sat down before them at the dressing-table.

‘If I do this and . . . and you succeed, how do I know that I shall be allowed to go free?’

‘The Colonel promised that you should. You must take my word for it that I shall carry out his instructions.’

‘I should look a fool if I betrayed my friend and then went to prison for ten years.’

‘I’ll tell you your best guarantee of our good faith. Except by reason of Chandra you are not of the smallest importance to us. Why should we put ourselves to the bother and expense of keeping you in prison when you can do us no harm?’

She reflected for an instant. She was composed now. It was as though, having exhausted her emotion, she had become on a sudden a sensible and practical woman.

‘Tell me what you want me to write.’

Ashenden hesitated. He thought he could put the letter more or less in the way she would naturally have put it, but he had to give it consideration. It must be neither fluent nor literary. He knew that in moments of emotion people are inclined to be melodramatic and stilted. In a book or on the stage this always rings false and the author has to make his people speak more simply and with less emphasis than in fact they do. It was a serious moment, but Ashenden felt that there were in it elements of the comic.

‘I didn’t know I loved a coward,’ he started. ‘If you loved me you couldn’t hesitate when I ask you to come. . . . Underline couldn’t twice.’ He went on. ‘When I promise you there is no danger. If you don’t love me, you are right not to come. Don’t come. Go back to Berlin where you are in safety. I am sick of it. I am alone here. I have made myself ill by waiting for you and every day I have said he is coming. If you loved me you would not hesitate so much. It is quite clear to me that you do not love me. I am sick and tired of you. I have no money. This hotel is impossible. There is nothing for me to stay for. I can get an engagement in Paris. I have a friend there who has made me serious propositions. I have wasted long enough over you and look what I have got from it. It is finished. Good-bye. You will never find a woman who will love you as I have loved you. I cannot afford to refuse the proposition of my friend, so I have telegraphed to him and as soon as I shall receive his answer I go to Paris. I do not blame you because you do not love me, that is not your fault, but you must see that I should be a stupid to go on wasting my life. One is not young for ever. Good-bye. Giulia.’

When Ashenden read over the letter he was not altogether satisfied. But it was the best he could do. It had an air of verisimilitude which the words lacked because, knowing little English, she had written phonetically, the spelling was atrocious and the handwriting like a child’s; she had crossed out words and written them over again. Some of the phrases he had put in French. Once or twice tears had fallen on the pages and blurred the ink.

‘I leave you now,’ said Ashenden. ‘It may be that when next you see me I shall be able to tell you that you are free to go where you choose. Where do you want to go?’

‘Spain.’

‘Very well, I will have everything prepared.’

She shrugged her shoulders. He left her.

There was nothing now for Ashenden to do but wait. He sent a messenger to Lausanne in the afternoon, and next morning went down to the quay to meet the boat. There was a waiting-room next to the ticket-office and here he told the detectives to hold themselves in readiness. When a boat arrived the passengers advanced along the pier in line and their passports were examined before they were allowed to go ashore. If Chandra came and showed his passport, and it was very likely that he was travelling with a false one, issued probably by a neutral nation, he was to be asked to wait and Ashenden was to identify him. Then he would be arrested. It was with some excitement that Ashenden watched the boat come in and the little group of people gathered at the gangway. He scanned them closely but saw no one who looked in the least like an Indian. Chandra had not come. Ashenden did not know what to do. He had played his last card. There were not more than half a dozen passengers for Thonon, and when they had been examined and gone their way he strolled slowly along the pier.

‘Well, it’s no go,’ he said to Félix, who had been examining the passports. ‘The gentleman I expected hasn’t turned up.’

‘I have a letter for you.’

He handed Ashenden an envelope addressed to Madame Lazzari on which he immediately recognised the spidery handwriting of Chandra Lal. At that moment the steamer from Geneva which was going to Lausanne and the end of the lake hove in sight. It arrived at Thonon every morning twenty minutes after the steamer going in the opposite direction had left. Ashenden had an inspiration.

‘Where is the man who brought it?’

‘He’s in the ticket-office.’

‘Give him the letter and tell him to return to the person who gave it to him. He is to say that he took it to the lady and she sent it back. If the person asks him to take another letter he is to say that it is not much good as she is packing her trunk and leaving Thonon.’

He saw the letter handed over and the instructions given and then walked back to his little house in the country.

The next boat on which Chandra could possibly come arrived about five and having at that hour an important engagement with an agent working in Germany, he warned Félix that he might be a few minutes late. But if Chandra came he could easily be detained; there was no great hurry since the train in which he was to be taken to Paris did not start till shortly after eight. When Ashenden had finished his business he strolled leisurely down to the lake. It was light still and from the top of the hill he saw the steamer pulling out. It was an anxious moment and instinctively he quickened his steps. Suddenly he saw someone running towards him and recognised the man who had taken the letter.

‘Quick, quick,’ he cried. ‘He’s there.’

Ashenden’s heart gave a great thud against his chest.

‘At last.’

He began to run too and as they ran the man, panting, told him how he had taken back the unopened letter. When he put it in the Indian’s hand he turned frightfully pale (‘I should never have thought an Indian could turn that colour,’ he said), and turned it over and over in his hand as though he could not understand what his own letter was doing there. Tears sprang to his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. (‘It was grotesque, he’s fat, you know.’) He said something in a language the man did not understand and then in French asked him when the boat went to Thonon. When he got on board he looked about, but did not see him, then he caught sight of him, huddled up in an ulster with his hat drawn down over his eyes, standing alone in the bows. During the crossing he kept his eyes fixed on Thonon.

‘Where is he now?’ asked Ashenden.

‘I got off first and Monsieur Félix told me to come for you.’

‘I suppose they’re holding him in the waiting-room.’

Ashenden was out of breath when they reached the pier. He burst into the waiting-room. A group of men, talking at the top of their voices and gesticulating wildly, were clustered round a man lying on the ground.

‘What’s happened?’ he cried.

‘Look,’ said Monsieur Félix.

Chandra Lal lay there, his eyes wide open and a thin line of foam on his lips, dead. His body was horribly contorted.

‘He’s killed himself. We’ve sent for the doctor. He was too quick for us.’

A sudden thrill of horror passed through Ashenden.

When the Indian landed Félix recognised from the description that he was the man they wanted. There were only four passengers. He was the last. Félix took an exaggerated time to examine the passports of the first three, and then took the Indian’s. It was a Spanish one and it was all in order. Félix asked the regulation questions and noted them on the official sheet. Then he looked at him pleasantly and said:

‘Just come into the waiting-room for a moment. There are one or two formalities to fulfil.’

‘Is my passport not in order?’ the Indian asked.

‘Perfectly.’

Chandra hesitated, but then followed the official to the door of the waiting-room. Félix opened it and stood aside.

‘Entrez.’

Chandra went in and the two detectives stood up. He must have suspected at once that they were police-officers and realised that he had fallen into a trap.

‘Sit down,’ said Félix. ‘I have one or two questions to put to you.’

‘It is hot in here,’ he said, and in point of fact they had a little stove there that kept the place like an oven. ‘I will take off my coat if you permit.’

‘Certainly,’ said Félix graciously.

He took off his coat, apparently with some effort, and he turned to put it on a chair, and then before they realised what had happened they were startled to see him stagger and fall heavily to the ground. While taking off his coat Chandra had managed to swallow the contents of a bottle that was still clasped in his hand. Ashenden put his nose to it. There was a very distinct odour of almonds.

For a little while they looked at the man who lay on the floor. Félix was apologetic.

‘Will they be very angry?’ he asked nervously.

‘I don’t see that it was your fault,’ said Ashenden. ‘Anyhow, he can do no more harm. For my part I am just as glad he killed himself. The notion of his being executed did not make me very comfortable.’

In a few minutes the doctor arrived and pronounced life extinct.

‘Prussic acid,’ he said to Ashenden.

Ashenden nodded.

‘I will go and see Madame Lazzari,’ he said. ‘If she wants to stay a day or two longer I shall let her. But if she wants to go to-night of course she can. Will you give the agents at the station instructions to let her pass?’

‘I shall be at the station myself,’ said Félix.

Ashenden once more climbed the hill. It was night now, a cold, bright night with an unclouded sky and the sight of the new moon, a white shining thread, made him turn three times the money in his pocket. When he entered the hotel he was seized on a sudden with distaste for its cold banality. It smelt of cabbage and boiled mutton. On the walls of the hall were coloured posters of railway companies advertising Grenoble, Carcassonne and the bathing places of Normandy. He went upstairs and after a brief knock opened the door of Giulia Lazzari’s room. She was sitting in front of her dressing-table, looking at herself in the glass, just idly or despairingly, apparently doing nothing, and it was in this that she saw Ashenden as he came in. Her face changed suddenly as she caught sight of his and she sprang up so vehemently that the chair fell over.

‘What is it? Why are you so white?’ she cried.

She turned round and stared at him and her features were gradually twisted to a look of horror.

‘Il est pris,’ she gasped.

‘Il est mort,’ said Ashenden.

‘Dead! He took the poison. He had the time for that. He’s escaped you after all.’

‘What do you mean? How did you know about the poison?’

‘He always carried it with him. He said that the English should never take him alive.’

Ashenden reflected for an instant. She had kept that secret well. He supposed the possibility of such a thing should have occurred to him. How was he to anticipate these melodramatic devices?

‘Well, now you are free. You can go wherever you like and no obstacle shall be put in your way. Here are your ticket and your passport and here is the money that was in your possession when you were arrested. Do you wish to see Chandra?’

She started.

‘No, no.’

‘There is no need. I thought you might care to.’

She did not weep. Ashenden supposed that she had exhausted all her emotion. She seemed apathetic.

‘A telegram will be sent to-night to the Spanish frontier to instruct the authorities to put no difficulties in your way. If you will take my advice you will get out of France as soon as you can.’

She said nothing, and since Ashenden had no more to say he made ready to go.

‘I am sorry that I have had to show myself so hard to you. I am glad to think that now the worst of your troubles are over and I hope that time will assuage the grief that I know you must feel for the death of your friend.’

Ashenden gave her a little bow and turned to the door. But she stopped him.

‘One little moment,’ she said. ‘There is one thing I should like to ask. I think you have some heart.’

‘Whatever I can do for you, you may be sure I will.’

‘What are they going to do with his things?’

‘I don’t know. Why?’

Then she said something that confounded Ashenden. It was the last thing he expected.

‘He had a wrist-watch that I gave him last Christmas. It cost twelve pounds. Can I have it back?’