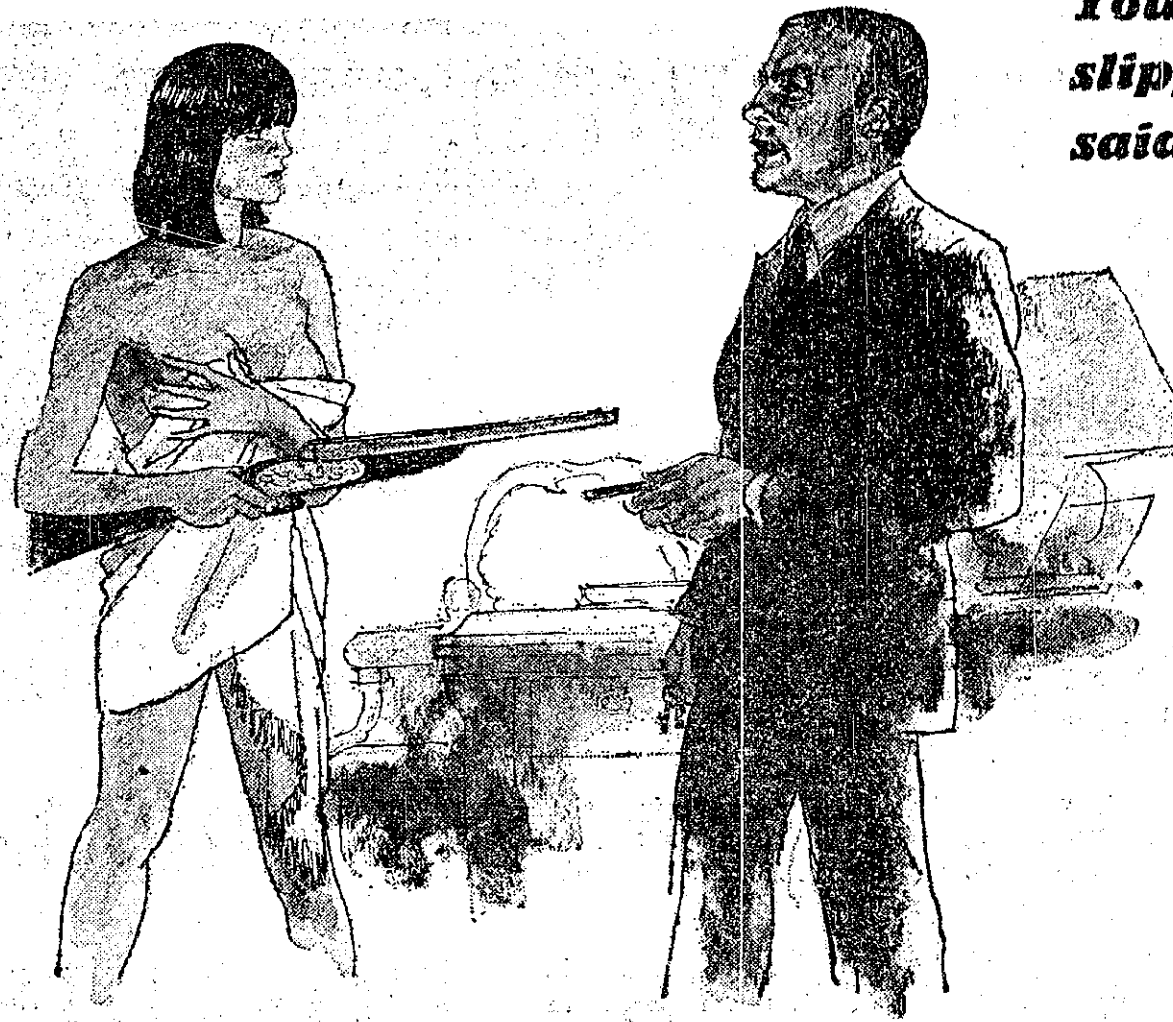


Callan!

'Keep this man alive... the Admiralty need him'

by JAMES MITCHELL



Your towel's slipping, said Callan

"YOU ever heard of Rod Mercer?" asked Hunter.

Callan did his best: "Pop singer?" he asked.

Hunter snorted. "He's even richer than that... He designs engines, makes them, sells them. A vulgarian, but remarkably wealthy for this day and age."

"You don't like him?" Hunter snorted once more: first a wrong answer, then an irrelevance. "Not my day, thought Callan."

"He's a nuisance," said Hunter, then gestured to the drinks table to show Callan he was forgiven, went on as Callan mixed Chivas Regal, ice and water. "Clever people so often are... He designed an engine for a motorboat, a very large, very fast motorboat—the sort that can carry rockets, and cannon. The Admiralty were quite keen for a while, then somebody else came up with something better—or so they thought."

"Too bad for Mercer," Hunter immediately said where Israel to be precise. "The Israelis liked it very much. Just the sort of thing they need. They ordered several million dollars' worth."

"So Brits know-how triumphed once more."

"Not exactly — no," said Hunter. His hands went out to the yellow file—surveil-

lance only—on the sofa table in front of him, and moved it so that it was exactly parallel to the table's edge. "You mean he didn't deliver?" asked Callan. "On he delivered," said Hunter. "He was pleased—he'd been paid in dollars after all—and they were pleased—they had their engines. Only they're not pleased any more... The engines don't work. They'll sue him?"

"They'll do rather more than that," said Hunter. "They'll kill him." "A bit drastic," said Callan. "If we all started that every time an engine broke down there couldn't be a car-dealer left alive."

Mercer up to it. That's why he's going to die. "And what am I supposed to do?" said Callan. "Send a wreath?" "You're supposed to keep him alive," said Hunter. Against Shin Beth, Pros as good as any in the world: tough, dedicated, deadly with small arms. For them to kill Mercer was as easy as blowing out a match; for Callan to keep Mercer alive was about as difficult as picking up that same match and making it light a second time. "Why don't you give me an easy one for a change?" said Callan. "Just to relieve the monotony."

"You're too good for the easy ones," said Hunter, "and we both know it." He pushed the file towards Callan. "The Admiralty have changed their minds about Mercer's engine," he continued. "They've now decided it's better than the one they opted for."

"Two days, perhaps three," said Hunter. "An execution needs very high authorisation—but they'll get it."

"That's a hell of a good bug you've planted in Tel Aviv," said Callan. Hunter looked complacent. "The best," he said; then the complacency vanished. "But headily expensive."

Callan called Mercer's design office and got a secretary; the house in Berkshire yielded a caretaker, the Mayfair flat nothing at all. The house in Jamaica produced a very Caribbean mixture of static and incomprehension. Well at least his first job was obvious. First he had to find Rod Mercer. It wasn't easy. To begin with Mercer didn't have a factory, just the design office Callan had phoned, and Callan sent Meres there as a prospective customer to talk to the secretary, and Meres when he was trying could get anything out of a secretary.

equality — or hadn't you heard? Women drive airplanes now, and dig ditches—and pull triggers. And to save this life Callan couldn't be sure whether she would or she wouldn't. To save his life, he shrugged and moved towards the phone, a move that brought him a little closer to her hands.

"Your towel's slipping," he said, and she looked down because the way he said it she believed that was when the pig is in for a treat. . . . By the time she looked up again Callan had leaped and the fall of his hand had snapped the shotgun's barrels, knocking it from her hands.

They lay on the floor beside them, still at full-cock, and she bent for it and he grabbed her and this time the towel really did slip, but all he could think as she struggled was how strong she was, then her right hand hooked into the side of his neck, and Callan grimaced with the pain and said his tribute to women's flo, caught the fist as it aimed a second blow, twisted and threw her.

"I told you your towel was slipping," said Callan, and this time it was. Her fingers leaped to adjust it.

"How your mind does run on assault," said Callan. "First shooting then a punch-up, then rape, then a 'You forget theft,' said the girl."

"I didn't come to steal." "You couldn't anyway. Rod doesn't keep a gun in the house. He keeps you here."

"Only when I want to come," said the girl. "Where is he?"

She shrugged, and the towel only just survived the strain. "He didn't leave a forwarding address," she said, "and even if he had—"

"Now it's your manners that's slipping," said Callan. "Give him a message, love. Tell him a man came about his life insurance."

"What about it?" "Tell him to increase it."

HE got out quick then, and found a phone booth that hadn't been vandalised, dialled the long family number.

"Yes?" Hunter's secretary said. "Let me speak to Charlie, please."

Hunter came through at once. Didn't he ever sleep? "You've got something?" he asked.

"A clip round the ear... Can you get an exchange tap on Mercer's phone in Farm Street?"

Hunter sighed. The G.P.O. were never happy about tapping phones.

Nevertheless, he said. "You want," said Callan, "and told him why."

"Who is she?" Hunter asked. "According to the file she's Mercer's business consultant," said Callan.

"Her name's Angela Wait. She's got a mole on her right thigh."

"That isn't on Mercer's file," Hunter memorised.

"I deduced it," said Callan. "Also deduced she'd been taking a shower."

"You'll stay with her of course," said Hunter.

Callan looked out of the phone box; rain was falling, dreary and persistent. "Oh, of course," he said.

"Why should I want to go to bed when a case stands outside and get wet?"

"Precisely," said Hunter, and hung up, and Callan pushed the phone in the little man's hand, and hoped the little man had done better than he had.

BY the time Lonely came to relieve him the rain had stopped, but even so the little man sunk in gloom. He and his partner of the moment had not had a successful night.

"Four houses we done Mr. Callan," he said, "and three flats. And we hardly made petrol money. I tell you straight—this old country of ours is in a mess."

Callan rubbed the spot where Angela Wait had hit him and asked her how Lonely what he must do, and at once the little man was happy; he didn't even haggle about money, because following posh birds was his hobby anyway.

Callan went home to bed, and slept, but not for long.

Lonely rang him at 9.30. The subject was at a travel agents' buying a ticket for Malaga. She'd also inquired about a hire-car from there to a place that sounded like Puerto Sanchez.

"Just one ticket?" Callan asked.

"Yeah," said Lonely. "Iberia. Afternoon flight. It was the first she could get. His voice was a little bit."

"You really see her with nothing but a towel on?"

"She did," said Callan. "Stay with her."

"Be a pleasure," said Lonely, and hung up, awed by Mr. Callan's achievement. Next geckers would have to pay, and money to see the subject in a towel, and Mr.

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