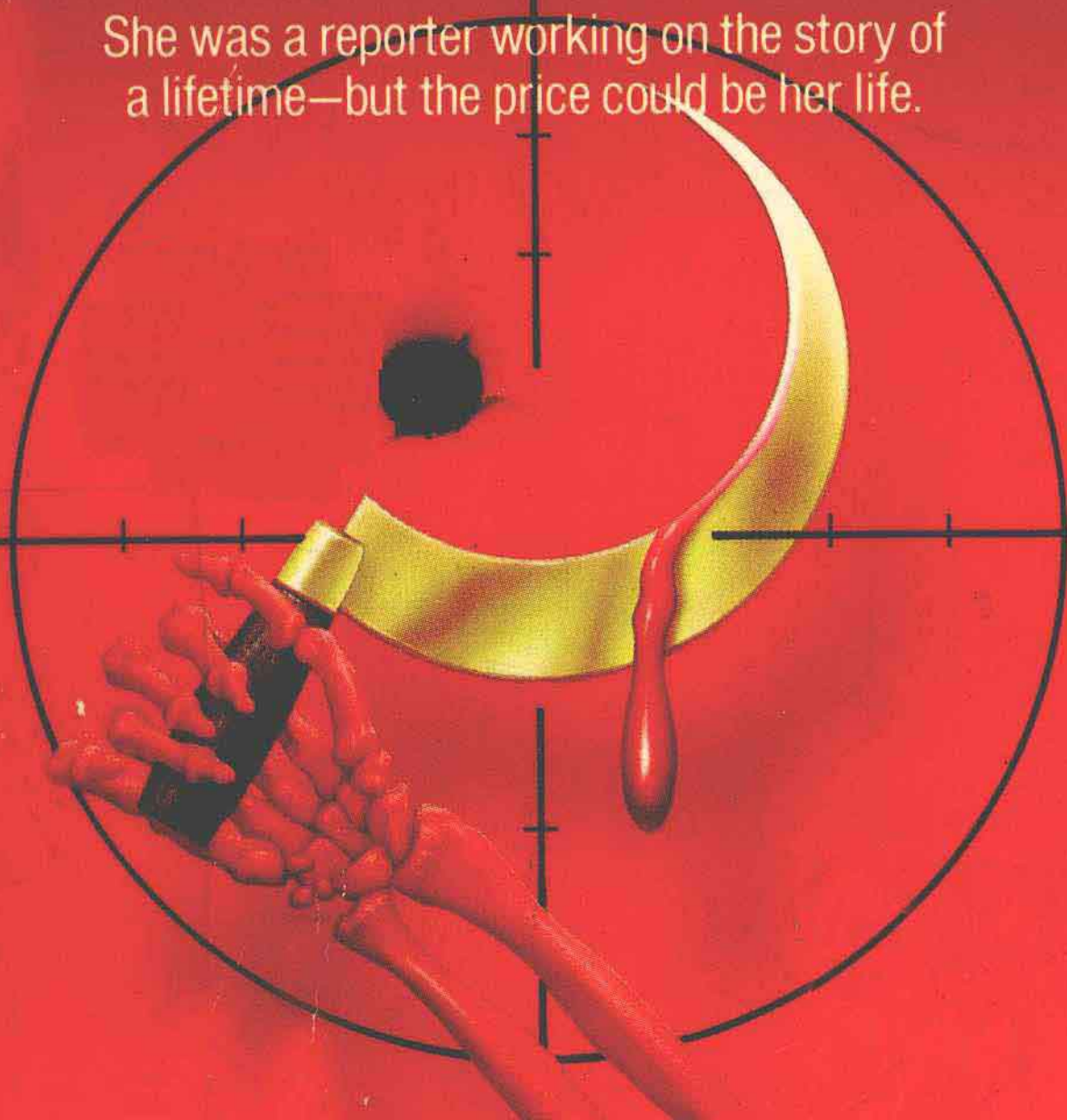


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She was a reporter working on the story of
a lifetime—but the price could be her life.



RIDE A PALE HORSE

Helen MacInnes

The characters in this novel are imaginary. Their names and experiences have no relation to those of actual people except by coincidence.

A Fawcett Crest Book
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The Snare of the Hunter

The Venetian Affair

While Still We Live

In memory of Gilbert

*And I looked, and behold a pale horse:
and his name that sat on him was Death,
and Hell followed with him.*

—REVELATION VI, 8



1

THE ROOM WAS COMFORTABLE ENOUGH, ADEQUATE BUT dull, totally unimaginative, a cream-walled box with everything else colored brown. Someone in Prague had ordered the essentials—bed, dresser, table, chairs, desk, a small state-controlled radio—straight out of a catalogue. Or perhaps this was the regulation room, repeated one hundred and ten times in this country hotel, judged suitable for foreign guests and the minor Czechoslovak officials who floated around in the background with polite advice and constant guidance.

Karen Cornell stopped pacing over the nine-by-twelve brown carpet, halted at the window. Even its view, showing her a driveway that circled a garden of scarlet geraniums and white begonias before it swept down an avenue through thick woods, did not lift her depression. It only reminded her once more of six days of helpful supervision. For there, drawn close to the hotel entrance, was a neat line of black Fiats, the cars provided for the visiting journalists to see them safely into Prague and back again.

Their drivers were linguists, and escorts, too. Once in Prague, they stayed by your side. If you wanted a stroll through the streets, a look at shops and people, they went with you, friendly and obliging. After all, you couldn't speak Czech, could you? You could get lost so easily, be late for tight schedule of meetings, lunches, entertainments. But now the escorts, ever dutifully lined up with their cars, did not seem to have much business. This was the sixth day, when meetings had ended and the only luncheon had been an early farewell downstairs to the eight West Europeans and one American who represented the press of the free world. The Eastern-bloc journalists, forty-eight of them, were probably sleeping off the dumpings (good) and the beer (excellent); they weren't leaving until tomorrow or the next day. The West Europeans, like this American, were waiting for all the notes they had made to be returned from the censors, worrying while they waited and eyed their watches. Damn all censors, Karen Cornell was thinking as she left the window, didn't they know we all have planes to catch? It was now almost three o'clock: she was to move out of the hotel by four-thirty for her flight to Vienna. She'd pack her bag and stop looking at the desk, where she had expected her notes to be lying in their envelopes once she had escaped from the luncheon.

There was nothing, but nothing, in her notes that could possibly rile a censor. Her system of classifying them by envelopes, each with the subject of its contents clearly marked on its top left-hand corner, was simple, time-saving, and invaluable for ready reference. So what was delaying those blasted censors? There were only two or three pages in each envelope; nothing unexpected, nothing exciting had happened at the Prague Convocation for Peace, which she had been covering for four days. (The fifth day was a country jaunt, a visit to a thriving village of farms, planned and supervised by the state, that made a vivid contrast to the inefficiency of another village, where farmers were trying to cling to their pre-1968 ideas of

possession.) Convocation for Peace...the usual faces, the usual speeches. All wanted peace, all condemned the United States. A thousand strong in agreement and fervor, except for two West German women who had managed to be included with the Greens and tried to suggest that *all* nuclear weapons should be discarded by *everyone*. Their protest had been drowned out in three minutes, and they were escorted efficiently out of the hall, two small pebbles disappearing into a deep pond with only a little plop to bear witness to their existence.

But, thought Karen, I didn't put that brief interlude into my notes. I'm carrying it out in my head. And that was the stupidity of censorship. It could black out your written lines, but what about your mind?

Convocation—an impressive word, serious, benevolent, religious almost. And there had been Christians around, mingling with the atheists, quite forgetting that they had been denounced as enemies when religion was declared the opium of the people. Short memories?

So the journalists had been convoked, too, to give their seal of approval. And they came, hoping they could talk with the representatives, but finding as usual that only a few were available for any real discussion. Specially selected, of course: a strong wall of unshakable opinion, fervent, dedicated, against which the Westerners' arguments made not one crack. But that wasn't her main assignment here. The special correspondent of the monthly *Washington Spectator*, published and owned by the Hubert Schleeman, had been invited for quite another reason. Schleeman had been given the firm impression that there was to be an interview for Karen Lee Cornell with—no less—the President of the Socialist Federated Republic himself.

Schleeman's contact, the press aide at the Czechoslovak Embassy in Washington, had impressed on him the need for absolute discretion; no talk, no rumors to be circulated about this exceptional opportunity, or other papers and periodicals would be pestering his office.

Silence had been kept, secrecy was intact, and Karen had arrived in Prague on an ego trip that floated as high as a helium balloon.

This wasn't the first of her political interviews: Mitterrand last year; Helmut Schmidt on his way out of office; Kohl on his way in. Before that giddy accumulation of names, there had been a seven-year apprenticeship in the art of interviewing. First, a monthly column in the *Spectator* dealing with Washington personalities, foreign as well as home-grown. Next, brief interviews with congressmen; a longer one with a governor; full-length with two congressional committee chairmen, a new justice of the Supreme Court, a top aide at the White House. She had earned her way.

Yes, she reminded herself in mounting bewilderment, dismay, frustration, anger, we kept our word, Schleeman and I. And Jimmy Black, my editor, the only other person to hear about this project, kept his lips tightly buttoned, too. Not one word or whisper from us. Yet the interview fell through. No excuse offered, either; not one word of regret. No interview was possible this week. Or next. Totally impossible at present. Schleeman must have misunderstood.

If so, this was a first for Schleeman. He had never yet misunderstood a quiet invitation from any embassy or even misinterpreted a suggestion. He will be flaming mad. As I am. And I have the additional fear that somehow, some way, the blame for the failure of this assignment will be dumped on me. A remark I made, an attitude I displayed, made them doubt I was a suitable interviewer. That could be the little sound wave traveling back to Schleeman's quick ear. He wouldn't believe it. Or would he?

But I've been so damned careful, so circumspect. Not like Tony Marcus, the *London Observer's* man, whose quick tongue was irrepressible. "So," he had said when they first met, "you're the spectator and I'm the observer, but I rather think we'll be only two of the sheep shep-

herded around." And when she had smiled discreetly, said nothing, he had added, "Have you noticed the eminently respectable journalists gathered at the West European table? Was that why we have been invited? To legitimize all these bastards?" His amused glance swept around the clusters of Eastern-bloc newsmen. "Dutiful lot, aren't they? There was really no need to come here. They don't have to write anything. They just add a phrase or two to the handouts." She had smiled again, turned away, pretended to seek out Duvivier of *Le Monde*, whom she had met in Paris last year.

She snapped the locks of her bag. Packing complete. Ready to leave, except for her briefcase, open and waiting for her files to be jammed in when they came back from the censors. You're a coward, she told herself. Tony Marcus may write an objective column, but he has the courage to be frank when he speaks. You may as well admit it: you wouldn't be so full of small criticisms and anger today if you had been given that interview yesterday. Your ego is punctured, deflated completely, lying in shreds around your feet. And what about your career? What happens to all your plans if news of this slap-in-the-face gets around. It could, too. There would be plenty who would laugh, and some who would crow with delight. She hadn't reached this stage in her life without making enemies. Because she was thirty-seven and left them behind, because she was a woman who got the promotions? At first they had said her husband probably wrote her stuff, a successful novelist who knew how to put words together. But she had gone on writing her own material after he had died, more and more sure of her craft. So then success was blamed on her face and figure—she knew how to use them, didn't she? Did she? Hell, no, she thought: a face and figure added to difficulties. Some people immediately believed you were brainless.

Three o'clock. All was far from well. If she didn't get her envelopes back—then, perhaps, she had to reconstruct most of her notes, such as they were, from memory.

It was sharp enough, thank heaven. ("Ah yes," her dear critics said, "she's wired for sound. Must carry a recording machine wherever she goes.")

"Stop this!" she told her reflection in the dresser's mirror. "You're turning paranoid. Stop it!" This gargoyle face glaring back at her would really delight her competition. So she calmed down, combed her dark hair back into proper place, added powder and lipstick, studied the neckline of her blue silk shirt, tried to take comfort in the way its color emphasized her eyes. My notes, she thought again, if they aren't returned, does that mean a reprimand of some kind? She didn't even know how to reach the censors' office to try to prod them into action. Or perhaps that wouldn't be wise. Not wise at all. Censors might not like being prodded, even in the gentlest fashion.

Her telephone rang. It was perched on the extension of the headboard on her bed. She dropped lipstick and compact on top of her handbag and reached it on its second ring.

"Miss Cornell?"

"Yes."

"My name is Vasek. I'm in charge of press relations."

His English was good, his accent fair. Vasek? In charge of press relations? One of the really important guys who kept a low profile? (It was the unimportant men in this regime who were much on view.)

"Miss Cornell? Are you still there?"

"I am."

"Have you enjoyed your visit? If you have any comments, I'd be glad to hear them. I'm sure any small difficulties could be easily explained."

"Could they?"

"I think so. Why don't you join me downstairs? I am telephoning from the lobby. I am sure a little talk could put your mind to rest. I am sorry you have been disappointed."

Sorry . . . The first apology given. "Indeed I have been. You know about that?"

"Yes. Regrettable. But perhaps—" Vasek paused. "All is not lost yet, Miss Cornell."

A last chance to get that interview? A change of mind in high places? Quickly, she calculated the time of her appointment in Vienna tomorrow afternoon against a morning flight from here. She could manage it. "I could stay for this evening—" she began and was interrupted.

"Why don't we talk? Will you join me downstairs? I'll be waiting near the elevator."

"Give me three minutes."

Josef Vasek replaced the receiver and turned to his assistant. "She's coming."

"Do you think it will do any good? She scarcely spoke a word at the luncheon today. She's a tough customer."

And that is what I'm betting on, thought Vasek. She's my gamble. "Well, we can't send her away antagonized. It doesn't pay to make enemies of the foreign press, does it? I'll talk to her in the garden, calm her down."

"All you'll hear will be complaints."

"Perhaps I should hand this job over to you, Bor."

"No, thank you. I'll just string along and admire your technique."

"Fine. Or, better still, why don't we save time? You deal with Duvivier. He's in the bar, I think. He's worrying about his friend—that *Observer* reporter who left without saying good-bye to him. Reassure him, can you?"

"I'll manage that. Here she comes, all cream and peaches. But she's a tough lady. I warned you." Averting his eyes from the elevator door, Bor moved off and made his way through the crowded lobby toward the bar.



2

KAREN CORNELL STEPPED OUT OF THE ELEVATOR. NEAR its door there were several people grouped, and she could recognize them all. Not one was named Vasek. Then she saw a man—a stranger she had glimpsed only once or twice, usually in the distance. None of her colleagues had met him either or could give her his name. He was probably of some importance. He might be wearing an ill-fitted double-breaster, but that unctuous little squirt called Bor—always impeccably dressed—had just left him with a bow of deference which he barely acknowledged. Medium height, middle-aged, and carrying too much weight around his waistline. (A sedentary job or a bulky jacket?) He was pretending not to notice her. She halted, controlled a rising excitement. If this was Vasek, let him make the first move: he knew damned well who she was.

He began walking, but not toward her. He seemed to be heading for the side entrance to the lobby that led out onto the terrace and a flower garden. Then it appeared as if he had caught sight of her when he glanced at the

group in front of the elevators. He halted, turned, came forward through the crowd of people.

"Miss Cornell. My name is Vasek. I don't believe we have met. I am glad to have this chance to wish you a good journey. You are leaving tonight?"

"This afternoon."

"So soon? I hope your visit was enjoyable."

"I'd have preferred a more central hotel."

"But why, Miss Cornell?" He was astonished. "There was always a car for your convenience." His tone was soothing, his face a mask of politeness. "Have you any other comments?" But there was a sudden gleam of humor in his light-gray eyes.

"I was under the impression I was to be granted—"

"Didn't you have your interview yesterday with the Minister of Agriculture?"

A five-minute lecture, she reminded herself, before we were given a tour of model farms. Her impatience grew. "Yes. But I expected—"

"A moment, please, Miss Cornell. Too much noise here. Shall we try the terrace? Then we won't need to raise our voices."

She had the feeling that these sentences were as much for Bor's benefit—the man had appeared almost magically beside Vasek—as for hers.

Vasek spoke with Bor in a quick interchange of Czech, and Bor left—rather grudgingly, it seemed to Karen—with his usual bows. "Nothing important," Vasek said to her. Just an excuse. Bor hadn't found the French journalist in the bar. "He was looking for someone. I told him to try the man's bedroom." Anywhere, Vasek thought angrily, anywhere except at my elbow. "This way, Miss Cornell." He led her toward the terrace.

"If Bor is looking for one of my colleagues, he'll find him trying to track down the censors." A neat way to introduce my own worry, she thought. "I should be doing that myself. I'm leaving here at four-thirty. I haven't yet received my notes, and I—"

"You'll have them before you leave. I'm afraid the terrace is a bit crowded, too." He looked around the array of occupied chairs and urged her toward the steps into the garden. He said clearly, "I know you've had certain problems. Why not tell me your complaints? I can explain anything that is puzzling you, and I am sure you will feel much better. Can't have you leaving with unanswered questions, can we?"

But once they had reached the flower beds and were strolling leisurely on a path that took them a little distance from the terrace, his voice dropped. "Don't show surprise or shock at anything I say. You will argue with me, and I shall appear to be explaining away your doubts. Yes, you should interrupt me naturally, but *no* comments on what I am telling you. No astonishment, please!" For she had turned her head to look at him with her eyes wide and her lips parted. "When we reach that patch of grass ahead of us, we'll stop for a little. My back will be to the terrace, so you will face it. Eyes will be watching us. And there is one highly skilled lip reader among them. That is why you must stay absolutely normal. What you say will be known." He fell silent, stopped to look at a rosebush.

She stopped, too, but kept her face averted from the terrace. "My turn to talk?" I'm on the verge of a story, she told herself, excitement once more stirring. I feel it, I sense it, I can smell it. All that playacting of his in the lobby, all that little pantomime on the terrace of attempting to pacify a complaining guest—yes, he is a man in trouble, bigger than any of those I thought I had.

"Briefly. We haven't much time—ten minutes at most."

"Then I'll go on asking about my notes." Her face turned to admire the yellow rosebush they had passed. She halted briefly. "Why the delay? My material didn't need to be censored. It's absolutely harmless," she ended with considerable indignation.

He looked back, too, at the cluster of flowers, long enough to let any watcher see his lips. "Harmless? We must be the judge of that. And I assure you, we only hope