
THE FANTASTIC STORIES OF
CORNELL WOOLRICH
EDITED BY CHARLES G. WAUGH
AND MARTIN H. GREENBERG

With an Introduction by Francis M. Nevins, Jr.

Afterword by Barry N. Malzberg



"The subject matter of [Woolrich's] fantasy and horror stories—snake priestesses, voodoo, vampires, ritual sacrifice, elixirs of life, predestination, metempsychosis, reincarnation—will be new to many of his readers . . . but the treatment, the uniquely human touches, the awesome power to make our flesh prickle . . . are carried over intact from his mainstream crime fiction."—Francis M. Nevins, Jr., from the Introduction

Woolrich (1903–68) is best known as a suspense writer; but "inevitably," as Barry Malzberg notes in his Afterword, "his vision verged toward the fantastic," as it does in these eight stories. "Whether destructive coincidence was masked in the 'naturalistic' or the 'incredible,'" his best works are "great swollen dreams, turgid constructions of the night." Whether suspense, fantasy, detective, or horror story, what unifies Woolrich's work is, in Malzberg's terms, "the central conception that nothing really mattered. At all. But the suffering. Ah, that mattered; that mattered quite a bit."

Woolrich's stories are about this suffering. The horror of it. The futile efforts to avoid it. The knowledge that life is death. Only death: "I had that trapped feeling," he wrote in his autobiography, "like some sort of a poor insect that you've put inside a downturned glass, and it tries to climb up the sides, and it can't and it can't and it can't." The following eight stories show that until near the end of Woolrich's life, no amount of misery could diminish his rare talent.

"Kiss of the Cobra": Detective Charlie Lawton matches wits with a snake priestess who kills but leaves no clues. No jury would convict her, yet Lawton figures a way to gain revenge.

"Dark Melody of Madness": Voodoo. New Orleans at night. Band leader Eddie Bloch unleashes Hell's own fury when he invades the nocturnal rites of Papa Benjamin. He steals a voodoo rhythm, a melody, and converts them into a nightclub act that leads to riches. But the world is no longer big enough for Eddie Bloch.

"Speak to Me of Death": The prediction of death was part of a plot to separate a millionaire from his life and money. But even with the plot exposed, the medium insists that at midnight John Bridges must suffer "death at the jaws of a lion."

"I'm Dangerous Tonight": In the "Blue Hour, . . . the ribbon of darkness between the false dawn and

(Continued on back flap)

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Cornell Woolrich

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THE POET OF THE SHADOWS: CORNELL WOOLRICH

By Francis M. Nevins, Jr.



It started with a sneaker, an old soft-soled canvas gym shoe that rubbed his heel raw. The heel became infected, the doctor made him keep his foot elevated for six weeks, and by the time he began to walk again

he'd completed the first draft of a novel. That is one version of how it started. In his unfinished autobiography he provided another, saying that it was a severe case of jaundice that kept him immobilized, and that he'd recovered long before that first draft was finished. But if you had asked him he probably would have told you that it didn't matter a damn which version was taken for the truth because nothing really mattered a damn in the end anyway.

Cornell George Hopley-Woolrich was born in New York City on December 4, 1903, to parents whose marriage collapsed in his youth. Much of his childhood was spent in Mexico with his father, a civil engineer. His schooling was punctuated by frequent holidays whenever another revolutionary *jefe* captured the town where they lived, and he cultivated the hobby of collecting the spent rifle cartridges that littered the streets beneath his windows.

At the age of eight he was taken by his maternal grandfather to Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts to see a traveling French company perform *Madame Butterfly*, and the experience gave him a sudden sharp insight into color and drama and his first sense of tragedy. Three years later, on a night when he looked up at the low-hanging stars from the valley of Anahuac, he understood that someday, like Cio-Cio-San, he

too would have to die. From that moment on he was haunted by a sense of doom. "I had that trapped feeling," he wrote in his autobiography, "like some sort of a poor insect that you've put inside a downturned glass, and it tries to climb up the sides, and it can't, and it can't, and it can't."

During his adolescence he returned to New York City and lived with his grandfather and aunt and mother in the grandfather's house on 113th Street near Columbia University. The genteel environment seems temporarily to have dissipated the young man's morbidity, and by his late teens the serious pensive child had become a frivolous Good Time Guy, bent only on pleasure, full of a Great-To-Be-Alive optimism. In 1921 he enrolled in Columbia College, with his father paying the tuition from Mexico City. His major was journalism but he dreamed of more romantic occupations, like becoming an author or a professional dancer. Together with a classmate named Jacques Barzun, who was to attain international eminence as an historian of ideas, he took a course in creative writing and another on the novel. Barzun remembers Woolrich not as a Good Time Guy but as a shy and introspective youth with a keen interest in literature and under the complete domination of his mother. In his junior year the incident took place, whatever it was, that led to his first experiment with fiction. Almost before he knew it his novel sold, and he quit Columbia to pursue his dream of bright lights.

The main influence on Woolrich's early work was F. Scott Fitzgerald, the literary idol of the twenties, and that first Woolrich novel, *Cover Charge* (1926), chronicles the lives and loves of the Jazz Age's gilded youth, the child-people, flitting like birds without nests from thrill to thrill, conversing in a mannered slang which reads today like a foreign language. But several motifs from his earlier and later life and his later suspense fiction can be detected in this rather amateurish debut. The fascination with dance halls and movie palaces. The use of popular song lyrics to convey mood. Touches of vibrantly colorful description. A long interlude in Mexico City complete with performance of *Madame Butterfly*. Romance between Alan Walker, the ballroom-dancer protagonist, and two women, each of whom is old enough to be his mother. An extravaganza of coincidence to keep the story moving. And a

despairing climax with Alan alone in a cheap hotel room, his legs all but useless, abandoned by the women he at various times loved, contemplating suicide. "I hate the world. Everything comes into it so clean and goes out so dirty."

His second novel, *Children of the Ritz* (1927), which may have been suggested by his socialite mother's marriage to a civil engineer, is a frothy concoction about a spoiled heiress who impulsively marries her chauffeur. The book won first prize of \$10,000 in a contest cosponsored by *College Humor* magazine, which serialized it, and First National Pictures, which filmed the story in 1929. Woolrich was invited to Hollywood to help with the adaptation, and stayed on as a staff writer. One of the dialogue and title writers employed by First National around this time was a gentleman named William Irish. (Irish's name appears in the credits of three First National films of 1928–29, all directed by Benjamin Christensen: *Haunted House*, *Seven Footprints to Satan*, *House of Horror*. Woolrich received no screen credit for his Hollywood contributions of the period.)

With novels, movie chores, and an occasional article or story for magazines like *College Humor*, *College Life*, *McClure's* and *Smart Set*, Woolrich must have been a busy young man indeed. By the time of his gritty and cynical third book, *Times Square* (1929), he had begun to develop the headlong storytelling drive and the concern with the torments and the maniacal power of love which were to mark his later suspense fiction. In the first half of his autobiographically rooted fourth novel, *A Young Man's Heart* (1930), the scene is Mexico around 1910 and the viewpoint is that of a young boy during and after the collapse of his parents' marriage. And his last true presuspense book, *The Time of Her Life* (1931), combines a Jazz Age version of the Cinderella myth with a love triangle made up of a poor but life-intoxicated young girl, her domineering mother, and a burned-out music teacher.

In December of 1930, while still working in Hollywood, Woolrich suddenly married 20-year-old Gloria Blackton, a daughter of pioneer movie producer, J. Stuart Blackton, who had founded Vitagraph Studios in 1897. Apparently Gloria saw in Woolrich a boy who needed mothering. The marriage was never consummated. A graphic diary he kept but later

destroyed indicates that he had been homosexual for some time prior to the marriage, which he had entered as a sort of sick joke, or perhaps for cover. In the middle of the night he would put on a sailor outfit that he kept in a locked suitcase and prowl the waterfront for partners. The marriage soon ended and Woolrich fled to New York and mother. "I was born to be solitary," he says in his autobiography, "and I liked it that way." But the shadow of his desperate need for a relationship with a woman who never was, and never could have been, haunts the pages of his stories like a demon that cannot be exorcised.

After the breakup of his marriage, Woolrich and his mother traveled extensively in Europe. He wrote very little during the early 1930s. But his only novel of the period, *Manhattan Love Song* (1932), is both the best and the most prophetic of his youthful books, anticipating the motifs of his later suspense fiction with its tale of a love-struck young couple cursed by an inexplicable malignant fate which leaves one dead and the other desolate. For the next two years Woolrich sold next to nothing. He had moved out of the house on 113th Street and into a cheap hotel, determined to make it as a writer without his mother's help, but was soon deep in debt and reduced to sneaking into movie houses by the fire doors for entertainment. Frantically he tried to complete and find a publisher for a novel he'd begun two years earlier, a story of ballroom dancers in 1912 Paris for which he hoped some big Hollywood studio would pay him enough to liberate him from the depression. No one was interested in the book, and finally Woolrich tossed the entire manuscript of *I Love You, Paris* into the garbage. What he did not know was that he was on the brink of a new life as a writer, a life so different from his earlier literary career that in his autobiography he said it would have been better if all his presuspense fiction "had been written in invisible ink and the reagent had been thrown away." He was about to become the Poe of the twentieth century.

"There was another patient ahead of me in the waiting room. He was sitting there quietly, humbly, with all the terrible resignation of the very poor." With these words his new life began. Woolrich's first crime story, "Death Sits in the Den-

tist's Chair" (*Detective Fiction Weekly*, 8/4/34), offers a vivid picture of New York City during the worst of the depression, a bizarre murder method (cyanide in a temporary filling) and a race against the clock to save the poisoned protagonist—elements which would soon become Woolrich hallmarks. His two other mystery tales of 1934 are equally characteristic. "Walls That Hear You" (*Detective Fiction Weekly*, 8/18/34) opens with the invasion of nightmare into the viewpoint character's workaday existence when he finds his younger brother with all ten fingers cut off and his tongue severed at the roots. And "Preview of Death" (*Dime Detective*, 11/15/34) has a Hollywood moviemaking background and another unusual murder method—setting fire to an actress in a flammable Civil War hoopskirt—which Woolrich had first used as a method of accidental death in *Times Square*.

In 1935 Woolrich sold ten crime stories, of uneven quality but stunning variety, which together embodied most of the motifs and beliefs and techniques at the core of Woolrich's fiction. "Murder in Wax" (*Dime Detective*, 3/1/35) is his earliest attempt at first-person narrative from the viewpoint of a woman. "The Body Upstairs" (*Dime Detective*, 4/1/35) is marked by casual police brutality and intuition that passes for detection. In "Kiss of the Cobra" (*Dime Detective*, 5/1/35) demonic nightmare once again invades everyday life, but this time in rather absurd form as the narrator's widowed father-in-law brings home as his second wife a Hindu snake priestess complete with reptiles. "Red Liberty" (*Dime Detective*, 7/1/35) anticipates the police procedural genre with its simple story about the finding of a body inside the Statue of Liberty. "Dark Melody of Madness" (*Dime Mystery*, 7/35), better known under its later title, "Papa Benjamin," deals with a jazz bandleader who learns too much about a New Orleans voodoo cult, and marks the return of the evil power whose prey is man, which Woolrich had introduced in *Manhattan Love Song*. The author's best story of the year is "The Corpse and the Kid" (*Dime Detective*, 9/35), better known as "Boy with Body," in which a young man finds that his father has killed his promiscuous new wife and desperately tries to cover up the crime by carrying the woman's body, wrapped in a rug, out of the New Jersey seaside town where the family

lived and over to the roadhouse rendezvous where her current lover is waiting for her. The account of the boy's journey is Woolrich's first set piece of pure nail-biting suspense, and the psychological overtones suggest some of the horrors in the author's relations with his own parents. "Dead on Her Feet" (*Dime Detective*, 12/35) tells of a murder at a marathon dance contest and of a cop who forces the dead girl's lover to dance with her corpse until he confesses, driving the innocent man insane just before the real killer is caught. If that story was influenced by Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, the dominant influence on "The Death of Me" (*Detective Fiction Weekly*, 12/7/35) was clearly James M. Cain, from whose *The Postman Always Rings Twice* Woolrich borrowed—not once but over and over—the motif of the man who gets away with the murder he did but is nailed for the one he didn't. "The Showboat Murders" (*Detective Fiction Weekly*, 12/14/35) is Woolrich's first rapid-action whizbang, with a thin plot but whirlwind pace. And his final story of the year, "Hot Water" (*Argosy*, 12/28/35) concerns a movie star and her rough-diamond bodyguard and gives further evidence of how much Hollywood meant to Woolrich.

By the end of the year Woolrich was a professional, having earned a grand total of \$2487 from his crime stories. Between 1936 and 1939 he sold at least 105 more stories as well as two book-length magazine serials, and by the end of the decade he had become a fixture in mystery pulps of all levels of quality—from *Black Mask* and *Detective Fiction Weekly* to cheapies like *Thrilling Mystery* and *Black Book Detective*—and had even appeared in Whit Burnett's general fiction magazine *Story*. One of his pulp tales, "Face Work" (*Black Mask*, 10/37) was turned into a mediocre low-budget movie called *Convicted* (Columbia, 1938), starring Rita Hayworth and Charles Quigley. Despite their wide variety, very few of these hundred-odd stories lack the unique Woolrich mood, tone, and preoccupations. Among them are historical adventures like "Black Cargo" (*Argosy*, 7/31/37), Runyonesque comedies like "Oft in the Silly Night" (*Argosy*, 11/13/37), powerful antipolice stories like "Detective William Brown" (*Detective Fiction Weekly*, 9/10/38), fast-action whizbangs like "You Pays Your Nickel" (*Ar-*

gosity, 8/22/36) which is better known as "Subway," Grand Guignol gems like "The Living Lie Down with the Dead" (*Dime Detective*, 4/36), tales of crime and punishment hinting at preternatural forces like "Mystery in Room 913" (*Detective Fiction Weekly*, 6/4/38), heart-pounding clockraces packed with tension like "Three O'Clock" (*Detective Fiction Weekly*, 10/1/38) and "Men Must Die" (*Black Mask*, 8/39), which is better known as "Guillotine," and chaotic tragedies presided over by powers whose plaything is man, like "I Wouldn't Be in Your Shoes" (*Detective Fiction Weekly*, 3/12/38). The typical settings of these stories are the seedy hotel, the cheap dance hall, the precinct station backroom, the rundown movie house, and the recurring themes are the corrosion of love and trust and the entrapment of little people by uncontrollable powers. Sometimes the malignant powers are personal, like the self-appointed avenging angel of "After-Dinner Story" (*Black Mask*, 1/38) who sets out to punish a crime beyond the law and winds up destroying the innocent either along with or instead of the guilty. Sometimes the powers are socioeconomic, with the depression driving the helpless poor over the edge of despair as in "Goodbye, New York" (*Story*, 10/37). And occasionally, in Woolrich's most terrifying stories like "I Wouldn't Be in Your Shoes," the malign powers are metaphysical, the dark gods are in control and the innocent are damned.

What was the man like who spun out these bleak visions? The best physical description comes from Woolrich's pulp contemporary, Steve Fisher, who used him as the model for the love-tormented and brutal homicide detective Cornell in his 1941 novel *I Wake Up Screaming*. "He had red hair and thin white skin and red eyebrows and blue eyes. He looked sick. He looked like a corpse. His clothes didn't fit him. . . . He was frail, grey-faced and bitter. He was possessed with a macabre humor. His voice was nasal. You'd think he was crying. He might have had T. B. He looked like he couldn't stand up in a wind." As for his life style, the reminiscences of writers like Fisher and Frank Gruber picture him as a terrifyingly introverted man, living alone with his mother in hotels, going out only when it was absolutely essential, his

whole external world dominated by Claire Attalie Woolrich and his inner world, his work, reflecting in its tortured patterns the strangler grip in which his mother held him.

In 1940 Woolrich joined the migration of pulp detective writers from lurid-covered magazines to hardcover books. His first novel of suspense, *The Bride Wore Black* (1940), recycles the motif of the avenging angel. Julie Killeen, whose husband was killed on the church steps moments after their marriage, spends years tracking down and systematically murdering the drunk driver and his four cronies whom she holds responsible for her beloved's death. Eventually she is herself stalked through the years by homicide cop Lew Wanger, and when their paths finally converge, both hunters find themselves in the presence of the malignant powers. This first in Woolrich's so-called Black Series, which may have inspired the French *serie noire*, was followed by *The Black Curtain* (1941), the masterpiece on the overworked subject of amnesia. Frank Townsend recovers from a three years' loss of memory, becomes obsessed with the determination to learn who and what he was during those missing years, and finds love, hate, and a murder charge waiting for him behind the curtain. *Black Alibi* (1942) is a terror novel about a killer jaguar menacing a large South American city, while the police hunt a human murderer who may be hiding behind the jaguar's claws. Woolrich's most sustained piece of first-person narration by a woman, *The Black Angel* (1943), deals with a terrified young wife's race against time to prove that her convicted husband did not murder his girlfriend and that some other man in the dead woman's life is guilty. *The Black Path of Fear* (1944) tells of a man who runs away to Havana with an American gangster's wife, followed by the vengeful husband, who kills the woman and frames her lover, leaving him a stranger in a strange land, menaced on all sides and fighting for his life. And in *Rendezvous in Black* (1948), which in effect is a rewrite of *The Bride Wore Black* with the sexes reversed, a grief-crazed young man, holding one among a small group of people responsible for his fiancée's death, devotes his life to entering the lives of each of that group in turn, finding out whom each one most loves, and murdering these

loved ones so that the person who killed his fiancée will live the grief he lives.

During the early 1940s Woolrich continued to turn out stories and novelets for the pulps but in diminishing quantity, publishing fourteen in 1940, eleven in 1941, six in 1942, ten in 1943. Among these stories, however, are classics like "All at Once, No Alice" (*Argosy*, 3/22/40), "Finger of Doom" (*Detective Fiction Weekly*, 6/22/40), "C-Jag" (*Black Mask*, 10/40), "And So to Death" (*Argosy*, 3/1/41), "Marihuana" (*Detective Fiction Weekly*, 5/3/41), and "Three Kills for One" (*Black Mask*, 7/42). As in the Black novels and the strongest of the pulp work of the thirties, the leitmotif is loss of love. Prototypically, the viewpoint character's beloved vanishes almost literally in the noonday sun, in such a way that the protagonist not only cannot find her but can't convince a single soul that she ever existed. Or, in another quintessential Woolrich situation, the protagonist comes to after a blackout (induced by drugs, hypnotism or some other cause) and little by little becomes convinced that he has committed some monstrous act while out of himself. Sometimes these stories end happily, sometimes in despair. There are no series characters in Woolrich, and the reader can never know in advance whether a particular suspense story of his will be dark or light—which is one of the technical tricks that makes his stories the most suspenseful ever written.

Woolrich's dwindling output of short fiction in the forties was due at least in part to the discovery of his huge backlog of stories by the entrepreneurs of dramatic radio. Dozens of his pulp tales were naturals for audio adaptation, and his material was purchased in dizzying quantities for broadcast on series like *Suspense* and *Molle Mystery Theatre*. Occasionally Woolrich would adapt one of his own stories for radio, and his best work for the medium, such as his thirty-minute *Suspense* version of *The Black Curtain*, starring Cary Grant (broadcast 12/3/43), ranks among the most powerful radio dramas ever written.

As if all this activity were not enough, Woolrich continued to write more novels, too many for publication under a single byline. He showed the manuscript of one such novel to Whit

Burnett of *Story Magazine*, who in turn showed it and ultimately sold it to an editor at J. B. Lippincott. Since Simon & Schuster was then publishing the Black Series and had exclusive right to use the name Cornell Woolrich, a pseudonym was needed. The name that Woolrich and Burnett hit upon was William Irish. Had Woolrich met that obscure First National title writer thirteen years before, and had he been carrying the man's name in the back of his mind ever since?

The novel that Lippincott published under the Irish byline was *Phantom Lady* (1942), in which an innocent man is sentenced to die for the murder of his wife, and his two best friends race the clock to find the apparently nonexistent woman who can give the husband an alibi. The second Irish novel, *Deadline at Dawn* (1944), is another clockrace story, with a desperate young couple given until sunrise to clear themselves of a murder charge and escape the web of the city. Woolrich evokes New York after dark and the despair of those who walk its streets with a pathos unmatched in the genre. In *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (1945), which was published under the byline George Hopley (Woolrich's middle names), the suspense rises to unbearable pitch as a simple-minded recluse with uncanny powers predicts a millionaire's imminent death by the jaws of a lion, and the doomed man's daughter and a sympathetic cop struggle to avert a destiny which they suspect and soon come to hope was conceived by a merely human power. *Waltz into Darkness* (1947), again as by Irish, is set in New Orleans around 1880 and tells of the hopeless love affair between an unbearably lonely man and an impossibly evil woman. And in the decade's final Irish novel, *I Married a Dead Man* (1948), a woman with nothing to live for, fleeing from her sadistic husband, is injured in a train wreck, is mistaken for another woman with everything to live for who was killed in the crackup, grasps this heaven-sent chance to start life over with a new identity, falls in love again, and is destroyed along with the man she loves. As in "I Wouldn't Be in Your Shoes," only two resolutions are possible, neither makes sense and both destroy people's lives. "I don't know what the game was. . . . I only know we must have played it wrong, somewhere along the way. . . . We've lost. That's all I know. We've lost. And now the game is through."

The popular and critical success of the novels led to publication of several collections of Woolrich's shorter work in hardcover and paperback-original volumes, which are extremely rare today. His stories were staple items in the endless anthologies of short mystery fiction published during the forties. And in addition to the dozens of radio plays adapted from his work, fifteen movies were made from Woolrich material between 1942 and 1950 alone. Among the better Woolrich-based films were *Street of Chance* (Paramount, 1942), from *The Black Curtain*; *The Leopard Man* (RKO, 1943), from *Black Alibi*; *Phantom Lady* (Universal, 1944); and *The Black Angel* (Universal, 1946). Several of the others, like *Deadline at Dawn* (RKO, 1946) with its Clifford Odets screenplay and *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (Paramount, 1948), mauled their literary sources so badly that one finds little in them of the authentic Woolrich. But the author's influence pervaded the *films noirs* of the Forties so extensively that a large number of superb pictures of that period, like Edgar Ulmer's low-budget masterpiece, *Detour* (PRC, 1946), seem like Woolrich films even though he had nothing to do with them.

Woolrich published very little after 1948. There was one minor novel under each of his three bylines in 1950–51, and a few short stories. His mother's prolonged illnesses seemed to paralyze his ability to write. That he was remembered at all during the fifties is largely due to Ellery Queen (Frederic Dannay), who reprinted in his magazine a host of Woolrich's pulp tales, and to Alfred Hitchcock, whose *Rear Window* (1954) was based on a Woolrich story. His magazine work proved as adaptable to television as it had to radio a decade earlier, and series like *Mirror Theater*, *Ford Theater*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *Schlitz Playhouse of Stars* frequently presented thirty-minute filmed versions of his material. Indeed even the distinguished *Playhouse 90* made use of Woolrich, turning his novel *Rendezvous in Black* into a feature-length telefilm (broadcast 10/25/56) starring Franchot Tone, Laraine Day and Boris Karloff. But what is probably the finest adaptation of Woolrich in any form is Hitchcock's sixty-minute version of "Three O'Clock," starring E. G. Marshall and broadcast on the series *Suspicion*, 9/30/57 under the title *Four O'Clock*. This is one of the finest films of agonizing sus-

pense ever made, pure Hitchcock and pure Woolrich at one and the same time, and perhaps the most totally suspenseful film Hitchcock has ever directed.

Woolrich's personal situation remained wretched, and more than once he sank to passing off slightly updated old stories as new work, fooling book and magazine publishers as well as readers. The dustjackets on his story collections *Nightmare* (1956) and *Violence* (1958) claimed that each book contained two stories never published before, although in fact all the stories had appeared in magazines long ago.

Not long after the death of Woolrich's mother came her son's first new book in seven years, dedicated:

To
Claire Attalie Woolrich
1874–1957
In Memoriam
This Book: Our Book

Hotel Room (1958) is a collection of nonsuspenseful stories set in a single room of a New York City hotel at various times ranging from the building's years of sumptuous fashionableness to the last days before its demolition. The St. Anselm was an amalgam of all the desiccated Victorian residential hotels in which mother and son had lived, and the stories set there mark the beginning of Woolrich's end. All that was left in him was a handful of "tales of love and despair." His best story of the Fifties, a wryly downbeat story of a pulp mystery writer of the 1930s alone in a hotel room and desperately trying to turn out a complete novelet overnight, was intended as a chapter in *Hotel Room* but was excised at the last minute and published separately (*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, 9/58) as "The Penny-a-Word."

The credit page of *Beyond the Night* (1959), a rare paperback collection concentrating on Woolrich's excursions into the occult, states that three of the book's six stories were brand-new, but in fact two of the trio were already more than twenty years old. The only genuine new tale in the collection, "The Number's Up," is a bitter little account of gangland executioners mistakenly taking an innocent couple out to be shot and one of Woolrich's best late stories. His last new novel,

Death Is My Dancing Partner (1959), is a mawkish mixture of *amour fou* and the occult dealing with Mari, a dancer in the temple of the death goddess Kali, and Maxwell Jones, a third-rate bandleader who sees her dance as his key to that room at the top, despite the legend that at each performance of the death dance Kali claims a victim. (What looks like a later novel, *The Doom Stone* (1960), is actually just a book version of Woolrich's 1939 *Argosy* serial "The Eye of Doom," with the original part four removed and replaced by a new last section.)

Diabetic, alcoholic, wracked by self-contempt and alone, Woolrich dragged out his life. He would come to a party, bringing his own bottle of cheap wine in a paper bag, and stand in a corner the whole evening. If someone approached and tried to tell him how much he or she admired his work, he would growl "You don't mean that" and find another corner. He continued to write, but left unfinished much more than he ever completed. And publishers continued to issue collections of his stories. *The Ten Faces of Cornell Woolrich* (1965), with a glowing introduction by Ellery Queen, was of high quality, but seven stories out of the ten were lifted from earlier Woolrich collections. *The Dark Side of Love* (1965) brought together eight of the author's recent stories, including three that had appeared nowhere before. Only that dark gem, "Too Nice a Day to Die," ranks with his best work, but even his poorest tales of the Sixties are permeated by the hypnotic power of Woolrich's self-disgust and yearning for love.

The best of his late stories still hold the magic touch that could chill the heart, and his last two suspense tales, "For the Rest of Her Life" (*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, 5/68) and "New York Blues" (*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, 12/70), are among his finest. He had plenty of money, and his critical reputation was secure not only in America but in Europe, where the celebrated director, Francois Truffaut, filmed both *The Bride Wore Black* and *Waltz into Darkness*. But Woolrich's emotional condition remained hopeless, and his physical condition deteriorated as well. He developed gangrene in his leg and let it go untended, so that when he finally sought medical help the doctor had no choice but to amputate.

While in the hospital he told the sad history of his life to the Catholic chaplain and said that he wanted to return to the faith in which he had been baptized. After the operation he lived in a wheelchair, unable to learn how to walk on an artificial leg. On September 25, 1968, he died of a stroke, leaving unfinished two novels (*Into the Night* and *The Loser*), an autobiography (*Blues of a Lifetime*), a collection of short stories (*I Was Waiting for You*), and a long list of titles for stories he had never begun, one of which captures his bleak world view in a single phrase: "First You Dream, Then You Die." He left no survivors, and only a tiny handful of people attended his funeral. His estate of nearly a million dollars was bequeathed in trust to Columbia University for the establishment of a scholarship fund for students of creative writing. The fund is named for Woolrich's mother.

2

If there is a single factor that makes Woolrich the inimitable suspense artist that he was, it is his hopeless view of life. At the end of the traditional formal detective novel all of our perplexity has been dissolved and every fragment of the story has been explained so that we can step back, as it were, and view the entire sequence of events as a rationally harmonious mosaic. At the end of the traditional suspense novel all of our panic has been dissolved, the demons are scattered and the world is again safe. But in the typical Woolrich detective story no rational explanation is possible, and in the typical Woolrich suspense story terror is not dissipated, it's omnipresent.

Woolrich's world is controlled by powers that delight in destroying us. They are unreachable by human goodness, their ways are not our ways, and we are helpless against them. Occasionally, as in *Night Has a Thousand Eyes*, we see the nature of Woolrich's god directly, in all its hideous malignancy. More often, however, we see only its reflection in the universe, which is portrayed as chaotic, irrational and abandoned to

the demonic, as in "I Wouldn't Be in Your Shoes" and *I Married a Dead Man*.

Perhaps the most graphic portrait of the god is drawn in "The Light in the Window" (*Mystery Book Magazine*, 4/46). A mentally disturbed soldier returns from World War II to his home city. While standing in the darkness across the street from his girl's apartment, wondering how to tell her he is home, he is brought up against a barrage of circumstantial evidence, which convinces him that she has been sleeping with another man. As if in a trance he strangles the girl. Almost as soon as he has left her apartment his shellshock returns, and the night streets become a battleground. He tries to dig a foxhole in the sidewalk with bare and bloody hands. He mistakes a solicitous passerby for a lieutenant and salutes him. Finally he is taken to a hospital, and comes out a vegetable, with nothing left but the wait for the merciful release of death. "You had to wait for it, what else could you do? It was an order, from a lieutenant. A different one, you never saw. But He'd given it just the same; you had to obey." At this point both the soldier and the reader learn that the girl had been faithful, that the cumulative evidence had all been "coincidence," and that the janitor in the girl's apartment building has just been executed for her murder. "You just had to be patient and wait, that was all," the soldier thinks. "You couldn't question a lieutenant." Most readers would conclude, of course, that once again no lieutenant is present, that chance is all the god there is. But then there's the inescapable fact that the pattern of events Woolrich has described is totally dependent on multiple coincidence, so that something more than chance must be at work. A pattern so complex and so directed to a single end cannot be attributed to happenstance, says the old watchmaker argument, but the god whose existence this argument proves is one we would be much happier without.

The everyday world is no more comforting in Woolrich's vision than the powers beyond, for the dominant reality in that world is the depression. Woolrich has no peer at describing a frightened little guy in a run-down apartment, with a hungry wife and children, no money, no job, and desperation

eating him like a cancer. There is more of the anguish of the 1930s in stories like "Goodbye, New York" and "Dusk to Dawn" (*Black Mask*, 12/37) and "Borrowed Crime" (*Black Mask*, 7/39) than in volumes of social history.

If both the powers above us and the depression beside us are our predators, so too are the police. Individual cops and the so-called justice system as a whole make frequent appearances in Woolrich's stories, and despite occasional decent exceptions, the overall impression is of a human force just as brutal as the preternatural powers, indeed their earthly counterpart. He seems to take a perverse delight in portraying monstrous police outrages as being casually accepted by all concerned, not least by the victims. In "The Body Upstairs" the cops investigate a woman's murder by poking lighted cigarettes into her husband's armpits until, though innocent, he is about to confess—at which point the detective in charge berates the husband as a weakling who can't take punishment. In "Graves for the Living" (*Dime Mystery*, 6/37) the police, after listening to an incredible (though in fact true) story told by a complete stranger, take one of their own men into an all-night drugstore, kick the proprietor out, and pour acid on the cop until he confirms the story. In "Murder at the Automat" (*Dime Detective*, 8/37) the detectives who are unable to solve the killing of the title threaten to frame the chief suspect, who in fact is innocent. In "Detective William Brown" Woolrich describes the rise of a conscienceless opportunist through the police hierarchy, and the coverup that ensues when, after Brown's heroic death, his plodding buddy Greeley learns that Brown's success had been based on framing an innocent man for a crime Brown couldn't solve and then shooting the man "while resisting arrest." And in "Three Kills for One" we watch police brutality leading to the electrocution of an innocent man, followed by another coverup when the detectives learn what they have done. Then we follow a frustrated idealist who quits the force and devotes the rest of his life, in the manner of Victor Hugo's Javert, to hounding and psychologically torturing the real criminal, who soon becomes almost as sympathetic a figure as Jean Valjean. There is nothing that the protesters of the

Viet Nam era learned about the police that Woolrich had not described long before.

All we can do about this nightmare world, Woolrich says, is to create, if we can, a few tiny islands of love and trust which may help us for a while to forget what kind of universe we live in. Woolrich longed to love and be loved as a dying man in a desert longs for water. He never found it. That is why he could evoke the power of love and its joys and risks and agonies with such poignancy. That is why he could portray the loss of a loved one with such piercing sadness, as in chapter 2 of *Phantom Lady* when the morgue attendants are carrying out the body of Scott Henderson's wife. "Hands riveted to him, holding him there. The outer door closed muffledly. A little sachet came drifting out of the empty bedroom, seeming to whisper: 'Remember? Remember when I was your love? Remember?'"

But love can die while the lovers go on living, and Woolrich was a master at describing the slow corrosion of doubt eating at the fragile foundations of trust between two people. Among his most moving stories of corrosion are "I Wouldn't Be in Your Shoes," "Charlie Won't Be Home Tonight" (*Dime Detective*, 7/39), "The Red Tide" (*Detective Story*, 9/40), "He Looked Like Murder" (*Detective Fiction Weekly*, 2/8/41), which is better known as "Two Fellows in a Furnished Room," and the already discussed "The Light in the Window." Most of these have to do with a close relationship between two central characters—lovers, husband and wife, father and son, roommates. A crime is committed and a slowly mounting accumulation of evidence compels or comes within an inch of compelling one of the two to believe that the other is guilty. The suspense builds as the viewpoint character oscillates between doubt and trust and doubt again, and since Woolrich does not write traditional suspense stories, the reader has no comfortable assurance that things will work out, nor even the assurance that they won't. In some of the tales the suspected person is innocent and the damning evidence the result of wild coincidence or a frame-up, but in others the suspect is indeed guilty, and in still others neither the characters nor the reader ever learn what the truth is.

Yearn for love as he did, Woolrich, was well aware of the horrors that love can inspire and described them as intensely as he evoked love's daylight side. The ordeals to which the drug-crazed King Turner subjects his estranged wife in "Marihuana" and the atrocities which Marie in "Mind Over Murder" (*Dime Detective*, 5/43) visits upon the man she loves, are among the most memorable of these dark manifestations. In his avenging angel novels, *The Bride Wore Black* and *Rendezvous in Black*, Woolrich explored the lover's drive to avenge the death of the beloved with greater empathy than any other mystery writer before or since. He knew in the pit of his soul how lovelessness could catapult a person over the edge, and the experience of Louis Durand in *Waltz into Darkness* is one Woolrich must have shared.

And suddenly, one day, the cumulative loneliness of fifteen years, held back until now, overwhelmed him, all at one time, inundated him, and he turned this way and that, almost in panic.

Any love, from anywhere, on any terms. Quick, before it was too late! Only not to be alone any longer.

There are very few irredeemably evil characters in Woolrich, for if one loves or needs love, and has lost it, or if one is at the brink of death or destruction, Woolrich is with that person, indeed becomes that person, no matter what else he or she has done. Even in a silly story like "The Mystery of the Blue Spot" (*Detective Fiction Weekly*, 4/4/36), once the outlandish alibi gimmick has been punctured Woolrich suddenly shifts viewpoints from the investigator to the murderess, who had killed because she had lost her love and who now kills herself. But also in his strongest work he makes us identify with all sorts of moral outcasts. He forces us to sit, bound and gagged and paralyzed, with Paul Stapp in his own basement, while the time bomb Stapp himself has set but now cannot reach ticks closer and closer to "Three O'Clock." He compels us to count the minutes with the murderer Robert Lamont in "Men Must Die" while the executioner, unwittingly poisoned but still functioning, approaches closer and closer to the prison to guillotine him. He makes us share the last moments of the killer Gates in "Three Kills for One," when the cold steel

hood falls over his head and in a tired voice he says "Helen, I love you" just before he is electrocuted.

"I was only trying to cheat death," Woolrich wrote in a fragment found among his papers. "I was only trying to surmount for a little while the darkness that all my life I surely knew was going to come rolling in on me some day and obliterate me. I was only trying to stay alive a little brief while longer, after I was already gone." The world of Woolrich is a feverish place, where the prevailing emotions are loneliness and fear and the prevailing activity the race against the clock, against time and death. In his best stories every detail reinforces these motifs, even the chapter headings. Chapter 1 of *Phantom Lady* is entitled "The Hundred and Fiftieth Day Before the Execution," so that even before Marcella Henderson is strangled the countdown to the day of her innocent husband's electrocution for the murder has already begun. In *Deadline at Dawn* Woolrich replaces the customary chapter titles or numbers with clock faces, so that like Quinn and Brickley we feel in our bones the coming of the dreaded sunrise. Over and over again Woolrich uses the ticking away of the seconds before the protagonist is to be destroyed to create an atmosphere of unbearable tension.

Admittedly many of his stories collapse into smithereens on careful rereading and analysis. In terms of technical plot craftsmanship Woolrich was easily the sloppiest of all the mystery genre's giants. But what in his upbeat stories is a weakness becomes in his more characteristic downbeat stories one of his great strengths, his ability to integrate coincidence and contradiction and implausibility into his vision of despair. No careful craftsman could have written "I Wouldn't Be in Your Shoes" and *I Married a Dead Man*, where no possible explanation can account for what has happened and we are face to face with the irreducible senselessness of the universe. No plot technician could have written "The Light in the Window" with its string of interlocking coincidences revealing the nature of the evil god. No routinely competent storyteller could have evoked Eric Rogers' fanatical hunger for justice in "Three Kills for One" by having him carry on his crusade for three years without visible means of support, as if his rage to restore order to his world were all the food and

drink he needed. Like the playwrights of the Absurd, Woolrich recognized that a senseless story best mirrors a senseless existence.

Seeing life as he did, Woolrich almost had to write an occasional tale that went over the edge of the known world. The subject matter of his fantasy and horror stories—snake priestesses, voodoo, vampires, ritual sacrifice, elixirs of life, predestination, metempsychosis, reincarnation—will be new to many of Woolrich's readers. But the treatment, the uniquely human touches, the awesome power to make our flesh prickle, the subordination of all else to what Woolrich called the line of suspense, these aspects are carried over intact from his mainstream crime fiction. As Barry N. Malzberg rightly points out in his Afterword to this collection, the master's touch permeates all of his work without regard to technical categories which ultimately are meaningless.

Some of these stories have been previously reprinted in anthologies and collections which are now priceless rarities; others, like "Kiss of the Cobra" and "I'm Dangerous Tonight," have never been in any book before. Two were adapted into hour-long films for television drama series during the 1960s: "Papa Benjamin" was broadcast as an episode of Boris Karloff's *Thriller* (1961), with John Ireland as the doomed musician, and "Jane Brown's Body" in a stupidly rewritten version became an episode of the short-lived British series *Journey to the Unknown* (1968). But rare or familiar as individual stories might be, their collection in one volume demonstrates that even if he'd never written a word of pure suspense fiction Woolrich would have been a fantasy-and-horror author of high quality.

This is the world that Cornell Woolrich made, these are the shadows he transmuted into dark poetry. Trapped in the most wretched psychological environment and gifted or cursed with an understanding of his own and all people's trappedness, he took his decades of wretched solitude and shaped them into a body of work that will haunt our descendants as it haunted our forebears. He tried to escape the spectre of Anahuac, and he couldn't, and he couldn't, and he couldn't. But the world he imagined, will.

THE FANTASTIC STORIES OF
CORNELL WOOLRICH

KISS OF THE COBRA



MARY'S old man, after six years of office-managing for a tire company in India, comes heading back with a brand-new wife. He breaks it to us in a telegram first and then makes a bee-line for the place we've

taken up in the hills beyond San Bernardino. It seems he wants to show her to us.

My boss has been whiter than snow to me. I'm on leave-of-absence with pay, and that's how we happen to be there.

When I had dragged myself in, a few weeks before, to report for duty after a tussle with the flu, I was down to 130, stripped, and saw spots in front of my eyes. He took one look at me and started swearing. "Get out of here!" he hollered. "Go 'way back someplace and sit down for six weeks. I'll see that you get your checks. It gives me the shivers to look at you!" When I tried to thank him he reached for his inkwell, maybe just to sign some report, but I didn't wait to find out.

So we hauled two centuries out of the bank, took the kid-brother with us, and wound up in this dead-end up in the San Benny mountains. It hasn't even electric lights, but it isn't so bad at that. You can't quite hear the caterpillars drop. So there we are now, the three of us. Mary and me and the kid-brother, waiting for her old man to show up.

He drives up around eight in the evening, smack off the boat, in a car he's hired down in L. A. He's brought her with him. She gets out and comes up to the house on his arm, while the driver starts unloading half of Asia behind them. He comes in grinning all over and shakes hands with the three of us. "This is Veda," he says.

"Where'd she ever get that name?" I think to myself.

She's a slinky sort of person, no angles at all; and magnetic—you can't take your eyes off her. She's dressed like a Westerner, but her eyes have a slant to them. They are the eyes of an Easterner. She doesn't walk like our women do, she seems to writhe all in one piece—undulates is the word.

She's smoking a ten-inch Russian cigarette, and when I touch her hand the sensation I get is of something cold wriggling in my grasp—like an eel. I can't help it, the skin on the back of my own hand crawls a little. I try to tell myself that anyone's handshake would feel like that after a drive in the open on a raw, damp night like this. But I can tell Mary doesn't like her either. She acts a little afraid of her without knowing why, and I have never known Mary to be afraid of anything in her life before. Mary keeps blinking her eyes rapidly, but she welcomes her just the same and takes her upstairs to show her her room. A peculiar odor of musk stays behind in the room after she's gone.

I go out to the pantry and I find the kid brother helping himself to a stiff nip. "The rain is bringing things up out of the ground," he mutters.

Kids don't finish growing until they're twenty-five, so I kick him in the shins, take it away from him, and kill it myself, so as not to cheat him out of an extra half inch or so. "What's your trouble?" I snap.

"She's Eurasian," he scowls, staring down at the floor. "Something mixed like that." He's been to college and I haven't, so he has me there. "Tough on sis," he says. "Damn it, I would have preferred some little digger with a pickax and baby-blue eyes. There's something musty, something creepy about her. *Brrh!*"

Me too, but I won't give in to him. "It's the house, it's been shut up all summer." And we look at each other and we know I'm lying.

All kinds of trunks, boxes, crates come in and go up to her room, the driver is paid off and takes the car back to L. A., and the five of us are left alone now in the house.

WHEN she comes down to supper I don't like her any better; in fact, a hell of a lot less. She's put on a shiny dress, all fish-

scales, like this was still India or the boat. On her head she's put a sort of beaded cap that fits close—like a hood. A mottled green-and-black thing that gleams dully in the candlelight. Not a hair shows below it, you can't tell whether she's a woman or what the devil she is. Right in front, above her forehead, there's a sort of question-mark worked into it, in darker beads. You can't be sure what it is, but it's shaped like a questionmark.

Then, when we all sit down and I happen to notice how she's sitting, all the short hairs on the back of my neck stand up. She's sort of coiled around in her chair, like there were yards and yards of her. One arm is looped sinuously around the back of the chair, like she was hanging from it, and when I pretend to drop my napkin and look under the table, I see both her feet twined around a single chair-leg instead of being flat on the floor. But I tell myself, "What the hell, they probably sit different in India than we do," and let it go at that.

Then, when Mary slaps around the soup-plates I get another jar. We're none of us very refined and we all bend our heads low over the soup, so as not to miss any of it. But when I happen to look up and take a gander at her, her head is down lower than anyone else's with that damn flat hood on it, and I get a sudden horrible impression, for a minute, of a long black-and-green snake sipping water down by the edge of a river or pool. I shake my head to clear it and keep from jumping back, and tell myself that that nip I had in the pantry just before dinner was no good. Wait'll I get hold of that guy in San Benny for selling me stuff like that!

O.K. Supper's over and Mary tickles the dishes, and then we light a log fire in the fireplace and we sit around. At ten Mary goes up to bed; she can't stand that damn Indian perfume or whatever it is. Vin, that's the kid-brother, and I stick around a little longer sipping port and listening to the old man jaw about India, and I keep watching Veda.

She's facing the fire, still in that coiled-up position. She's sort of torpid, she hasn't moved for hours, but her eyes glitter like shoe-buttons in the light of the flames. There's something so reptilian about her that I keep fighting back an impulse to grab up a long stick, a fire-iron, anything at all, and batter and whack at her sitting over there.

It scares me and I sweat down the back—God, I must be going screwy! It's my father-in-law's wife, it's a woman, and me thinking things like that! But you can't see the lines of her body at all, they're lost in a thick, double coil, the top one formed by her hip, the lower one by her calf, and then that flat, hooded head of hers rising in the middle of it and brooding into the fire with its basilisk eyes.

After a long time, she moves, but it only adds to the horrid impression that I can't seem to get rid of. I'm watching her very closely and she evidently doesn't know it. But what I see is this: she sort of arches her neck, which is long and thin anyway, so that her head comes up a little higher. She holds it for a minute, reared like that, and then she lets it sink back again between her shoulder blades. So help me God, if it isn't like a snake peering out from some tall grass to see what's what!

She repeats it again a little while later, and then a third time. Vin and the old man don't see it at all, and it's barely noticeable anyway. Just like a person easing a stiff neck by stretching it. Only she does it in a sort of rounded way, almost a spiral way. But maybe it's just a nervous habit, I try to tell myself, and what's the matter with me anyway? If this keeps up, I'm a son of a so-and-so if I don't go in and see a doctor tomorrow.

I LOOK at the wall clock and it's five to eleven, late for the mountains, so I give Vin the eye to clear, to give the newlyweds a break alone together by the fire. Meanwhile a big orange moon has come up late and everything is as still as death for miles around, not even a mountain owl's hoot, as if the whole set-up was just waiting for something to happen.

The kid and I get up and say goodnight, and, fire or no fire, her hand isn't any warmer than before, so I let go of it in a hurry. Vin goes right up but I take a minute off to lock up the windows and the door. Then, as I'm climbing, I glance around at them. They've moved closer together and the dying fire throws their shadows on the wall behind them. The old man's head looks just like what it should, but hers is flat, spade-shaped, you almost expect to see a forked tongue come

darting in and out. She's moving a little and I see what she's doing, she's rouging her lips. I give a deep sigh of relief and it takes such a load off my mind to find out she's just a regular woman after all, that I stop there for a minute and forget to go on.

Then she takes something out of the little bag she has with her and offers it to him. It's one of those long reefers she seems partial to. She also takes one herself. "Cigarette," she murmurs silkily, "before we go up?" She says it in such a soft voice it almost sounds like a hiss.

I know I have no business watching, so I soft-shoe it the rest of the way up and go about my business. Only five minutes go by, less than that even, and I hear a rustling and a swishing in the upstairs hall and that's her going to her room—by herself. You don't hear any footsteps when she walks, just a soft sound that scaly dress of hers makes when it drags along the floor.

Her door closes and goodnight to her, I say to myself; and I think I wouldn't want to be in Mary's father's shoes for all the rice in China. Then, as I come out of the bathroom with my toothbrush in my hand, I hear the old man's step starting up the stairs from the floor below and I wait there out in the hall to have a last word with him.

HE comes up slow, he's breathing kind of hard, sounds like sandpaper rubbing on concrete, and then when he gets half-way to where the landing is, he hesitates. Then he comes on a step or two more, stops again, and then there's a soft *plop* like something heavy falling. Right after that the woodwork starts to creak and snap a lot, as if somebody was wrestling on it. I don't wait to listen to any more, I throw my toothbrush away and I chase to the end of the hall. When I look down, I gasp in surprise.

He's lying flat on his back on the staircase landing between the two floors, and he's threshing about and squirming horribly, as if he's in convulsions. The agonized movement of his body is what's making the woodwork creak like that. Something seems to be jerking him all over, his arms and legs will stiffen to their full length and then contract again like cork-

screws. His tongue's sticking all the way out of his mouth, and saliva or foam or something is bubbling around it. His eyes are glazed over.

One jump brings me down to where he is, and I lift his head and get it off the floor. As I do so, his whole face begins to blacken in my hands. There is one last hideous upheaval, as if I was trying to hold down a wild animal, and then everything stops. There's not a twitch left in his whole body after that.

Vin's heard the racket and he comes tearing out of his room.

"Whiskey," I pant. "Don't know what it is, gotta bring him to!" But there isn't any bringing to. Before the kid can sprint down past me and then up again with it he's stiff as a board in my arms, I'm holding a lead weight, with a color that matches.

The blackness has spread all over his body like lightning and shows up in the veins in his throat and on his wrists, as if ink had been poured into his arteries. Nothing to be done, he isn't breathing. We pour the whiskey into his open mouth, but when we tilt his head to make it go down it comes right back again.

I pass him to Vin and get out from under and go down and take a miniature Keeley cure right then and there. It isn't because he's Mary's old man or because it happened right in my arms, it's those terrific spasms and that blackness that have gotten me. I get over it in a minute and we bring him down off the landing between us and lay him out. Then I let the kid have a double bracer and the hell with his extra growth.

WE LOOK at him lying there on the divan, stiff, as a ramrod, and I try to flex his arms and legs. A peculiar muscular rigidity has already set in all over, even in those few minutes. I'm no medical student but I know it can't be *rigor mortis* that soon. This is the United States, but this was an unrecognizable death, a sudden, thrashing, black, tropical death—here in the States.

"Get your hat," I say to Vin, "and thumb yourself down into

town and bring back the medical expert. Damn this place anyway for not having a telephone!" I push him out the door.

Now, there are only four of us left in the house, two of them women and one a dead man, and the moon's peeping in at all the windows and filling the place with black shadows. From the minute the kid's dogs have left the wooden porch, you don't hear another sound outside, not the snapping of a twig, not the rustling of a dry leaf.

I'm not scared of stiffs. That's because of the unpleasant business I'm in. I cover his face to hide the blackness and then I pull down all the shades to keep the nosey moon out.

Then, as I start up the stairs to break the news to Mary, I see a thread hanging, moving in the air above the landing where he fell. It shows up against the light shining down from the upstairs hall, and that's how I happen to notice it.

It's a cigarette burning itself out where he dropped it when he fell. It's the same one she gave him when I left them before the fire. I said those Russian ones are long, it's lasted all this while, as long as a cigar would. There's still an inch or two left of it, there's still a dab of unburned tobacco in it; and the end, the mouthpart, is still intact. That's all that matters, so I pinch it out and wrap it in my handkerchief.

After I've told Mary and persuaded her it's better if she doesn't go down and look at him, I knock on the other door across the hall, *her* door. No answer. So I open it and I go in. Not there. She must have gone downstairs while I was in Mary's room just now.

The air is loaded with that sticky musk smell that follows her wherever she goes. It's even worse up here though. Downstairs, it was more like a perfume; up here it's rank, fetid. It recalls stagnant, green pools and lush, slimy, decaying vegetation.

On the dresser, she has a lot of exotic scents and lotions in bottles, the same as any other woman would, the only difference being that hers hail from India. Sandalwood, attar of roses—but one of them's just ordinary everyday liquid mucilage mixed in with the others. No label on it, but my nose tells me this—and my fingertips, when I try it. I even take a pretty good-sized chance and test it on the tip of my tongue.

Just mucilage. Anyone that's ever sealed an envelope or licked a stamp knows the taste. I wonder what it's doing there among those other things, but I put it back.

In the drawer, I come across a box of those extra-long cigarettes of hers, and I help myself to two or three just to see how they'll stack up against chemical analysis. She has some other peculiar junk hanging around too, that I can't make head or tail of. I know what it is all right, but I can't figure what she's doing with it.

First off, she has a cake of that stuff they call camphor ice—in a tin box. It freezes the skin, closes up the pores, is supposed to be good for chapped hands or something. But, since when do they have chapped hands in India? All right, I argue to myself, maybe she brought it with her to guard against the colder climate over here, and I put that back too.

Then there's a funny little Indian contraption of wood about the size of a cup and saucer, which looks like a baby-sized pestle and mortar. The hollow part of it is all smeared red, like she was in the habit of pounding out and mixing her own rouge instead of buying it ready-made. Well, maybe they do that in India too.

Next I come across a hell of a whole lot of flannel. At first I think it is bandage, but there is too much of it for that. So the best I can figure she makes her undies out of it.

So much for the dresser, and I haven't gotten anywhere much. She has a lot of trunks, bags, boxes, etc., ranged around the room—all the stuff that I saw the driver unload from the car when she and the old man got here. One of the biggest pieces has a cover draped over it.

WHEN I yank this off, lo and behold, a chicken-coop! Not only that, but the peculiar rank smell I've mentioned seems to come stronger from there than anywhere else. It nearly throws me over when I try to go near it. So she keeps pets, does she? I get up close to the thing and try to peer down into it between two of the slats, and I can't see a thing, there's a very close wire mesh on the inside. There's something alive in it though, all right, because while I'm standing there with my face up against it, I hear the wire netting sing out. The wing of a chicken must have brushed against it.

I *cluck* a little at it. No answering *cluck*. I shift it around a little and shake it up a little to try to get a peep out of them—it must be more than one chicken, one chicken couldn't smell that strong—and the wire sings out plenty, *zing, zing, zing*.

I go around on the other side of it and and I spot a saucer of milk standing there on the floor next to it. One of the slats on that side is hinged, so that it can be opened up just about six inches from the floor. I reach down and I put my hand on it and I'm just fixing to lift it, then I think: "The hell with her and her chickens, I'd better go down and find out what she's up to instead of wasting my time up here." So I ease out of the room and go downstairs.

She's down there with the body. I stop and watch her for a minute from the stairs. She's uncovered his face and she's groveling upon him—sort of twined about him. Her face is hidden against him as if she was trying to burrow her way into his clothes and she couldn't have got any closer if she tried. Maybe it's just the Oriental mode of displaying grief, but I have my doubts. There's something pathological in this, that creature is less than human—or thinks she is.

Something snaps in me. "Don't coil up on him like that!" I bark at her. "You're like a damn snake nesting on something it's killed!"

She untwines slowly and raises her head and turns it my way, and a ghoulish smile flickers on her face. Maybe I just imagine that, for it's dark in the room.

There's a pounding outside at the door and Vin has come back with the medical expert and a policeman. There's a motorcycle throbbing against a tree out there, and it's the friendliest sound I've heard in twenty-eight years. They've parked the ambulance as close to the house as they can get it, which is about half a mile down the dirt road which gives up at about that point.

"So what's the riot?" says the medical guy. "This kid comes tearing in on a Ford without brakes, which he stole from a Jap farmer, and knocks over one of the lamp posts outside headquarters—"

"That was the only way I could stop it," explains Vin.

"Stole ain't the word," I squelch the hick. "I'm Lawton of the L. A. homicide bureau, and since he was deputizing for

me, you call that commandeering. I want an autopsy from you."

"When'd it happen?"

"Five after eleven."

He goes over and he fumbles around a little, then he straightens up and his mouth is an O. "P. M., huh?"

"Not last year and not last week, eleven tonight!" I snap.

"Never saw anything like it," he mutters. "Stiff as a board and all black like that! You're gonna get your autopsy, mister."

"And make it gilt-edged, too."

There's a rustling on the stairs and we all look upward. Veda's on her way back to her room, with that damn long dress of hers trailing after her up the steps like a wriggling tail.

"Who's the spook?" asks the examiner.

"We're coming to her. First, the autopsy," I tell him. "Don't put it off, I want it right away—as soon as you get back with him!"

The driver comes in with a rubber sheet and he and the cop carry the old man out between them.

"Turn these over for me too," I say, "and get me a chemical analysis on them," and I pass him the butts I swiped in her room and the one the old man was smoking on the stairs when he fell. "And make room for my wife on the front seat, I'm sending her in with you."

He gives me a surprised look. "You sure you want her to ride with us on a death car like that?"

"One sure thing, she's not staying another minute in this house, not while I know it. Wait, I'll bring her right down!"

I GO up to get her, and I find her in the hall shivering and pop-eyed. She's standing outside Veda's door bent over at the keyhole like she was rooted to the spot. But as soon as she sees me she comes running to me and goes into a clinch and hides her head on my shoulder and starts bawling and shaking all over. "Charlie, I'm afraid to stay here! That awful woman, that awful heathen woman in there, she's possessed of the devil."

I lead her downstairs and out, and walk her down the road to where the car is, and on the way she tells me about it. "It's

enough to make your hair stand on end," she whispers. "Such awful goings-on in there."

"All right," I say soothingly, "tell Charlie about it, Charlie'll know if it's bad or not."

"I heard the gentlemen come downstairs," she says, "so I got up to come down and make them a cup of coffee. As I was going past her door, I heard funny sounds from there. I'm only a woman after all, so I stopped and took a look through the keyhole. And after that I couldn't move from there. I was held there against my will, until you came along. Charlie, she was *dancing*—all by herself and in such a weird way, and it kept getting worse all the time. She kept getting nearer and nearer the door, until I think she would have caught me there if you hadn't come. She seemed to *know* someone was outside her door, and she kept her eyes on it. I couldn't budge!"

I know she isn't exaggerating, because I, myself, noticed a sort of magnetism or mild hypnotism about this Veda from the minute she came in the house. "What kind of a dance was she doing?" I ask her.

"First, she was just standing in one place and just wriggling back and forth and curving in and out like she didn't have any spine at all. She still had on that horrible, glittery dress clinging to her like a wet glove and that ugly hood on her head, and she kept making a hissing noise and sticking her tongue in and out like she was tasting something. But then, afterwards, it got even worse than that. All of a sudden she went down on the floor in a heap and began crawling around on her stomach and switching her legs from side to side, like she was a fish or mermaid got stranded outside of the water—"

"Or a snake?" I put in.

She grabs my arm. "That's it, that's it! Now I know what she reminded me of! Every once in awhile she'd lift her head off the floor and raise it up and look around, and then she'd drop it back again. Then, finally, she squirms over to a little saucer of milk standing next to a big packing case and she starts drinking from it, but just with her tongue, without using her hands at all."

"O.K., Toots, get in, you're going to town."

"Charlie, I think you'd better notify the state asylum," she

whispers. "I think his death has made her lose her mind. She must really think she's a snake."

This is putting it so mild that I have a hard time not laughing right in her face. That creature lurking back there in the house doesn't only think she's a snake; for all practical purposes, she is one. I don't mean in the slang sense, either. She is subhuman, some sort of monstrosity or freak that India has bred just once in all its thousands of years of history.

Now, there are two possibilities as I see it. She is what she is, either of her own free will—maybe a member of some ghastly snake-worshipping cult—or without being able to control herself. Maybe her mother had some unspeakable experience with a snake before she was born. In either case she's more than a menace to society, she's a menace to the race itself.

As for Mary's tip about the asylum, what's the sense? She could beat an insanity rap too easily. The strangeness of her ways, the far country she comes from, would be points in her favor. It would be a cinch for her to pass off the exhibition Mary saw through the keyhole as just an Asiatic way of showing grief for the departed. And even if I could get her booked in an institution, look what I'd have on my conscience unloading her on a bunch of poor harmless nuts clipping paper dolls! She'd depopulate the place in a week. No, I tell myself, if I can only get the goods on her for the old man's death, she goes up for first-degree murder without any fancy insanity trimmings. The rope's the only sure cure for what's the matter with her.

So far, I haven't got a thing, no motive and not even any evidence and won't have until that damned medical examiner reports to me. The law being what it is, a person's innocent until you can prove him guilty. I can't prove her guilty just because I don't like how she dresses, how she hisses when she talks, how her room smells, and how she drinks milk off the floor.

I go back to the house alone. The moon's on the late shift, and now there are only three of us there—one of them's a kid of twenty who's just goofy enough to fall for this exotic vamp of death.

My footsteps don't make any noise on the dirt road, and, as I come up on the porch the living-room windows are orange from the fire going inside. I look in through one of them and I see her and the kid there in the room. He's standing there motionless, as if fascinated, and she's coiled up next to him and I see one of her white arms creeping, wavering like a vine up his coat sleeve. I freeze all over with dread. Their heads start coming closer together, slowly, very slowly, and in another minute their lips will meet.

Maybe this first kiss won't hurt him any, but I'm not in the mood to take a chance; I'd rather see him kissing poison ivy. Her head starts to weave a little and her neck lengthens in that old familiar movement. It's the almost hypnotic slowness of the thing that gives me a chance to do something about it. I nearly take the front door off its hinges and before they can even turn their heads to look, I've split them wide apart with my shoulder for a wedge.

They each react differently. He flops back, and I can tell the build-up she has given him has already taken effect, because he turns sore. Maybe he's ashamed too. She sinks back into a sort of coiled watchfulness and tries to look very innocent and harmless. She wets her lips a little.

"Watch what you're doing!" he shouts wrathfully, and before I can get out of the way, *wham*, right below the ear! I go down holding onto my jaw and I feel rotten, not from the blow either. Something tells me he's a goner, unless I can reason with him. If he won't listen to me nothing can save him. "Vin, for Pete's sake, you don't know what you're up against!"

"In the East," she lisps, "a kiss means only friendship, peace." But the look she squirts at me would drop an ox.

"Your kind of kiss means death, East or West!" Maybe I shouldn't show my hand like that, but my busting in has told her enough already. She goes slinking up the stairs like a noisome reptile crawling back into its hole.

"You let up on her!" the kid blusters. "You're all wrong! Being a detective has gone to your head! She told me herself you suspect her of all kinds of God-awful stuff. She didn't have anything to gain from the old guy's cashing in!"

I pick myself up and brush myself off. "No? Not much!"

He points at the fireplace. "Know what she just did before

you got here? She brings down a codicil to the old guy's will, that he signed on the boat coming over, and shows it to me—makes me read it. It cut her in on his estate instead of leaving it to me and your wife, Mary. It was done against her wishes, as a wedding present to her. Then she throws it in the fire. She don't want his money, especially when there's suspicion attached to her!"

Damn clever! I swear softly to myself. Not that I believe for a minute that she isn't interested in the old guy's money. She isn't throwing it away that easy. Probably it was only a carbon-copy and the original's put away in a safe place. But, this way, she's given herself an out; gypped me out of my motive. If I jump on her now, I can't produce any—and without one where am I?

A money motive will stack up stronger in a criminal court of justice than any other you can dig up. It's liable to make an innocent person guilty in the minds of any twelve people in a jury box, I don't care who they are. If you can't produce one you may as well turn your defendant loose unless you can show them newsreel films of the crime in the act of being committed!

Veda was a pushover for a deaf, dumb and blind defense attorney now, if I dared haul her up. As a matter of fact, now that the original will was the only one left in circulation, a much stronger motive could be pinned on Mary and the kid than on her, and there was nothing to prevent the defense boomeranging and trying to show that it was to their interest to get the old guy out of the way *before* he changed his will and dished them out of it in favor of this stranger from the East. There wouldn't be much danger of its going any further than that, but at least it would free her—and then woe betide California, Oregon, Washington, while she roamed the Pacific Coast jacking up the death rate!

"So now," the kid says bitterly, "why don't you get smart to yourself, y'would-be gumshoer, and lay off her! Strain a muscle and act chivalrous even if it ain't in you!"

I CLOSE my eyes to shut out what I see coming to him. Is he sold on her! Has she got what it takes to catch 'em young and brand 'em! He's doomed if I don't break this thing up in a

hurry. It may be puppy love to him, but what has he got that she wants? She don't want anything from him but his life! She would probably have picked on me instead, only she knows I'm on to her, can tell I don't trust her. The resistance ratio would be too high. Maybe guys in their prime aren't her meat; she only works on the old and the young.

What the hell can I do? I can't drive him out of the house at the point of my gun and make him stay away from her. He'd probably throw a rock at me the minute my back was turned and come right in again the back way. "All right, Sir Galahad," I tell him sadly, "have it your way."

"Aw, go to hell!" he says, and bangs out of the house to kick around among the trees outside and blow off steam. I do too. I smash last night's empty whiskey bottle across the room, then I just sit down and wait. The old man never died a natural death, and my hands are tied. It hurts where I ought to have pleasure!

The moon chokes down out of sight, it gets light, and at six there's a lot of commotion and backfiring outside and the San Benny medical expert is back with his report. No cop with him this time I notice, which doesn't look encouraging. I can hardly wait for him to get in the house. I almost haul him in by the collar. The kid looks up scornfully, I notice, then goes ahead scuffling pebbles with the point of his shoe out there.

"All right, what's the ticket? Hurry up!" I fire at the examiner.

"I been up all night," he says. "I been working like a machine. I wouldn't do this for my own mother." He has a baffled air about him. "I'm out of my depth," he admits.

"I ain't interested in your swimming ability. I wanna know about that stiff and those cigarettes. What'd you find?"

"Well, we'll tackle the butts first. They're out. I had the tobacco and the paper analyzed, triple-ply. No narcotic, not dipped or impregnated in any poisonous solution—absolutely nothing wrong anywhere."

"Wa-a-ait a minute, wa-a-ait a minute now!" I haul up short. "I got eyes. What was that brownish stain on the mouthpiece of the one he'd smoked? Don't try to hand me it was nicotine discoloring the paper, either, because it didn't

run all the way around the tip. It was just in one place and one only!"

"That," he explains, "was a dot of dried blood. He'd torn his lip there in smoking the cigarette. Too dry. Often happens."

"O.K.," I say disappointedly, "let's get on with it. What are you putting down in your report as the direct cause?"

"Paralysis of the nerve centers." He takes a turn or two around the room. "But there was no rhyme or reason for it. It wasn't a stroke, it wasn't apoplexy, it wasn't the bubonic plague—"

Through the window just then, I see the kid look up at the upper part of the house, as though a pebble or something fell near him and attracted his attention. But I'm too interested in what we're talking about to give him much thought right then. He sort of smiles in a goofy way.

I turn back to the examiner. "Then you can't tell me anything? You're a big help!"

"I can't give you any more facts than those. And since it's my business to give you facts and not theories, I'll shut up."

"The pig's aunt you will!" I blaze. "You'll give me whatever you've got whether you can back it up or not."

"Well, this is off the record then. I'd be laughed at from here to Frisco and back. But the only close parallel to the symptoms of that corpse, the only similarity to the condition of the blood stream and to the bodily rigidity and distortion I've ever found, was in bodies I used to see every once in awhile along the sides of the roads, years ago, when I was a young medical student out in India, Java, and the Malay States."

"Write a book about it!" I think impatiently. "And what stopped 'em?" I hurry him up. It's like pulling teeth to get anything out of this guy.

"The bite of a cobra," he says in a low voice.

THE front door inches open and the kid sidles back in the house and tracks up the stairs sort of noiseless and self-effacing like he didn't want to attract attention. He's been up all night, and I figure he's going to bed and don't even turn my head and look around at him. Besides, I've finally got something out of this guy, and it chimes in with what's been in the

back of my mind ever since she first showed up here, and I'm too excited right then to think of anything else.

"Then what's holding you up?" I holler out excitedly. "Put it down in your report, that's all I need! If you ain't sure of the species, just say 'poisonous snake bite.' What are you waiting for? You want me to catch the thing and stuff it for you before you'll go ahead? I'll produce it for you all right!"

I remember those "chickens" of hers in that crate with the wire netting—upstairs in her room at this very minute. Chickens, me eye! And a couple of hours after I should have thought of it, I realize that chickens don't drink milk, they peck corn.

"And when I do produce it, the findings aren't going to be 'accidental death.' The charge is going to be murder in the first degree—with a cobra for a weapon."

Whereupon, he goes and throws cold water all over me. "You can produce dozens of 'em," he tells me, shaking his head. "You can empty the whole zoo into this house, and I still can't put anything like that into my report."

I nearly have pups all over the carpet. "Why? For Pete's sake, why?"

"Because, for anyone to die of snake bite, there has to be a bite—first of all. The fangs of any snake would leave a puncture, a livid mark, a zone of discoloration. What do you suppose my assistant and I were doing all night, sitting playing rummy? I tell you we went over every inch of body surface with the highest-powered microscopes available. There wasn't a blemish. Absolutely no place anywhere into which the venom could have been injected."

I throw all the possibilities that occur to me at him one after the other. I'm not a trained doc, remember. Anyway, he squelches them as fast as they come. "When you examined the blood stream, or what was left of it, weren't there heavier traces of this stuff in some parts than others? Couldn't you track it down from there?"

"It's very volatile. It diffuses itself all over the system, like lightning, once it's in. Does away with itself as a specific. It's not a blood poison, it's a nerve poison. You can tell it's there by the effects rather than by the cause."

"How about a hypodermic needle?"

"That would have left a swelling—and a puncture too; even if smaller than the snake's fangs, even if invisible to the naked eye."

"How about internally?"

"It doesn't kill internally. We analyzed the contents of his stomach. Nothing foreign there, nothing harmful."

I move the position of one of the chairs in the room rather suddenly—with my foot. "What a temper," he says reproachfully.

"Maybe I've stuck too close to the village green," I let him know. "maybe I should have had L. A. in on this."

"Suit yourself. But, if you go over our heads like that, you better have a direct accusation ready—and be able to back it up. I can't support you if it comes to a showdown. This report'll have to stay the way it is—'paralysis of the nerve centers, of unknown origin'—take it or leave it."

"You take it," I say violently, and I tell him a good place to keep it while I'm at it. "You get L. A. on the wire for me when you go back," I order him as he prepares to leave in a huff, "and have 'em send a squad up here with butterfly nets and insect guns. We're gonna play cops and robbers." And when he takes his departure we don't say goodbye to each other.

I LOCK the front door on the inside and ditto the back door and drop both keys into my pocket. Then I latch all the shutters and fasten down all the windows with a hammer and wedges of wood. She isn't going to get away from here until I've cinched this thing one way or the other, and I've got to be having some sleep soon. I can't hold out forever.

I go upstairs, and there's not a sound around me. It's been light out for a long time now, but the upstairs hallway is still dim, and, at the end of it, where the kid's room is, lamplight is shining through the crack of his door. I thought he was asleep by now, and I get a little worried for a minute but when I tap on it and hear him say, "Come in," I heave a long breath of relief, it's sweet music to my ears.

He's in bed, all right, but he's propped up reading a book, with a cigarette in his mouth. He hasn't noticed it got light and he's forgotten to turn out the lamp. That's all right—I

used to do that too, when I was his age. "Didn't mean to butt in," I say. I figure it's a good time to patch up that little set-to we had downstairs before.

He beats me to the rap. "I'm sorry about what happened before."

"Forget it." I haul up a chair and sit down alongside the bed, and we're all set to bury the hatchet and smoke the pipe of peace. "You got me wrong, that was all." I frisk myself, no results. "Let's have one of your butts."

"I'm out of them myself," he grins.

"Then where'd you get that one?" I get a little uncomfortable for a minute. I give it a quick look. It's just one of the regular-size ones though.

"One of Veda's," he admits. He keeps talking around it without taking it out of his mouth. "I been dragging on it for ages, they last a long time." So that's why it's down to ordinary size! "Now don't go getting all het up again," he says as he sees me change color. "I didn't ask her for it, she offered it to me."

I try to remind myself those butts got a clean bill of health. I try to tell myself that if nothing's happened so far, after he's smoked it all this time—

I can hardly stay still on the chair. I lean forward and watch his face anxiously. He seems perfectly normal. "Feel all right, kid?"

"Never felt better."

Then, I see something that I haven't noticed until now, and I go pins and needles all over. "Wait a minute, whatcha been doing? Where'd ya' get all that red all over your mouth?"

He turns all colors of the rainbow and looks guilty. "Aw, there you go again! All right, she kissed me. So what? I couldn't push her away, could I?"

My heart's pounding in my ears and I can hardly talk. It's too much like the set-up she gave the old man! She was rouging her lips, she was getting set to kiss him when I left them alone, and when I found him he had one of her butts. Still, there's no use losing my head, nothing's happened to the kid so far, and if I frighten him—

I haul out my handkerchief and try to talk slow and easy.

"Here, get it off with this. Get it off easy, don't rub." My wrist is jerking like sixty as I pass it to him, though. "Just sort of smooth it off, keep your tongue away from it."

That's where the mistake happens. To do it he has to get the cigarette out of the way. He touches it, he parts his lips. It goes with the upper one! It's adhered, just like the old man's!

He flips it out, there isn't time for me to stop him, he winches and he says "Ow!"

I'm on my feet like a shot. "What'd you do?"

"Caught my lip on it," he says and tosses it down angrily. He's out of bed before he knows what's happened to him and I've flung him halfway across the room to the door. "Bathroom, quick!" I pant. "One of my razor blades—cut it wide open, split it to the gums if you have to, bleed like a pig, it's your only chance!"

HE does it, he must read death on my face, for once he doesn't argue. I don't go with him, can't. I'm shaking so, I'd cut his throat. The water gives a roar into the washbasin, he lets out a yell of pain, and he's done it.

Second mistake. Opening it up like that only gives all the red stuff a chance to get in. He's young, maybe he could have fought off the smaller amount that would have penetrated through the original slit. Too late, the examiner's words come back to me: "It isn't a blood poison, it's a nerve poison. Letting the blood out won't help, it isn't rattlesnake venom." I've finished him!

He's back in the doorway, white as a sheet. Blood's pouring down his chin and the front of his pajamas look like he'd had a nosebleed. It isn't a nosebleed; he's opened the cleft of his lip to the nostrils. It's started in already though, the poison; it's on him already, and he doesn't know what it is.

"What'd you make me do that for, I feel—" He tries to get to me and totters. Then I guess he knows what it is—for just one minute he knows what it is—that's all the time has to know it in.

I get him onto the bed—that's all I can do for him—and the rest of it happens there. He just says one thing more, "Don't let me, will you? Charlie, I dowanna die!" in a voice like a

worn-out record running down under a scratchy needle. After that, he's not recognizable as anything human any more.

I can't do anything for him, so I just turn my face to the wall and shut out the rustling with my hands clapped to my ears. "Charlie, I dowanna die!" He isn't saying it any more, it's over all ready, but it goes on and on. For years I'll probably hear it.

After awhile I cover him over without looking and I go to my own room. I've got a job to do—a job no one but me can do. While I'm in there there's a sort of fluttery sound for a minute outside, as though something whisked itself along the hall and down the stairs just then. That's all right. I took care of the doors and windows before I came up. "Charlie, I dowanna die!" No, no insanity plea. Not this time—that's too easy. An asylum's too good.

I get my gun out of the closet where it's been since we came here, and I break it. Two slugs in it. Two are enough. I crack it shut again and shove it on my hip. Then I take a long pole that's standing in a corner, the handle of a floor-mop or something, and I go across the hall to her room. She's pounding on the door downstairs. I can hear her shaking it, clawing at it, trying to get out of the house. She can wait.

I shift the chicken coop around so it faces my way, and *zing, zing, zing*, goes the wire netting. Then I step back and prod the hinged slat open with the end of the long pole. Then I dig the pole into the bedclothes and loosen them up. There's no wire mesh over the place that the one movable slat covers. There's sort of a wicket left in it there, and out through that wicket comes the hooded head, the slow, coiling, glistening length of one of the world's deadly things, the king cobra of India! I see Veda's twin before my dilating eyes. The same scaly, gleaming covering; even the same marking like a question-mark on its hood! Endless lengths of it come out, like gigantic black-and-green toothpaste out of a squeezed tube, and I want to throw up in revulsion. Twelve feet of it—a monster. The story might have ended then, right in the room there—but the thing is torpid, sluggish from the cold climate and its long confinement.

It sees me, standing back across the room from it. Slowly it

rears up, waist high, balancing on tightening coils for the thrust. Quickly the horrid hood swells, fills out with animosity. There's not a sound in the room. I'm not breathing. The pounding and the lunging at the door downstairs has stopped some time ago. And, in the silence, I suddenly know that she's come back into the room with me, that she's standing somewhere right behind me.

I dare not turn around and look; dare not take my eyes off the swaying, dancing funnel of death, before me, for an instant. But I feel a weight suddenly gone from my hip. She's got my gun!

Over my shoulder comes a whisper, "You've locked death into the house with you."

The split second seems to expand itself into an hour. She edges her way along the wall until she comes into my range of vision. But my eyes can't even flicker toward her. I know my own gun's on me. But rather than the other death.

Suddenly, I dip on buckled knees. I heave the long pole out from the bed like a fishing rod. A scarlet blanket and sheet come with it. The sheet drops off on the way, the blanket, heavier, clings to the end. The loathsome, fetid mouth of the thing below it has already gone wide. The blanket falls in swift effacement, covers the monster in stifling folds just as its head has gone back in the last preparatory move.

A fraction of an instant later, there is a lightning lunge against the blanket. A bulge appears there which soon is gone again—where the snake's head struck after its spring. After that, everything is squirming, thrashing, cataleptic movement under the folds as it tries to free itself.

There's a flash of fire from the wall and my hand burns—but if I drop that pole I'm gone. I wield the mop-handle in my bleeding, tortured hand, making it hiss through the air, flattening the blanket under it. It breaks in two under the terrific impacts, but I keep on with the short end of it until there's no life under that blanket any more. Even then I step on the mess and grind and stamp with my steel-rimmed heels until the blanket discolours in places.

Veda stands there against the wall, the smoking gun in her hand, moaning: "You have killed a god!" If she really worshipped that thing, her whole world has come to an end. The gun slips from her hand, clatters to the floor. I swoop for it

and get it again. She sinks down to her knees, her back against the wall, very still, looking at me. Her breath is coming very fast, she doesn't betray her feelings in any other way.

Sometimes under the greatest tension, in moments almost of insanity, you can think the clearest. I am almost insane just then. And, in a flash, the whole set-up comes to me, now that it's too late, now that the old man and the kid are gone. That lunge at the blanket just now has told me the whole story. The thick flannel I found in her drawer!

She held that before the opening in the crate and extracted the venom that way—when the cobra struck. Then she mixed it with her rouge in the little wooden mortar. Then she waxed her lips with camphor ice, freezing the pores tight shut, forming an impervious base for the red stuff. Then she kissed them, smeared them with it, offered them a cigarette to smoke—

They're still there on the dresser, her long, thick-tipped cigarettes. I take a couple out of the box. Then I take the little bottle of mucilage, standing with all the perfumes, and I let a drop of it fall on the end of each cigarette. She did that too—I know that, now.

It dries in no time, but the moisture of the human mouth will dampen it again and cause the paper to stick to the lips. She sees me do all this, and yet she doesn't move, doesn't try to escape. Her god is dead, the fatalism of the East has her in its grip. Almost, I relent. But—"Charlie, I dowanna die!" rings in my ears.

I turn to her. You'd think nothing had happened, you'd think the kid was only asleep back there in his room, the way I talk to her. "Have a cigarette."

She shakes her head and backs away along the wall.

"Better have a cigarette," I say, and I take up the gun and bead it at her forehead. This is no act, and she can tell the difference. I won't even ask her a second time. She takes a cigarette. "What have I done?" she tries to say.

"Nothing," I answer, "nothing that I can prove, or even care to prove any more. Doll up. You have it with you."

SHE smiles a little, maybe fatalistically, or maybe because she still thinks she can outsmart me. She rouges her lips. She

raises the cigarette. But I see the half-curves it makes. "No you don't, not that end. The way it's supposed to be smoked."

She puts the glued end in and I hold the match for her. She can't tell yet about it but the smile goes and her eyes widen with fear.

I light my own—that's glued, too. "I'm going to smoke right along with you; one of these is no different from the other. See, I have a clear conscience; have you?" I'm going to match her, step by step—I want to know just when it happens. I didn't know I could be that cruel, but—"Charlie, I dowanna die!"

She begins by taking quick little puffs, not letting it stay any time in her mouth; and each time she puts it in at a different place. She thinks she'll get around it that way. That's easy to stop. "Keep your hands down. Touch it one more time and I'll shoot."

"Siva!" she moans. I think it is their goddess of death or something. Then to me: "You are going to kill me?"

"No, you are going to kill yourself. You last through that cigarette and you are welcome to your insanity plea when they get here from L. A."

We don't talk any more after that. Slowly the cigarettes burn down. I don't take mine out, either. A dozen times her hands start upward and each time the gun stops them. Time is on my side. She begins to have trouble breathing, not from fear now, from nicotine and burnt paper. Her eyes fill with moisture. Not even an inveterate smoker can consume a ten-inch fag like that without at least a couple of clear breaths between drags.

I can't stand it myself any more and out comes my own, and there's a white-hot sting to my lower lip. She holds on, though, for dear life. So would I, if death was going to be the penalty. I can see her desperately trying to free hers by working the tip of her tongue around the edges. No good. She begins to strangle deep down in her throat, water's pouring out of her eyes. She twists and turns and retches and tries to get a free breath. It's torture, maybe, but so were the thousand red-hot needles piercing that kid's body upstairs—awhile ago.

All at once, a deep groan seems to come all the way up from

her feet. The strangling and the gasping stop and the cigarette is smoldering on the floor. A thread of blood runs down her chin—purer, cleaner than the livid red stuff all around it. I lay the gun down near her and I watch her. Let her make her own choice!

"There is only one more bullet in it," I tell her. "If you think you can stand what's coming, you can pay me back with it."

She knows too well what it's going to be like, so she has no time to waste.

She grabs for the gun and her eyes light up. "I am going, but you are coming with me!" she pants.

She levels my rod at me. Four times she pulls the trigger and four times it clicks harmlessly. The first chamber and the last must have been the loaded ones, and the ones in between were empty.

Now, she has no more time to waste on getting even. The twitching has already set in. She turns the gun on herself.

"Once more will get you out of it," I say, and I turn away.

This time, there's a shattering explosion behind me and something heavy falls like a log. I don't bother looking. I wrap my handkerchief around my throbbing hand and go downstairs to the front door to wait for the men from L. A. to show up. I don't smoke while I'm waiting, either.

Dime Detective, May 1935

DARK MELODY OF MADNESS



AT four in the morning, a scarecrow of a man staggers dazedly into the New Orleans Police Headquarters building. Behind him at the curb a lacquered Bugatti purrs like a drowsy cat, the finest car that ever stood out there. He weaves his way through the ante-room, deserted at that early hour, and goes in through the open doorway beyond. The sleepy desk-sergeant looks up; an idle detective scanning yesterday's *Times-Picayune* on the two hind legs of a chair tipped back against the wall raises his head; and as the funnel of light from the cone-shaped reflector overhead plays up their visitor like flashlight powder, their mouths drop open and their eyes bat a couple of times. The two front legs of the detective's chair come down with a thump. The sergeant braces himself, eager, friendly, with the heels of both hands on his desk-top and his elbows up in the air. A patrolman comes in from the back room, wiping a drink of water from his mouth. His jaw also hangs when he sees who's there. He sidles nearer the detective and says behind the back of his hand, "That's Eddie Bloch, ain't it?"

The detective doesn't take the trouble to answer. It's like telling him what his own name is. The three stare at the figure under the light, interested, respectful, almost admiring. There is nothing professional in their scrutiny, they are not the police studying a suspect; they are nobodies looking at a celebrity. They take in the rumpled tuxedo, the twig of gardenia that has shed its petals, the tie hanging open in two

loose ends. His topcoat was slung across his arm originally; now it trails along the dusty station-house floor behind him. He gives his hat the final, tortured push that dislodges it. It drops and rolls away behind him. The policeman picks it up and brushes it off—he never was a bootlicker in his life, but this man is Eddie Bloch.

Still it's his face, more than who he is or how he's dressed, that would draw stares anywhere. It's the face of a dead man—the face of a dead man on a living body. The shadowy shape of the skull seems to peer through the transparent skin; you can make out its bone-structure as though an X-ray were outlining it. The eyes are stunned, shocked, haunted gleams, set in a vast purple hollow that bisects the face like a mask. No amount of drink or dissipation could do this to anyone, only long illness and the foreknowledge of death. You see faces like that looking up at you from hospital-cots when all hope has been abandoned—when the grave is already waiting.

Yet strangely enough, they knew who he was just now. Instant recognition of who he was came first—realization of the shape he's in comes after that, more slowly. Possibly it's because all three of them have been called on to identify corpses in the morgue in their day. Their minds are trained along those lines. And this man's face is known to hundreds of people. Not that he has ever broken or even fractured the most trivial law, but he has spread happiness around him, set a million feet to dancing in his time.

The desk-sergeant's expression changes. The patrolman mutters under his breath to the detective, "Looks like he just came out of a bad smashup with his car." "More like a drinking-bout, to me," answers the detective. They are simple men, capable within their limitations, but those are the only explanations they can find for what they now see before them.

The desk-sergeant speaks. "Mr. Eddie Bloch, am I right?" He extends his hand across the desk in greeting.

The man can hardly stand up. He nods, he doesn't take the hand.

"Is there anything wrong, Mr. Bloch? Is there anything we can do for you?" The detective and the patrolman come over

closer. "Run in and get him a drink of water, Latour," the sergeant says anxiously. "Have an accident, Mr. Bloch? Been held up?"

The man steadies himself with one arm against the edge of the sergeant's desk. The detective extends an arm behind him, in case he should fall backwards. He keeps fumbling, continually fumbling in his clothes. The tuxedo-jacket swims on him as his movements shift it around. He is down to about a hundred pounds in weight, they notice. Out comes a gun, and he doesn't even have the strength to lift it up. He pushes it and it skids across the desk-top, then spins around and points back at him.

He speaks, and if the unburied dead ever spoke this is the voice they'd use. "I've killed a man. Just now. A little while ago. At half-past three."

They're completely floored. They almost don't know how to handle the situation for a minute. They deal with killers every day, but killers have to be gone out after and dragged in. And when fame and wealth enter into it, as they do once in a great while, fancy lawyers and protective barriers spring up to hedge the killers in on all sides. This man is one of the ten idols of America, or was until just lately. People like him don't kill people. They don't come in out of nowhere at four in the morning and stand before a simple desk-sergeant and a simple detective, stripped to their naked souls, shorn of all resemblance to humanity, almost.

There's silence in the room for a minute, a silence you could cut with a knife. Then he speaks again, in agony. "I tell you I've killed a man! Don't stand there looking at me like that! I've killed a man!"

The sergeant speaks, gently, sympathetically. "What's the matter, Mr. Bloch, been working too hard?" He comes out from behind the desk. "Come on inside with us. You stay here, Latour, and look after the telephone."

And when they've accompanied him into the back room: "Get him a chair, Humphries. Here, drink some of this water, Mr. Bloch. Now what's it all about?" The sergeant has brought the gun along with him. He passes it before his nose, then breaks it open. He looks at the detective. "He's used it all right."

"Was it an accident, Mr. Bloch?" the detective suggests respectfully. The man in the chair shakes his head. He's started to shiver all over, although the New Orleans night is warm and mellow. "Who'd you do it to? Who was it?" the sergeant puts in.

"I don't know his name," Bloch mumbles. "I never have. They call him Papa Benjamin."

His two interrogators exchange a puzzled look. "Sounds like—" The detective doesn't finish it. Instead he turns to the seated figure and asks almost perfunctorily: "He was a white man, of course?"

"He was colored," is the unexpected answer.

The thing gets more crazy, more inexplicable, at every step. How should a man like Eddie Bloch, one of the country's best-known band-leaders, who used to earn a thousand dollars every week for playing at Maxim's, come to kill a nameless colored man—and then be put into this condition by it? These two men have never seen anything like it in their time; they have subjected suspects to forty-eight-hour grillings and yet compared to him now those suspects were fresh as daisies when they got through with them.

He has said it was no accident and he has said it was no hold-up. They shower questions at him, not to confuse him but rather to try to help him pull himself together. "What did he do, forget his place? Talk back to you? Become insolent?" This is the South, remember.

The man's head goes from side to side like a pendulum.

"Did you go out of your mind for a minute? Is that how it was?"

Again a nodded no.

The man's condition has suggested one explanation to the detective's mind. He looks around to make sure the patrolman outside isn't listening. Then very discreetly: "Are you a needle-user, Mr. Bloch? Was he your source?"

The man looks up at them. "I've never touched a thing I shouldn't. A doctor will tell you that in a minute."

"Did he have something on you? Was it blackmail?"

Bloch fumbles some more in his clothes; again they dance around on his skeletonized frame. Suddenly he takes out a cube of money, as thick as it is wide, more money than these

two men have ever seen before in their lives. "There's three thousand dollars there," he says simply and tosses it down like he did the gun. "I took it with me tonight, tried to give it to him. He could have had twice as much, three times as much, if he'd said the word, if he'd only let up on me. He wouldn't take it. That was when I had to kill him. That was all there was left for me to do."

"What was he doing to you?" They both say it together.

"He was killing me." He holds out his arm and shoots his cuff. The wristbone is about the size of the sergeant's own thumb-joint. The expensive platinum wrist watch that encircles it has been pulled in to the last possible notch and yet it still hangs almost like a bracelet. "See? I'm down to 102. When my shirt's off, my heart's so close to the surface you can see the skin right over it move like a pulse with each beat."

They draw back a little, almost they wish he hadn't come in here. That he had headed for some other precinct instead. From the very beginning they have sensed something here that is over their heads, that isn't to be found in any of the instruction-books. Now they come out with it. "How?" Humphries asks. "How was he killing you?"

There's a flare of torment from the man. "Don't you suppose I would have told you long ago, if I could! Don't you suppose I would have come in here weeks ago, months ago, and demanded protection, asked to be saved—if I could have told you what it was? If you would have believed me?"

"We'll believe you, Mr. Bloch," the sergeant says soothingly. "We'll believe anything. Just tell us—"

But Bloch in turn shoots a question at them, for the first time since he has come in. "Answer me! Do you believe in anything you can't see, can't hear, can't touch—?"

"Radio," the sergeant suggests not very brightly, but Humphries answers more frankly: "No."

The man slumps down again in his chair, shrugs apathetically. "If you don't, how can I expect you to believe me? I've been to the biggest doctors, biggest scientists in the world—they wouldn't believe me. How can I expect you to? You'll simply say I'm cracked, and let it go at that. I don't want to spend the rest of my life in an asylum—" He breaks off and sobs. "And yet it's true, it's true!"

They've gotten into such a maze that Humphries decides it's about time to snap out of it. He asks the one simple question that should have been asked long ago, and the hell with all this mumbo-jumbo. "Are you sure you killed him?" The man is broken physically and he's about ready to crack mentally too. The whole thing may be an hallucination.

"I know I did. I'm sure of it," the man answers calmly. "I'm already beginning to feel a little better. I felt it the minute he was gone."

If he is, he doesn't show it. The sergeant catches Humphries' eye and meaningfully taps his forehead in a sly gesture.

"Suppose you take us there and show us," Humphries suggests. "Can you do that? Where'd it happen, at Maxim's?"

"I told you he was colored," Bloch answers reproachfully. Maxim's is tony. "It was in the Vieux Carré. I can show you where, but I can't drive any more. It was all I could do to get down here with my car."

"I'll put Desjardins on it with you," the sergeant says and calls through the door to the patrolman: "Ring Dij and tell him to meet Humphries at the corner of Canal and Royal right away!" He turns and looks at the huddle on the chair. "Buy him a bracer on the way. It don't look like he'll last till he gets there."

The man flushes a little—it would be a blush if he had any blood left in him. "I can't touch alcohol any more. I'm on my last legs. It goes right through me like—" He hangs his head, then raises it again. "But I'll get better now, little by little, now that he's—"

The sergeant takes Humphries out of earshot. "Pushover for a padded cell. If it's on the up-and-up, and not just a pipe dream, call me right back. I'll get the commissioner on the wire."

"At this hour of the night?"

The sergeant motions toward the chair with his head. "He's Eddie Bloch, isn't he?"

Humphries takes him under the elbow, pries him up from the chair. Not roughly, but just briskly, energetically. Now that things are at last getting under way, he knows where he's at; he can handle them. He'll still be considerate, but he's

businesslike now; he's into his routine. "All right, come on, Mr. Bloch, let's get up there."

"Not a scratch goes down on the blotter until I'm sure what I'm doing," the sergeant calls after Humphries. "I don't want this whole town down on my neck tomorrow morning."

Humphries almost has to hold him up on the way out and into the car. "This it?" he says, "wow!" He just touches it with his nail and they're off like velvet. "How'd you ever get this into the Vieux Carré without knocking over the houses?"

Two gleams deep in the skull jogging against the upholstery, dimmer than the dashboard lights, are the only sign that there's life beside him. "Used to park it blocks away—go on foot."

"Oh, you went there more than once?"

"Wouldn't you—to beg for your life?"

More of that screwy stuff, Humphries thinks disgustedly. Why should a man like Eddie Bloch, star of the mike and the dance-floor, go to some colored man in the slums and beg for his life?

Royal Street comes whistling along. He swerves in toward the curb, shoves the door out, sees Desjardins land on the running-board with one foot. Then he veers out into the middle again without even having stopped. Desjardins moves in on the other side of Bloch, finishes dressing by knotting his necktie and buttoning his vest. "Where'd you get the Aquitania?" he wants to know, and then, with a look beside him: "Holy Kreisler, Eddie Bloch! We used to hear you every night on my Emerson—"

"Matter?" Humphries squelches, "Got a talking-jag?"

"Turn," says a hollow sound between them and three wheels take the Bugatti around into North Rampart Street. "Have to leave it here," he says a little later, and they get out. "Congo Square," the old stamping-ground of the slaves.

"Help him," Humphries tells his mate tersely, and they each brace him by an elbow.

Staggering between them with the uneven gait of a punch-drunk pug, quick and then slow by turns, he leads them down a ways, and then suddenly cuts left into an alley that isn't there at all until you're smack in front of it. It's just a crack between two houses, noisome as a sewer. They have to break

into Indian file to get through at all. But Bloch can't fall down; the walls almost scrape both his shoulders at once. One's in front, one behind him.

"You packed?" Humphries calls over his head to Desjardins, up front.

"Catch cold without it," the other's voice comes back out of the gloom.

A slit of orange shows up suddenly from under a window-sill and a shapely coffee-colored elbow scrapes the ribs of the three as they squirm by. "This far 'nough, honey," a liquid voice murmurs.

"Bad girl, wash y'mouth out with soap," the unromantic Humphries warns over his shoulder without even looking around. The sliver of light vanishes as quickly as it came.

The passage widens out in places into mouldering courtyards dating back to French or Spanish colonial days, and once it goes under an archway and becomes a tunnel for a short distance. Desjardins cracks his head and swears with talent and abandon.

"Y'left out—" the rearguard remarks dryly.

"Here," pants Bloch weakly, and stops suddenly at a patch of blackness in the wall. Humphries washes it with his torch and crumbling mildewed stone steps show up inside it. Then he motions Bloch in, but the man hangs back, slips a notch or two lower down against the opposite wall that supports him. "Let me stay down here! Don't make me go up there again," he pleads. "I don't think I can make it any more. I'm afraid to go back in there."

"Oh, no!" Humphries says with quiet determination. "You're showing us," and scoops him away from the wall with his arm. Again, as before, he isn't rough about it, just business-like. Dij keeps the lead, watering the place with his own torch. Humphries trains his on the band-leader's forty-dollar custom-made patent-leather shoes jerking frightenedly upward before him. The stone steps turn to wood ones splintered with usage. They have to step over a huddled black drunk, empty bottle cradled in his arms. "Don't light a match," Dij warns, pinching his nose, "or there'll be an explosion."

"Grow up," snaps Humphries. The Cajun's a good dick, but

can't he realize the man in the middle is roasting in hellfire? This is no time—

"In here is where I did it. I closed the door again after me." Bloch's skull-face is all silver with his life-sweat as one of their torches flicks past it.

Humphries shoves open the sagging mahogany panel that was first hung up when a Louis was still king of France and owned this town. The light of a lamp far across a still, dim room flares up and dances crazily in the draught. They come in and look.

There's an old broken-down bed, filthy with rags. Across it there's a motionless figure, head hanging down toward the floor. Dij cups his hand under it and lifts it. It comes up limply toward him, like a small basketball. It bounces down again when he lets it go—even seems to bob slightly for a second or two after. It's an old, old colored man, up in his eighties, even beyond. There's a dark spot, darker than the weazened skin, just under one bleared eye and another in the thin fringe of white wool that circles the back of the skull.

Humphries doesn't wait to see any more. He turns, flips out and down, and all the way back to wherever the nearest telephone can be found, to let headquarters know that it's true after all and they can rouse the police commissioner. "Keep him there with you, Dij," his voice trails back from the inky stair-well, "and no quizzing. Pull in your horns till we get our orders!" The scarecrow with them tries to stumble after him and get out of the place, groaning, "Don't leave me here! Don't make me stay here—!"

"I wouldn't quiz you on my own, Mr. Bloch," Dij tries to reassure him, nonchalantly sitting down on the edge of the bed next to the corpse and retying his shoelace, "I'll never forget it was your playing *Love in Bloom* on the air one night in Baton Rouge two years ago gave me the courage to propose to my wife—"

But the Commissioner would, and does, in his office a couple hours later. He's anything but eager about it, too. They've tried to shunt him, Bloch, off their hands in every possible legal way open to them. No go. He sticks to them like flypaper. The old colored man *didn't* try to attack him, or rob him, or blackmail him, or kidnap him, or anything else. The

gun didn't go off accidentally, and he didn't fire it on the spur of the moment either, without thinking twice, or in a flare of anger. The Commissioner almost beats his own head against the desk in his exasperation as he reiterates over and over: "But why? Why? Why?" And for the steenth time, he gets the same indigestible answer: "Because he was killing me."

"Then you admit he did lay hands on you?" The first time the poor Commissioner asked this, he said it with a spark of hope. But this is the tenth or twelfth and the spark died out long ago.

"He never once came near me. I was the one looked him up each time to plead him. Commissioner Oliver, tonight I went down on my knees to that old man and dragged myself around the floor of that dirty room after him, on my *bended knees*, like a sick cat—begging, crawling to him, offering him three thousand, ten, any amount, finally offering him my own gun, asking him to shoot me with it, to get it over with quickly, to be kind to me, not to drag it out by inches any longer! No, not even that little bit of mercy! Then I shot—and now I'm going to get better, now I'm going to live—"

He's too weak to cry; crying takes strength. The Commissioner's hair is about ready to stand on end. "Stop it, Mr. Bloch, stop it!" he shouts, and he steps over and grabs him by the shoulder in defense of his own nerves, and can almost feel the shoulder-bone cutting his hand. He takes his hand away again in a hurry. "I'm going to have you examined by an alienist!"

The bundle of bones rears from the chair. "You can't do that! You can't take my mind from me! Send to my hotel—I've got a trunkful of reports on my condition! I've been to the biggest minds in Europe! Can you produce anyone that would dare go against the findings of Buckholtz in Vienna, Reynolds in London? They had me under observation for months at a time! I'm not even on the borderline of insanity, not even a genius or musically talented. I don't even write my own numbers, I'm mediocre, uninspired—in other words completely normal. I'm saner than you are at this minute, Mr. Oliver. My body's gone, my soul's gone, and all I've got left is my mind, but you can't take that from me!"

The Commissioner's face is beet-red. He's about ready for a

stroke, but he speaks softly, persuasively. "An eighty-odd-year-old colored man who is so feeble he can't even go upstairs half the time, who has to have his food pulleyed up to him through the window in a basket, is killing—whom? A white stumble-bum his own age? No-o-o, Mr. Eddie Bloch, the premier bandsman of America, who can name his own price in any town, who's heard every night in all our homes, who has about everything a man can want—that's who!"

He peers close, until their eyes are on a level. His voice is just a silky whisper. "Tell me just one thing, Mr. Bloch." Then like the explosion of a giant firecracker, "How?" He roars it out, booms it out.

There's a long-drawn intake of breath from Eddie Bloch. "By thinking thought-waves of death that reach me through the air."

The poor Commissioner practically goes all to pieces on his own rug. "And you don't need a medical exam!" he wheezes weakly.

There's a flutter, the popping of buttons, and Eddie Bloch's coat, his vest, his shirt, undershirt, land one after another on the floor around his chair. He turns. "Look at my back! You can count every vertebra through the skin!" He turns back again. "Look at my ribs. Look at the pulsing where there's not enough skin left to cover my heart!"

Oliver shuts his eyes and turns toward the window. He's in a particularly unpleasant spot. New Orleans, out there, is stirring, and when it hears about this, he's going to be the most unpopular man in town. On the other hand, if he doesn't see the thing through now that it's gone this far he's guilty of a dereliction of duty, malfeasance in office.

Bloch, slowly dressing, knows what he's thinking. "You want to get rid of me, don't you? You're trying to think of a way of covering this thing up. You're afraid to bring me up before the Grand Jury on account of your own reputation, aren't you?" His voice rises to a scream of panic. "Well, I want protection! I don't want to go out there again—to my death! I won't accept bail! If you turn me loose now, even on my own cognizance, you may be as guilty of my death as he is. How do I know my bullet stopped the thing? How does any of us know what becomes of the mind after death? Maybe his

thoughts will still reach me, still try to get me. I tell you I want to be locked up, I want people around me day and night, I want to be where I'm safe—!"

"Shh, for God's sake, Mr. Bloch! They'll think I'm beating you up—" The Commissioner drops his arms to his sides and heaves a gigantic sigh. "That settles it! I'll book you all right. You want that and you're going to get it! I'll book you for the murder of one Papa Benjamin, even if they laugh me out of office for it!"

For the first time since the whole thing has started, he casts a look of real anger, ill-will, at Eddie Bloch. He seizes a chair, swirls it around, and bangs it down in front of the man. He puts his foot on it and pokes his finger almost in Bloch's eye. "I'm not two-faced. I'm not going to lock you up nice and cozy and then soft-pedal the whole thing. If it's coming out at all, then all of it's coming out. Now start in! Tell me everything I want to know, and what I want to know is—everything!"

THE strains of *Goodnight Ladies* die away; the dancers leave the floor, the lights start going out, and Eddie Bloch throws down his baton and mops the back of his neck with a handkerchief. He weighs about two hundred pounds, is in the pink, and is a good-looking brute. But his face is sour right now, dissatisfied. His outfit starts to case its instruments right and left, and Judy Jarvis steps up on the platform, in her street clothes, ready to go home. She's Eddie's torch singer, and also his wife. "Coming, Eddie? Let's get out of here." She looks a little disgusted herself. "I didn't get a hand tonight, not even after my rumba number. Must be staling. If I wasn't your wife, I'd be out of a job I guess."

Eddie pats her shoulder. "It isn't you, honey. It's us, we're beginning to stink. Notice how the attendance has been dropping the past few weeks? There were more waiters than customers tonight. I'll be hearing from the owner any minute now. He has the right to cancel my contract if the intake drops below five grand."

A waiter comes up to the edge of the platform. "Mr. Graham'd like to see you in his office before you go home, Mr. Bloch."

Eddie and Judy look at each other. "This is it now, Judy. You

go back to the hotel. Don't wait for me. G'night, boys." Eddie Bloch calls for his hat and knocks at the manager's office.

Graham rustles a lot of accounts together. "We took in forty-five hundred this week, Eddie. They can get the same ginger ale and sandwiches any place, but they'll go where the band has something to give 'em. I notice the few that do come in don't even get up from the table any more when you tap your baton. Now, what's wrong?"

Eddie punches his hat a couple of times. "Don't ask me. I'm getting the latest orchestrations from Broadway sent to me hot off the griddle. We sweat our bald heads off rehearsing—"

Graham swivels his cigar. "Don't forget that jazz originated here in the South, you can't show this town anything. They want something new."

"When do I scam?" Eddie asks, smiling with the southwest corner of his mouth.

"Finish the week out. See if you can do something about it by Monday. If not, I'll have to wire St. Louis to get Kruger's crew. I'm sorry, Eddie."

"That's all right," broad-minded Eddie says. "You're not running a charity bazaar."

Eddie goes out into the dark dance-room. His crew has gone. The tables are stacked. A couple of old colored crones are down on hands and knees slopping water around on the parquet. Eddie steps up on the platform a minute to get some orchestrations he left on the piano. He feels something crunch under his shoe, reaches down, picks up a severed chicken's claw lying there with a strip of red rag tied around it. How the hell did it get up there? If it had been under one of the tables, he'd have thought some diner had dropped it. He flushes a little. D'ye mean to say he and the boys were so rotten tonight that somebody deliberately threw it at them while they were playing?

One of the scrubwomen looks up. The next moment, she and her mate are on their feet, edging nearer, eyes big as saucers, until they get close enough to see what it is he's holding. Then there's a double yowl of animal fright, a tin pail goes rolling across the floor, and no two stout people, white or col-

ored, ever got out of a place in such a hurry before. The door nearly comes off its hinges, and Eddie can hear their cackling all the way down the quiet street outside until it fades away into the night. "For gosh sake!" thinks the bewildered Eddie, "They must be using the wrong brand of gin." He tosses the object out onto the floor and goes back to the piano for his music scores. A sheet or two has slipped down behind it and he squats to collect them. That way the piano hides him.

The door opens again and he sees Johnny Staats (traps and percussion) come in in quite a hurry. He thought Staats was home in bed by now. Staats is feeling himself all over like he was rehearsing the shim-sham and he's scanning the ground as he goes along. Then suddenly he pounces—and it's on that very scrap of garbage Eddie just now threw away! And as he straightens up with it, his breath comes out in such a sigh of relief that Eddie can hear it all the way across the still room. All this keeps him from hailing Staats as he was going to a minute ago and suggesting a cup of java. But—"superstitious," thinks broad-minded Eddie. "It's his goodluck charm, that's all, like some people carry a rabbit's foot. I'm a little that way myself, never walk under a ladder—"

Then again, why should those two mammies go into hysterics when they lamp the same object? And Eddie recalls now that some of the boys have always suspected Staats has colored blood, and tried to tell him so years ago when Staats first came in with them, but he wouldn't listen to them.

Staats slinks out again as noiselessly as he came in, and Eddie decides he'll catch up with him and kid him about his chicken-claw on their way home together. (They all roost in the same hotel.) So he takes his music-sheets, some of which are blank, and he leaves. Staats is way down the street—in the *wrong direction*, away from the hotel! Eddie hesitates for just a minute, and then he starts after Staats on a vague impulse, just to see where he's going—just to see what he's up to. Maybe the fright of the scrubwomen and the way Staats pounced on that chicken-claw just now have built up to this, without Eddie's really knowing it.

And how many times afterwards he's going to pray to his God that he'd never turned down that other way this night—

away from his hotel, his Judy, his boys—away from the sunlight and the white man's world. Such a little thing to decide to do, and afterwards no turning back—ever.

He keeps Staats in sight, and they hit the Vieux Carré. That's all right. There are a lot of quaint places here a guy might like to drop in. Or maybe he has some Creole sweetie tucked away, and Eddie thinks: I'm lower than a ditch to spy like this. But then suddenly right before his eyes, half-way up the narrow lane he's turned into—there isn't any Staats any more! And no door opened and closed again either. Then when Eddie gets up to where it was, he sees the crevice between the old houses, hidden by an angle in the walls. So that's where he went! Eddie almost has a peeve on by now at all this hocus-pocus. He slips in himself and feels his way along. He stops every once in awhile and can hear Staats' quiet footfall somewhere way up in front. Then goes on again. Once or twice the passage spreads out a little and lets a little green-blue moonlight part way down the walls. Then later, there's a little flare of orange light from under a window and an elbow jogs him in the appendix. "You'd be happier here. Doan go the rest of the way," a soft voice breathes. A prophecy if he only knew it!

But hardboiled Eddie just says: "G'wan to bed, y' dirty stay-up!" out of the corner of his mouth, and the light vanishes. Next a tunnel and he bangs the top of his head and his eyes water. But at the other end of it, Staats has finally come to a halt in a patch of clear light and seems to be looking up at a window or something, so Eddie stays where he is, inside the tunnel, and folds the lapels of his black jacket up over his white shirt-front so it won't show.

Staats just stands there for a spell, with Eddie holding his breath inside the tunnel, and then finally he gives a peculiar, dismal whistle. There's nothing carefree or casual about it. It's a hollow swampland sound, not easy to get without practice. Then he just stands there waiting, until without warning another figure joins him in the gloom. Eddie strains his eyes. A gorilla-like, Negro roustabout. Something passes from Staats' hand to his—the chicken-claw possibly—then they go in, into the house Staats has been facing. Eddie can hear the

soft shuffle of feet going up stairs on the inside, and the groaning, squeaking of an old decayed door—and then silence.

He edges forward to the mouth of the tunnel and peers up. No light shows from any window, the house appears to be untenanted, deserted.

Eddie hangs onto his coat collar with one hand and strokes his chin with the other. He doesn't know just what to do. The vague impulse that has brought him this far after Staats begins to peter out now. Staats has some funny associates—something funny is going on in this out-of-the-way place at this unearthly hour of the morning—but after all, a man's private life is his own. He wonders what made him do this, he wouldn't want anyone to know he did it. He'll turn around and go back to his hotel now and get some shut-eye; he's got to think up some novelty for his routine at Maxim's between now and Monday or he'll be out on his ear.

Then just as one heel is off the ground to take the turn that will start him back, a vague, muffled wailing starts from somewhere inside that house. It's toned down to a mere echo. It has to go through thick doors and wide, empty rooms and down a deep, hollow stairwell before it gets to him. Oh, some sort of a revival meeting, is it? So Staats has got religion, has he? But what a place to come and get it in!

A throbbing like a far-away engine in a machine shop underscores the wailing, and every once in a while a *boom* like distant thunder across the bayou tops the whole works. It goes: *Boom-putta-putta-boom-putta-putta-boom!* And the wailing, way up high at the moon: *Eeyah-eeyah-eeyah. . .*

Eddie's professional instincts suddenly come alive. He tries it out, beats time to it with his arm as if he were holding a baton. His fingers snap like a whip. "My God, that's grand! That's gorgeous! Just what I need! I gotta get up there!" So a chicken-foot does it, eh?

He turns and runs back, through the tunnel, through the courtyards, all the way back where he came from, stooping here, stooping there, lighting matches recklessly and throwing them away as he goes. Out in the Vieux Carré again, the refuse hasn't been collected. He spots a can at the corner of two lanes, topples it over. The smell rises to heaven, but he

wades into it ankle-deep like any levee-rat, digs into the stuff with both forearms, scattering it right and left. He's lucky, finds a verminous carcass, tears off a claw, wipes it on some newspaper. Then he starts back. Wait a minute! The red-rag, red strip around it! He feels himself all over, digs into all his pockets. Nothing that color. Have to do without it, but maybe it won't work without it. He turns and hurries back through the slit between the old houses, doesn't care how much noise he makes. The flash of light from Old Faithful, the jogging elbow. Eddie stoops, he suddenly snatches in at the red kimono sleeve, his hand comes away with a strip of it. Bad language, words that even Eddie doesn't know. A five-spot stops it on the syllable, and Eddie's already way down the passage. If only they haven't quit until he can get back there!

They haven't. It was vague, smothered when he went away; it's louder, more persistent, more frenzied now. He doesn't bother about giving the whistle, probably couldn't imitate it exactly anyhow. He dives into the black smudge that is the entrance to the house, feels greasy stone steps under him, takes one or two and then suddenly his collar is four sizes too small for him, gripped by a big ham of a hand at the back. A sharp something that might be anything from a pocketknife blade to the business edge of a razor is creasing his throat just below the apple and drawing a preliminary drop or two of blood.

"Here it is, I've got it here!" gasps Eddie. What kind of religion is this, anyway? The sharp thing stays, but the hand lets go his collar and feels for the chicken claw. Then the sharp thing goes away too, but probably not very far away.

"Whyfor you didn't give the signal?"

Eddie's windpipe gives him the answer. "Sick here, couldn't."

"Light up, lemme see yo' face." Eddie strikes a match and holds it. "Yo' face has never been here before."

Eddie gestures upward. "My friend—up there—he'll tell you!"

"Mr. Johnny yo' friend? He ax you to come?"

Eddie thinks quickly. The chicken claw might carry more weight than Staats. "That told me to come."

"Papa Benjamin sen' you that?"

"Certainly," says Eddie stoutly. Probably their deacon, but

it's a hell of a way to— The match stings his fingers and he whips it out. Blackness and a moment's uncertainty that might end either way. But a lot of savoir-faire, a thousand years of civilization, are backing Eddie up. "You'll make me late. Papa Benjamin wouldn't like that!"

He gropes his way on up in the pitch blackness, thinking any minute he'll feel his back slashed to ribbons. But it's better than standing still and having it happen, and to back out now would bring it on twice as quickly. However, it works, nothing happens.

"Fust thing y'know, all N'yorleans be comin' by," growls the African watchdog sulkily, and flounders down on the stair-case with a sound like a tired seal. There is some other crack about "darkies lookin' lak pinks," and then a long period of scratching.

But Eddie's already up on the landing above and so close to the *boom-putta-boom* now it drowns out every other sound. The whole framework of the decrepit house seems to shake with it. The door's closed but the thread of orange that outlines it shows it up to him. Behind there. He leans against it, shoves a little. It gives. The squealings and the grindings it emits are lost in the torrent of noise that comes rushing out. He sees plenty, and what he sees only makes him want to see all the more. Something tells him the best thing to do is slip in quietly and close it behind him before he's noticed, rather than stay there peeping in from the outside. Little Snowdrop might always come upstairs in back of him and catch him there. So he widens it just a little more, oozes in, and kicks it shut behind him with his heel—and immediately gets as far away from it as he can. Evidently no one has seen him.

Now, it's a big shadowy room and it's choked with people. It's lit by a single oil-lamp and a hell of a whole lot of candles, which may have shone out brightly against the darkness outside but are pretty dim once you get inside with them. The long flickering shadows thrown on all the walls by those cavorting in the center are almost as much of a protection to Eddie, as he crouches back amidst them, as the darkness outside would be. He's been around, and a single look is enough to tell him that whatever else it is, it's no revival meeting. At first, he takes it for just a gin or rent party with the lid off,

but it isn't that either. There's no gin there, and there's no pairing off of couples in the dancing—rather it's a roomful of devils lifted bodily up out of hell. Plenty of them have passed out cold on the floor all around him and the others keep stepping over them as they prance back and forth, only they don't always step over but sometimes *on*—on prostrate faces and chests and outstretched arms and hands. Then there are others who have gone off into a sort of still trance, seated on the floor with their backs to the wall, some of them rocking back and forth, some just staring glassy-eyed, foam drooling from their mouths. Eddie quickly slips down among them on his haunches and gets busy. He too starts rocking back and forth and pounding the flooring beside him with his knuckles, but he's not in any trance, he's getting a swell new number for his repertoire at Maxim's. A sheet of blank score paper is partly hidden under his body, and he keeps dropping one hand down to it every minute jotting down musical notes with the stub of pencil in his fingers. "Key of A," he guesses. "I can decide that when I instrument it. Mi-re-do, mi-re-do. Then over again. Hope I didn't miss any of it."

Boom-putta-putta-boom! Young and old, black and tawny, fat and thin, naked and clothed, they pass from right to left, from left to right, in two concentric circles, while the candle flames dance crazily and the shadows leap up and down on the walls. The hub of it all, within the innermost circle of dancers, is an old, old man, black skin and bones, only glimpsed now and then in a space between the packed bodies that surround him. An animal-pelt is banded about his middle; he wears a horrible juju mask over his face—a death's head. On one side of him, a squatting woman clacks two gourds together endlessly, that's the "putta" of Eddie's rhythm; on the other, another beats a drum, that's the "boom." In one upraised hand he holds a squalling fowl, wings beating the air; in the other a sharp-bladed knife. Something flashes in the air, but the dancers mercifully get between Eddie and the sight of it. Next glimpse he has, the fowl isn't flapping any more. It's hanging limply down and veins of blood are trickling down the old man's shrivelled forearm.

"That part don't go into my show," Eddie thinks facetiously.

The horrible old man has dropped the knife; he squeezes the life-blood from the dead bird with both hands now, still holding it in mid-air. He sprinkles the drops on those that cavort around him, flexing and unflexing his bony fingers in a nauseating travesty of the ceremony of baptism.

Drops spatter here and there about the room, on the walls. One lands near Eddie and he edges back. Revolting things go on all around him. He sees some of the crazed dancers drop to their hands and knees and bend low over these red polka-dots, licking them up from the floor with their tongues. Then they go about the room on all fours like animals, looking for others.

"Think I'll go," Eddie says to himself, tasting last night's supper all over again. "They ought to have the cops on them."

He maneuvers the score-sheet, filled now, out from under him and into his side-pocket; then he starts drawing his feet in toward him preparatory to standing up and slipping out of this hell-hole. Meanwhile a second fowl, black this time (the first was white), a squeaking suckling pig, and a puppy dog have gone the way of the first fowl. Nor do the carcasses go to waste when the old man has dropped them. Eddie sees things happening on the floor, in between the stomping feet of the dancers, and he guesses enough not to look twice.

Then suddenly, already reared a half-inch above the floor on his way up, he wonders where the wailing went. And the clacking of the gourds and the boom of the drum and the shuffling of the feet. He blinks, and everything has frozen still in the room around him. Not a move, not a sound. Straight out from the old man's gnarled shoulder stretches a bony arm, the end dipped in red, pointing like an arrow at Eddie. Eddie sinks down again that half-inch. He couldn't hold that position very long, and something tells him he's not leaving right away after all.

"White man," says a bated breath, and they all start moving in on him. A gesture of the old man sweeps them into motionlessness again.

A cracked voice comes through the grinning mouth of the juju mask, rimmed with canine teeth. "Whut you do here?"

Eddie taps his pockets mentally. He has about fifty on him. Will that be enough to buy his way out? He has an uneasy

feeling however that none of this lot is as interested in money as they should be—at least not right now. Before he has a chance to try it out, another voice speaks up. “I know this man, papaloi. Let me find out.”

Johnny Staats came in here tuxedoed, hair slicked back, a cog in New Orleans’ night-life. Now he’s barefooted, coatless, shirtless—a tousled scarecrow. A drop of blood has caught him squarely on the forehead and been traced, by his own finger or someone else’s, into a red line from temple to temple. A chicken-feather or two clings to his upper lip. Eddie saw him dancing with the rest, groveling on the floor. His scalp crawls with repugnance as the man comes over and squats down before him. The rest of them hold back, tense, poised, ready to pounce.

The two men talk in low, hoarse voices. “It’s your only way, Eddie. I can’t save you—”

“Why, I’m in the very heart of New Orleans! They wouldn’t dare!” But sweat oozes out on Eddie’s face just the same. He’s no fool. Sure the police will come and sure they’ll mop this place up. But what will they find? His own remains along with that of the fowls, the pig and the dog.

“You’d better hurry up, Eddie. I can’t hold them back much longer. Unless you do, you’ll never get out of this place alive and you may as well know it! If I tried to stop them, I’d go too. You know what this is, don’t you? This is voodoo!”

“I knew that five minutes after I was in the room.” And Eddie thinks to himself, “You son-of-a-so-and-so! You better ask Mombo-jombo to get you a new job starting in tomorrow night!” Then he grins internally and, clown to the very end, says with a straight face: “Sure I’ll join. What d’ye suppose I came here for anyway?”

Knowing what he knows now, Staats is the last one he’d tell about the glorious new number he’s going to get out of this, the notes for which are nestled in his inside pocket right now. And he might even get more dope out of the initiation ceremonies if he pretends to go through with them. A song or dance for Judy to do with maybe a green spot focussed on her. Lastly, there’s no use denying there *are* too many razors, knives, and the like, in the room to hope to get out and all the way back where he started from without a scratch.

Staats’ face is grave, though. “Now don’t kid about this

thing. If you knew what I know about it, there's a lot more to it than there seems to be. If you're sincere, honest about it, all right. If not, it might be better to get cut to pieces right now than to tamper with it."

"Never more serious in my life," says Eddie. And deep down inside he's braying like a jackass.

Staats turns to the old man. "His spirit wishes to join our spirits."

The papaloi burns some feathers and entrails at one of the candle-flames. Not a sound in the room. The majority of them squat down all at once. "It came out all right," Staats breathes. "He reads them. The spirits are willing."

"So far so good," Eddie thinks. "I've fooled the guts and feathers."

The papaloi is pointing at him now. "Let him go now and be silent," the voice behind the mask cackles. Then a second time he says it, and a third, with a long pause between.

Eddie looks hopefully at Staats. "Then I can go after all, as long as I don't tell anyone what I've seen?"

Staats shakes his head grimly. "Just part of the ritual. If you went now, you'd eat something that disagreed with you tomorrow and be dead before the day was over."

More sacrificial slaughtering, and the drum and gourds and wailing start over again, but very low and subdued now as at the beginning. A bowl of blood is prepared and Eddie is raised to his feet and led forward, Staats on one side of him, an anonymous colored man on the other. The papaloi dips his already caked hand into the bowl and traces a mark on Eddie's forehead. The chanting and wailing grow louder behind him. The dancing begins again. He's in the middle of all of them. He's an island of sanity in a sea of jungle frenzy. The bowl is being held up before his face. He tries to draw back, his sponsors grip him firmly by the arms. "Drink!" whispers Staats. "Drink—or they'll kill you where you stand!"

Even at this stage of the game, there's still a wisecrack left in Eddie, though he keeps it to himself. He takes a deep breath. "Here's where I get my vitamin A for today!"

STAATS shows up at orchestra rehearsal next A.M. to find somebody else at drums and percussion. He doesn't say much

when Eddie shoves a two-week check at him, spits on the floor at his feet and growls: "Beat it, you filthy—"

Staats only murmurs: "So you're crossing them? I wouldn't want to be in your shoes for all the fame and money in this world, guy!"

"If you mean that bad dream the other night," says Eddie, "I haven't told anybody and I don't intend to. Why, I'd be laughed at. I'm only remembering what I can use of it. I'm a white man, see? The jungle is just trees to me; the Congo, just a river; the night time, just a time for electric lights." He whips out a couple of C's. "Hand 'em these for me, will ya, and tell 'em I've paid up my dues from now until doomsday and I don't want any receipt. And if they try putting rough-on-rats in my orange juice, they'll find themselves stomping in a chain-gang!"

The C's fall where Eddie spat. "You're one of us. You think your're pink? Blood tells. You wouldn't have gone there—you couldn't have stood that induction—if you were. Look at your fingernails sometimes, look in a mirror at the whites of your eyes. Good-by, dead man."

Eddie says good-by to him, too. He knocks out three of his teeth, breaks the bridge of his nose, and rolls all over the floor on top of him. But he can't wipe out that wise, knowing smile that shows even through the gush of blood.

They pull Eddie off, pull him up, pull him together. Staats staggers away, smiling at what he knows. Eddie, heaving like a bellows, turns to his crew. "All right, boys. All together now!" *Boom-putt-putta-boom-putta-putta-boom!*

GRAHAM shoots five C's on promotion and all New Orleans jams its way into Maxim's that Saturday night. They're standing on each other's shoulders and hanging from the chandeliers to get a look. "First time in America, the original *Voodoo Chant*," yowl the three sheets on every billboard in town. And when Eddie taps his baton, the lights go down and a nasty green flood lights the platform from below and you can hear a pin drop. "Good-evening, folks. This is Eddie Bloch and his Five Chips, playing to you from Maxim's. You're about to hear for the first time on the air the *Voodoo Chant*, the age-old ceremonial rhythm no white man has ever been

permitted to listen to before. I can assure you this is an accurate transcription, not a note has been changed." Then very softly and far-away it begins: *Boom-putta-putta-boom!*

Judy's going to dance and wail to it, she's standing there on the steps leading up to the platform, waiting to go on. She's powdered orange, dressed in feathers, and has a small artificial bird fastened to one wrist and a thin knife in her other hand. She catches his eye, he looks over at her, and he sees she wants to tell him something. Still waving his baton he edges sideways until he's within earshot.

"Eddie, don't! Stop them! Call it off, will you? I'm worried about you!"

"Too late now," he answers under cover of the music. "We've started already. What're you scared of?"

She passes him a crumpled piece of paper. "I found this under your dressing-room door when I came out just now. It sounds like a warning. There's somebody doesn't want you to play that number!"

Still swinging with his right hand, Eddie unrolls the thing under his left thumb and reads it:

You can summon the spirits but can you dismiss them again? Think well.

He crumples it up again and tosses it away. "Staats trying to scare me because I canned him."

"It was tied to a little bunch of black feathers," she tries to tell him. "I wouldn't have paid any attention, but my maid pleaded with me not to dance this when she saw it. Then she ran out on me—"

"We're on the air," he reminds her between his teeth. "Are you with me or aren't you?" And he eases back center again. Louder and louder the beat grows, just like it did two nights ago. Judy swirls on in a green spot and begins the unearthly wail Eddie's coached her to do.

A waiter drops a tray of drinks in the silence of the room out there, and when the headwaiter goes to bawl him out he's nowhere to be found. He has quit cold and a whole row of tables has been left without their orders. "Well, I'll be—!" says the captain and scratches his head.

Eddie's facing the crew, his back to Judy, and as he vibrates

to the rhythm, some pin or other that he's forgotten to take out of his shirt suddenly catches him and strikes into him. It's a little below the collar, just between the shoulder blades. He jumps a little, but doesn't feel it any more after that. . . .

Judy squalls, tears her tonsils out, screeches words that neither he nor she know the meaning of but that he managed to set down on paper phonetically the other night. Her little body goes through all the contortions, tamed down of course, that that brownskin she-devil greased with lard and wearing only earrings performed that night. She stabs the bird with her fake knife and sprinkles imaginary blood in the air. Nothing like this has ever been seen before. And in the silence that suddenly lands when it's through, you can count twenty. That's how it's gotten under everyone's skin.

Then the noise begins. It goes over like an avalanche. But just the same, more people are ordering strong drinks all at once than has ever happened before in the place, and the matron in the women's restroom has her hands full of hysterical sob-sisters.

"Try to get away from me, just try!" Graham tells Eddie at curfew time. "I'll have a new contract, gilt-edged, ready for you in the morning. We've already got six-grand worth of reservations on our hands for the coming week—one of 'em by telegram all the way from Shreveport!"

Success! Eddie and Judy taxi back to their rooms at the hotel, tired but happy. "It'll be good for years. We can use it for our signature on the air, like Whiteman does the Rhapsody."

She goes into the bedroom first, snaps on the lights, calls to him a minute later: "Come here and look at this—the cutest little souvenir!" He finds her holding a wax doll, finger high, in her hands. "Why it's you, Eddie, look! Small as it is it has your features! Well isn't that the clev—!"

He takes it away from her and squints at it. It's himself all right. It's rigged out in two tiny patches of black cloth for a tuxedo, and the eyes and hair and features are inked onto the wax.

"Where'd you find it?"

"It was in your bed, up against the pillow."

He's fixing to grin about it, until he happens to turn it over.

In the back, just a little below the collar, between the shoulder-blades, a short but venomous-looking black pin is sticking.

He goes a little white for a minute. He knows who it's from now and what it's trying to tell him. But that isn't what makes him change color. He's just remembered something. He throws off his coat, yanks at his collar, turns his back to her. "Judy, look down there, will you? I felt a pin stick me while we were doing that number. Put your hand down. Feel anything?"

"No, there's nothing there," she tells him.

"Musta dropped out."

"It couldn't have," she says. "Your belt-line's so tight it almost cuts into you. There couldn't have been anything there or it'd still be there now. You must have imagined it."

"Listen, I know a pin when I feel one. Any mark on my back, any scratch between the shoulders?"

"Not a thing."

"Tired, I guess. Nervous." He goes over to the open window and pitches the little doll out into the night with all his strength. Damn coincidence, that's all it was. To think otherwise would be to give them their inning. But he wonders what makes him feel so tired just the same—Judy did all the exercising, not he—yet he's felt all in ever since that number tonight.

Out go the lights and she drops off to sleep right with them. He lies very quiet for awhile. A little later he gets up, goes into the bathroom where the lights are whitest of all, and stands there looking at himself close to the glass. "Look at your fingernails sometime; look at the whites of your eyes," Staats had said. Eddie does. There's a bluish, purplish tinge to his nails that he never noticed before. The whites of his eyes are faintly yellow.

It's warm in New Orleans that night but he shivers a little as he stands there. He doesn't sleep any more that night. . . .

In the morning, his back aches as if he were sixty. But he knows that's from not closing his eyes all night, and not from any magic pins.

"Oh my God!" Judy says, from the other side of the bed, "look what you've done to him!" She shows him the second

page of the *Picayune*. "John Staats, until recently a member of Eddie Bloch's orchestra, committed suicide late yesterday afternoon in full view of dozens of people by rowing himself out into Lake Pontchartrain and jumping overboard. He was alone in the boat at the time. The body was recovered half an hour later."

"I didn't do that," says Eddie grimly. "I've got a rough idea what did, though." Late yesterday afternoon. The night was coming on, and he couldn't face what was coming to him for sponsoring Eddie for giving them all away. Late yesterday afternoon—that meant *he* hadn't left that warning at the dressing-room or left that death-sentence on the bed. He'd been dead himself by then—not white, not black, just yellow.

Eddie waits until Judy's in her shower, then he phones the morgue. "About Johnny Staats. He worked for me until yesterday, so if nobody's claimed the body send it to a funeral parlor at my exp—"

"Somebody's already claimed the remains, Mr. Bloch. First thing this morning. Just waited until the examiner had established suicide beyond a doubt. Some colored organization, old friends of his it seems—"

Judy comes in and remarks: "You look all green in the face."

Eddie thinks: I wouldn't care if he was my worst enemy, I can't let that happen to him! What horrors are going to take place tonight somewhere under the moon? He wouldn't even put cannibalism beyond them. The phone's right at his fingertips, and yet he can't denounce them to the police without involving himself, admitting that he was there, took part at least once. Once that comes out, bang! goes his reputation. He'll never be able to live it down—especially now that he's played the Voodoo Chant and identified himself with it in the minds of the public.

So instead, alone in the room again, he calls the best-known private agency in New Orleans. "I want a bodyguard. Just for tonight. Have him meet me at closing-time at Maxim's. Armed, of course."

It's Sunday and the banks are closed, but his credit's good anywhere. He raises a G in cash. He arranges with a reliable crematorium for a body to be taken charge of late tonight or early in the morning. He'll notify them just where to call for

it. Yes, of course! He'll produce the proper authorization from the police. Poor Johnny Staats couldn't get away from "them" in life, but he's going to get away from them in death, all right. That's the least anyone could do for him.

Graham slaps a sawbuck-cover on that night, more to give the waiters room to move around in than anything else, and still the place is choked to the roof. This Voodoo number is a natural, a wow.

But Eddie's back is ready to cave in, while he stands there jogging with his stick. It's all he can do to hold himself straight.

When the racket and the shuffling is over for the night, the private dick is there waiting for him. "Lee is the name."

"Okay, Lee, come with me." They go outside and get in Eddie's Bugatti. They whizz down to the Vieux, scrounge to a stop in the middle of Congo Square, which will still be Congo Square when its official name of Beauregard is forgotten.

"This way," says Eddie, and his bodyguard squirms through the alley after him.

"'Lo, suga' pie," says the elbow-pusher, and for once, to her own surprise as much as anyone else's, gets a tumble.

"'Lo, Eglantine," Eddie's bodyguard remarks in passing, "So you moved?"

They stop in front of the house on the other side of the tunnel. "Now here's what," says Eddie. "We're going to be stopped halfway up these stairs in here by a big orangoutang. Your job is to clean him, tap him if you want, I don't care. I'm going into a room up there, you're going to wait for me at the door. You're here to see that I get out of that room again. We may have to carry the body of a friend of mine down to the street between us. I don't know. It depends on whether it's in the house or not. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Light up. Keep your torch trained over my shoulder."

A big, lowering figure looms over them, blocking the narrow stairs, ape-like arms and legs spread-eagle in a gesture of malignant embrace, receding skull, teeth showing, flashing steel in hand. Lee jams Eddie roughly to one side and shoves up past him. "Drop that, boy!" Lee says with slurring indifference, but then he doesn't wait to see if the order's carried out

or not. After all, a weapon was raised to two white men. He fires three times, from two feet away and considerably below the obstacle, hits where he aimed to. The bullets shatter both knee-caps and the elbow-joint of the arm holding the knife.

"Be a cripple for life now," he remarks with quiet satisfaction. "I'll put him out of his pain." So he crashes the butt of the gun down on the skull of the writhing colossus, in a long arc like the overhand pitch of a baseball. The noise of the shots goes booming up the narrow stairwell to the roof, to mushroom out there in a vast rolling echo.

"Come on, hurry up," says Eddie, "before they have a chance to do away with—"

He lopes on up past the prostrate form, Lee at his heels. "Stand there. Better reload while you're waiting. If I call your name for Pete's sake don't count ten before you come in to me!"

THERE'S a scurrying back and forth and an excited but subdued jabbering going on on the other side of the door. Eddie swings it wide and crashes it closed behind him, leaving Lee on the outside. They all stand rooted to the spot when they see him. The papaloi is there and about six others, not so many as on the night of Eddie's initiation. Probably the rest are waiting outside the city somewhere, in some secret spot, wherever the actual burial, or burning, or—feasting—is to take place.

Papa Benjamin has no juju mask on this time, no animal pelt. There are no gourds in the room, no drum, no transfixed figures ranged against the wall. They were about to move on elsewhere, he just got here in time. Maybe they were waiting for the dark of the moon. The ordinary kitchen chair on which the papaloi was to be carried on their shoulders stands prepared, padded with rags. A row of baskets covered with sacking are ranged along the back wall.

"Where is the body of John Staats?" raps out Eddie. "You claimed it, took it away from the morgue this morning." His eyes are on those baskets, on the bleared razor he catches sight of lying on the floor near them.

"Better far," cackles the old man, "that you had followed him. The mark of doom is on yo' even now—" A growl goes up all around.

"Lee," grates Eddie, "in here!" Lee stands next to him, gun in hand. "Cover me while I take a look around."

"All of you over in that corner there," growls Lee, and kicks viciously at one who is too slow in moving. They huddle there, cower there, glaring, spitting like a band of apes. Eddie makes straight for those baskets, whips the covering off the first one. Charcoal. The next. Coffee-beans. The next. Rice. And so on.

Just small baskets that Negro women balance on their heads to sell at the market-place. He looks at Papa Benjamin, takes out the wad of money he's brought with him. "Where've you got him? Where's he buried? Take us there, show us where it is."

Not a sound, just burning, shriveling hate in waves that you can almost feel. He looks at that razor blade lying there, bleared, not bloody, just matted, dulled, with shreds and threads of something clinging to it. Kicks it away with his foot. "Not here, I guess," he mutters to Lee and moves toward the door.

"What do we do now, boss?" his henchman wants to know.

"Get the hell out of here I guess, where we can breathe some air," Eddie says, and moves on out to the stairs.

Lee is the sort of man who will get what he can out of any situation, no matter what it is. Before he follows Eddie out, he goes over to one of the baskets, stuffs an orange in each coat-pocket, and then prods and pries among them to select a particularly nice one for eating on the spot. There's a thud and the orange goes rolling across the floor like a volley-ball. "Mr. Bloch!" he shouts hoarsely, "I've found—him!" And he looks pretty sick.

A deep breath goes up from the corner where the Negroes are. Eddie just stands and stares, and leans back weakly for a minute against the door-post. From out the layers of oranges in the basket, the five fingers of a hand thrust upward, a hand that ends abruptly, cleanly at the wrist.

"His signet," says Eddie weakly, "there on the little finger—I know it."

"Say the word! Should I shoot?" Lee wants to know.

Eddie shakes his head. "They didn't—he committed suicide. Let's do what we have to—and get out of here!"

Lee turns over one basket after the other. The stuff in them spills and sifts and rolls out upon the floor. But in each there's something else. Bloodless, pallid as fish-flesh. That razor, those shreds clinging to it, Eddie knows now what it was used for. They take one basket, they line it with a verminous blanket from the bed. Then with their bare hands they fill it with what they have found, and close the ends of the blanket over the top of it, and carry it between them out of the room and down the pitch-black stairs, Lee going down backwards with his gun in one hand to cover them from the rear. Lee's swearing like a fiend. Eddie's trying not to think what the purpose, the destination of all those baskets was. The watch-dog is still out on the stairs, with a concussion.

Back through the lane they struggle and finally put their burden down in the before-dawn stillness of Congo Square. Eddie goes up against a wall and is heartily sick. Then he comes back again and says: "The head—did you notice—?"

"No, we didn't," Lee answers. "Stay here, I'll go back for it. I'm armed. I could stand anything now, after what I just been through."

Lee's gone about five minutes. When he comes back, he's in his shirt, coatless. His coat's rolled up under one arm in a bulky bulge. He bends over the basket, lifts the blanket, replaces it again, and when he straightens up, the bulge in his folded coat is gone. Then he throws the coat away, kicks it away on the ground. "Hidden away in a cupboard," he mutters. "Had to shoot one of 'em through the palm of the hand before they'd come clean. What were they up to?"

"Practice cannibalism maybe, I don't know. I'd rather not think."

"I brought your money back. It didn't seem to square you with them."

Eddie shoves it back at him. "Pay for your suit and your time."

"Aren't you going to tip off the squareheads?"

"I told you he jumped in the lake. I have a copy of the examiner's report in my pocket."

"I know, but isn't there some ordinance against dissecting a body without permission?"

"I can't afford to get mixed up with them, Lee. It would kill

my career. We've got what we went there for. Now just forget everything you saw."

The hearse from the crematorium contacts them there in Congo Square. The covered basket's taken on, and what's left of Johnny Staats heads away for a better finish than was coming to him.

"G'night, boss," says Lee. "Anytime you need any other little thing—"

"No," says Eddie. "I'm getting out of New Orleans." His hand is like ice when they shake.

He does. He hands Graham back his contract, and a split week later he's playing New York's newest, in the frantic Fifties. With a white valet. The Chant, of course, is still featured. He has to; it's his chief asset, his biggest draw. It introduces him and signs him off, and in between Judy always dances it for a high-spot. But he can't get rid of that backache that started the night he first played it. First he goes and tries having his back baked for a couple of hours a day under a violet-ray lamp. No improvement.

Then he has himself examined by the biggest specialist in New York. "Nothing there," says the big shot. "Absolutely nothing the matter with you: liver, kidneys, blood—everything perfect. It must be all in your own mind."

"You're losing weight, Eddie," Judy says, "you look bad, darling." His bathroom scales tell him the same thing. Down five pounds a week, sometimes seven, never up an ounce. More experts, X-rays this time, blood analysis, gland treatments, everything from soup to nuts. Nothing doing. And the dull ache, the lassitude, spreads slowly, first to one arm, then to the other.

He takes specimens of everything he eats, not just one day, but every day for weeks, and has them chemically analyzed. Nothing. And he doesn't have to be told that anyway. He knows that even in New Orleans, way back in the beginning, nothing was ever put into his food. Judy ate from the same tray, drank from the same coffeepot he did. Nightly she dances herself into a lather, and yet she's the picture of health.

So that leaves nothing but his mind, just as they all say. "But I don't believe it!" he tells himself. "I don't believe that

just sticking pins into a wax doll can hurt me—me or anyone!”

So it isn't his mind at all, but some other mind back there in New Orleans, some other mind *thinking*, wishing, ordering him dead, night and day.

“But it can't be done!” says Eddie. “There's no such thing!”

And yet it's being done; it's happening right under his own eyes. Which leaves only one answer. If going three thousand miles away on dry land didn't help, then going three thousand miles away across the ocean will do the trick. So London next, and the Kit-Kat Club. Down, down, down go the bathroom scales, a little bit each week. The pains spread downward into his thighs. His ribs start showing up here and there. He's dying on his feet. He finds it more comfortable now to walk with a stick—not to be swanky, not to be English—to rest as he goes along. His shoulders ache each night just from waving that lightweight baton at his crew. He has a music-stand built for himself to lean on, keeps it in front of his body, out of sight of the audience while he's conducting, and droops over it. Sometimes he finishes up a number with his head lower than his shoulders, as though he had a rubber spine.

Finally he goes to Reynolds, famous the world over, the biggest alienist in England. “I want to know whether I'm sane or insane.” He's under observation for weeks, months; they put him through every known test, and plenty of unknown ones, mental, physical, metabolic. They flash lights in front of his face and watch the pupils of his eyes; they contract to pin-heads. They touch the back of his throat with sandpaper; he nearly chokes. They strap him to a chair that goes around and around and does somersaults at so many revolutions per minute, then ask him to walk across the room; he staggers.

Reynolds takes plenty of pounds, hands him a report thick as a telephone-book, sums it up for him. “You are as normal, Mr. Bloch, as anyone I have ever handled. You're so well-balanced you haven't even got the extra little touch of imagination most actors and musicians have.” So it's not his own mind, it's coming from the outside, is it?

The whole thing from beginning to end has taken eighteen months. Trying to out-distance death, with death gaining on

him slowly but surely all the time. He's emaciated. There's only one thing left to do now, while he's still able to crawl aboard a ship—that's to get back to where the whole thing started. New York, London, Paris, haven't been able to save him. His only salvation, now, lies in the hands of a decrepit colored man skulking in the Vieux Carré of New Orleans.

He drags himself there, to that same half-ruined house, without a bodyguard, not caring now whether they kill him or not, almost wishing they would and get it over with. But that would be too easy an out, it seems. The gorilla that Lee crippled that night shuffles out to him between two sticks, recognizes him, breathes undying hate into his face, but doesn't lift a finger to harm him. The spirits are doing the job better than he could ever hope to. Their mark is on this man, woe betide anyone who comes between them and their hellish satisfaction. Eddie Bloch totters up the stairs unopposed, his back as safe from a knife as if he wore steel armor. Behind him the Negro sprawls upon the stairs to lubricate his long-awaited hour of satisfaction with rum—and oblivion.

He finds the old man alone there in the room. The Stone Age and the Twentieth Century face each other, and the Stone Age has won out.

"Take it off me," says Eddie brokenly. "Give me my life back—I'll do anything, anything you say!"

"What has been done cannot be undone. Do you think the spirits of the earth and of the air, of fire and water, know the meaning of forgiveness?"

"Intercede for me, then. You brought it about. Here's money, I'll give you twice as much, all I earn, all I ever hope to earn—"

"You have desecrated the obiah. Death has been on you from that night. All over the world and in the air above the earth you have mocked the spirits with the chant that summons them. Nightly your wife dances it. The only reason she has not shared your doom is because she does not know the meaning of what she does. You do. You were here among us."

Eddie goes down on his knees, scrapes along the floor after the old man, tries to tug at the garments he wears. "Kill me right now, then, and be done with it. I can't stand any more—" He bought the gun only that day, was going to do it

himself at first, but found he couldn't. A minute ago he pleaded for his life, now he's pleading for death. "It's loaded, all you have to do is shoot. Look! I'll close my eyes—I'll write a note and sign it, that I did it myself—"

He tries to thrust it into the witch-doctor's hand, tries to close the bony, shriveled fingers around it, tries to point it at himself. The old man throws it down, away from him. Cackles gleefully, "Death will come, but differently—slowly, oh, so slowly!"

Eddie just lies there flat on his face, sobbing dryly. The old man spits, kicks at him weakly. He pulls himself up somehow, stumbles toward the door. He isn't even strong enough to get it open at the first try. It's that little thing that brings it on. Something touches his foot, he looks, stoops for the gun, turns. Thought is quick but the old man's mind is even quicker. Almost before the thought is there, the old man knows what's coming. In a flash, scuttling like a crab, he has shifted around to the other side of the bed, to put something between them. Instantly the situation's reversed, the fear has left Eddie and is on the old man now. He's lost the aggressive. For a minute only, but that minute is all Eddie needs. His mind beams out like a diamond, like a lighthouse through a fog. The gun roars, jolting his weakened body down to his shoes. The old man falls flat across the bed, his head too far over, dangling down over the side of it like an over-ripe pear. The bed frame sways gently with his weight for a minute, and then it's over. . . .

Eddie stands there, still off-balance from the kick-back. So it was as easy as all that! Where's all his magic now? Strength, will-power flood back through him as if a faucet was suddenly turned on. The little smoke there was can't get out of the sealed-up room, it hangs there in thin layers. Suddenly he's shaking his fist at the dead thing on the bed. "I'm gonna live now! I'm gonna live, see?" He gets the door open, sways with it for a minute. Then he's feeling his way down the stairs, past the unconscious watchdog, mumbling it over and over but low, "Gonna live now, gonna live!"

THE Commissioner mops his face as if he were in the steam room of a Turkish bath. He exhales like an oxygen tank. "Ju-

das, Joseph and Mary, Mr. Bloch, what a story! Wish I hadn't asked you; I won't sleep tonight." Even after the accused has been led from the room, it takes him some time to get over it. The upper right-hand drawer of his desk helps some—just two fingers. So does opening the windows and letting in a lot of sunshine.

Finally he picks up the phone and gets down to business. "Who've you got out there that's absolutely without a nerve in his body? I mean a guy with so little feeling he could sit on a hatpin and turn it into a paperclip. Oh yeah, that Cajun, Desjardins, I know him. He's the one goes around striking parlor-matches off the soles of stiffes. Well, send him in here."

"No, stay outside," wheezes Papa Benjamin through the partly-open door to his envoy. "I'se communin' with the obiah and yo' unclean, been drunk all last night and today. Deliver the summons. Reach yo' hand in to me, once fo' every token, yo' knows how many to take."

The crippled Negro thrusts his huge paw through the aperture, and from behind the door the papaloi places a severed chicken-claw in his upturned palm. A claw bound with a red rag. The messenger disposes of it about his tattered clothing, thrusts his hand in for another. Twenty times the act is repeated, then he lets his arm hang stiffly at his side. The door starts closing slowly. "Papaloi," whines the figure on the outside of it, "why you hide yo' face from me, is the spirits angry?"

There's a flicker of suspicion in his yellow eyeballs in the dimness, however. Instantly the opening of the door widens. Papa Benjamin's familiar wrinkled face thrusts out at him, malignant eyes crackling like fuses. "Go!" shrills the old man, "'liver my summons. Is you want me to bring a spirit down on you?" The messenger totters back. The door slams.

The sun goes down and it's night-time in New Orleans. The moon rises, midnight chimes from St. Louis Cathedral, and hardly has the last note died away than a gruesome swamp-land whistle sounds outside the deathly still house. A fat Negress, basket on arm, comes trudging up the stairs a moment later, opens the door, goes in to the papaloi, closes it again, traces an invisible mark on it with her forefinger and kisses

it. Then she turns and her eyes widen with surprise. Papa Benjamin is in bed, covered up to the neck with filthy rags. The familiar candles are all lit, the bowl for the blood, the sacrificial knife, the magic powders, all the paraphernalia of the ritual are laid out in readiness, but they are ranged about the bed instead of at the opposite end of the room as usual.

The old man's head, however, is held high above the encumbering rags, his beady eyes gaze back at her unflinchingly, the familiar semicircle of white wool rings his crown, his ceremonial mask is at his side. "I am a little tired, my daughter," he tells her. His eyes stray to the tiny wax image of Eddie Bloch under the candles, hairy with pins, and hers follow them. "A doomed one, nearing his end, came here last night thinking I could be killed like other men. He shot a bullet from a gun at me. I blew my breath at it, it stopped in the air, turned around, and went back in the gun again. But it tired me to blow so hard, strained my voice a little."

A revengeful gleam lights up the woman's broad face. "And he'll die soon, papaloi?"

"Soon," cackles the weazened figure in the bed. The woman gnashes her teeth and hugs herself delightedly. She opens the top of her basket and allows a black hen to escape and flutter about the room.

When all twenty have assembled, men and women, old and young, the drum and the gourds begin to beat, the low wailing starts, the orgy gets under way. Slowly they dance around the three sides of the bed at first, then faster, faster, lashing themselves to a frenzy, tearing at their own and each other's clothes, drawing blood with knives and fingernails, eyes rolling in an ecstasy that colder races cannot know. The sacrifices, feathered and furred, that have been fastened to the two lower posts of the bed, squawk and flutter and fly vertically up and down in a barnyard panic. There is a small monkey among them tonight, clawing, biting, hiding his face in his hands like a frightened child. A bearded Negro, nude torso glistening like patent leather, seizes one of the frantic fowls, yanks it loose from its moorings, and holds it out toward the witch-doctor with both hands. "We'se thirsty, papaloi, we'se thirsty fo' the blood of ou' enemies."

The others take up the cry. "We'se hung'y, papaloi, fo' the bones of ou' enemies!"

Papa Benjamin nods his head in time to the rhythm.

"Sac'fice, papaloi, sac'fice!"

Papa Benjamin doesn't seem to hear them.

Then back go the rags in a gray wave and out comes the arm at last. Not the gnarled brown toothpick arm of Papa Benjamin, but a bulging arm thick as a piano-leg, cuffed in serge, white at the wrist, ending in a regulation police-revolver with the clip off. The erstwhile witch-doctor's on his feet at a bound, standing erect atop the bed, back to the wall, slowly fanning his score of human devils with the mouth of his gun, left to right, then right to left again, evenly, unhurriedly. The resonant bellow of a bull comes from his weazenened slit of a mouth instead of papaloi's cracked falsetto. "Back against that wall there, all of you! Throw down them knives and jiggers!"

But they're slow to react; the swift drop from ecstasy to stupefaction can't register right away. None of them are over-bright anyway or they wouldn't be here. Mouths hang open, the wailing stops, the drums and gourds fall still, but they're still packed close about this sudden changeling in their midst, with the familiar shriveled face of Papa Benjamin and the thick-set body, business suit, of a white man—too close for comfort. Blood-lust and religious mania don't know fear of a gun. It takes a cool head for that, and the only cool head in the room is the withered cocoanut atop the broad shoulders behind that gun. So he shoots twice, and a woman at one end of the semicircle, the drum beater, and a man at the other end, the one still holding the sacrificial fowl, drop in their tracks with a double moan. Those in the middle slowly draw back step by step across the room, all eyes on the figure reared up on the bed. An instant's carelessness, the wavering of an eye, and they'll be in on him in a body. He reaches up with his free hand and rips the dead witch doctor's features from his face, to breathe better, see better. They dissolve into a crumpled rag before the blacks' terrified eyes, like a stocking-cap coming off someone's head—a mixture of paraffin and fibre, called moulage—a death-mask taken from the

corpse's own face, reproducing even the fine lines of the skin and its natural color. Moulage. So the Twentieth Century has won out after all. And behind them is the grinning, slightly-perspiring, lantern-jawed face of Detective Jacques Desjardins, who doesn't believe in spirits unless they're under a neat little label. And outside the house sounds the twenty-first whistle of the evening, but not a swampy sound this time; a long, cold, keen blast to bring figures out of the shadows and doorways that have waited there patiently all night.

Then the door bursts inward and the police are in the room. The prisoners, two of them dangerously wounded, are pushed and carried downstairs to join the crippled door-guard, who had been in custody for the past hour, and single-file, tied together with ropes, they make their way through the long tortuous alley out into Congo Place.

In the early hours of that same morning, just a little more than twenty-four hours after Eddie Bloch first staggered into Police Headquarters with his strange story, the whole thing is cooked, washed and bottled. The Commissioner sits in his office listening attentively to Desjardins. And spread out on his desk as strange an array of amulets, wax images, bunches of feathers, balsam leaves, *ouangas* (charms of nail parings, hair clippings, dried blood, powdered roots), green mildewed coins dug up from coffins in graveyards, as that room has ever seen before. All this is State's Evidence now, to be carefully labeled and docketed for the use of the prosecuting attorney when the proper time comes. "And this," explains Desjardins, indicating a small dusty bottle, "is methylene blue, the chemist tells me. It's the only modern thing we got out of the place, found it lying forgotten with a lot of rubbish in a corner that looked like it hadn't been disturbed for years. What it was doing there or what they wanted with it I don't—"

"Wait a minute," interrupts the Commissioner eagerly. "That fits in with something poor Bloch told me last night. He noticed a bluish color under his fingernails and a yellowness to his eyeballs, but *only* after he'd been initiated that first night. This stuff probably had something to do with it, an injection of it must have been given him that night in some way without his knowing it. Don't you get the idea? It floored him just the way they wanted it to. He mistook the

signs of it for a give-away that he had colored blood. It was the opening wedge. It broke down his disbelief, started his mental resistance to crumbling. That was all they needed, just to get a foothold in his mind. Mental suggestion did the rest, has been doing it ever since. If you ask me, they pulled the same stunt on Staats originally. I don't believe he had colored blood any more than Bloch has. And as a matter of fact the theory that it shows up in that way generations later is all the bunk anyway, they tell me."

"Well," says Dij, looking at his own grimy nails, "if you're just going to judge by appearances that way, I'm full-blooded Zulu."

His overlord just looks at him, and if he didn't have such a poker-face, one might be tempted to read admiration or at least approval into the look. "Must have been a pretty tight spot for a minute with all of them around while you put on your act!"

"Nah, I didn't mind," answers Dij. "The only thing that bothered me was the smell."

EDDIE BLOCH, the murder charge against him quashed two months ago, and the population of the State Penitentiary increased only this past week by the admission of twenty-three ex-*vooodoo*-worshippers for terms varying from two to ten years, steps up on the platform at Maxim's for a return engagement. Eddie's pale and washed-out looking, but climbing slowly back up through the hundred-and-twenties again to his former weight. The ovation he gets ought to do anyone's heart good, the way they clap and stamp and stand up and cheer. And at that, his name was kept out of the recently concluded trial. Desjardins and his mates did all the states-witnessing necessary.

The theme he comes in on now is something sweet and harmless. Then a waiter comes up and hands him a request. Eddie shakes his head. "No, not in our repertoire any more." He goes on leading. Another request comes, and another. Suddenly someone shouts it out at him, and in a second the whole place has taken up the cry. "The *Voodoo Chant!* Give us the *Voodoo Chant!*"

His face gets whiter than it is already, but he turns and tries

to smile at them and shake his head. They won't quit, the music can't be heard, and he has to tap a lay-off. From all over the place, like a cheering-section at a football game, "We want the Voodoo Chant! We want—!"

Judy's at his side. "What's the matter with 'em anyway?" he asks. "Don't they know what that thing's done to me?"

"Play it, Eddie, don't be foolish," she urges. "Now's the time, break the spell once and for all, prove to yourself that it can't hurt you. If you don't do it now, you'll never get over the idea. It'll stay with you all your life. Go ahead. I'll dance it just like I am."

"Okay," he says.

He taps. It's been quite some time, but he can rely on his outfit. Slow and low like thunder far away, coming nearer. *Boom-putta-putta-boom!* Judy whirls out behind him, lets out the first preliminary screech, *Eeyaeeya!*

She hears a commotion in back of her and stops as suddenly as she began. Eddie Bloch's fallen flat on his face and doesn't move again after that.

They all know, somehow. There's an inertness, a finality about it that tells them. The dancers wait a minute, mill about, then melt away in a hush. Judy Jarvis doesn't scream, doesn't cry, just stands there staring, wondering. That last thought—did it come from inside his own mind just now—or outside? Was it two months on its way, from the other side of the grave, looking for him, looking for him, until it found him tonight when he played the Chant once more and laid his mind open to Africa? No policeman, no detective, no doctor, no scientist, will ever be able to tell her. Did it come from inside or from outside? All she says is: "Stand close to me, boys—real close to me, I'm afraid of the dark."

Dime Mystery, July 1935

SPEAK TO ME OF DEATH



lick-looking roadster stopped in front of Headquarters at about nine that night, and its lone occupant sat there in it for a moment before cutting the ignition, as if trying to make up her mind what to do.

The car had money written all over it, money without flash. The number was so low it was almost zero. The girl in it took a cigarette out of the box fitted to the door, pulled a patented lighter out of the dash, inhaled deeply as if to brace herself. Then she got out and went up the steps between the two dark-green lights.

She was tall and slim and young. She wore a little leopard-skin jacket that didn't come below her elbows. The price of it probably ran into three figures. Her face was pale, paler than powder could have made it. At the top of the steps she took a second and final drag. Then she dropped the cigarette, stepped on it, and went in. She asked to see the lieutenant in charge.

His name was McManus and he brought a chair forward with his own hands for her in the back room. She was that kind of a girl.

She said, "My name is Ann Bridges." Then she looked down at the floor. You could see her wrists were trembling, where she held them folded over one knee. Diamond-splinters flashed around her wristwatch from the slight vibration.

"Any relative of John T. Bridges?" McManus said.

Ann Bridges looked up again. "I'm his niece," she said. "In fact his only relative." She took it in her stride, said it almost

off-handedly. To McManus it was a stunning piece of information; it was like finding yourself in the same room with the heir-apparent to a throne. He never thought of doubting her. There was something 14-karat about her that couldn't have been faked.

She said, "It isn't the pleasantest thing in the world to come to the police like this—" she broke off abruptly. Then she went ahead: "I don't even know what there is you people can do about it. But something's got to be done—"

McManus' voice was kind. "You tell me what it is."

"That's the worst part of it. It doesn't sound like anything when you tell it. Anything at all. But it is something!" Her voice rose almost to the point of hysteria. "I can't just stand by and watch him—sink into the grave before my eyes! I *had* to tell somebody—*had* to get it off my chest! I've waited too long as it is!" Her eyes misted. "I've driven down here four nights in a row—and the first three times I lost my nerve, drove on around the block without stopping. I said to myself, 'Ann, they'll think you're crazy, Ann, they'll laugh at you—'"

McManus went over to her and rested a fatherly hand on her shoulder. "We don't laugh at people," he said gently. "We run across anything and everything, in our line—but we don't laugh at people who are in trouble." It wasn't because she was Ann Bridges; it was because she was so young and lovely and there was such distress written on her face.

"Something has hold of us," she said. "Something that started in by being nothing at all, by being just a joke over the luncheon table; something that's grown and grown, until now it's like an octopus throttling us. I can't name it to you, because I don't know what to call it, don't know what it is. It threatens him, not me, but you see I love him, and so the threat is to the two of us."

She gave a little sob deep in her throat.

"Call it a prophecy, call it a prediction, call it fate—call it what you will. I fought against it hard enough, God knows. But the evidence of my own eyes, my own ears, my own senses, is too much for me. And the time's too short now. I'm afraid to take a chance. I haven't got the nerve to bluff it out, to sit pat. You don't gamble with a human life. Today's the 13th, isn't it? It's too close to the 14th; there isn't time-mar-

gin enough left now to be skeptical, to keep it to myself any longer. Day by day I've watched him cross off the date on his desk-calendar, drawing nearer to death. There are only two leaves left now, and I want help! Because on the 14th—at the exact stroke of midnight, as the 15th is beginning—

She covered her face with both arms and shook silently.

"Yes?" urged McManus. "Yes?"

"He's become convinced—oh, and almost I have too—that at exactly midnight on the 14th he's to die. Not just die but meet his death in full vigor and health, a death rushing down to him from the stars he was born under—rushing down even before he existed at all. A death inexorable, inescapable. A death horrid and violent, inconceivable here in this part of the world where we live."

She took a deep, shuddering breath, whispered the rest of it. "*Death at the jaws of a lion.*"

McManus didn't answer for an awfully long time. When he spoke, it wasn't to her at all. He opened the door, called to someone, said, "I'm not to be disturbed—until further orders, hear?"

When he came back to her she said limply, "Thanks—for not laughing, for not smelling my breath, for not hinting that I should see a doctor. Oh, thanks, anyway!"

He took a package of cigarettes out of the desk-drawer, passed them to her. "I know you modern kids," he said paternally. "Smoke up. Pull yourself together. Tell it in your own way. Begin at the beginning—and tell it right straight through—"

IT all started (Ann Bridges said) about an airplane ride. My Uncle John was going to 'Frisco on business, and he'd bought his ticket. He showed it to me at lunch, and I saw that the take-off was dated Friday the 13th. Half-kiddingly I suggested he put off leaving until the day after. There'd been a bad crack-up a week before, but lord! we were both joking, not serious about it.

My maid must have overheard us. She came to me later and said, "Beg your pardon, miss, but if that were I, I'd never let him do a thing like that."

I said, "Be your age."

She said, "I know of someone who could warn you, if there is to be any trouble. A man who's gifted with second sight. Why don't you let me take you to him?"

I gave her a cold look and I said, "Just what do I look like to you? Are you seriously suggesting that I go to some flea-bitten fortune-teller with a dirty cloth wrapped around his head and—"

"He's not a fortune-teller," she defended. "He'd resent being called that. He doesn't make a profession of it, and he doesn't take money for it."

"I bet he doesn't refuse it, either," I said cynically.

"He's a good man," she said stoutly, "not a sharper of any kind. He happens to be born with this gift, he can't help that. He doesn't trade on it in any way, in fact he doesn't like to use it. My family and I have known him for years—"

I smiled to myself, as anyone would have. "He's certainly sold himself to you, Elaine," I remarked.

"We won't talk any more about it, miss," she said stiffly. "Only, you remember that time I was in trouble—" She'd got mixed up with some man, and I'd straightened it out for her; it wouldn't be fair for me to give you the details. "You were the only one knew about that, Miss Bridges. I didn't say a word at home, I didn't dare. He took me aside one night and told me the whole thing. He told me how it was going to end up, too. He said the man was going to meet death, and I'd be rid of him once and for all. I fainted dead away on the floor. You remember how we heard two months later he'd been run over on the street?"

I did, but my skepticism wouldn't dent much. "You didn't say a word to me at the time, how was that?"

"He made me promise not to. I've broken my word to him today. He doesn't want it to become known. He hates his gift himself, says it causes him nothing but misery—"

All of which sounded reasonable enough, but I was definitely not impressed. I've had very good common sense all my life, and you have to watch your step—when you own twenty millions.

My uncle took off from Newark early the next morning, and when I got back to the house the maid blurted out: "There's

nothing to worry about, Miss Bridges. I—I asked him about this trip, and he said it was safe to make it.”

“Oh, you did, did you?” I said severely. “And who told you to?”

“I didn’t tell him who it was or anything about it. Just asked him about this morning’s plane,” she defended. “But Mr. Bridges needn’t have gone at all, could have saved himself the trouble. He told me that whoever this party is that’s going out there, he or she is doomed to disappointment; nothing will come of it, he’ll just have wasted his time.”

My uncle’s in the import and export business; he’d gone to see about an important consignment of silk from Japan, but the maid couldn’t have known that, much less this seer of hers. I’m afraid I snickered rudely right in her face.

Nothing daunted, she rushed on: “But don’t let Mr. John come back by air, Miss Bridges, whatever you do! Wire him to take the train instead. The eastbound plane *is* going to run into trouble—he saw it clearly. Not a crack-up, but it’s going to be grounded somewhere in the Rockies and half of them are going to die of exposure before they’re located. He saw snow piled all around it and people with frozen hands and feet having to have them amputated later—”

I blew up. I said, “One more word out of you, and I’ll give you your week’s notice!”

She didn’t open her mouth from then on, just went around looking sorry for me.

Uncle John had told me he was starting back the following Saturday. Take-off was at seven Pacific Coast Time, ten back here. I’ll admit I got a little worried Friday night, wondered whether or not I oughtn’t to send that wire after all. I was afraid he’d laugh at me. More than that even, I hated to give in to her after the way I’d talked. I went to bed without sending the wire. It was too late when I woke up in the morning, he would have started already.

He should have got in about noon Sunday. I drove to the airport to meet him, and he wasn’t on the plane. That gave me a nasty turn. I asked at the airport-office, and they told me he’d booked a seat from Chicago east, along with several other people, on this one, and none of them had shown up to

make the connection; the 'Frisco plane had been overdue when they left Chicago.

I went home plenty worried. It was in the papers and on the radio already, reported missing somewhere over the Rockies with fourteen people in it!

The maid saw how I was taking it, so finally she came out with: "I suppose I'm discharged, but I knew better than you—I took the liberty of sending Mr. John a wire over your name last night, begging him to come by train instead—"

Discharged? I could have kissed her! But then anxiety raised its head again. "He's stubborn, he'd never listen to a message like that—"

"I—I told him that one of his associates wanted to consult him about a very important matter, and mentioned a place where the planes don't stop, so he'd have to take a train. *He* says," she went on, "that it won't be found for three days, the plane. It wouldn't have meant death, it isn't Mr. John's time yet, but he would have lost both feet and been a helpless cripple for the rest of his—"

All of which evoked a pretty creepy feeling in me. It wasn't helped any when my uncle got off the train three days later, safe and sound. The first words out of his mouth were that he'd made the trip for nothing: a maritime strike had broken out on the Coast and his silk-shipment was tied up indefinitely at Honolulu; he hadn't been able to accomplish a thing.

The snow-bound plane was sighted from the air later that same day, and when the rescue-parties got to it, seven of the fourteen were dead from exposure, and several of the survivors had to have their hands or feet amputated as soon as they got them to a hospital. Just as *he'd* foretold—rescuedate, circumstances, number of casualties, and all! It was uncanny. I didn't want to believe, I fought like anything against believing—and yet there it was.

I told my uncle the whole story of course—who wouldn't have?—and he was as impressed as I was. What we did next was what anyone else would have done after what had happened. We asked the maid to take the two of us to this man, we wanted to see him for ourselves. She wasn't to tell him who we were, just two friends of hers. I even put on an old

coat and hat of hers, to look properly working-class, and we left the car home, went there on foot.

It was a big let-down, at first. This fortune-teller was merely a middle-aged man sitting in a furnished-room with his suspenders hanging down! His name was Jeremiah Tompkins, about as unimpressive a name as they come. And worst of all, he was just a bookkeeper. Had been, rather, for he wasn't working just then. If I remember correctly, he was reading the want ads in a newspaper when we came in.

I could see my uncle was more disappointed; he was almost resentful. After all, Uncle John is a levelheaded, intelligent businessman. That a figure like this should be able to spout prophecies, should know more than he did himself about what was going to happen to him, was too much for him to swallow.

"Watch," he said to me out of the corner of his mouth, "I'll show you. I'll show you he's just a phony, that all this was just a coincidence. I've got something here that's the best little miracle-eraser in the world!"

And he took out five hundred dollars in cold cash and pressed it into Tompkins' hand. Tompkins had been reading the want ads, remember, and Elaine told me later her people were having him in for meals with them out of sheer pity.

"You've done something for me I can never repay you for," my uncle said as a come-on. "This is just a token of my gratitude. Call on me at any time and I'll be more than glad to—"

Tompkins didn't let him finish. He threw the money down at my uncle's feet. "I don't like being insulted," he said quietly. There was a sort of dignity about the way he said it, at that. "It's like being paid for—for showing a gruesome scar or some deformity. I don't do that for money, and I won't take money for it. This girl here—" he pointed at Elaine—"is a friend of mine. She asked me some questions about a plane and I answered them for her, that's all. Please go. I don't like being made a holy show of."

"But you don't know who I am," my uncle began protestingly.

Tompkins gave a bleak smile and put his hand up to his head, as though he had a headache. Not in that theatrical way clairvoyants do when they're about to "go into their

trance," but as though something were hurting him, wouldn't let him alone.

He answered as though he were speaking against his will. "You're John Bridges," he said. "Your mother died when you were fourteen years old, and it was the sight of the beautiful silk kimonos and wrappers she wore that really made you go into the export and import business later on. . . ."

Elaine could have told him all that, was the unspoken thought in my mind.

He turned to me and answered it as though it had been said aloud. I went white and nearly fell through the floor! "But here's something she couldn't have," he said. "About you. You took off your dance-slippers under a restaurant-table one night last week and a waiter accidentally kicked one halfway across the room. Rather than admit it was yours, you left in your stocking-feet. And you've got a diamond and ruby necklace with twenty stones in it in Safety-Box No. 1805 at the National Security Bank. Also a bundle of letters you bought back from a gigolo in Paris for fifty thousand francs."

My own uncle didn't know about that!

"I don't ask you to believe in me, I don't care whether you do or not," this Tompkins went on somberly. "I didn't ask you to come here in the first place. You're going to the police about me some day, anyway, and get me in a lot of trouble."

My hands strayed up and down the blank wall trying to find the door where there wasn't any door. My eyes were blurred. I moaned, "Get me out of here!" The whole world was turning upside-down on its axis. I felt like a fly walking on the ceiling.

My uncle took me home. The five hundred stayed there on Tompkins' floor. Elaine brought it back with her when she returned, after we did.

"Wouldn't touch it," she murmured. "What do you think he did, though? Borrowed five dollars from me, to tide himself over."

That business of the \$500 sold the fortune-teller to my uncle more than any number of bull's-eye predictions could have. He was convinced now that Jeremiah Tompkins wasn't a phony, a fake, a schemer of any kind. That he was a phenomenon: an ordinary, in fact sub-ordinary, human being

with this frightful gift—or blight—of prognostication. In other words, the groundwork of credulity had been laid. The rest followed in due course.

To begin with, Uncle John tried to make the man a gift of money again—no longer to show him up, but in all sincerity and respect now. He mailed him his personal check, for \$1000 this time. It came back inside a readdressed envelope, almost by return mail, torn into eight neat pieces. That failing, my uncle got Tompkins a job—and made sure he'd accept it by keeping his own name out of it. He had a friend advertise for a bookkeeper. The friend, without knowing the details, agreed to bar all except one of the applicants who might answer it—Jeremiah Tompkins. In other words, it was a one-man ad. Elaine was posted to call the man's attention to it in the paper, in case it should escape his eye. It all worked out according to plan; he took the job.

"But," I insisted stubbornly to the two of them, "if he's the actual mindreader he showed himself to be, how is it he didn't know at once who was in back of this paid ad you showed him? Why couldn't he see that the job came through Uncle John?"

"He doesn't go around all day, reading what's in people's minds—he'd kill himself doing that," Elaine protested, as though I had disparaged the man. "It seems to come to him in flashes, only when he'll let it—and he doesn't like to. It's there in his unconscious self the whole time." She meant subconscious. "And he lets it flicker out once in awhile, or else it gets out in spite of him—I don't know."

Anyway, Tompkins took the job, and if he was a first-class mystic, he wasn't any great shakes as a bookkeeper. My uncle's friend had to let him go in about six weeks. The friend didn't, of course, know the inside story; he claimed the man was too moony and moody—in plain English, shiftless.

Meanwhile Tompkins kept getting under my uncle's skin deeper and deeper. The strike on the Pacific Coast gave signs of going on all the rest of the summer. The silk shipment, which was worth thousands, was stuck there in Honolulu, rotting away. My uncle got an offer from a Japanese dealer in the islands, considerably below its intrinsic value, let alone any profit. It looked like a case of take what he could get or

lose the whole thing. It wasn't a question of the money so much, with him, but he hated to come out second best in any transaction, hated to admit himself licked.

He'd already drafted the cable accepting the Jap offer, then at the last minute held it without filing. He went and looked up Tompkins by himself, without confiding in anyone.

I don't know what passed between them. All I know is that Uncle John came home that night and told me he'd cabled the Japs to go to hell; the shipping strike was going to be over in forty-eight hours, right when the deadlock seemed at its worst.

I don't have to remind you what happened. You've read how the Chief Executive himself intervened unexpectedly two days later and the strike was arbitrated and called off between sun-up and sundown. The President's own advisers hadn't known he was going to do it, so it was said. My uncle's consignment beat every other cargo into 'Frisco; and by getting into port first—well, it was quite a windfall. Uncle John got exactly double the usual price for the shipment.

A man in a shabby furnished-room, without a job of his own, had saved his firm exactly \$200,000 all told!

I kept out of it from then on. I wanted to hang onto my peace of mind; more than that even, my sanity. I didn't want to turn into a neurotic ghost-ridden candidate for a mental clinic. I wouldn't even discuss Tompkins with Uncle John, or let him mention the man to me. So I can't give you the intermediate steps.

But then the thing finally clamped down on my uncle, as anyone might have known it would eventually. Three months ago, I saw the change come over him and asked him what it was. He suddenly retired from business, sold out—or rather gave away his interest for next to nothing. He lost concern in everything and anything. He got haggard. I could see the mortal terror standing out in his eyes, day by day.

He'd gone to Tompkins again about some enormous venture he was contemplating. He was gambling more and more on these "inside tips," growing more reckless all the time. But this time there was a different answer, a catastrophic answer.

The thing under discussion was a long-term transaction, that would have taken about six months to pay off. "It doesn't

matter one way or the other," Tompkins told him indifferently, "unless of course it's the firm itself you're thinking about, and not yourself personally." And then very indifferently, as though he'd known it all along: "Because you'll be dead by that time. Your life's coming to an end at midnight on the 14th-to-15th of next March."

I don't know whether Tompkins told it to him all at once, or doled it out piece-meal. I don't know how many times my uncle had to seek him out—plead with him maybe, or grovel on bended knees. I don't know anything at all. Uncle John wouldn't have been human if he hadn't asked the man how he would die, in what manner, and what could be done to prevent it.

"Nothing," was the merciless answer. "You can't stop it from happening, can't evade it. Though you fly to the far ends of the world, though you hide yourself in the depths of the earth, though you gather a thousand men about you to shield you, it will still find you out. It's there—written down for you—*Death by the jaws of a lion.*"

And then Uncle John started going slowly to pieces. Oh, it's not the money, Lieutenant McManus! It's not that he's endowed Tompkins with hundreds of thousands of dollars at a time, that he's dissipating our fortune, my inheritance, trying to buy minutes and *seconds* of life back from a man who admits, himself, that he has no control over it, can do nothing about it. I don't mind that.

It's that he's dying by inches, before my very eyes, day by day. It's that the Spanish Inquisition, the Chinese, the Iroquois, never devised tortures to compare to what he's going through now. It's that it's become communicated to me; I'm terrified, and sick with horror, and beating my hands together in the dark. It's that the sun has gone out and we're two people trapped in a black pit. It's that there's only tomorrow left now. I want help! *I want help!*

SHE was so overwrought that she fell forward across his desk, burying her face against it, pounding it helplessly with her little clenched fist, again and again. McManus had to send out for a sedative. When she had drunk the spirits of ammonia, she lay down on a cot in another room and rested,

dozed off for awhile. McManus covered her up to the chin with his own overcoat, with his own hands.

When he went back again alone to his office, he spat out: "Gad, what things you run into!" Twenty million dollars, eighteen years old, and her very soul taken from her. On the border-line of gibbering idiocy, almost. As for the uncle, McManus could imagine the shape *he* was in.

He sat down at his desk, stayed there staring blankly before him as though he'd forgotten the whole incident.

After about five minutes, he picked up the phone very slowly, and he said even more slowly: "Send Tom Shane in here to me. And Schafer. And Sokolsky. And Dominguez. Send out a short-wave if you have to, I want 'em here right away. Tell 'em to drop whatever they're on, no matter what it is. . . ."

Tom Shane was just a pleasant-looking fellow in a thirty-dollar herringbone suit. He didn't look dumb and he didn't look bright either. Just a guy you wouldn't mind having a glass of beer with. He lined himself up to the left of the other three.

"Shane," said McManus, "are you afraid of lions?"

"I wouldn't go to bed with one," admitted Shane frankly.

"Shane," said McManus, "do you think you can keep a millionaire from being mangled by a lion at exactly twelve o'clock tomorrow midnight?"

It wasn't really a question. McManus seemed to be talking absent-mindedly while he did a lot of thinking behind the smoke-screen of words. "I may as well tell you now that the 'lion' might take almost any kind of a shape. It might be a bullet. It might be a poisoned cup of coffee. Then again it just might be an honest-to-goodness lion. I could fill that house with fellows like you, have 'em hanging from the chandeliers like mistletoe, but I don't want to do that. Then the 'lion' would only defer its visit, come around some other time, maybe six months from now, when it was least expected. I don't want that to happen; I want it to come when it's due to come, so I can make sure it'll never come again. So there's only one man going up there to that house with those two people, and I don't want him to fall down on the job. It's a double-header too. If this is what I think it is, that girl's as

doomed as her uncle. That would mop up the twenty millions nicely, otherwise she could always bring suit to recover what's already been given away of it.

"So, Tom Shane, you go in there in the next room and sit by Ann Bridges, and go home with her when she's feeling fit enough. You're not a detective—you're her boy-friend on a week-end visit as her house-guest, or her new butler, or a traveling-salesman trying to sell her vacuum-cleaners, I don't care. But keep those two people alive. Midnight tomorrow's the deadline."

Tom Shane wheeled around and went out without a word. He still didn't look bright, but he didn't look dumb either. Just a well-built guy in a herringbone suit.

McManus said, "Schafer, you're on a girl named Elaine O'Brien—and all her family too. I want to know more about 'em than they know about themselves. And be ready to pinch."

"Sokolsky, you're on a guy named Jeremiah Tompkins. And don't kid yourself by the way he looks that he's no great shakes of a guy. He's the kingpin in this, whatever it is. Don't let him out of your sight. Dictaphones and every trick of the trade. And try not to think while you're at it; the guy's supposed to be a mind-reader. Take somebody else on it with you, it's not going to be any pushover. And be even readier to pinch than Schafer. Tompkins has got to be in custody long before midnight—whether you get anything on him or not."

There was just a guy left that looked a little like Valentino, only better-looking.

"Dominguez," McManus said, "I've gotta lotta little odd-jobs for you. But they're just as important as the other guy's assignments, don't bluff yourself they're not. Find out what zoos there are within a 500-mile radius of here. Check with every one of them and find out if they keep lions. Find out if any have escaped or been swiped."

"Swipe a lion?" breathed the detective.

"Warn the keepers of all of 'em to keep extra watch over their lion cages tonight and all day tomorrow. Report to me. Got that? *Then*, find out at what night-club Miss Ann Bridges had a slipper kicked across the dance floor two years ago. And what became of it. Also, the mate to it. Use your Latin looks, apply for a job there or something. Find out what waiter

what waiter?

picked 'em up after she'd gone, and what he did with them. If you can get hold of him, bring him in. Report to me. *Then*, buttonhole one of the big-shots at the National Security Bank, ask his cooperation, see if you can trace the leak by which the number of Miss Bridges' safe-deposit box—1805—and what it had in it, came into the possessh of a third party. There's nothing criminal in that, in itself, but it would give us a swell lead.

"Y'got less than twenty-four hours to do all this in! Y'ain't eating and y'ain't sleeping and y'ain't even taking time off to talk from now on! Get going!"

And when he was all by himself once more, McManus picked up the phone and asked for long distance. "Gimme Paris, France," he said matter-of-factly, "the Chief of the *Sûreté*."

Many blackmailing gigolos have had telephone love-calls, but few have ever been the cause of a transatlantic long-distance from police official to police-official!

THE University Club Building has two entrances, one on the side street, the other on the avenue. An L-shaped lobby connects them. It's just for men, of course—college men—and women aren't allowed above the mezzanine floor, but the lobby's usually full of them, calling for pinch-hitters to fill in at dances, theatre-parties, house-parties, etc.

Ann Bridges and Tom Shane arrived there simultaneously, she in her car at the main entrance, he in a taxi at the side entrance. He had a cowhide overnight-bag with him, and had changed in the cab itself. He had Princeton written all over him and—no offense—was now veering dangerously toward the dumb side of the not-dumb, not-bright equation. He had a polo coat hanging down his back below the elbows, orange-and-black tie (very narrow diagonals, not loud), the usual thick brogues. If you'd have unbuttoned his jacket, you'd have seen a fraternity pin on the lower tab of his vest. He looked about twenty-three. He jelled perfectly.

The girl was just coming in one side of the lobby as Shane showed up from the other, bag in hand. They were collegiately informal—and loud. He didn't raise his hat; she punched him on the shoulder. "Hi, toots." "'Lo ducky!" He

grabbed her arm and they went sailing outside to her car, two young things without a care in the world.

Heads turned after them. Somebody mentioned her name. Everybody wondered who he was. All this to baffle watchful eyes that otherwise might have seen her drive away from Headquarters with Shane and would have known him to be a detective. A ticket for a traffic violation she had actually received two days previously was screen enough for her visit there tonight. McManus had had the desk-sergeant enter a dummy complaint against her in his records, and a Headquarters reporter had fallen for it, phoned in a couple of lines about it to his paper.

In the car she took the wheel. Shane pitched his bag into the back seat, lay back on the base of his skull. But as they shot off, he suddenly grew up again.

"Feel well enough to drive?" he asked.

"It'll keep my mind busy till we get there. College men usually let the other fellow do their driving for them anyway. If you're not one to the life—! How did you do it so quickly?"

"Borrowed the outfit from a friend who really went to one—changed in the cab. . . . Who's out there with him?" he asked abruptly.

"We have a cook, and a door-opener; then there's Elaine, and Uncle John's secretary. My uncle will be all right—I know what you're thinking—but he'll be all right until tomorrow night. He wants to live too badly to—to do anything to himself ahead of time. It's tomorrow night we've got to worry about." She drew in her breath fearfully and repeated it a second time: "Tomorrow night."

"Step it up a little," Shane said quietly. "Ninety won't hurt it any." The clock on the dashboard said midnight. The midnight before *the* midnight.

It was a palatial place, lost in the midst of its own grounds. Couldn't see it from the main road, it was so far back, but a private driveway led to it. Lighted by their own private road-lights.

Two granite lions couchant, like a sort of omen, were the first things met Shane's eye as he got out in front of the entrance. A little like the lions in front of the Public Library in New York, but smaller. They went up the steps between them.

"I bet it hasn't helped any to have those things staring him in the face every time he went in or out the last few weeks," Shane muttered grimly.

"He's spoken several times of having them removed and replaced by something else," the girl said, "but this terrible lethargy, this fatalism, that's come over him, has prevented his doing even that."

The butler let them in. Shane, taking a snapshot of the man through his mask of collegiate vacuity, decided this wasn't one of those crime-story butlers who are to be suspected at sight. He was an old man—sixty or more—had loyalty written all over him, and looked plenty worried in the bargain.

"How is he, Weeks?" the girl asked in a whisper.

The butler shook his head. "I can't stand much more of it myself, Miss Ann. Just watching him. He's sat in one place ever since you left, staring at a clock on the wall." The old man looked sort of hopefully toward Shane; then, noting the get-up, his hopes seemed to fade a little.

"Yes, he knows about it, Weeks," the girl said; "that's why he's here. Take his bag up—put him in the room next to my uncle."

On each side of the long entrance hall a ceiling-high stained-glass panel was set into the blank wall, with electric lights hidden behind them to throw them into relief. They gleamed out in beautiful medieval tones of ruby, emerald, sapphire and mauve. Each leaded sub-division bore the head of some mythological or heraldic animal—a unicorn, a wild boar, a lion rampant, a phoenix. . . .

She saw Shane looking at the windows as they went by. "They came from England," she said dully. "Some royal abbey or other. Time of the Plantagenets."

Shane didn't know who the Plantagenets were. He wasn't supposed to, anyway. "Pretty old, I guess, eh?" he hazarded. It occurred to him that, judging by the number of decorative animals around, the prophecy might very well have originated right here in the house, in someone's evil, fertile mind.

"He ever been here, to your knowledge?" he asked.

"Who, Tompkins? Never."

She took the detective in to see the doomed John Bridges. Bridges sat in the middle of a big room, and he had gath-

ered three time-pieces around him. A big clock on the wall, a medium-sized one on the table before him, an expensive white-gold watch on his wrist. All three were ticking remorselessly away in the silence, like the mechanism of a time-bomb. There was a minute's difference, Shane noted, between the wall and table clocks. Bridges turned two feverish, burning eyes in hollow sockets toward his niece as she came in.

"Which is right?" he pleaded. "What does yours say?"

"It's twenty-nine past twelve, not half-past," the girl said.

His face lit up joyously. "Oh, Ann!" he cried. "Oh, Ann! that gives me a minute more! Just think, a minute more!"

Tom Shane thought, "For what he's done to this guy already, Tompkins deserves the chair, whether he intends doing anything more or not."

Aloud he said, cheerfully, "You and I, oldtimer, are going to have a good stiff highball together—then we're going up to bed!"

"Yes, yes," Bridges agreed pathetically. "My next-to-the-last night on earth! I must celebrate, I must—" His voice broke dismally. "Oh, help me to forget, fellow, for just five minutes! Just five minutes, that's all I ask!" He opened a drawer, pulled out a checkbook, scribbled hastily in it. "If you can take my mind off it for just five minutes, write your own figure in here over my name! Five thousand, then thousand, I don't care!"

Shane thought: "I wonder how many times friend Tompkins has cashed in like this?" He went out to mix the highballs himself, and gave Bridges a shot of Scotch that would have lifted a horse off its shoes. McManus' words came back to him: "It may be a poisoned cup of coffee." He sampled the drink himself first, rinsing his mouth with it carefully. The taste was so good he hated to waste it, so he swallowed it. "Pleasant way of dying, anyway," he consoled himself.

He took the drinks inside. "You go to bed, kid," he told the girl. "Lock your door. It's my job from now on."

She said, "You're swell. Keep us alive," with a funny little catch in her voice as she sidled by him and went up the stairs.

The wall-clock chimed one, with a horrid, shuddery, brazen sound. "Twenty-three hours to go," John Bridges said.

Shane clicked their glasses together with almost enough

force to shatter them. "Here's to crime!" he said huskily. He winked one eye deliberately at the doomed man.

3 A.M.—Schafer, lieutenant. Sorry to wake you up, but I've lost this Elaine O'Brien twist, Miss Bridges' maid—"

You've lost her? Well, find her again! Whaddye mean by—

It ain't that. I know where she is, but she's no good to us any more. She's dead.

Dead? What happened to her?

She did the Dutch. Took a run up to the bathroom just before I closed in on her, and swallowed something. I called an ambulance right away, but it was too late.

So then she *was* implicated! She knew something and was afraid we'd get it out of her!

She didn't know I was on her tail. I had just about located her house, when I heard the screaming start up inside. Time I busted in, it was all over. I'm holding the rest of them. They claim it was the prophecy preying on her mind. She came home tonight and told them she couldn't stand the gaff, waiting around out there for it to happen. I checked on the drug-store where she got the stuff, and she bought it a full three days ago, long before Miss Bridges came to us. What'll I do with the rest of 'em?

Bring 'em in Schafer—and keep 'em from swallowing things.

10 A.M.—Dominguez, lieutenant. I took a dishwashing-job at the Club Cuckoo, where Miss Bridges lost her shoes. My hands are red as lobsters!

Never mind your hands, I'm no palm-reader. What'd you get?

They knew who she was, so they knew whose shoes they were. First the manager was going to send 'em out to her house next day—after all, they cost about fifty bucks a pair—but a Frenchman fella who was sitting there at one of the tables buttonholes him. This gee gives the manager a lotta malarkey about how he's an old friend of Miss Bridges, knew her in Paris, and he'll see she gets 'em back. I got all this from a waiter, who I gave a tip on the horses to while I was mas-saging the crockery—

Well, you got something, Don. I was just asking about that very guy at the rate of twenty bucks a syllable. The shake-down racket made Paris too hot for him, so he came over here about two years ago. You gotta descriptch, I suppose?

Yeah. Misplaced eyebrow on his lip. When he's doing the hot spots he wears one eyeglass in his right lamp. Very good-looking. A short little devil, about five—

That's enough. One of his names is Raoul Berger, but he's got twenty others. So he got the shoes?

No. The pay-off is the manager wanted all the credit for himself and hung onto them. But this Frog didn't seem to mind—

Sure he didn't. All he cared about was knowing what had taken place, so he could tip off Tompkins and get under her skin. I'm sending out a general alarm for Berger right away. They're probably working hand-in-glove together, and intend splitting the Bridges millions between 'em at the windup. Probably the idea was originally Berger's, since he'd already shaken her down once in Europe.

Now, about the safe-deposit box, chief. I been conferring with Cullinan—he's the manager of that branch of the National Security—and we questioned the vault-keeper. I think I've cleared up pretty definitely about how the number of Miss B's box, 1805, was known—but not its contents. The vault custodian seems straight enough; he's been with them for years. He recalls definitely that one day about a year and a half ago, Miss B. took her box into one of the little private cubbyholes that are provided for that purpose down in vault room. The custodian recalls it, because she came out and absent-mindedly left her key behind her in there. . . . Now, two of these keys are used at a time, see. The custodian has one, and the owner of the box has the other. The number of the box it opens is engraved on the shaft of each key. Well, Miss B. stepped right back inside, that day she mislaid her key, and the custodian went with her to help her look. The key wasn't in there. They came out again—she went through her purse and everything—no sign of it. He stepped in again a second time, and there it was, right on the slab! . . . The custodian's pretty certain that the adjoining booth was occupied at the time, but is hazy about just who was in there. That doesn't

matter. The partitions don't run all the way up to the ceiling. Obviously it was our friend Berger, and obviously he'd been in there every time she was, waiting for just such a thing to happen. And when it did, he probably used a fish-hook or a magnet on the end of a string to draw the key up, memorize its number, then replace it again. All to add to Tompkin's buildup with her as a wizard. But about what the contents of the box were, I don't know, unless he used some kind of a mirror as a periscope—

More likely she bought that necklace in Paris. Berger'd seen it on her over there, and he figured it would be in the box. Also the letters she'd written to him. Took a guess at it and scored a bull's-eye. To get into the vaults all he'd have to do was rent a box under a phony name for five, six bucks, stuff it with old newspapers, and keep showing up each time she did. Still, it isn't as easy as it sounds. Berger had to stay out of sight—she knew what he looked like—and he had to get in right next door to her each time, not further down the line.

For twenty million bucks I'd go to that much trouble myself.

Get busy on them zoos, or you won't even be earning forty-eight-hundred.

Zoos! That's gratitude for ya!

5 P.M.—Sokolsky, lieutenant—

It's about time I was hearing from you! Where've you been all this time? What've you got?

A pretty bad case of the jitters, for one thing. And Dobbs—I took him on this detail with me—is about ready to crack wide open. I don't think he'll be any good for the rest of this case.

I ain't asking for a health report, I wanna know—

It's uncanny about that guy—Tompkins, I mean. He—he can see through walls and things—

Less words and more facts!

Yes, sir. We took a room in the same house he lives in. We got a lucky break and got the one right over his. Tompkins was out at the time, so we fixed up a dictaphone and led it up through the ceiling behind the steampipe. The landlady don't

like him, on accounta he read what was in her mind when she insured her third husband so heavily, after losing two in a year, and also 'cause he's hep that the color of the hair she goes around wearing ain't her own. She didn't tell me this; I put two and two together from the remarks she let drop. Anyway, I got around her and found out some French cake-eater's been calling on Tompkins off and on for the past year or so.

Your voice makes sweet music! We're getting places fast, now!

The landlady thinks this Frenchy is the nuts, but that's neither here nor there. The point is, he's the only person at all—outside of the O'Brien girl and the old man Bridges himself—who has been near Tompkins since he's living in the house. . . .

Well, the O'Brien girl's out of it now. I don't think she was in on it, anyway. Just a stooge they used to pump facts out of about the Bridges family. I think maybe she found out there was something phony up, after it was too late, and realizing what she'd done to her benefactors, committed the old harry. Go ahead, Sock, what else?

I gave Tompkins' room a good going-over while I was in there, and came across any number of checks made out by Bridges. Way up in the high brackets too, telephone numbers! The only thing that don't jell right, was some of 'em were dated six months or more back. He hauls 'em in all right, but don't seem to bother cashing 'em! Maybe he's just cagey, afraid to go too heavy yet while Bridges is still alive. Maybe he's saving them all up until B. and the girl have been done away with!

Will those checks build us a case against him and his French shill! What'd you do with them?

I was afraid he'd miss them if I impounded them this soon. Dobbs and I rushed a few of the biggest ones out, had 'em photostated, and then replaced 'em again.

Good work!

Tompkins came in about midnight, just as we were getting through, so we beat it upstairs to listen in. About two in the morning this French pal of his pays him a visit. Dobbs took down everything in shorthand, until he went haywire, and I'll read it to you.

Tompkins says, "You again? What do you want now?"

"Endorse me another one of them checks—I'm running short."

T. refuses at first, says he don't want Bridges' money, and Frenchy has no right to it either. Frenchy pulls a gun on him or something, and makes him do it. Then Frenchy says, "Now you get hold of Bridges tomorrow and have him change his will, while there's still time. I'll supply the lawyer, a friend of mine. He's to turn over everything to you, see? Kid him that you'll call off the prophecy if he does it."

Tompkins says, "But I can't. It's not in my power. It's there. It's going to happen."

The French guy does a slow burn. "You think I believe that stuff? Save that for him! You do what I tell you, or—"

Tompkins answers quietly, "You're not going to get hold of his money, Berger. You're not going to live long enough to. Why, you're going to die even sooner than he is! His time is tomorrow night, but yours is right tonight! You're never even going to get out of this house alive. There are two dicks in the room over us right now, listening to every word we say—their names are Sokolsky and Dobbs—"

The notes break off there, loot, because Dobbs keeled over right at the mike and pulled a dead faint on the floor. Yeah, honest! It gave me a pretty stiff jolt myself. Just seeing the leadwire of the dictaphone, which I'm sure he didn't, wouldn't have given this Tompkins our names—nor how many of us there were.

I'll have to quote the rest from memory: "Death," says Tompkins, "is rushing at you right now, I hear the beat of his swift wings. I feel it, I see it, it's on its way. You have only minutes left. And for me there is imprisonment waiting, and lingering death in a little stone room—"

I heard the Frenchman yell out, "So you framed me, you dirty double-crossing lug! Well, see if you saw this in your crystal ball!"

And with that the gun goes off, and nearly busts my eardrum. The Frenchman has shot him.

I didn't wait to hear any more. I unlimbered my own gun and lit out and down the stairs hell-bent for leather. Berger had beaten me out to the stairs; he was already a flight below me.

I yelled, "Hold it! Stay where you are!" Instead he turned and fired at me, and I fired at the same time he did. He fell all the rest of the way down to the ground floor, and when I got to him he was dead.

Tompkins came out of his room unhurt, but with a powder burn across his forehead. Berger must have fired at point-blank range, and still didn't hit him! He started coming down slowly to where I was, with nothing in his hands. Dobbs had come to, and came down behind him, looking like he'd seen a ghost.

Well, this is the hardest part to believe; look, you can suspend me if you want to, but it's the God's honest truth. This man Tompkins came all the way down to where I was bending over the body at the foot of the stairs. I straightened up and covered him with my gun. It didn't faze him in the least, he kept moving right on past me toward the street-door. Not quickly, either; as slowly as if he was just going out for a walk. He said, "It isn't my time yet. You can't do anything to me with that."

I said, "I can't, eh? You take one step away from me, and it'll not only be your time, but you'll be a minute late!"

Dobbs was practically useless; he almost seemed to be afraid of the guy.

Tompkins turned his back on me and took that one step more. I fired a warning shot over his head. He put his hand on the doorknob. So I lowered the gun and fired at the back of his knee, to bring him down. The bullet must have gone right through between his legs. I heard it hit wood along the door-frame. Tompkins opened the door and stepped into the opening, and I got mad. I reared after him and fired point-blank at the back of his head. He wasn't five yards away from me. It was brutal—would have been murder and I'm willing to admit it myself, even though technically he was resisting arrest! I'm telling you he didn't even stagger; it never even got him. He went on through and the darkness swallowed him up.

I leaned there against that door for a minute seeing ghosts, then I ran out after him. He was clean gone, not a sign of him up or down the block.

Loot, I'm in a frame of mind where I don't care what you

do to me. My job is to get flesh-and-blood guys that know a bullet when they feel one, not protoplasms that don't even know enough to lie down when they're hit. . . .

Awright, Sokolsky, pull yourself together. Bring in the stiff and rinse yourself out with a jolt of rye; maybe it'll help you carry out instructions better next time! All I know is you let Tompkins slip right through your fingers, and we're right back where we were. We got to start all over again. We've stopped the crook, but the maniac or screwball or whatever you want to call him, the more dangerous of the two, is at large. And every minute he stays that way, Bridges and his niece are in danger of their lives! Tompkins wasn't bluffing when he walked out that door. He believes in that hooey himself; and if the prophecy don't work, he'll help it work! We've got seven hours to pick him up again, out of seven million people!

"Don't!" Shane yelled at the man roughly. "Take your eyes off that clock! You're starting to get me myself, doing that! I'm only human!" He took a quick step over to the table and turned the instrument face down.

John Bridges gave a skull-like grin, all teeth and no mirth. "You're only human—that's right. That's the truest thing you ever said, son. You're a detective too, aren't you, son? That's why you've been hanging around here all day. Don't try to tell me, I know. This poor child here thinks you can save me. *You* think you can save me, too. You poor fools! Nothing can—nothing! *He* said I'm to die, and I've got to die."

"He's lying through his teeth!" Shane yelled hotly. "That Tompkins is a faker and a crook and a skunk. He'll fry in hell, before anything gets near you. I'll live to see it, and so will she—and so will you!"

Bridges' head fell forward, over his lap. "Will it hurt much?" he whined. "I guess it must. Those terrible fangs in their mouths! Those sharp, cruel claws, tearing your skin to ribbons! But it won't be the claws—it's the jaws that will mangle me, worry me like a cat worries a mouse! By the *jaws* of a lion, he said—by the *jaws* of a lion!"

Ann Bridges put her hands over her ears. "Don't," she mur-

mured quietly. She gave Shane a look. "I'm trying so hard to—to stay all in one piece."

Shane poured a dynamic drink, all Scotch with just a needle of seltzer. He handed it to Bridges with a stony face. "Give yourself a little bravemaker," he suggested in an undertone.

The millionaire deliberately thrust the glass away from him. Liquor spilled all over the carpet; the glass bounced and rocked on its side without breaking. "Alcohol! Trying to ward off death with bottled slops!"

Shane took out his gun, pointed it butt-first at the old millionaire. "Don't this mean anything to you? Don't it mean anything to you that every window and door of this house is locked fast, that there's an electric alarm on them? That there's dozens of armed men within call hidden all around this estate, ready to jump in and grab anyone or anything the minute it shows? That we're sealed up tight, just the five of us?"

The secretary had lit out in panic sometime during the previous night. Just as Elaine O'Brien had fled. Shane had found a note from him that morning, saying he couldn't stand it, resigning the job.

Bridges cackled horribly, like a chicken about to have its neck wrung. "Five against Fate. Five against the stars. And what a five! A fat Finnish cook, an old-man bulter, a slip of a girl, a loud-mouthed boy with a gun, and I—!"

"Fate, hell! Stars, hell!" Shane smashed the butt of his gun fiercely at the face of the clock on the wall. Thick glass dribbled off it. "That for Fate, and that for the stars!"

Something happened to the clock. The damaged mechanism started whirring violently, the hands began to fluctuate—the hour-hand slowly, the minute-hand more rapidly. They telescoped, jammed together in a straight line pointing at the top of the dial, stayed that way. The whirring sound stopped, the apparatus went dead.

Bridges pointed a bloodless finger at the omen; he didn't have to say anything.

In the silence the old butler came to the door, stood looking in at them a minute. "Dinner is served," he said hollowly.

"The Last Supper," Bridges shuddered. He got up, swayed,

tottered toward the dinning room. "Eat, drink, let us be merry, for—tonight we die!"

Ann Bridges ran to the detective, clung to him. What difference did it make, at a time like this, that Shane was still a stranger to her, that she hadn't even known him twenty-four hours before?

"And I still say it was just a coincidence," he muttered pugnaciously. "You say it too! Look at me and say it! It was just a coincidence. That happened to be the nearest place on the dial where they both met exactly, those two hands. My blows dented them. They got stuck there just as the works died, that was all. Stay sane whatever you do. Say it over and over. It was just a coincidence!"

Outside the tall French windows, in the velvety night-sky, the stars in all their glory twinkled derisively in at them.

10:45 P.M.—Dominguez, Mac. I've been trying to get through to you for fifteen minutes. Must be some trouble along the line somewhere. I'm way the hell out at a little crossroads called Sterling Junction—yeah, it's only about ten miles from the Bridges place, in the other direction. Very bad grief. Checking the zoos like you told me, I dig up a traveling road-show—a carnival or whatever you want to call it—making a one-night-stand here.

Now they had two lions—yes, I said *had*, that's the grief. Two monsters, a male and a female, both in one cage. My check-up was a postmortem. They'd both busted out not twenty minutes before—don't know if the cage was left open through the keeper's carelessness, or deliberately tampered with. I beat it right up here to find out what I could. The female was shot dead just outside the carnival-grounds but the male got away clean. A posse is out after it with everything from shotguns to fire-extinguishers, hoping to rub it out before it gets anyone. They think it's heading toward the Bridges estate. Someone in a Ford reported sighting what he mistook to be an enormous tawny dog with iridescent green eyes in the underbrush as he went by.

Earlier in the evening, the keeper tells me, there was a peculiar-looking duck mooning around the lion cage. Kept staring at them like he was trying to hypnotize the two brutes.

The keeper caught this guy teasing them with a bit of goods torn from a woman's dress, flitting it at them through the bars. He sent him about his business, without having sense enough to try and find out what the idea was. It may have been our friend Tompkins, then again it may not. Plenty of village half-wits can't resist riling caged animals like that.

D'you suppose brutes like that can be mesmerized or hypnotized in some way, loot? D'you suppose they can be given the scent of one particular person, through a bit of clothing, like bloodhounds? Yeah, I know, but then this whole affair is so screwy from first to last, nothing would surprise me any more. You better contact Shane right away and let him know he's up against the real thing, not a metaphor any more. There's a lot of difference between a man-eater like that and a little runt like Tompkins, when it comes to a showdown!

JOHN BRIDGES was slumped in a big overstuffed chair by now, staring wild-eyed at nothing. Shane was perched on the chair arm, his gun resting on his thigh, finger around the trigger, safety off. Ann Bridges was standing behind the chair, leaning over it, pressing soothing hands to her uncle's forehead.

The portières were drawn across the French windows now, veiling the stars outside—that were there nevertheless. In addition, a ponderous bookcase blocked one window, a massive desk the other. The double-doors were locked on the inside, and the key to them was in Shane's vest pocket. The butler and the Finnish cook were, at their own request, locked in the scullery. If death must come to the head of the house, perhaps it would pass them by. They were not marked for it.

It was the awful silence that was so hard to bear. They couldn't get the old millionaire to say anything any more. Their own voices—Shane's and Ann's—were a mockery in their ears, so they quit trying to talk after a while. Bridges wouldn't drink either, and even if he had, he was past receptivity by now; it wouldn't have affected him.

The girl's face was the color of talcum. Her uncle's was a death mask, a bone structure overlaid by parchment. Shane's was granite, with a glistening line of sweat just below his hair line. He'd never forget this night, the detective knew, no

matter what else happened for the rest of his life. They were all getting scars on their souls, the sort of scars people got in the Dark Ages, when they believed in devils and black magic.

The travesty of food and drink that Shane had swallowed at that shadowy supper-table a while before was sticking in his craw. How can wine warm you when the toast is death at midnight? He'd tried to urge the girl to leave while there was time, to get out and let the two of them face it alone. He hadn't been surprised at her staunch refusal; he admired her all the more for it. He would nevertheless have overridden her by physical force if necessary—the atmosphere had grown so macabre, so deadly—but for one fact, one all important fact that he hadn't mentioned.

When he'd tried to contact McManus, to have a special bodyguard sent out to take Ann away, he found out that the phone was dead. They were cut off here. She couldn't go alone, of course; that would have been worse than staying.

They had a clock with them in the room again. Bridges begged and pleaded so hard for one, that Shane had reversed his edict. The mental agony of Bridges, and the strain on Ann and himself, he noticed, were much worse without a clock than with one. It was far better to know just how much time there was left. Shane had brought in a large one with a pendulum, from the entrance hall. It was fourteen minutes to twelve, now.

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick—and it was thirteen minutes to twelve. The pendulum, like a harried gold planet, kept flashing back and forth behind the glass pane that cased it. Ann kept manipulating her two solacing hands over the doomed man's temples, stroking gently.

"It goes so fast, so fast," John Bridges groaned, eyes on the clock. The minute-hand, shaped like a gold spearhead, had just notched forward again—eleven to twelve.

"Damn!" Shane said with a throaty growl, "Damn!" He began to switch the muzzle of his gun restlessly up and down on his thigh. Something to shoot at, he thought; gimme something to shoot at! A drop of sweat ran vertically down his forehead as far as the bridge of his nose, then off into one of the tear-ducts beside it.

Tick, tick, tick—whish, whish, whish—eleven to twelve.

Bridges said suddenly, without taking eyes off the clock: "Son—Shane, or whatever your name is—call Warren 2424 in the city for me. Ask *him* once more—oh, I've asked him so many times, so many thousand times already—but ask him once more, for the last time, if there isn't any hope for me? Ask him if I've got to go, if he still sees it?"

Shane said, "Who?" But he knew who. Bridges wasn't aware yet that Tompkins was no doubt in custody long ago, that McManus had probably seen to that item right after Ann's visit, first thing.

"Tompkins," the dead man in the chair answered. "I haven't—haven't heard from him in two days now. And if—if there isn't any hope, then say goodbye for me."

Shane said curiously, sparring for time because he knew the phone was dead, "You want me to unlock those doors, go out there into the other room where the phone is?"

"Yes, yes," Bridges said. "It's still safe, we have—yes, there's ten minutes yet. You can be back in here inside of a minute. His landlady will answer. Tell her to hurry and bring him down to the phone—"

Shane snapped his fingers mentally, got off the arm of the chair. "Maybe I can bring this baby back to life," he thought. "Why didn't I think of this before?" He gave the girl a look. "Stay right by him, where you are, Miss Ann. I'll just be outside the door."

He took the doorkey out, opened the two tall halves, stepped quickly to the phone in the room beyond. The lights were on all over the house, everything was still.

The phone was still dead, of course. One of the lines must be down somewhere. He said loudly into the silent mouth-piece, "Give me Warren 2424, hurry it up!" He feigned a pause, then he said: "Bring Jeremiah Tompkins to the phone, quickly! This call is from John Bridges."

He faked another wait, slightly longer this time. He could hear the clock ticking remorselessly away in there where Ann Bridges and her uncle were, everything was so quiet. He kept his gun out in his right hand; the phone was a hand-set. A gust of wind or something scuffed and snuffed at one of the French windows over on the other side of the house; instantly his gun was pointing in that direction, like the magnetic

needle of a compass. There was something almost animal about the sound—*Phoof!* like that. A snuffle.

It wasn't repeated, and the fact that he was staging an act out here, a lifesaving act, took Shane's mind off the interruption. He said aloud, into empty space: "Tompkins? I'm talking on behalf of Mr. Bridges. Does that still hold good, for tonight at twelve? It's nearly that now, you know."

There was a long mirror-panel in the wall over him. In it he could see the room he had left, see the two of them in there, the girl and her uncle, tense, bending forward, drinking in every word he uttered.

"Fight fire with fire," he thought. "I don't know why McManus didn't sweat Tompkins down to the bone, then make him eat his prophecy to Bridges's face. That would have undone the damage quicker than anything else!"

He raised his voice. "That's more like it!" he said. "When did you find this out? Re-checked, eh? You should have let him know first thing—he's been worried sick! I'll tell him right away!" He hung up, wondering just how good an actor he was going to be.

He went briskly in again, gave them the bridgework. He could tell by the girl's face that, woman-like, she saw through the bluff; maybe she had found out already that the phone was n.g. But if he could only sell the death-candidate himself—

"It's all off!" he announced cheerfully. "Tompkins just told me so himself. There's been a change in—in, uh, the stars. He's not getting the death-vibrations any more. Can't possibly be midnight tonight. He'll tell you all about it himself when he—" Something in the old man's face stopped him. "What's the matter, what're you looking at me like that for? Didn't you hear what I just said?"

John Bridges' head was thrown wearily back, mouth open. He began to roll it slowly from side to side in negation. "Don't mock me," he said. "Death's too serious to be mocked like that. I just remembered—after I sent you out there—his landlady had that phone taken out a month ago. Too much trouble calling roomers to it all the time, she said. There is no phone at all now in the house where Tompkins lives."

Shane took it like a man. He turned away without a word, closed the doors again behind him, leaned his back against them. Tossing the key up and down in the hollow of his hand, he smiled mirthlessly out of the corner of his mouth.

The figure in the chair was holding out a hand toward him, a trembling hand. "It's five-to," he quavered. "I'm going to say goodby now. Thank you for sticking by me, anyway, son. Ann, my dear, come around in front of me. Kiss me goodby."

Shane said in a hoarse, offensive voice: "What'll you have for breakfast?" He ignored the outstretched hand.

Bridges didn't answer. The girl crouched down before him and he kissed her on the forehead. "Goodby, dear. Try to be happy. Try to forget—whatever horror you're about to witness in the next few minutes."

Shane said belligerently, trying to rally him: "Not to want to die is one thing. Not to lift a finger to keep from dying is another! Were you always like this, all your life?"

The doomed man said, "Its easy to be brave with forty years ahead of you. Not so easy with only four minutes—"

The tick of the clock, the hiss of its pendulum, seemed louder than all their voices. Three minutes to twelve . . . two minutes. John Bridges' eyes were like billiardballs in his head, so rounded, so hard, so white, straining toward those two hands closing in on one another. Shane's trigger-finger kept twitching nervously, aching to pull, to let go—but in which direction he didn't know, couldn't tell.

That was the worst part of it, there wasn't anything to shoot at!

One minute to go. The space between the two hands was a sliver of white, a paring, a thread. Three pairs of eyes were on it. Dying calf-eyes; frightened woman's eyes; hard, skeptical policeman's eyes that refused to believe.

Then suddenly the space was gone. The two hands had blended into one.

A bell, a pair of them, rang out jarringly. The phone that Shane had thought dead, that *had* been dead until now, was peeling on the other side of the door. The shock lifted him off his heels. The girl jolted too. Bridges alone gave no sign, seemed already half into the other world.

Bong! the clock went mellowly, majestically.

Before the vibration had died away Shane was already outside at the signaling instrument, gun-hand watchfully fanning the empty air around him. A trick? A trap to draw him away? He'd thought of that. But Bridges and the girl were in full sight of him; to get to them anything would have to pass him first. And he had to find out what this call was.

It must be vital, coming at just this precise—

It was vital, *Bong!* went the clock a second time, over McManus' distant voice in his ears: "Hello! Shane—Shane? Line was down, couldn't get through to you till now. Been trying for an hour. . . . Everything's under control, Shane. We've beaten the rap, the guy's saved! No time to tell you now. I'll be out there the quickest I can—"

Bong! cut across the voice, third stroke of the hour.

"Hurry, chief," said Shane. "The poor guy is sweating his very life away with terror. I want to tell him it's all O.K."

"General alarm was out for Tompkins. At half-past ten tonight he walks in here of his own accord, gives himself up! Yeah, Headquarters! Said he knew he'd be arrested anyway. Was he! He's still spouting Bridges has to die. Also that he's going to conk out himself, in jail waiting for his trial to come up. The latter he has my best wishes on. Here's something for you, kid, after what you must have gone through out there tonight—according to Tompkins, you're marrying twenty-million bucks inside a year. Ann Bridges, before the year is out!"

Bong!

"Oh, one other thing. I just got word they shot a lion that was heading your way, cornered it on the outskirts of the estate. A real one that broke out of its cage earlier tonight. We thought at first Tompkins had something to do with it, but he's been able to prove he wasn't anywhere near there when it happened. Just one of those spooky coincidences—"

The girl's frenzied scream seared through Shane like cauterization. He dropped the phone like a bar of red-hot iron, whirled. Bridges flashed by before he could stop him. The old man whisked out the other door, and turned down the entrance-hall like something bereft of its senses.

"Hold him! He's gone out of his mind!" Ann Bridges screamed.

Bong! sounded dismally.

Shane raced after him. Glass crashed far down the lighted hall. Bridges was standing there, stock still, when Shane turned into the hallway. The millionaire seemed to be leaning over against the wall, up where those two stained-glass panels were.

The detective didn't see what had happened until he got there. Then he stood frozen, unable to breathe. For John Bridges was headless, or seemed to be; he ended at the neck. . . . Then Shane saw that was because he'd thrust his head through one of those leaded panes, clear to the other side.

Jagged teeth of thick, splintered glass held his neck in a vise, had pierced his jugular. You could see the dark shadow running down the inside of the lighted pane that was the millionaire's life-blood.

He was gone, gone. . . . And the square of glass he'd chosen, in his blind, headlong flight, out of all the squares, was that one of the lion rampant!

Bong!

The mane and rabid eyes and flat, feline nostrils of the beast still showed undestroyed above John Bridges' gashed neck, as though the painted image were swallowing the man bodily. And for fangs now, instead of painted ones there were jagged spears of glass, thrusting into Bridges' flesh from all sides of the orifice he himself had created.

Shane felt the cold horror which washed his spine and turned his blood into ice water.

Death by the jaws of a lion!

Bong! the clock went for the twelfth time, and then all was silence.

McMANUS raised worried eyes above the report he was making out. "What'll I put in here? Would you call it murder by mental suggestion?"

"I'm not so sure," Shane answered low.

"Are you starting to go superstitious on me too?" the lieu-

tenant snapped. But his eyes went uneasily toward the window, beyond which the stars were paling into dawn.

They both kept looking troubledly out and up, at those distant inscrutable pin-points of brilliance, that no man can defy or alter.

Argosy, February 1937

I'M DANGEROUS TONIGHT

Prelude



THE thing, whatever it was—and no one was ever sure afterwards whether it was a dream or a fit or what—happened at that peculiar hour before dawn when human vitality is at its lowest ebb. The

Blue Hour they sometimes call it, *l'heure bleue*—the ribbon of darkness between the false dawn and the true, always blacker than all the rest of the night has been before it. Criminals break down and confess at that hour; suicides nerve themselves for their attempts; mists swirl in the sky; and—according to the old books of the monks and the hermits—strange, unholy shapes brood over the sleeping rooftops.

At any rate, it was at this hour that her screams shattered the stillness of that top-floor apartment overlooking the Parc Monceau. Curdling, razor-edged screams that slashed through the thick bedroom door. The three others who shared the apartment with Maldonado—her maid, her secretary, her cook—sat bolt upright in their beds. They came out into the hall one by one. The peasant cook crossed herself again and again. The maid whimpered and seemed ready to add her own screams to those that were sounding in that bedroom at the end of the hall. The secretary, brisk, business-like, modern, and just a little metallic, wasted no time; she cried out, "Somebody's murdering *madame!*" and rushed for the bedroom door.

She pounded, pushed at it; it wouldn't open. But then they

all knew that Maldonado habitually slept with her door locked. Still, the only way to reach her was through this door. The screams continued, a little less violently now than at first.

"Madame Maldonado!" the secretary cried frantically. "Open! Let us in! What is the matter?"

The only answer was a continuation of those long, shuddering moans of terror. "Come here and help me!" the secretary ordered the cringing cook. "You're strong. Throw your weight against the door. See if you can break it down!"

The husky Breton woman, strong as an ox, threw her shoulder against it again and again. The perpendicular bolt that held it was forced out of its groove in the sill, the two halves shot apart. Something streaked by between the legs of the three frightened women—Maldonado's Persian cat, a projectile of psychic terror, its fur standing like a porcupine's quills, its green eyes lambent, its ears flat—hissing, spitting.

The secretary was the first to enter. She was an intelligent young woman of the modern breed, remember. She believed only what her eyes saw, what her ears heard, what her nostrils smelled. She reached out quickly, snapped the light switch. The screams died with the darkness, and became instead a hoarse panting for breath. Eve Maldonado, greatest of all Paris designers, lay crouched across the bed like a terrified animal. There was no sign of a struggle anywhere in the big room. It held no intruder in it, no weapon, no trace of blood or violence. Maldonado was very much alive, unbruised and unhurt, but her face was the color of clay, and her whole body trembled uncontrollably. She couldn't speak for a long time.

Her overtaxed vocal cords refused to respond.

But there were things in the room that should not have been there—a thin diaphanous haze of smoke, as from a cigarette, suspended motionless halfway between floor and ceiling. The bowl beside the bed was crammed with cigarette-ends, but none of those butts in it were smoldering any longer, and both windows overlooking the Parc were wide open. The fresh before-dawn breeze blowing through them should have dissipated that haze long ago. Yet it was plainly visible in the electric light, as though it had been caused by

something heavier than burnt paper and tobacco. There was a faintly noticeable odor also, an unpleasant one. A little like burnt feathers, a little like chemicals, a little like—sulphur or coal gas. Hard to identify, vague, distinctly out of place there in that dainty bedroom.

"*Madame!* What was it? What has happened?" the secretary asked anxiously. The other two were peering in from the doorway.

A steel gleam on the night-stand beside the bed caught her eye. She put out her hand and quickly hid the needle before the other two had seen it. "*Madame,*" she whispered reproachfully, "you promised me—!" Maldonado had been in a severe automobile accident a year before. To relieve the pain she had suffered as an after-effect it had been necessary for awhile to—

THE young woman went over and hid the needle swiftly in a drawer. Coming back, something on the floor touched her foot. She stooped to pick up some kind of triangular cape or cloak. It was black on one side, a bright flame-red on the other. At first glance it seemed to be brocaded satin, but it wasn't. It glistened. It was almost like the skin of a snake. An odor of musk arose from it.

Maldonado affected exotic negligees like this one; she must have dropped it in the throes of her nightmare just now. But then as the secretary prepared to fling it back across the foot of the bed, she saw that there was already one there, an embroidered Chinese thing. At the same instant the designer caught sight of what she was holding; it seemed to renew all her terror. She screamed once more, shrank away from it. Her voice returned for the first time.

"That's it! That's *it!*" She shuddered, pointing. "Don't bring it near me! Take it away. Take it away, I'm afraid of it."

"But it's yours, *madame*, isn't it?"

"No!" the woman groaned, warding it off with both hands and averting her head. "Oh, don't—*please* take it away."

"But it must be yours. How else did it get here? You must have brought it home with you from the atelier. You've forgotten, that's all."

Maldonado, beside herself, was holding her head between

her two hands. "We have nothing like that at the shop," she panted. "I *saw* how it got in here! I *saw* how it came into this room!"

The secretary, holding the thing up by one hand, felt a sudden inexplicable surge of hatred well up in her. A hatred that was almost murderous. She thought, "I'd like to kill her!" And the craving was literal, not just a momentary resentment expressed by a commonplace catch-phrase. She could feel herself being *drawn* to commit some overt act against the whimpering woman on the bed. Crushing her skull with something, grasping her throat between her hands and throttling her. . . .

It must have shown in her face. Maldonado, staring at her, suddenly showed a new kind of fear, a lesser fear than before—the fear of one human for another. She drew back beyond the secretary's reach.

The secretary let the thing she was holding fall to the floor. The impulse died with it. She passed the back of her hand dazedly before her eyes. What had made her feel that way just now? Was Maldonado's hysteria catching—one of those mass-psychoses to which women, in particular, are sometimes susceptible? This woman before her was her employer, her benefactress, had always treated her well. She admired her, respected her—and yet suddenly she had found herself contemplating killing her. Not only contemplating it, but contemplating it with delight, almost with an insatiable longing. Perhaps, she thought, it was the reaction from the severe nervous shock Maldonado's screams had caused them all just now. But even so, to take so horrible a form—

Something was affecting the other two, too; she could see that. Some sort of tension. The maid, who was a frivolous little soul, kept edging toward the door, as if she didn't like it in here, without knowing why. The Breton cook had her underlip thrust out belligerently and the flesh around her eyes had hardened in hostility, but against whom, or what was causing it, there was no way of telling.

Maldonado said, "Get them out of here. I've got to talk to you." The secretary motioned and they went.

The maid returned for a moment, dropped the fugitive cat just over the threshold, then closed the door on it. The animal, perfectly docile in her arms until then, instantly began

to act strangely. Its fur went up and its ears back, it crouched in wary retreat from the inanimate piece of goods on the floor, then finding that its escape was cut off, sidled around it in a wide circle and slunk under the bed. No amount of coaxing could get it out again. Two frightened green eyes in the shadows and a recurrent hissing were all that marked its presence.

MALDONADO'S face was ghastly. "That," she said, pointing below the bed where the cat lurked, "and that"—pointing to what lay on the floor—"prove it was no dream. Do dreams leave marks behind them?"

"What was no dream?" The secretary was cool, patient. She had humored Maldonado before.

"What I saw—in here." She caught at her throat, as though still unable to breathe properly. "Get me some cognac. I can speak to *you* about it. I couldn't in front of them. They'd only say I was crazy—" She drank, put the thimble-glass down. A trace of color returned to her face. "There was someone in this room with me!" she said. "I was lying here wide awake. I distinctly remember looking at my watch, on the stand here next to me, just before it happened. I can even recall the time. It was 4:35. Does one look at the time in one's sleep?"

"One could dream one had," the secretary suggested.

"That was no dream! A second later, as I put the watch down, there was a soft step on the balcony there outside my window, and someone came through it into the room—"

"But it's seven floors above the street, there's no possible way for anyone to get on it! It's completely cut off!" The secretary moved her hands. "It didn't occur to me to scream at first, for that very reason. It seemed impossible that anyone *could* come in from there—"

"It is," said the secretary levelly. "You've been working too hard."

"It was no burglar. It seemed to be someone in an opera-coat. It made no hostile move toward me, kept its back toward me until it had gone all the way around here, to the foot of the bed, where you found that—thing. Then it turned to look at me—" She shuddered spasmodically again, and quickly poured out a few more drops of cognac.

"And?" the secretary prompted.

Maldonado shaded her eyes with her hand, as though unable to bear the thought even now. "I saw its face—the conventional face that we all have seen in pictures and at plays. Illuminated from below with the most awful red light. Unspeakably evil. Little goat-horns coming out of here, at the side of the skull—"

The secretary flicked her thumb toward the bureau drawer where she'd hidden the needle. "You'd used—that, just before this?"

The secretary's glance was piercing.

"Well, yes. But the cat didn't. And how do you explain what—you picked up from the floor? Whatever it was, it was all wrapped in that thing. It took it off, kept swirling it around there in the middle of the room—a little bit like matadors do in a bullfight. I distinctly felt the *breeze* from it in my face, coming from that way, toward the windows, not away from them! And then he, it—whatever the thing was—spoke. I heard it very clearly. There were no sounds from the street at all. He said, 'Why don't you create a dress like this, Maldonado, and dedicate it to me? Something that will turn whoever wears it into my servant. Here, I'll leave it with you.' That was when I at last found my voice and began to scream. I thought I'd go insane. And even through all my screaming I could hear Rajah over there in the corner with his back up, spitting madly—"

The secretary was getting a little impatient with this preposterous rigamarole. Maldonado was supposed to be one of the brainiest women in Paris, and here she was driveling the most appalling nonsense about seeing a demon in her room. Either the sedatives she was using were breaking down her mind, or she was overworked, subject to hallucinations. "And did this visitor leave the same way, through the window?" the secretary asked ironically.

"I don't know. I was too frightened to look."

The secretary tapped her teeth with her thumbnail. "I think we'd better tell Dr. Renard that that"—she indicated the drawer—"is beginning to get a hold on you. He'd better discontinue it. Suppose you take another swallow of cognac and try to get some sleep—"

She brushed the fallen cloak aside with the point of her toe, then stopped, holding it that way. Again that sudden urge, that blind hatred, swept her. She wanted to swing the cognac-decanter high over her head, to brain Maldonado with it, to watch the blood pour out of her shattered head.

She withdrew her foot, staggered a little. Her mind cleared.

Maldonado said: "Take that thing out of here! Don't leave it in here with me! How do we know what it is?"

"No," the secretary said weakly, "Don't ask me to touch it any more. I'm almost frightened myself now. I'm going back to my room, I feel—strange." She pulled the door open, went out without looking back.

The cat, seeing an avenue of escape, made a belated dash from under the bed, but the door was already closed when the animal reached it again. The cat stood up on its hind paws, scratching and mewling pathetically. Maldonado slipped off the bed and went to get it. "Come here, come here," she coaxed. "You seem very anxious to leave me—" She picked it up and started back with it in her arms, stroking it. As she did so she trod unwittingly on the cloak, lying there coiled on the floor like a snake waiting to strike.

HER face altered; her eyebrows went up saturninely, the edges of her fine white teeth showed through her parted lips; in an instant all tenderness was gone, she was like a different person altogether.

"Well, leave me then, if you want to so badly!" she said, as the cat began to struggle in her arms. Her eyes dilated, gazing down at it. "Leave me for good!" She threw the animal brutally on the bed, then with a feline swiftness that more than matched its own, she thrust one of the heavy pillows over it, bore down with her whole weight, bands turned inward so that the fingers pointed toward one another. Her elbows slowly flexed, stiffened, flexed, stiffened, transmitting the weight of her suspended body to the pillow—and to what lay trapped below it.

The little plumed tail that was all that protruded, spiraled madly, almost like the spoke of a wheel, then abruptly stopped. Maldonado's foot, unnoticed, was still caught in a fold of the cloak, had dragged it across the floor after her.

Hours later, the secretary returned to tell her she was giving up her job. She was putting on her gloves and her packed valise stood outside in the hall. The little maid had fled already, without the formality of giving notice. The pious cook was at Mass, trying to find an answer to her problem: whether to turn her back on the perfectly good wages she was earning, or to risk remaining in a place where inexplicable things took place in the dead of the night. As for the secretary herself, all she knew was that twice she had been tempted to murder within the space of moments. There was some unclean mystery here that she could not fathom. She was modern and sensible enough to realize that the only thing to do, for her own sake, was remove herself beyond its reach. Before temptation became commission.

What had precipitated her decision was a phone call she had made to the workshop in an effort to trace the cape that was the only tangible evidence of the mystery. Their answer, after an exhaustive check-up had been made, only bore out Maldonado's words: there had never been anything answering its description in the stockroom, not even a two-by-four sample. An account was kept of every button, every ribbon. So whatever it was, how it had got into Maldonado's room, it hadn't come from the shop.

The secretary saw at a glance that a change had come over Maldonado, since she had left her several hours before. A shrewd, exultant look had replaced the abysmal terror on her face. Whatever unseen struggle had taken place in here in the interval, had been won by the forces of evil. Maldonado was sitting at her desk, busy with pencil and sketch-pad doing a rough draft. She had the cape draped around one shoulder.

"Three times I took this thing to the window, to throw it out into the street," she admitted, "and I couldn't let go of it. It seemed to cling magnetically to my hands. The idea wouldn't let me alone, it kept me hypnotized, until finally I had to get it down on paper—"

A cry of alarm broke from the secretary. "What happened to Rajah?" She had just seen the lifeless bedraggled tail hanging down below the pillow. "Take that off him, he'll suffocate!"

Maldonado paid no attention. "He has already suffocated."

She held up the sketch. "Look, that's just the way—what I saw last night—carried it. Call the car. I'm going to get to work on it at once. There's money in it, it'll be worth a fortune—" But her eyes, over the top of the sketch, had come to rest on the secretary's slim young throat. There was a sharp-pointed ivory paper cutter lying on the desk. As she held the drawing up with one hand, the other started to inch uncontrollably toward it, like a crawling five-legged white beetle.

Inching, crawling—

The secretary, warned by some sixth sense, gave a muffled cry, turned and bolted down the long hallway. The street-door of the apartment slammed after her.

Maldonado smiled a little, readjusted the cape over her shoulder, went on talking to herself as though nothing had happened while she studied the finished sketch. "I'll advertise it as—let's see—'*I'm Dangerous Tonight—a dress to bring out the devil in you!*'"

And so a deadly thing was born.

Chapter 1

American in Paris

SHE was standing on a small raised turntable, about two feet off the floor, which could be revolved in either direction by means of a small lever, on the same general principle as a mobile barber's chair. She had been standing on it since early afternoon, with short rest periods every half-hour or so; it was eleven at night now.

They were all around her, working away like ants, some on their knees, some standing up. The floor was littered with red and black scraps, like confetti. She had eyes for only one thing in the whole workroom: a pair of sharp shears lying on a table across the way from her. She kept looking at them longingly, moistening her lips from time to time. When they were closed, like they were now, they came to a sharp point, like a poniard. And when they were open, the inner edge of each blade was like a razor. She was digging her fingernails into her own sides, to keep from jumping down to the floor, picking them up, and cutting and slashing everyone within reach with them. She'd been doing that, in her brain, for

hours; she was all black-and-blue from the pinch and bite of her own nails. Once, the seamstress kneeling at her feet had saved her. She'd already had one foot off the stand, on her way over to them, and the latter had stuck a pin in her to make her hold still. The pain had counteracted the desperate urge she kept feeling. It did no good to try to look at anything else; her eyes returned to the shears each time.

The funny part of it was, when she was at rest, off the stand in just her underthings, and had every opportunity of seizing them and doing what she wanted to, she didn't seem to want to. It was only when she was up there with the dress on her that the urge swept over her. She couldn't understand why her thoughts should take this homicidal turn. She supposed it was because she was due to meet Belden at the Bal Tabarin at midnight, and just tonight they'd picked to work overtime, to finish the thing, keeping her here long after she should have been out of the place.

Meeting him wasn't like meeting anyone else; he was living on borrowed time; he couldn't stick around any one place too long waiting for anyone. He was wanted for murder in the States, and there was an American detective over here now, looking for him; he had to lie low, keep moving around fast, with this Government man always just a step behind him, creeping up slowly but surely. Twice now, in the past two weeks, he'd just missed Belden by the skin of his teeth. And Belden couldn't get out of town until the fake passports his friend Battista was making for him were ready. He'd have them by the end of this week, and then he was going to head for the Balkans—and take her with him, of course. Until then, he was caught in a squirrel cage.

He was a swell guy; suppose he did run dope from France into the States? *She* was for him. She'd rather part with her right arm than see him arrested and taken back to die.

He'd killed one of their Department of Justice agents, and they'd never rest until they'd evened things up. They sat you in a chair over there, he'd told her, and shocked you to death with electricity. It sounded awful, a million times worse than the swift and merciful guillotine.

She was crazy about him, steadfast with that utter loyalty only a woman in love can know. She'd have gone through fire

and water to be with him, anytime, anywhere. She was ready to be a fugitive with him for the rest of her life—"Whither thou goest, I will go; thy people shall be my people"—and when a Parisienne is ready to leave Paris behind forever, that's something. She hadn't seen him in five days now; he had to keep moving—but last night he'd got word to her along the underworld grapevine: "The Bal au Diable, Wednesday at twelve." And here it was after eleven, and she wasn't even out of the shop yet! Wouldn't that look great, to keep him waiting, endanger him like that?

SHE couldn't hold out any longer. Pinching herself didn't do any good, her sides were numb now. Her eyes fastened on the shears; she started to edge toward the edge of the stand, her hand slowly stroking her side. One good jump, a grab, a quick turn—and she'd have them. "I'll take Maldonado first," she decided, as she reached the edge of the platform. "The sewing-woman's so fat, she can't get out of the room as fast—" Her knees started to dip under her, bracing for the flying jump.

The designer spoke. "All right, Mimi, take it off. It's finished."

The sewing woman pulled; the dress fell to the floor at the mannequin's feet, and she suddenly stopped eyeing the scissors, wavered there off-balance, got limply to the floor. Now she could get at them easily—and she didn't try, seemed to have forgotten.

She staggered into the little curtained alcove to put on her street clothes.

"It's been a hard job," Maldonado said, "You all get a bonus." She went downstairs to her car. They started putting the lights out. The rest of the staff, the piece workers, had gone home hours ago. The sewing woman stayed behind a moment to stitch in the little silk label: *I'm Dangerous Tonight, by Maldonado*. Without that label it was just a dress. With it, it was a dress worth twenty thousand francs (and if the buyer was an American, twenty-five thousand).

Mimi Brissard looked at the junk she wore to work. Stockings full of holes, sloppy old coat. And it was too late now to go back to her own place and dress decently for him. She'd

never make it; she lived way out at Bilancourt. She'd look fine, showing up in these rags to meet a swell guy like Belden! Even if he was a fugitive, even if the Bal au Diable was an underworld hangout, he'd be ashamed to be seen with her. He might even change his mind about taking her.

The sewing-woman had finished the label, hung the dress up. "Coming, Mimi?"

"Go ahead," the girl called through the curtain, "I'll lock up." She'd been with them for five years, they trusted her. There was no money or anything kept up here anyway, just clothes and designs.

"Don't forget the lights." The old woman trudged wearily down the curved stone staircase to the street.

The girl stuck her head out around the curtain, eyed the dress. "I bet he'd be proud of me if I dared wear that! I could bring it back before we open up tomorrow, and they'd never even know." She went over to it, took the hanger down. The dress swept against her. Her eyes narrowed to slits. Her indecision evaporated. "Let anyone try to stop me, and see what they get!" she whispered half audibly. A minute later she had slipped the red dress over her lithe young body and was strutting—there is no other word for it—before the mirror. She hadn't heard the step on the stairs, maybe because the watchman wore felt-soled shoes to make his rounds. He must have come up to see what was taking her so long.

"Eh? Wait, where do you think you're going in that? That's the firm's property." The old man was standing there in the doorway, looking in at here.

She whirled, and the tiny arrow-headed train, that was like a devil's tail, spun around after her. The shears were still lying there on the table, midway between them.

"Where do you think I'm going? I'll tell you where *you're* going—right now! To the devil, and you're not coming back!"

There was no excuse for it. The rebuke had been paternal, half humorous. He was a good-natured, inoffensive old man, half crippled with rheumatism. He was certainly no match for her young and furious strength. And the lust to kill—this dynamic murder-voltage charging her—that gave her the force and determination of two able-bodied men.

Her hand gave a catlike pounce, and the shears clashed; the blades opened, then closed spasmodically, like a hungry

mouth, as her fingers gripped the handle. They came up off the table point-foremost.

He saw in her eyes what was coming. "Wait, *mademoiselle*! Don't! Why—?"

She couldn't have told him even if she wanted to. There was a murderous frenzy in her heart. She closed in on him as he tried to retreat, facing her because he was too horrified to turn his back. There was a spasm of motion from her hand, too quick for the eye to follow, and the point of the shears suddenly sank into his chest.

He gave a cough, found the wall with his back, leaned against it. His head went down and his old black alpaca cap fell off. He could still talk. "Have pity! I've never harmed you! I'm an old man! My Solange needs me—"

The shears found his throat this time. He fell down on top of them and was silent.

Something dark like mucilage glistened where he lay.

She had jumped back—not in remorse, but to keep the bottom of her skirt clear of his blood.

Tensed, curved forward from the waist up, peering narrowly at him like something out of a jungle that kills not for food but for love of killing, she executed strange gestures, as though her arms were those of a puppet worked by strings by some master-puppeteer. Stretched them full-length up over her head, palm to palm, as if in some unholy incantation. Then let them fall again and caressed her own sides, as though inordinately pleased.

At last she moved around him, retrieved the ring of keys that he carried beneath his blouse. She would need them to come back into the building later on. She found the light-switch, plunged the room—and what it contained—into darkness. She closed the door, and moved down the circular stone-stairs with a rustling sound, such as a snake might make on a bed of dry leaves.

Chapter 2

First Night of a Gown

THE *bal* was not on the list of synthetic Apache dens that guides show visitors to Paris. It was too genuine for that;

sightseers would have been disappointed, as the real thing always makes a poorer show than the fake. It did not pay those who frequented it to advertise themselves or be conspicuous. Nothing ever seemed to be going on there. People would come in, slump down in a chair; no one would pay any attention to them; they would sometimes sit for hours, seemingly lost in dreams; then as suddenly be gone again, as unnoticed as they had come.

There was an accordion fastened to the wall, and a man who had lost an arm in the trenches would occasionally come in, sit down by it, and play softly sentimental ballads with his one hand only, pulling in in and out of the wall.

The *bal* consisted of simply a long, dingy, dimly lighted, smoke-filled semi-basement room; no one ever spoke above a low murmur. If the police never bothered anyone, possibly it was because that was the smartest thing to do. The *bal* often came in handy as a convenient starting-point for a search for any wanted criminal at any given time; it was a focal point for the Paris underworld.

When Mimi, in her red-and-black dress, came down the short flight of stone steps from the street-level, Belden wasn't there. At one table was a soiled glass in a china-saucer stamped: *1Fr50*. As she passed by she glanced into it; in the dregs of vermouth-and-cassis floated a cigarette end. That was Belden's unmistakable trademark; that was where he'd been sitting. He never drank anything without leaving a cigarette in the glass or cup.

She sat down one table away. She knew all the faces by sight, but she gave no sign of recognition, nor was any given to her. No. . . . There was one face there she didn't know. Out in the middle of the room, only its lower half visible under a snapdown hat-brim. It didn't have the characteristic French pallor. The chin was squarer than Gallic chins are apt to be. There was a broadness of shoulder there, also, unknown on the Continent.

The man had a stale beer before him. But that was all right; no one came in here to eat or drink. He was staring at the red-and-white checks of the tablecloth, playing checkers on the squares with little *sou*-pieces. He looked at nothing, but he saw everything; it was written all over him. The at-

mosphere was tense, too. Without seeming to, all the others were watching him cautiously; they scented danger. His presence was a threat. . . .

Petion, the proprietor, found something to do that brought him past her table. Carefully he removed the neglected glass and saucer from the one ahead.

"Where's Belden?"

Petion didn't seem to hear. The corner of his mouth moved in Apache argot. "Get out of here fast, you little fool. That bird over there is the one that's after him. The American *flic*. Luckily Belden saw him arrive. We got him out the back way. He's up at your place, waiting for you. His own room is too hot." Petion couldn't seem to get the grimy cloth at Belden's table straight enough to please him.

The man in the middle of the room jumped a five-*sou* piece with a ten-*sou* piece. You could almost *feel* the eyes peering through the felt of the shadowing brim.

"Now, watch out how you move—you may draw him after you without knowing it and put him onto Belden."

There was a fruit-knife on the table. She glanced at it, then her eyes strayed to Petion's fat neck, creased above his collar. He caught the pantomime, gave her a surprised look, as much as to say, "What's got into *you*? He been feeding you some of his product?"

He straightened the empty chair and said aloud: "Well, what are you hanging around for? I tell you the dog is a United States Government agent."

"All right, clear away," she breathed impatiently, "I can handle this."

SHE got up and started slowly toward the stairs to the street. Death by electrocution, the thing she'd always dreaded so, ever since Belden had first told her what he had coming to him. Death by electricity—much worse than death at the point of a pair of shears or a table knife. She veered suddenly, as uncontrollably as though pulled by a magnet, turned off toward that table in the middle of the room, went directly over to it. She was smiling and her eyes were shining.

There was a small, nervous stir that rustled all over the room. One man shifted his chair. Another set his glass of *vin*

blanc into a saucer, too noisily. A woman laughed, low in her throat.

He didn't seem to see her, not even when her fingertips were resting on the edge of the table.

"*Soir, m'sieu.*"

He said in English: "Wrong table, *petite. Pas libre ce soir.*"

She'd learned some English from Belden. So now she pulled a second chair out, sat down, helped herself to one of his cigarettes. Her hand trembled a little, but not from nervousness. In the dim recesses of the room whispers were coursing along the walls: "She's giving him the come-on, trying to get him somewhere where Belden can finish him. That's the kind of girl to have!"

"She'll trip herself up. Those fish are no fools."

She began to speak quietly, her eyelids lowered. "I am Mimi Brissard, and I live at Bilancourt, number 5 rue Poiteaux top floor front."

The line of his mouth hardened a little. "Move on. I told you I'm not int—"

"I am Belden's girl," she continued as though she hadn't heard him, "and he is up there right now, waiting for me. Now, are you interested?"

He pushed his hat back with a thumb and looked at her for the first time. There was no admiration in his eyes, not any gratitude, only the half-concealed contempt the police always have for an informer. "Why are you welshing on him?" he said warily.

She couldn't answer, any more than she could have answered the old watchman when he had asked her why she was stabbing him to death. She fingered the dress idly, as thou she sensed something, but it eluded her.

"You better go back and tell him it won't work," he said drily. "He's not getting me like he got Jimmy Fisher in New York, he's not dealing with a green kid now. I'm getting him—and without the help of any chippy either!"

"Then I have to prove that this is no decoy? Did you see that vermouth-glass with the cigarette in it over there? That was he. This goes with it." She palmed a scrap of paper at him: *Bal au Diable 24h*. "I was to meet him here. You spoiled

it. He's up there now. He's armed and he'll shoot to kill, rather than go back—"

"What did you think I expected him to do, scatter petals at my feet?"

"Without me you haven't got one chance in ten of taking him alive. But through me, you can do it. And you want him alive, don't you?"

"Yep," he said curtly. "The man he killed—Jimmy Fisher—was my brother. . . ."

She squirmed eagerly inside the glistening cocoon that sheathed her. But a change had come over him meanwhile. Her nearness, her presence at the table, seemed to be affecting him on some way. He had come alive, menacingly, hostilely, and he was . . . dangerous, too. His jaw line set pugnaciously, a baleful light flickered in his gray eyes, his upper lip curled back from his teeth. His hand roamed down his coat toward the flap of his back-pocket. "I never wanted to kill anyone so much in my life," he growled throatily, "as I do you right now!" He started tugging at something, at the small of his back.

She looked down, saw that a flounce of her dress was brushing against his knee. She moved her chair slightly back, and the contact broke.

His hand came up on the table again, empty. His face slowly slipped back into its mask of impassivity. He was breathing a little heavily, that was all, and there was a line of moisture along the crease in his forehead.

"So he's at Bilancourt, 5 rue Poteaux," he said finally. "Thanks. You're a fine sweetheart. Some other dame, I suppose."

"No," she said simply. "I loved him very much only an hour ago, at eleven o'clock. I must have changed since then, that's all. I don't know why. Now I'd like to think of him being electrocuted and cursing my name as he dies. . . . Follow me there and watch which window lights up. Keep watching. My window-shade's out of order. Tonight it will be especially so. I'll have trouble with it. When you see it go up, then come down again, you'll know he's ready for the taking."

"Okay, Delilah," he murmured. "When I first hit Paris I

thought there was no one lower than Belden. He shot an unarmed kid of twenty-five—in the back, without giving him a chance. But now I see there's someone lower still—and that's his woman. He, at least, wouldn't turn you in; I'll give him that much. But let me warn you. If you think you're leading me into a trap, if I have to do any shooting, you get the first slug out of this gun! That's how you stand with me, little lady."

She smiled derisively, stood up. She didn't bother to reply to his contempt. "Don't leave right after me, they're all watching you here. I'll wait for you under the first streetlight around the corner. She added dreamily: "I couldn't think of anything I wanted to do more than this. That's why I'm doing it."

She went slowly up the stone steps to the street-door, her pointed train wriggling after her from side to side. She turned her head and flashed a smile over her shoulder. Then she went out and the darkness swallowed her.

Frank Fisher rinsed his mouth with beer and emptied it out on the floor.

Chapter 3

Mademoiselle Judas

THE room was dark and empty when she stepped into it from the hall outside. The dim light shining behind her outlined her; her silhouette was diabolic, long and sinuous and wavering. Two ridges of hair above her ears looked almost like horns. Something clicked warningly somewhere in the room, but that was all. She closed the door.

"Chéri?" she whispered. "I'm going to put up the light. It's all right. *C'est Mimi.*"

A bulb went on, and its rays, striking out like yellow rain, touched off a gleam between two curtains pulled tightly together across a doorless closet. The gleam was black in the middle, holed through. It elongated into a stubby automatic; and a hand, an arm, a shoulder, a man, came slowly out after it toward her.

Steve Belden was misleadingly unogre-like, for a man who

had poisoned thousands of human lives with heroin. In repose his face was almost pleasant looking, and his eyes had that directness of gaze that usually betokens honesty.

The girl glanced quizzically at the gun as he continued to point it at her. "Well, put it away, Chéri," she protested ironically. "Haven't you seen me some place before?"

He sheathed it under his arm, scowled. "What took you so long? D'you know he nearly jumped me, waiting for you at the *bal* just now? Petion got me out the back way by pretending to shake out a table cloth, holding it up at arms's length for a screen. For a minute we were both in the same room, he and I! I hope you haven't steered him over here after you without knowing it."

"He wasn't there any more. Must have looked in merely, then gone away again."

"What's the idea of that dress? I nearly took a shot at you when you opened the door just now."

"It's what they kept me overtime working on tonight. I left it on to save time. I'll sneak it back first thing in the morning—"

"You'll have to have some reach, if you do. Battista finally came through with the passports. We're taking the Athens Express at daybreak. Matter of fact I could have made the night-train to the Balkans, if it hadn't been for you. I waited over so I could take you with me—"

"So four hours more in Paris does the trick?" she said, looking at him shrewdly.

He frowned.

"Yeah, and then we're all set. Fisher's extradition-writ's no good in Greece, and Panyiotis pulls enough weight there to fix it so we both disappear for good. If I've outsmarted him for three weeks now, I can outlast him the few hours there are left. What'd you say?"

She's said, "If—" in a low voice. "When did you get any sleep?"

"Night before last."

"Well, take off your coat, lie down here, rest up a while. I'll keep watch. I'll wake you in time for the train. Here, let me have that, I'll keep it trained on the door."

"What do *you* know about these things?" he grinned, but he

passed the gun over to her, stretched himself out. "Put out the light," he said sleepily. He began to relax, the long-sustained tension started to go out of his nerves; he could trust her. She was the only one. . . .

THE gun was not pointed at the door, but at him—at the top of his head from behind, through the bars of the bed. Her face was a grimace of delight. Then slowly she brought the gun down again. A bullet in the brain—You didn't feel anything, didn't know anything. But electrocution—what anguish, what terror preceded it! Electrocution was a much better way.

A sharp click from the gun roused him, after he had already begun to doze off. He stiffened, looked at her over his shoulder. "What was that?"

"Just making sure it's loaded." She kicked something along the floor with the tip of her foot, something metallically round. It rolled under the bed.

His eyes closed again. He turned his head toward the wall. His breathing thickened.

A warning *whirr* of the shade-roller roused him a second time. He raised half upright on his elbow. His free hand clawed instinctively at his empty shoulder-holster.

She was reaching for the cord, pulling the shade all the way down again to the bottom.

"What're you doing?" he rasped. "Get away from that window! I told you to put the light out, didn't I?"

"It slipped. It needs fixing," she murmured. "It's all right, there's no one down there. Here goes the light—"

The last thing he said, as he lay back again, was: "And take that damn dress off too, while you're about it. Every time I lamp it on you, it throws a shock into me all over again. I think I'm seeing things—"

She said nothing.

He drowsed off again. Then in the dark, only seconds later, she was leaning over him, shaking him awake. Her breath was a sob that threatened to become a scream. The whiteness of her form was dimly visible. She must have discarded the dress while he slept.

"Steve. *Mon* Steve!" she was moaning, "Get up!" She pulled

him frenziedly erect with both arms. "*Sauves-toi! Out! File—vite!* Maybe you can still make it by way of the roof—"

He was on his feet, clear of the bed, in an instant. "What's up? What's up?"

"I've sold you out!" the groan seemed to come from way down at the floor, as though she was all hollow inside. "I tipped him off at the *bal*. I signaled him with the shade just now—"

The light flashed on.

"Oh, don't stand there looking at me. Quick, get out this door, he has four flights to climb—"

He was usually very quick, but not this time. He stood there eyeing her as though he couldn't believe what he heard. Then at last, he grasped what she had told him. He pulled the gun from her unresisting hand, turned it the other way around, jabbed it at her heart. It clicked repeatedly, almost like a typewriter.

"I—the bullets—" she shuddered. "Under the bed— Oh, get, Steve—save yourself now—"

A warped floorboard groaned somewhere outside the room. "Too late!"

Belden had dropped down on one knee, was reaching out desperately toward the bullets. There was no pounding at the door; a shot exploded into it, and splinters of wood flew out on the inside. The china knob fell off and lay there like an egg. The door itself ricocheted back off the flat of someone's shoe.

"All right, don't move, Belden. You're through."

Fisher came in slowly, changed gun-hands with a sort of acrobatic twist, and brought out handcuffs.

"Pull your finger joint out of that trigger hole," he added.

The automatic turned over, fell upside down on the floor.

Fisher didn't speak again until the manacles had closed. Then he said, "Got a hat or anything you want to take with you?" He seemed to see Mimi for the first time. He nodded, said curtly: "Nice work, *Mademoiselle Judas*."

She stood shivering. The dress lay on the floor behind her, but she made no move to reach out for it.

Belden took his capture calmly enough. He didn't say a word to Mimi Brissard; didn't even look at her. "It's a pleasure," he said bitterly, as Fisher motioned him forward, "if

only because it means getting out of a town where there are—things like this.” He spat on the floor at her feet as he went by.

Fisher hung back a minute to look her almost detachedly, up and down. He pocketed his gun, took out a wallet with his free hand, removed some lettuce-like franc-notes. “What was it—money?” he said. “You haven’t asked for any, but I suppose that’s it. Here, go out and buy yourself a heart.”

The wadded bills struck her lightly in the center of the forehead, and fluttered down her to the floor. One caught upon her breast, just over her heart, and remained poised there, like a sort of badge.

She stood there with her eyes closed, perfectly motionless, as though she were asleep standing up, while the man she’d loved and his captor began their long descent side by side down the four flights of stairs that led to the street.

When they came out of the house a moment later, they had to force their way through the crowd of people standing there blocking the entrance.

Fisher thought for a moment that it was his own shot at the lock upstairs in the house that had attracted them. But they were all turned the other way, with their backs to the building. Out in the middle of the narrow cobbled street two or three of them were bending anxiously over something. Some broken white thing lying perfectly still at their feet. One of the men was hurriedly opening and separating the leaves of a newspaper—but not to read it.

Mimi Brissard had atoned, in the only way she had left.

Chapter 4

The Lady from Dubuque

Do I dare?” Mrs. Hiram Travis said aloud, to no one in particular, in her stateroom on the *Gascony* the night before it reached New York. Or if to anyone at all, to the slim, slinky red-and-black garment that the stewardess had laid out for her across the bed under the mistaken impression that she would wish to wear it. A stewardess who, although she had assured Mrs. Travis she was not susceptible in the least to seasickness, had come out of the cabin looking very pale and

shaken after having taken the dress down from its hanger. Mrs. Travis had noticed the woman glaring daggers at her, as if in some way *she* were to blame. But this being Mrs. Travis' first trip abroad, or anywhere at all except Sioux City, she was not well versed in the ways of stewardesses, any more than in those of French couturieres.

In fact she hadn't really known what that Maldonado woman was talking about at all; they had had to make signs to each other. *She* had wanted just a plain simple little dress to wear to the meetings of her Thursday Club back home in Dubuque, and then the next morning *this* had shown up at the hotel all wrapped up in crinkly paper. She hadn't wanted Hiram to think she was a fool, so she'd pretended it was the one she'd ordered, and good-natured as always, he'd paid for it without a word. Now here she was stuck with it! And the worst part of it was, if she didn't wear it tonight, then she'd never have another chance to. Because she really didn't have the nerve to wear it in Dubuque. Folks would be scandalized. And all the *francs* it had cost!

"Do I dare?" she said again, and edged a little closer.

One only had to look at Mrs. Hiram Travis to understand the reason for her qualms. She and the dress didn't match up at all. They came from different worlds. She was a youngish forty, but she made not the least attempt to look any younger than that. She was very plain, with her chin jutting a little too much, her eyes undistinguished, and her mouth too flat. Her hair was a brown-red. She had never used rouge and she had never used powder. The last time she'd smoked a cigarette was behind her grandmother's barn at the age of fourteen. She'd never drunk anything stronger than elderberry wine in her life, until a week ago in Paris, just for the look of things, she'd tried a little white wine with her meals. She made swell pies, but now that Hi had made so much money in the lawnmower business, he wouldn't let her do her own cooking any more. He'd even retired, taken out a half-a-million dollar life-insurance policy, and they'd made this trip to Paris to see the sights. Even there the latest they'd stayed up was one night when they had a lot of postcards to write and didn't get to bed until nearly eleven-thirty. About the most daring thing she'd done in her whole life was to swipe a fancy

salad fork from a hotel for a souvenir. It was also the closest she'd ever come to a criminal act. That ought to give you the picture.

She was mortally afraid of about eight million things, including firearms, strange men, and the water they were traveling on right now.

"Golly," she clucked, "I bet I'll feel like a fool in it. It's so—kind of vampish. What'll Hi say?" She reached out and rested her hand on the dress, which lay there like a coiled snake ready to strike. . . .

She drew her hand back suddenly. But she couldn't help reaching out again to touch the dress with a movement that was almost a caress.

Instantly her mind filled with the strangest thoughts—odd recollections of instants in her past that she would have said she had completely forgotten. The first time she'd ever seen her father wring a chicken's neck. The day that Hiram—'way back in high school—cut his arm on a broken window. A vein, he'd cut. He'd bled . . . a lot; and she'd felt weak and sick and terrified. The automobile smash-up they'd seen that time on the State highway on the way back from Fair . . . that woman lying all twisted and crumpled on the road, with her head skewed way around like it shouldn't be—couldn't be if the woman lived.

It was funny. . . . When those things had taken place, she'd felt terrible. Now—remembering them—she found herself going over every detail in her mind, almost—lovingly.

In a magazine she had once seen a picture of Salomé kneeling on the ground holding on a great tray the head of Baptist John. The woman's body was arched forward; there was a look of utter, half-delirious absorption on her face as her lips quested for the dead, partly open mouth. And quite suddenly, with a little shock of revelation, Sarah Travis knew what Salomé had felt.

The dress slipped from her fingers. She hurried to put it on. . . .

GEORGES, The *Gascony's* chief bartender, said: "Perhaps *monsieur* would desire another. That's a bad col' you catch."

The watery-eyed red-nosed little man perched before him

had a strip of flannel wound around his throat neatly pinned in back with two small safety-pins. He glanced furtively around over his shoulder, the length of the glittering cocktail lounge. "Mebbe you're right," he said. "But the missus is due up in a minute, I don't want her to catch me at it, she'll lace it into me, sure enough!"

Sarah, of course, wouldn't dream of approaching the bar; when she came they'd sit decorously at a little table over in the corner, he with a beer, she with a cup of Oolong tea, just to act stylish.

Hiram Travis blew his long-suffering nose into a handkerchief the size of a young tablecloth. Then he turned his attention to the live canary dangling over the bar in a bamboo cage, as part of the decorations. He coaxed a few notes out by whistling softly. Then he happened to look in the mirror before him—and he recoiled a little, his eyes bugged; and part of his drink spilled out of his glass.

She was standing next to him, right there at the bar itself, before he'd even had time to turn. An odor of musk enveloped him. The canary over their heads executed a few pinwheel flurries.

His jaw just hung open. "Well, fer—!" was all he could say. It wasn't so much the dress she was wearing, it was that her whole personality seemed to have subtly changed. Her face had a hard, set look about it. Her manner was almost poised. She wasn't fluttering with her hands the way she usually did in a room full of people, and he missed the nervous, hesitant smile on her lips. He couldn't begin to say what it was, but there was something about her that made him a little afraid of her. He even edged an inch or two away from her. Even Georges looked at her with a new professional respect not unmixed with fear.

"*Madame?*" he said.

She said, "I feel like a drink tonight," she said, and laughed a little, huskily. "What are those things—cocktails—? Like that woman over there has."

The bartender winced a little. "That, *madame*, is a double Martini. Perhaps something less—"

"No. That's what I want. And a cigarette, too. I want to try one."

Beside her, her husband could only splutter, and he stopped even that when she half turned to flash him a smile—the instinctive, brilliant smile of a woman who knows what feeble creatures men can be. You couldn't learn to smile like that. It was something a woman either knew the minute she was born, or never knew at all.

Georges recognized that smile.

"I can't believe it's you," Hiram Travis said, stupefied.

Again that smile. "It must be this dress," she said. "It does something to me. You have to live up to a gown like this, you know. . . ." There was a brief warning in her eyes. She picked up her cocktail, sipped at it, coughed a little, and then went on drinking it slowly. "About the dress," she said, "I put my hand on it and for a moment I couldn't take it away again, it seemed to *stick* to it like glue! Next thing I knew I was in it."

As the bartender struck a match to light her cigarette, she put her hand on his wrist to steady it. Travis saw him jump, draw back. He held his wrist, blew on it, looked at her reproachfully. Travis said: "Why, you scratched him, Sarah."

"Did I? And as she turned and looked at him, he saw her hand twitch a little, and drew still further away from her. "What—what's got into you?" he faltered.

There was some kind of tension spreading all around the horseshoe-shaped bar, emanating from her. All the cordiality, the sociability, was leaving it. Cheery conversations even at the far ends of it faltered and died, and the speakers looked around them as though wondering what was putting them so on edge. A heavy leaden pall of restless silence descended, as when a cloud goes over the sun. One or two people even turned and moved away reluctantly, as though they hadn't intended to but didn't like it at the bar any more. The gaunt-faced woman in red and black was the center of all eyes, but the looks sent her were not the admiring looks of men for a well-dressed woman; they were the blinking petrified looks a blacksnake would get in a poultry yard. Even the barman felt it. He dropped and smashed a glass, a thing he hadn't done since he'd been working on the ship. Even the canary felt it, and stood shivering pitifully on its perch, emitting an occasional cheep as though for help.

SARAH TRAVIS looked up, and saw it. She took a loop of her

dress, draped it around her finger, thrust it between the bars. There was a spasm of frantic movement inside, too quick for the eye to follow, a blurred pinwheel of yellow. Then the canary lay lifeless at the bottom of the cage, claws stiffly up-thrust. Its heart had stopped from fright.

It wasn't what she had done—they could all see that contact hadn't killed it—it was the look on her face that was so shocking. No pity, no regret, but an expression of savage satisfaction, a sense of power to deal out life-and-death just now discovered. Some sort of unholy excitement seemed to be crackling inside her; they could all but see phosphorescent flashes of it in her eyes.

This time they began to move away in numbers, with outthrust lower lips of repugnance and dislike turned her way. Drinks were left half-finished, or were taken with them to be imbibed elsewhere. She became the focal-point for a red wave of converged hate that, had she been a man, would surely have resulted in some overt act. There were sulky whispers of "Who is that?" as they moved away. The bartender, as he detached and lowered the cage, looked daggers at her, cursed between his teeth in French.

There was only one solitary drinker left now at the bar, out of all the amiable crowd that had ringed it when she first arrived. He kept studying her inscrutably with an expressionless face; seemingly unallergic to the tension that had driven everyone else away.

There's that detective again," she remarked with cold hostility. "Wonder he doesn't catch cold without that poor devil being chained to him. "Wonder where he's left him?"

"Locked up below, probably, while he's up getting a bracer," Travis answered mechanically. His chief interest was still his own problem: what had happened to his wife in the ten brief minutes from the time he'd left her preparing to dress in their stateroom until the time she's joined him up here? "I suppose they asked him not to bring him up with him manacled like that, for the sake of appearances. Why are you so sorry for his prisoner all of a sudden, and so set against him? Only last night you were saying what an awful type man the other fellow was and how glad you were he'd been caught."

"Last night isn't tonight," she said shortly. "People change, Hiram." She still had the edge of her dress wrapped around

her hand, as when she'd destroyed the canary. "I don't suppose you ever will, though." Her voice was low, thoughtful. She looked at her husband curiously, then deliberately reached out toward him with that hand and rested it against him.

Travis didn't go into a spasm and fall lifeless as the bird had. He displayed a sudden causeless resentment toward her, snapped, "Take your hand away, don't be pawing me!" and moved further away.

She glanced disappointedly down at her hand as though it had played a dirty trick on her, slowly unwound the strip of material, let it fall. She stared broodingly into the mirror for awhile, tendrils of smoke coming up out of her parted lips.

She said, "Hi, is that half-million-dollar insurance policy you took out before we left in effect yet or still pending?" and narrowed her eyes at her image in the glass.

"It's in effect," he assured her. "I paid the first premium on it the day before we left Dubuque. I'm carrying the biggest insurance of any individual in Iowa—"

She didn't seem particularly interested in hearing the rest. She changed the subject abruptly—or seemed to. "Which one of the bags have you got that gun in that you brought with you for protection? You know, in case we got robbed in Europe."

The sequence of questions was so glaringly, so unmistakably meaningful, that he did what almost anyone else would have done under the circumstances, ascribed it to mere coincidence and ignored it. Two separate disconnected chains of thought, crowding upon one another, had made her ask first one, then the other, that was all. It just would have *sounded* bad to a stranger, to that professional crime-detector over there for instance, but of course *he* knew better. After all he'd been married to her for eighteen years.

"In the cowhide bag under the bed in the stateroom," he answered calmly. "Why? Every time you got a peek at it until now you squeaked, 'Throw it away, Hi! I can't stand to look at them things!'"

She touched her hand to her throat briefly and moistened her lips.

Travis noticed something, and said: "What's the matter, you

seasick? Your face is all livid, kind of, and you're breathing so fast—I coulda told you not to monkey 'round with liquor when you're not used to it."

"It isn't either, Hiram. I'm all right. Leave me be." Then, with a peculiar ghastly smile lighting up her face, she said, "I'm going down below a minute to get something I need. I'll be back."

"Want me to come with you?"

"No," she said, still smiling, "I'd rather have you wait for me here, and then come out on the deck with me for a little stroll when I come back. That upper boat-deck. . . ."

The little undulating serpentine train of her dress followed her across the cocktail lounge and out. Hiram Travis watched her go, wondering what had happened to change her so. Georges watched her go, wondering what what had gone wrong at his bar tonight. Frank Fisher watched her go, wondering who it was she kept reminding him of. He had thought of Belden's sweetheart in Paris at once, but discarded her, because the two women didn't resemble one another in the least.

FIFTEEN was the number of her stateroom, and she knew that well, yet she had stopped one door short of it, opposite seventeen, and stood listening. The sound was so faint as to be almost indistinguishable, a faint rasping, little more than the buzz of an angry fly caught in the stateroom and trying to find a way out. Certainly it was nothing to attract the attention of anyone going by, as it had hers. It was as though her heart and senses were turned in to evil tonight, and the faintest whisper of evil could reach her.

She edged closer, into the little open foyer at right-angles to the passageway, in which the door was set. None of the stateroom-doors on the *Gascony* opened directly out into the public corridors. There was a food-tray lying outside the door, covered with a napkin, ready to be taken away. She edged it silently aside with the point of her foot, stood up closer to the door. The intermittently buzzing fly on the other side of it was more audible now. *Zing-zing, zing-zing, zing-zing.* It would break off short every so often, then resume.

Mrs. Hiram Travis, who had been afraid of strange men and

who had shuddered at the mere thought of criminals until twenty minutes ago, smiled knowingly, reached out and began to turn the glass doorknob. It made no sound in her grasp, but the motion must have been visible on the other side. The grating sound stopped dead, something clinked metallically, and then there was a breathless, waiting silence.

The faceted knob had turned as far as it would go in her hand, but the door wouldn't give. A man's voice called out: "Come on, jailer, quit playing hide-and-seek! Whaddya think you're going to catch me doing, hog-tied like I am?"

She tried the knob again, more forcefully. The voice said: "Who's there?" a little fearfully this time.

"Where's the key?" she whispered.

"Who are you?" was the answering whisper.

"You don't know me. I'd like to get in and talk to you—"

"What's the angle?"

"There's something you can do—for me. I want to help you."

"He's got the key, he took it up with him. Watch yourself, he'll be back any minute—" But there was a hopeful note in the voice now. "He's got both keys, the one to the door and the one to these bracelets. I'm cuffed to the head of the bed and that's screwed into the floor—"

"I left him up at the bar," she said, "If I could get near enough to him maybe I could get hold of the keys."

There was a tense little silence while the man behind the door seemed to be thinking things over.

"Wait a minute," the voice said, "I've got something here that'll help you. Been carrying it around in the fake sole of my shoe. Stand close under that open transom, I'll see if I can make it from here—"

Presently a little white, folded paper packet flew out, hit the wall opposite, landed at her feet.

She stooped swiftly to pick it up, scarcely conscious of the unaccustomed grace of her movement.

"Get it? Slip it into his drink, It's the only chance you've got. Now listen, the cuff-key is in his watch-pocket, under his belt; the door key's in his breast-pocket. He turned his gun over to the purser when we came aboard, said he wasn't taking any chances of my getting hold of it while he was asleep.

I don't know who you are or what the lay is, but you're my only bet. We dock tomorrow. Think you can do it?"

"I can do anything—tonight," Mrs. Hiram Travis of Du-buque answered as she moved away from the door.

FISHER looked at her a full half-minute while she stood beside him holding her cigarette poised. "Certainly," he said at last, "but you won't find the matches I carry any different from the ones your husband and the bartender both offered you just now—and which you refused." He struck one, held it for her.

"You see everything, don't you?"

"That's my business." He turned back to the bar again, as though to show the interruption was over.

She didn't move. "May I drink with you?"

He stiffened his finger at the Frenchman. "Find out what the lady is having." Then turned to go. "If you'll excuse me—"

"*With* you, not *on* you," she protested.

"This isn't a pleasure trip," he told her briefly. "I'm on business. My business is downstairs, not up here. I've stayed away from it too long already. Sorry."

"Oh, but a minute more won't matter—" She had thrust out her arm deftly, fencing him in. She was in the guise of a lady, and to be unnecessarily offensive to one went counter to a training he had received far earlier than that of the Department. It was ingrained in the blood. She had him at a disadvantage. He gave in grudgingly, but he gave in.

She signaled her husband to join them, and he came waddling up, blowing his nose and obviously beginning to feel his liquor. Tonight was one night Sarah didn't seem to give a rap how much he drank, and it was creeping up on him.

Georges set down three Martinis in a row. Mrs. Travis let a little empty crumpled white paper fall at her feet.

"Y'know," Travis was saying. "About this fella you're bringin' back with you—"

"Sorry," said Fisher, crisply but pleasantly, "I'm not at liberty to discuss that."

Mrs. Travis raised Fisher's drink to her lips with her left

hand, moved hers toward him with her right. Georges was busy rinsing his shaker.

"Last Spring one of you fellas showed up in Dubuque, I remember. He was lookin' for some bank-robber. Came around to the office one day—" Travis went into a long, boring harangue. Presently he broke off, looked at Fisher, and turned a startled face to his wife.

"Hey, he's fallen asleep!"

"I don't blame him much," she said, and brushed the lapel of Fisher's coat lightly, then the tab of his vest. "Spilled his drink all over himself," she murmured in explanation. She took her hand away clenched, metal gleaming between the finger-cracks. "Take him outside on the desk with you, Hi," she said. "Sit him in a chair, see if the air'll clear his head. Don't let anyone see him like this in here. . . ."

"You're right," said Travis, with the owl-like earnestness of the partially-intoxicated.

"The boat-deck. No one goes up there at night. I'll join you—presently." She turned and walked away.

SHE dangled the handcuff-key up and down in the palm of her hand, standing back just beyond his reach. He was nearly tearing his arm out of its socket, straining across the bed to get at it.

There was something oddly sinister about her, standing there grinning devilishly at him like that, something that made Steve Belden almost afraid. This ugly dame was really bad. . . .

"Well, come on, use that key! What'd you do, just lift it to come down here and rib with me it? That knockout-powder ain't going to last all night. It's going to pass off in a few minutes and—"

"First listen to what I have to say. I'm not doing this because I'm sorry for you."

"All right, let's have it! Anything you say. You're holding the aces."

She began to smile and it was a terrible thing to see. Poisonous . . . the pure distillation of evil . . . like a gargoyle-mask.

"Listen," she began. "My husband—there is a half-a-million

dollar insurance policy on his life—and I'm the sole beneficiary. I'm sick of him—he's a hick—never will be anything but a hick. I've got to be rid of him—got to. And I want that money. I've earned it. I'll never get another chance as good as now, on this boat. I don't want that half-a-million when I'm sixty and no good any more. I want it now, while I'm young enough to enjoy it. But even if there wasn't any insurance at all, I'd still want to do it. I hate the way he talks and the way he walks and the way he eats his shredded-wheat and the way he always is getting colds and talking like a trained seal! I hate everybody there is in the world tonight, but him most." And she gave the handcuff key one final filip, caught it again, blew her breath on it—just beyond his manacled reach.

He rubbed his strained shoulder, scowled at her. "What do you have to have me for?" he asked. "Not that it means anything to me to put the skids to a guy, even a guy that I've never set eyes on before; but for a dame that can get Fisher's stateroom and bracelet-keys out of his pocket right under his eyes—why do you have to have help on a simple little stunt like that?"

"I'll tell you why," she said. "You see, mister, I had him with me when I came aboard, and so I have to have him with me when I go ashore tomorrow. That's why I need you. You're going to be—Hiram, bundled up in his clothes, with your neck bandaged, and a great big handkerchief in front of your face. You won't have to speak. I'll do all the talking. If I just report that he disappeared at sea, I'll never be able to prove that he's dead, I'll never get the half-a-million. . . ."

"But suppose I do go ashore with you, how you gonna prove it then?"

"I'll—I'll find something—I don't know just yet. Maybe a—a body from the morgue—or something." She gave him a peculiar searching look.

Steve Belden was no fool. That look made him think that maybe he was slated to play the part of the "remains" in question, when the time came. But he was in no position to bargain. The important thing was to get these cuffs open and get off the ship. And he'd need her help for that. Then later—

"And do I get a cut of the five hundred grand?"

She laughed mirthlessly. "Why, no," she said. "I don't think

so. I'm saving your life, you see, and I think it's enough. Your life—for his. . . ."

"All right," he said. "No harm in asking. Now get busy with that key."

A quick twist of her wrist, a click, and the manacle dangled empty from the bed-rail. The murderer of Frank Fisher's brother was free again. His first words, as he chafed his wrist and stamped back and forth like a bear on a rampage, were not of gratitude—the underworld knows no gratitude—but low growls of revenge.

"A week in that filthy pig-pen of a French prison! Four days in this coop, chained up like an animal. Chained to him while I ate, chained to him while I slept, chained to him even while I shaved. *He's* never getting off this ship alive—!"

"Of course he isn't," the woman agreed. "How can we let him? The whole idea would be spoiled if he does. That'll be your job. I'm attending to—Hiram myself."

Belden waved his fists in the air. "If I only had a gun!"

"There's one in my cabin, in a cowhide suitcase under the bed—" Then as he turned toward the door: "Wait a minute. You can't do that. You'll bring the whole ship down on us, the moment you show your face, and there'll be a general alarm raised. Now if you go into my cabin next door, you can hide in the bath. I'll go up and find a way of bringing him down there with me—after I—Somehow your—Mr. Fisher—we have to get him in there before he comes back here and finds you gone. Now wait a minute, we can fix this bed in case he takes a quick look in here first."

She pushed pillows together under the covers, made a long log-like mound. "Give me your coat," she said. "You'll be wearing Hiram's clothes, anyway." She extended the empty sleeve out from the coverings, locked the open manacle around its cuff. "You went to bed fully-dressed, waiting for him to come down and tuck you in!"

"Hurry up," he kept saying. "We ain't got all night! We must be near Ambrose Lightship already."

"No. We mustn't rush," the lady from Dubuque, who had been afraid of strangers and weapons and violence, said quietly. "Follow me, and I'll get the gun out for you and rig you up in Hiram's things." She eased the door open, advanced

to the mouth of the foyer, and glanced up and down the long passageway. "Come on."

She joined him a moment later, unlocked her door for him. She crouched down, pulled out the valise, found the gun and held it up. "You'll have to use this through pillows," she said, "or you'll make a noise." She was handling the weapon almost caressingly. It pointed at his chest for a moment, and her eyes grew misty.

Belden jumped aside out of range, pulled the gun angrily away from her. "What's the matter with you anyway?" he barked. "You kill-crazy? I thought it was Fisher and your husband you were out to get!"

"Yes," she said sullenly. That was the greater treachery, so it had first claim on her. "But I told you, I hate everyone in the world tonight. Everyone—you hear?"

"Yeah? Well, we need each other, and until we're out of this squeeze, let's hang together. Now go on up there and get that dick down here. I'll be just behind the bathroom door there, waiting for him."

She grabbed up a long gauzy handkerchief and sidled out of the room. Behind her Belden wiped his beaded brow. He'd never run into a woman like her before and—hard-bitten as he was—he never wanted to again.

Chapter 5

Collusion

TRAVIS looked up from a deck-chair at the shadowy figure looming before him on the unlighted deck. "That you, Sarah? What took you so long? I don't think it's so good for my cold, staying up here in the wind so long."

"This is going to cure your cold," her voice promised him raspingly.

He motioned to the inert form in the chair beside him. "Hasn't opened his eyes since he came up here. Sure must be dead for sleep. Guess he ain't been getting much rest, chained to that fella down there—" He tittered inanely. "Wonder what they did when they wanted to turn over in bed?"

She bent over Fisher, shook him slightly, ever so slightly,

one hand above his breast-pocket, the other at the tab of his vest. Then she straighted again. "I didn't know they ever slept like that—did you?"

She turned toward the rail, went and stood beside it, outlined dimly against the stars. The wind fluttered her gown about her. She held the long gauzy handkerchief in one hand like a pennant. "What a lovely night," she said. "Come here and look at the water."

There was no one on this unroofed boat-deck, but the two of them—and Fisher.

"I can see it from here," her husband answered. "'Twouldn't be good for my cold to lean way out into the wind like that." He blinked fearfully into the gloom. "You look just like—some kind of a bogey-man standing there like that, with the wind making great big bat-wings grow behind your back. If I didn't know it was you, I'd be scared out of ten years' growth—"

She opened her fingers and the handkerchief fluttered downward like a ghostly streamer. A wisp of cloud passed over the new moon just then.

"Hiram," she called in a silvery voice, like the sirens on the rock to Ulysses, "I've lost my handkerchief. Come quickly, it's caught around the bottom of the railing. Hurry, before it blows loose—!"

Hiram Travis heard the voice of the woman he had been married to for eighteen years, asking him a common favor, and the obscured moon and the simulated bat-wings and the chill foreboding at the base of his skull became just the play-things of an overwrought imagination. He got up awkwardly from the deck-chair, waddled across to the rail beside her, peered down. His eyes were watery from his cold and blurred from unaccustomed liquor.

"You sure it's still there?" he said uncertainly. "Thought I saw it go all the way down."

"Of course it's still there, can't you see it? Bend over, you can see it from here—" Then as he prepared to squat on the inside of the guardrail and peer through it from there, she quickly forestalled him with a guiding hand at the nape of his neck. "No, lean over from above and look down on the outside, that's the only way you can see it. I'll hold you."

On the deckchair behind them the unconscious Fisher

stirred a little, mumbled in his drugged sleep. He seemed to be on the point of awakening. But the stupor was too strong for him. He sighed heavily, became inert once more.

"Blamed if I can see a dratted thing!" Travis was piping. He was folded almost double over the rail, like a clothespin, with his wife's hand at his shoulder. He made vague groping motions with one hand, downward into space; the other was clasped about the rail.

"You're nearly touching it. It's just an inch away from your fingertips—"

"Get one of the stewards, Sarah, I'm liable to go over myself first thing I know, doing this—"

It was the last thing he said in this world. The last thing she said to him was: "We don't need a steward—for *this*, darling."

She crouched down suddenly beside him, took her hand away from his shoulder. She gripped his bony ankles with both hands, thrust viciously upward, broke their contact with the deck, straightening as she did so. He did a complete somersault across the guard-rail; the arm that had gripped it was turned completely around in its socket, torn free. That was the last thing she saw of him—that momentary appeal of splayed white hand vanishing into the blackness. His screech was smothered in the sighing of the wind.

She thrust out her arms wide, in strange ritual of triumph, as Mimi Brissard had in Paris. She was a black, ominous death-cross against the starlight for a moment. Then she turned slowly, her eyes two green phosphorescent pools, toward where the helpless secret service man lay.

FISHER blinked and opened his eyes. He was still groggy from the dreams he had been having. Dreams in which long, skinny black imps out of hell had pushed people over the side of an immense precipice down into a bottomless abyss below. He'd been chained down, unable to help them, though they screamed to him for assistance. Over and over it had happened. It had been the worst form of torture, the most ghastly nightmare he had ever had. Then toward the end the imps had concentrated on him himself. They had tugged and pulled, trying to get him to the edge of the precipice, and he

had held back, dug his heels in, but inch by inch they had been overcoming him. . . .

He saw that he was partly off the chair he had been sleeping on. One leg, one arm and shoulder, hung down over the side, as though somebody had actually been tugging at him. But the lady from Dubuque, the harmless, inoffensive, eccentric middlewestern lady from Dubuque was the only person around, stretched out there in the chair beside his. His mouth lasted like cotton wool, and everything looked warped, like an image in a corrugated mirror. He fell down on his knees when he tried to get off the chair.

Instantly she was all solicitude, helping him get to his feet. She said, "Well, whatever happened to you? My husband and I have been taking turns watching over you. We didn't like to call any of the stewards, because—well, because of your position. People talk so on these ships—"

He could feel the drug-dilated pupils of his eyes slowly contract until they were normal again. The lines of the things he looked at resumed their straightness. But even then, the "kicks" wouldn't go away altogether; he had a regular hang-over from them. There was cement on his eyelids and it took all the strength he could muster to keep them open. He said surlily: "Where is he? I remember vaguely coming up here with him, leaning on him the whole way—"

She said, "He went below just a few minutes ago, to fix you up a bromo-seltzer. It's just what you need, it'll clear your head marvelously. Come on down with me a minute, and let him give it to you."

He could feel a sense of resentment toward her stir through him, as when you rub a cat's fur the wrong way. Yet she wasn't doing or saying anything to antagonize him. "Why don't you stay out of my business?" he blurted out uncontrollably, "What is this? I never saw you before until tonight—" And then as though the word *business* had reminded him of something, he stabbed his hand toward his watch-pocket, then upward to his breast-pocket.

"Did you lose something?" she asked innocently.

"No," he scowled, "and it's no thanks to myself I didn't, either! I ought to be shot!"

She bared her teeth momentarily at that, as though she

found the phrase privately amusing, for some reason of her own.

He stood up abruptly, stalked toward the faintly outlined white staircase leading to the deck below. She came hurrying after him. "Will you help me down the stairs please? They're hard for me to manage on these high heels—"

Grudgingly, he cupped his hand to the point of her elbow, guided her down the incline after him. Yet at the contact his antagonism rose to such a pitch it was all he could do to keep from throwing her bodily down past him, to break her neck or back. He took his hand away, jumped clear, to keep from giving in to the impulse, and a moment later she had gained the safety of the lower deck.

HE didn't wait. The muscular lethargy that had gripped him was slowly wearing off. Suddenly it broke altogether, and he was normal again. By that time he was hurrying along the inner passageway toward his stateroom, to see to his prisoner. Behind him, like something in a bad dream that couldn't be shaken off, came the rustle and the slither of Mrs. Travis' dress as she followed him.

He unlocked the door, threw it open, turned on the light switch. Belden lay there sound asleep. The covers up over his head, one arm stiffly held in place by the manacle. Fisher let out a deep breath of relief.

Before he could get in and close the door after him, the rustle and the slither had come to a stop directly behind him. He turned his head impatiently. This woman was worse than a burr.

She said, "We're right next door. Won't you stop in a moment and let Mr. Travis give you the bromo-seltzer before you retire? He came down, 'specially to mix it for you."

"That's good of him," he said shortly, "but I could get one from the steward just as well." An odor of musk enveloped him, at her nearness. Again his early training intervened in her favor, wouldn't let him slam the door in her face and end her importunities once and for all.

She suddenly reached past him and gently closed the door. "He's all right," she purred. "He'll keep a moment longer. He's

not running away." She took him by the hand, began to lead him gently but persistently down toward the next foyer.

The contact, as on the stalls just now, again inflamed with nearly uncontrollable and entirely murderous anger. His hands on her throat. . . . He pulled his hand away, face whitening with the effort to overcome it. "I can walk—"

She threw open her own door, called out loudly: "Hiram, here's Mr. Fisher for that bromo. Did you mix it yet?"

The stateroom was empty. A cowhide valise had been pulled partly out from under the bed, allowed to remain there with its lid up.

"He's in the bathroom, I guess," she said. She moved unobtrusively around behind Fisher and closed the stateroom door.

A frog-croak from the direction of the bathroom answered, "I'm mixing it now." Fisher glanced over that way. A blurred reflection created a flurry of movement across the mirror-panel set in the bathdoor, which was turned outward into the room.

She distracted his attention by standing in front of him, turning him around toward her, smiling that same saturnine smile that had been on her lips so often tonight.

He gave her a searching look, wary, mistrustful. "There's something about you—" The back of his hand went out and flicked her shoulder. "Where'd you get that dress? All night long it's kept reminding me of—"

"Paris," she said. "It's a Maldonado. . . ." The blur on the mirror-panel had become a shadow that lengthened as it crept out over the floor into the room. "See, I'll show you." She turned an edge of the shoulder over, revealed a little silk tab with lettering on it. "Can you read what it says?"

He bent his head, peered intently, off-guard.

I'm Dangerous Tonight

HER arms suddenly flashed around him like white whips, in a death-embrace, pinning his own close to his sides. "Now, Belden, *now!*" he heard her cry.

The lurking shadow in the background sprang forward, closed in. The white oblong of a pillow struck Fisher between

the shoulders, as though this were no more than a friendly pillow-fight. Then through it came a muffled detonation.

Fisher straightened suddenly, stood there motionless. The woman unclasped her arms, and he collapsed to the floor, lay there at her feet, eyes still open.

From over him came Belden's voice: "Go tell your brother you weren't so hot yourself!"

"Close his eyes," she said, "you've only stunned him!" as though she were talking about some insect.

The pillow fell across him again, and Travis' revolver and Belden's fist plunged into the soft middle of it. There were two more shots. Little goose-feathers flew up and settled again. When Belden kicked the scorched pillow aside, Fisher's eyes were closed.

"They don't come any deader than that!" he said.

She was crouched beside the door, listening.

She straightened up finally, murmured triumphantly: "We did it! It could have been champagne-corks, or punctured party-balloons. Half of them are drunk tonight, anyway!" Her lip curled.

"Let's get going," Belden answered impatiently. "We must be passing the Narrows already. We dock in a couple hours; we want to clear off before they find this guy—"

"All right, get in there and put on Hi's things, while I'm changing out here. Better put on two coats one over the other, he had more of a bulge than you. Turn your collar up around your face and hold a big handkerchief under your nose, you've got a bad cold. I'll pin one of those cloths around your neck like he had. I've got the passports and everything we need."

Belden disappeared into the bath with an armful of Travis' clothing. She stood before the mirror, started to tug at the dress, bring it down off her shoulders. It looped at her waist, fell down to the floor with a slight hiss. She stepped clear of the mystic ring it had formed about her feet, and as she did so the contact between it and her body broke for the first time since ten the night before.

She staggered against the wall, as though some sort of galvanic shock had pushed her. Her mouth opened like a suffocating fish out of water, slowly closed again. She was as limp

and as inert as the bullet-riddled man bleeding away on the floor.

Her hands went dazedly up to her hair, roamed distractedly through it, dragging it down about her shoulders. She was just Sarah Travis again, and the long bad dream was over. But darkness didn't give way to light, darkness gave way to perpetual twilight. Something snapped.

She had one more lucid moment. Her eyes found the opened closet door, where some of Travis' things could still be seen hanging on the rack. "Hi," she breathed soundlessly, "My husband." Then she began to shake all over. The shaking became low laughter, that at first sounded like sobbing.

Belden came out, in Travis' camel-hair coat, cap pulled down over his eyes. "Are you nearly—? What's the matter, what're you giggling about?"

The laughter rose, became full-bodied, a terrible thing in continuous crescendo.

"I'm getting out of here, if I gotta swim for it!" He could make it, he told himself; they were far enough up the Bay now. And he knew just where to go to lie low, until he could get word to—

The door closed behind him, muffling her paeans of soulless mirth, that throbbed there in that place of death.

When the ship's doctor was summoned, shortly after the *Gascony* had docked and lay motionless alongside one of the new piers at the foot of the West Fifties, he found her crouched on her knees like a Geisha, back to the wall, one arm extended, pointing crazily to the motionless form lying outstretched on the floor. The rise and fall of her ceaseless wrenching laughter was unbearable.

The doctor shook his head. "Bring a straitjacket," he said tersely, "she's hopelessly insane."

"Is he gone?" they asked, as he examined Fisher.

"Just a matter of minutes," was the answer. He's punctured like a sieve. Better call an ambulance. Let him do his dying ashore."

Chapter 6

The Chain Snaps

FISHER'S nurse at the Mount of Olives Hospital, Miss Wellington, was a pleasant young person with sleek auburn hair and a small rosette of freckles on each polished cheekbone. She wore rimless hexagonal glasses that softened, instead of hardened her eyes. She came down the gleaming, sterilized corridor in equally gleaming, sterilized white, carrying a tray containing a glass of milk, a cup of cocoa, and a geranium. Every convalescent's breakfast-tray in the hospital always had one flower on it. Miss Wellington remembered, however, that it had had a queer effect on the patient in Room Ten. He had growled he was not dead yet, the last time she had brought one in, and heaved it out of the open window with so much energy that his scars had reopened and begun to bleed again.

Miss Wellington wisely removed it from the tray, hid it in her uniform-pocket, and replaced it with two smuggled cigarettes. Fisher was a favorite of hers; she disliked tractable, submissive patients, and she was something of a philosopher anyway. A hundred years from now it would be all the same, whether the poor devil smoked or didn't.

She freed one hand to turn the knob and was about to enter Ten, when an alarmed, "Hold it! Just a minute!" was shouted at her from inside. Miss Wellington, undeterred, calmly barged right in.

"Oh, so that's it," she remarked, setting the tray down. "And where do you think you're going, young man?"

Fisher was hanging onto the foot of the bed with one hand, to keep his balance, and belting his trousers around his middle with the other. He had on one shoe, one sock, and his hat.

"Listen," he said, "I got a job to do, a report to make, and you can have my bed back. You can keep the slugs you took out of me, too; I'm generous that way."

"You get back there where you belong," she frowned with assumed severity. "D'you realize that they could put a new roof on this entire wing of the building, just with the lead that was taken out of you? And there was enough left over to

weatherstrip the windows, at that! You don't deserve hospitalization, any of you young huskies, the way you crowd your luck—"

He sat down shakily on the edge of the bed. His knees had gone rubbery. "I certainly don't," he agreed. "Any guy that falls down on his job—what good is he, tell me that? They should have left me where they found me, bleeding to death on the *Gascony*. That's all I had coming to me. That's all I'm worth."

"That's right, cry into your soup," she said. She struck a match, held it for him. "Here, smoke this—on an empty stomach; you've broken every other rule of the place, you may as well go the whole hog."

"You don't know what it means. The men I work with—not to be able to look any of them in the face—to have to go around tagged a failure for the rest of my life. That's all anybody has, Wellington, his pride in his job—"

She sighed. "I guess we'll have to let you go. It's better than having you die on our hands. If we try to keep you here you'll probably pine away. And I'm getting worn to a shadow pushing you back in bed every morning at eight, regularly. I'll get MacKenzie in, have him look you over. Put out that cigarette."

MacKenzie looked him over, said: "I'd strongly advise you to give it a week more—if I thought it would do any good. But if you're going to be rebellious and mentally depressed about it, it might do you more harm in the long run. There's really no reason for keeping you here any longer, only try to stay off your feet as much as you can—which I know you won't do anyway."

"Sure, and stay out of drafts," Fisher smiled bitterly, "and live to be a hundred. What for?" He put on his coat and tie. "Where's my gun?"

"You'll have to sign for that downstairs, on your way out."

At the door he turned and looked around the room, as though he was just seeing it for the first time. "Who paid for all this?"

"Somebody named Trilling."

Fisher nodded glumly. "He's my boss. Why did he bother?" MacKenzie and the nurse exchanged a look.

Fisher picked up his hat and walked out, head down, star-

ing at the floor. Along the corridor outside he had to steady himself with one arm against the wall, but he kept going until he'd stumbled into the elevator.

Miss Wellington touched the outside corner of an eye with her finger, stroked downward. "We didn't do that boy any good," she murmured. "The bullets were in his soul. Wonder what it'll take to get 'em out?"

At the local FBI headquarters half an hour later Fisher's face was ashen, but not entirely from the effort it had cost him to get there. He stood facing Trilling across the desk, a proffered chair rejected in the background.

"I haven't come to make excuses," he said quietly, "the facts speak for themselves. He got away. I hashed up the job. I let you down. I begged, I pleaded with you to give me the assignment. I not only put you to considerable expense with nothing to show for it; but through me Belden even got back into the country, which he never could have done by himself."

He laid it down before him on the desk. Jealously close to him, though, as if afraid to have it taken from him. "You want this—back?" he said huskily. There was almost a prayer in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Trilling said, and drew it the rest of the way across the desk. It fell into an open drawer, dropped from sight. "I don't, but Washington does, and I take my instructions from them. They seem to want results. What damned you was, not that he got away, but some story about a woman being involved—"

Fisher just stood there, his eyes on the desk where the badge had last been visible. His Adam's apple had gone up just once, and stayed high. After awhile, when he could speak again, he said: "Yes, I wonder what that story is, myself. I wonder if I'll ever know."

Trilling had turned his head away from the look on Fisher's face. He was on his way to the door now, his former superior knew. The voice came from further away. "There's no use standing here," it said. "I never did like a guy that crawled, myself. I guess you know what this means to me, though."

Trilling said, "I ought to. I'm in the same outfit. I'm you—a couple of notches higher up, that's all. Let's not consider this

irrevocable, let's just call it temporary. Maybe it will be straightened out in a few months. And again I say, this isn't me. This is word from Washington." He fumbled embarrassedly with a wallet inside his coat-pocket. "Fisher, come here a minute—" he said.

But the door had opened already. He heard Fisher say, to no one in particular: "That was my whole life. This is my finish now." The frosted-glass panel ebbed shut almost soundlessly, and his blurred shadow faded slowly away on the outside of it.

Trilling resignedly let the wallet drop back in his pocket. Then he caught sight of a wire-wastebasket standing on the floor beside his swivel-chair. He delivered a resounding kick at it that sent it into a loop, with the inexplicable remark: "Damn women!"

THE honkytonk bartender, who doubled as bouncer, waiter, and cashier, was in no mood to compromise. Mercy was not in him. He came out around the open end of the long counter, waddled threatening across the floor in a sullen, red-faced fury and began to shake the inanimate figure lying across the table with its head bedded on its arms. "Hey, you! Do your sleeping in the gutter!"

If you gave these bums an inch; they took a yard. And this one was a particularly glaring example of the *genus* bar-fly. He was in here all the time like this, inhaling smoke and then doing a sunset across the table. He'd been in here since four this afternoon. The boss and he, who were partners in the joint—the bartender called it *jernt*—would have been the last ones to claim they were running a Rainbow Room, but at least they were trying to give the place a *little* class, keep it above the level of a Bowery smoke-house; they even paid a guy to pound the piano and a canary to warble three times a week. And then bums like this had to show up and give the place a bad look!

He shook the recumbent figure again, more roughly than the first time. Shook him so violently that the whole reedy table under him rattled and threatened to collapse. "Come on, clear out, I said! Pay me for what you had and get outa here!"

The figure raised an unshaven face from between its arms, looked at him, said something.

The bartender raised his voice to a bellow, perhaps to bolster his courage. There had been a spark of something in that look. Just a spark, no more, but it had been there. "Oh, so you haven't got any money! So you think you can come in here, do your drinking on the cuff, and get away with it! Well, I'll show you what we do to bums that try that!"

He gripped the figure by his coat collar, took a half-turn in it, brought him erect and held him that way, half-strangled. Then, treacherously, he began to pump short jabs into the man's unguarded face, the muscles of his great beefy arm tightening and pulling like knotted ropes. Blood came, but the man couldn't fall; he was held tight by the nape of the neck. Heads in a long row down the bar turned to watch in idle amusement, not a hand was lifted to help him.

Then something happened. The bartender was suddenly floundering back against the opposite wall, the line of his jaw white at first, then turning a bruised red. He held it, steadied himself against the wall, spat out pieces of tooth-enamel. The figure across the way—the width of the narrow room separated them now—was holding onto an edge of the table for support, acting as though he'd fall down in another minute. He was holding, not his face where the barman had pummeled him, but his chest as if something hurt him there.

The bartender shrieked, "You will, will ya? Sock me, will ya? *Now ya gonna get it! Now I'll cut ya to pieces!*" He reached behind the bar, caught up an empty bottle from one of the lower shelves. Liquor dispensaries are supposed to break their bottles once they're emptied. This was the kind of place that didn't.

He gripped the bottle by the neck, cracked the bottom of it against the bar so that it fell off, advanced murderously upon his victim with the jagged sharp-toothed remainder in his hand for a weapon. And even yet, no one in the place made a move to interfere. He was only a bum; what difference did it make what happened to him?

The bum made no move to try to bolt for the door and get out of the place. Perhaps he sensed an outstretched leg would trip him if he tried it. Perhaps he was unequal to the effort.

Perhaps he didn't care. He even smiled a little, adding fuel to the blazing fire of the bartender's cowardly rage. "Matter, can't you use your hands?"

The bartender poised the vicious implement, to thrust it full in his face, grind it around, maim and maybe kill him.

And then suddenly a girl stood in between them, as though she had dropped from the ceiling. No one had seen where she had come from. A beautiful girl, shabbily dressed. Cheap little blouse and threadbare skirt; golden hair like an angel's, cascading out from under a round woollen cap such as boys wear for skating. She set down the little black dressing-case she'd brought out of the back room with her, caught the bartender's thick wrist in her slim fingers, pushed it back.

"Put that down, Mike!" she said in a cold, angry voice. "Let this man alone!"

THE bartender, towering over her five-feet-four of determination, shouted wrathfully: "What do you know about it? He's a bum, and he's going to get what's coming to him! You stick to your canarying and I'll handle the front room here!"

Her voice was like a whip. "He's not a bum. You're the bum. So much of a bum that you can't tell the difference any more! I still can, thank heavens, and I'm going to get out of here for good before I lose the ability to distinguish!"

The bartender retreated a step or two, put the shattered bottle shame-facedly behind his back. A sallow-complected, chunky man, with his hair all greasy ringlets, was standing at the entrance to the inner room. The girl turned her head toward him briefly. "Find someone else to do your canarying, Angelo. I'm not showing up Wednesday." She faced the bartender again. "How much does he owe you?"

The latter had had all the ground cut away around him. "Couple dollars," he mumbled indistinctly. "He's been riding along all evenin'—"

She snapped open a ridiculous little envelope-sized bag. There were five dollars in it; she'd just been paid tonight. She took two of them out. She didn't hand them to him, she dropped them disdainfully on the floor before him, with a million dollars worth of contempt.

Somewhere in back of her, Fisher spoke. "Let him use the bottle. You're only pushing me down a step lower, doing this."

She said without turning her head, "You're sick. Your mind's sick. I've watched you every night. No one's pushing you down, you're pushing yourself down."

The ringleted man in the doorway said, "Don't do this, Joan, what's matter with you? Why you quit?"

She didn't answer. She picked up the kit-bag standing at her feet, put two fingers behind Fisher's seedy coat-sleeve, said: "Come on, shall we? We don't belong in here—either of us."

Behind them, as they went out into the darkness side by side, the crest-fallen bartender was saying to anyone who would give him an ear: "She must be crazy, she don't even know the guy, never saw him before!" And then with a guilty look at his partner: "She was the best singer we ever had in here too."

A block away they stopped, in the ghostly light of an arc lamp. He turned toward her. "A man doesn't thank a woman for doing a thing like that," he blurted out. "That was the finishing touch you gave me in there just now. Hiding behind your skirts. Letting you buy them off for me."

She said, almost impatiently, "You're so easy to see through! Looking at you, listening to you, almost I know your whole story—without actually knowing any of it. A code is doing this to you. A code of your own that you've violated, or think you have. You'll go down under its weight, let it push you down into what that mug mistook you for. But you won't, you can't, slur its weight and responsibility off you." She shrugged as though that was all there was to be said. "Well, aren't you worth saving—from bottle glass?"

He smiled derisively.

She went on, "You didn't see me slowly walking around that inside room with my mouth open, from table to table, three nights this past week. You didn't hear me. But I saw you. I watched you through the cheap music. You sat there at that little table just outside the door, looking my way but seeing ghosts. Your eyes were the only ones in the place turned inward. You drank until your head fell down, but you weren't drunk—you couldn't get drunk."

She picked up the little kit that contained her costume, made to move on once more. "My name's Joan Blaine," she said, "and I like people with personal codes, because I've got one, too. But handle it right. Don't go down under it; make it push you, lift you up, instead. Come back with me awhile and I'll make you a cup of coffee. I can see that you've been ill recently, and you've probably been sleeping around on park benches lately."

He moved weakly after her, shaking his head. "You're a funny girl. How do you know I won't turn on you, rob you, maybe even murder you?"

"Faces don't lie," she answered. "Why didn't you run out with your tail between your legs when he came at you with the bottle? A real bum would have. You faced him, hardly able to stand up. Besides, *something, someone's*, got to come out right for me."

"Most of it didn't?" he said, in the pitiful little threadbare room, with its single fly-blown bulb, its white-painted cot with the iron showing through.

"Most of it didn't." She handed him a chipped cup of steaming black coffee. "I didn't come to New York to sing in a Third Avenue honkytonk at five dollars a throw. You'll never know how many tears and busted hopes this room of mine has seen. I was letting it get me down, too. The sight of you pulled me up short. That's why I quit my job so easily just now. Don't blame yourself for that. You've helped me, and perhaps I'm going to be able to help you before I'm through. Fisher—that what you said your name was?—you're going back and tackle this thing that threw you, all over again."

"Yeah," he said slowly. "Yeah, I am." There was a steely glint in his eyes that hadn't been there before. "It isn't over, Why didn't I see that before? Just round one is over. But round one's never the whole fight. Even though I'm on my own now—"

She didn't ask him what he meant. "Then the credit and the glory'll be all your own too, look at it that way."

"I'm not doing it for the credit and the glory. I'm doing it because it was my job, and I can't find rest or peace until my job is done. And even though it's been taken away from me, I'll see it through—no matter what—!" He balled a fist and

swung it with terrific emphasis around him where the shadows had been. Shadows that a man could fight, even though he couldn't understand them.

She smiled as though she'd gained her secret point. "All right, then," she said. "Tonight—there's a vacant room, little more than an attic, over me. Without a stick of furniture in it, without even a lock on the door. I'm going to give you one of the blankets from my bed, and you roll yourself up in it on the floor up there. No one needs to know. Tomorrow you and I are going out. You're going to get a shave and a necktie, and you're going after this thing that threw you, whatever it is. And I'm going to find the kind of a singing job I came to New York for, and lick it to a standstill when I do! Tomorrow—the world starts over for both of us, brand new."

He looked at her and he said once more what he'd said out on the street: "You're a funny girl. But a lovely one, too."

IT DIDN'T work itself out in no time at all, in an hour or a day or even a week, it never does. He'd slipped further down than he'd realized, and there were certain realities to be met first of all—to keep his head above water; to keep a roof over his head; to get his gun back out of hock. But he had to have money. He wasn't on the Bureau's payroll any more. So to have money he had to have a job. He knew he could have gone to Trilling or any of the other men that had worked with him, and written his own ticket. But his pride wouldn't let him. He would have worked for nothing, without salary, but—"Washington wants results," Trilling had said. He would have swept streets, waded through the filth of sewers, if only he could have had one thing back again—that little metal disk that had dropped so emphatically from the desk top into a drawer that day, pulling the sun and the moon and the stars down out of his sky after it.

So he sought Sixth Avenue and the melancholy Help-Wanted cards tacked up so thickly on its doorways, that usually mean only an unproductive agency fee. There was plenty that he could do—and agent's training is nothing if not painstaking, but most of it was highly specialized and in the upper brackets; there seemed to be more demand for waiters

and dishwashers along here than for dead-shots, jiu-jitsu experts.

As he moved from knot to knot of dejected employment seekers gathered before each doorway to scan the cards, he became aware of a face that seemed to keep up with his own migrations from group to group. Which was not unusual in itself, since scores of people were moving along in the same direction he was. But this particular man seemed to be studying him rather than the employment cards. Was it somebody who had recognized him from the old days, when he was with the Bureau? Fisher had a good memory for faces. He studied the man stealthily at first—he was a slimy, furtive-looking customer; but his clothes were both flashy and expensive. Fisher took care to keep his glance perfectly expressionless, to see if he could get the man to tip his hand. The man returned the look in a sort of questioning way, as though he were trying to ask him something.

Fisher took a chance, gave his head a slight nod in the affirmative. The man instantly left the group, strolled slowly on for a few yards, then halted with his back to the window of an empty store, obviously waiting for Fisher to join him.

Fisher moved as he had moved, with seeming aimlessness and unconcern, and stopped by him. The man turned his head the other way, away from him, then spoke through motionless lips even while he did so.

"Could you use any?"

FISHER understood instantly. A peddler, the lowest cog in that devil's hierarchy whose source of supply had been Belden, and whose capstone was lost somewhere in the nebulous clouds overhead. There had been a day when Fisher had hoped that pulling Belden out from under would bring the top man toppling within reach; that hope had been blasted. Fisher had to start over, single-handed now, at the lowest pier of the structure, work his way up. This slimy individual who tramped Sixth Avenue pavements probably no more knew who the ringleader was than Fisher did himself. But he was a means to an end.

Fisher understood the reason for the mistake the peddler

had made, that only a short while before would have been so irretrievable. But then only a short while before, it wouldn't have been made. Now he, Fisher, still had the telltale pallor and gauntness of his wounds and hospitalization. A misleading pallor, coupled with a suit whose cut suggested that he was not altogether penniless. So the peddler had jumped to the wrong conclusion. But then if anything backfired, the *could-you-use-any* gag could always be switched to shoelaces, razor blades, or anything equally harmless. Fisher knew many peddlers carried just such articles around with them in their pockets, just for an out. They never had the real thing; peddlers always traveled clean, to guard against sudden seizure and search. A second appointment was always necessary, no matter how well known both parties were to each other.

He answered the surreptitious question in a manner equally covert. "I could," he said, and saw to it that his hand trembled unnecessarily as he lit a cigarette. That wasn't wasted on the peddler.

"Who's been handing it to you?" he said, "I never saw you before."

Fisher pulled a name out of his mental card-index as you do a card in a card-trick. Someone that he knew had been rounded up while he was in Paris, was in a Federal pen now. "Revolving Larry," he said.

"He's at the Boarding House. So are half the others," the man told him. "What's your dish?"

Fisher knew the different underworld abbreviations for the deadly stuff—usually a single letter. "C," he said promptly.

"We're getting forty for it now. The lid went down something fierce six months ago."

Fisher whistled. "I'll never make it."

"That's what they all say. Ain't you got some gold teeth in your mouth or something?" Then he relented a little. "I'll get it for you for thirty-five, bein' you're an old buyer of Larry's."

Things must be pretty tough, Fisher knew, for it to come to that; Trilling and the rest must be doing a grand job. Only he—he alone—had fumbled.

"I'll raise it somehow," he said. Ironically enough, he wasn't

any too certain of being able to. Which was just the right attitude; too ready a supply of money would have immediately raised the other's suspicions.

"Go to Zillick's down the block. It has three booths at the back. Go in the middle one and wait. When you lamp me turning the pages of the directory outside, shove your money in the return-coin slot and walk out. Take it easy. Don't let the druggist see you. Your stuff'll be there when you go back for it. If you're even a dime short don't show up, it won't do ya no good. Twelve o'clock tonight."

"Twelve o'clock," Fisher agreed.

They separated. How many a seemingly casual street-corner conversation like that on the city's streets has just such an unguessed, sinister topic. Murder, theft, revenge, narcotics. While the crowd goes by around it unaware.

HE DIDN'T have thirty-five dollars. Go to Trilling or any of the others for it he could not and would not. Not because of any possible risk attached—he'd played and looked his part too well just now for the peddler to bother keeping him under observation.

He'd looked his part *too* well—that gave him the answer. He went back to the Mount of Olives, asked for MacKenzie. "So you want to borrow a hundred dollars?" MacKenzie said. He insisted on giving him a thorough physical examination first, as part of the bargain. Probably figuring it was the only way he could have got Fisher to submit to one. The results didn't seem to please him any too much.

"What've you been doing to yourself?" he snapped. "Not eating, and by the looks of you— See here, Fisher, if this is for liquor, you don't get it."

Fisher wondered what he'd have said if he knew what part of it was actually to be for. He said, "If it was for that, why would I have to have a hundred? Ten would be enough. I don't go around giving my word of honor these days. All I can say is, it's not for liquor."

"That's sufficient," MacKenzie said briskly, and counted out the money. "For Pete's sake, soak a finn of it into a good thick

steak. And don't be in any hurry about returning it. You working?"

Fisher smiled. "I'm starting to again—tonight at twelve." The full story of how he had been shot on the *Gascony* had of course never been divulged—either at the hospital or to the newspapers. Trilling had seen to the former, the *Compagnie Transatlantique* to the latter.

Wellington, who had been in the room watching him closely, said after he had gone: He's had a close shave, but it looks like somebody's beginning to probe for those bullets in his soul I spoke about."

"I think you love the guy," MacKenzie said testily, perhaps to get the fact that he'd loaned a hundred dollars out of his system.

"Sure I do," was the defiant reply. "You just finding out? I love every slug we ever took out of him, but what good does it do? He doesn't know a woman from a fire-hydrant."

But he was beginning to, even if he didn't know it himself yet. There was a difference to Joan's knock on his room door that evening, as though she too had had a break that day. It was the twenty-third day after they'd met in the honkytonk. He had his gun out, was sitting there cleaning it and going over it lovingly. It was like a part of him. He'd got it out about an hour before, with part of the hundred. He jumped nervously, thrust it out of sight under his mattress. The door of his room didn't have a lock yet, but she wasn't the kind would walk in on him, luckily, or she might have wondered, jumped to the wrong conclusions. He hadn't told her anything about himself yet, out of old habit and training that died hard. What he'd been, nor what it was that had thrown him. He'd tell her everything when—and if—the second payoff came. And he had a long way to go yet before he reached that. Until then—

He went over and opened the door. She was standing there glowing. It always surprised him all over again, each time he looked at her, how beautiful she really was. Blond hair, blue eyes, and all the rest; somehow it all blended together into a gem. But that was for other men, not for his business. A shield in Trilling's desk drawer—that was *his* gem.

She said, "I brought in a can of spaghetti with me. Come on down. I've got news for you." And down in her room, while he pumped a can-opener up and down and—of course—gashed his knuckle, she asked: "What luck?"

"I'm on my way, that all I can say."

"Great. Looks like I am too. It's been on the fire for several weeks now, but I'm superstitious; I didn't want to say anything for fear I'd jinx it. Some fellow—he's new to show business—is opening up a road house tomorrow night. He has a spot for a specialty singer. Lots of backing and he doesn't care what he pays for his talent. I've already auditioned for him three separate times; I'm beginning to wonder if it's my voice he's interested in or if he just likes to have me around. He's not using a floor show, you see—just a band, and a combination singer and hostess. So by tomorrow I'll know definitely whether I've clicked or not."

"You'll click," he assured her, "unless the guy's stone blind."

She opened her mouth in pretended amazement. "The great block of ice is actually beginning to thaw!"

Chapter 8

Hot Spot

THE phone booth was cramped and stuffy, so small that the pane of glass kept clouding with his breath. He cleared it off each time with the point of his elbow, holding a dead receiver to his ear for a stall. At 12:10 the peddler was suddenly standing there at the little rack outside, wetting his thumb as he busily flicked the leaves of a city directory. He didn't look up.

Fisher took out the three tens and a five he'd prepared, wedged them tightly into the return-coin slot. He came out, walked by to the front of the store, lingered there by the door. The peddler seemed to find the elusive number he was looking for just then, went in the booth, came out again a moment later, and brushed by Fisher without so much as a glance.

It wasn't really necessary for Fisher to have the little package that was back there in the booth now. This was not a decoy sale for the purpose of getting enough evidence to

make an arrest. Fisher no longer had the authority to make an arrest, and even if he did have, he lacked witnesses. But he retrieved the packet nevertheless, to prevent its falling into the hands of some innocent person. He pocketed it and turned the corner in the same direction the peddler had.

Fisher walked on, then turned to glance quickly over his shoulder.

The peddler was still in full sight. Fisher plunged into the nearest doorway, lingered a moment, and came out—not exactly disguised but with a sufficiently altered silhouette to be mistaken for someone else at a great enough distance along the dimly lighted streets. His snugly buttoned coat was open now, hanging loosely from the shoulders; instead of being bareheaded he had a disreputable felt hat jammed down on his head. A pair of heavily-outlined but lenseless eye-glass frames were stuck around his ears. He set out after the distant figure using a purposely altered gait and body-carriage.

When he returned to his room at three that morning, he knew where this minor bird-of-prey lived, what his name was. What remained to be found out was where and to whom he turned over the accrued profits of his transactions. That was tomorrow's job, for the peddler had made no further sales that night after leaving Fisher. Undressing, he left the little sealed packet in his coat pocket. It was probably three-quarters bicarbonate of soda, anyway.

He didn't see Joan in the morning, but he knew she had performed her usual self-imposed chore of brushing his suit before leaving, for it was neatly folded across the back of a chair just inside the door. He went back to where he had left off last night, resumed his vigil on the street corner near the peddler's room. They were ripping up car tracks on that street, and the presence of the WPA workers covered him beautifully. He dawdled on the curb, coatless, smoking and chatting with them, indistinguishable from the rest to a casual observer. Occasionally one would go out to the middle and strike a few lethargic blows with a pickaxe, very occasionally.

It was well past midnight again when he wearily climbed the rooming-house stairs, but the day hadn't been wasted. He

knew now where the peddler forked over his intake, where he secured his stuff. He was creeping back up the ladder again, at least as high as when they'd sent him over after Belden.

There was a dim light still on behind Joan's door and he thought he heard a sound like muffled sobbing coming from inside, as he went by. Her hopes of landing the job she had spoken of must have been dashed, the thing must have fallen through. He stopped and rapped lightly, thinking he might be able to cheer her up.

She didn't open for a minute or two. Then when she did, her eyes were bright and hard, like mica. She didn't smile.

"Did you land the spot?" he asked tentatively.

To his surprise she nodded, almost indifferently. "Yes," she said coldly, looking him up and down as though she'd never seen him before. "I signed the contract this afternoon."

"You don't act very happy about it," he remarked uncertainly.

It was obvious something had happened to change her. "Don't I?" she said hostilely, and prepared to close the door in his face.

He threw out his hand and held the door open. "What's the matter, Joan? What's the rub? I thought I heard you crying just now—"

She flared up at that. "Don't kid yourself, mister!" she cried bitterly, "I don't waste my time crying over—over snow-birds!"

"So that's it!" He forced his way into the room, closed the door behind him.

She kept her back turned to him. "Go ahead; lie about it! Say that what I found in your coat-pocket this morning was sugar to feed the horses, or chemical to develop films! Go ahead, alibi why don't you?"

"No, it isn't," he said grimly, "it's cocaine. Now you listen to me, you little fool!" He caught her by the shoulders and swung her around to face him, and none too gently. "If you were a man I'd part your teeth in the middle—"

THERE were tears in her eyes again, tears of rage. "This crazy town's got to quit playing tricks on me! I can't take it any more! No wonder something threw you, no wonder some-

thing got you down! And I wasted my time feeling sorry for you—"

"I wasn't going to tell you," he said, "but if you're going to go around making noises like a kitten left out in the rain, then here goes. I was a Department of Justice agent. We were cracking down on the ring that imports and sells this stuff. They waylaid my kid brother, got him alone and unarmed, and shot him down like a dog. I got myself put on that job—I was in Texas going after marihuana smugglers at the time—I followed the man that did it to Paris. I got him, and I started back with him. What happened is too long a story to go into now. I made the worst hash of the assignment that anyone could make. He got away from me almost in sight of the dock, left me for dead. My badge was taken away from me. That was the thing that got me, that had me down when I first met you. I'm trying to come back now, trying to lick the thing singlehanded. I bought that stuff you found in my pocket purposely, from a peddler, as a means toward an end. Through him maybe I can get to the higher-ups."

He glared at her. "Now you either take that or leave it. I'm not going to back it up with papers and documents—to try to convince you. Believe it or not as you choose."

He could tell by her face she did. It was radiant again. "I might have known you had some perfectly good reason. The mere fact that what I found hadn't been opened—Why, I remember reading about your brother. It was in all the papers the day I first came to New York; it had happened that very day. Fisher, the lady begs your pardon."

"The lady's going to make some guy a hell of a wife," he assured her grumpily, "the way she goes through pockets. Now tell me about yourself."

She had the signed contract right there with her. Six weeks at fifty a week, and, if she went over, it would be renewed for another six at seventy-five. Graham was the man's name, and the formal opening was set for tomorrow night. Luckily she wouldn't have to rehearse much, she was using most of the same numbers she had at the Third Avenue place, only one new one. She had to supply her own costumes, she rattled on, that was the only part of it she didn't like. And, oh yes, it was a little out of the way, hard to get to, but she supposed she'd

get used to that. Chanticler was what they were going to call it, and they had a great big rooster set up on the grounds, outlined in electric lights, and fixed so that its head swung back and forth and it seemed to be crowing—

She broke off short, stared at him. "What are you looking at me like that for? You're all—white."

He said in a strained voice, "In Westchester? Just within sight of the Sound? A low white rambling place?"

"Yes, but how did you—?"

"I followed that peddler there and back today. On the return trip he was carrying several little parcels he hadn't had when he went in. I suppose if they'd been examined, they'd have been found to be samples of favors and noisemakers for the festivities. He poses as a toy- and novelty-maker. You've signed on as singer and hostess at what's really a dope-ring headquarters."

They were very still for awhile. Finally she said, in a small scared voice: "What shall I do, Frank?" She'd never called him by his given name until now. "How'll I get out of it? I can't—really I can't."

"You take the job anyway," he told her. "Nothing'll happen to you, you'll be all right. They're just using you, and the electric-lighted rooster, and the white rambling roadhouse, as a front. If you back out now, after wanting the job as badly as you did, you may be endangering yourself. It's safer if you go through with it. Besides, I'm going to be there—tomorrow night—within call of your voice."

She went white herself this time. "But suppose they recognize you?"

"It'll be a ticklish spot," he admitted, "but it's a risk I've got to take. Trilling never exactly handed out publicity-photos of any of us around town, so I'm probably safe enough. Belden would be the only one would know me, and I hope he does!"

"But, you're not going to walk in there alone, are you?"

"Certainly I'm going alone. I have to. I haven't been assigned to go there, because I'm not a member of the Department any more, and accordingly I can't ask it to back me up. I'll either bring them this Graham, and Belden and the rest of the outfit too, or I'll end up a grease-spot on one of the Chanticler's tablecloths."

She said, with almost comic plaintiveness, resting her hand on his arm, "Try not to be a grease-spot, Frank, I—I like you the way you are!"

At the door he said, "I'll see you there, then, tomorrow night. Don't let on you know me, try not to act nervous when you see me, or you'll give me away. Little things like that count. I know I can depend on you." He smiled, and faked a fist, and touched her lightly on the chin with it. "My life is in your hands, pretty lady."

She said, "I had my costumes sent up there ahead, to the dressing room. My agent's smart as a whip, he dug up some notice about an auction-sale they were having—the wardrobe of some wealthy Iowa woman who went out of her mind and had to be committed to an asylum. I went there today and picked up just what I was looking for, for that new number I spoke of, and dirt-cheap. Wait'll you see, you won't know me in it."

GINGER ALE, the little gilt-edged folder said, was a dollar a bottle. You had to pay five dollars just to sit down, anyway, whether you ordered anything or not. Fisher'd had to pay an additional ten, at the door just now, to get a table at all, because he wasn't known. Twenty dollars to rent the dinner jacket he had on, five dollars for cab fare to get out here—and oh yes, twenty-five cents for the crisp little white carnation in his button-hole. He smiled a little when he thought of the old days and the quizzical look Trilling's face would have worn if he'd sent him in an expense-account like that. When tonight was over the only coin he'd have left would be the six bullets in the gun under his arm. He hoped tonight would bring him something; he didn't see how he could come back again in a hurry.

He was up to his old tricks again—and it felt swell, like a horse must feel when it's back between the wagon-shafts—staring idly down at the little silver gas-beads in his ginger-ale glass, yet not missing a thing that went on all over the big overcrowded room.

They were drinking champagne, and most of them, he could sense, were just casual revelers, drawn here unwittingly to front for Graham, to aid a cause they would have

shuddered at. Graham must have decided it was high time he had some enterprise to which he could safely ascribe the money he pulled out of the air—if he were suddenly pinned down. Awkward to be raking in money hand-over-fist and not be able to explain what it was derived from. By the looks of this place tonight, and the prices they were charging, he needn't worry; it could account for a big slice of his profits, with just a little juggling of the books. And it made a swell depot and distribution center, Fisher could see that with one eye closed.

That gigantic electrically-outlined rooster outside, for instance, that towered high above the roof of the building, must be visible far up and down the Sound on the darkest night. It could come in handy as a signal and beacon for, say, small launches making shore from larger ships further out, sinister tramps and freighters from Marseilles or Istanbul, with cargoes of dream-death.

What gave the whole plan away to him, what showed that it was meant for something more than just a wayside ad to motorists going by on the Post Road, was that the sign was unnecessarily outlined in bulbs on *both* sides, the side that faced landward, and the side that faced the building—and the Sound. The people around him didn't need to be told where they were, they knew it already. He had a good view of the sign from where he was sitting, through a ceiling-tall French window. The side that faced outward toward the highway was illumined in dazzling white bulbs, the side that faced the building—and dwarfed it—was in red. Red, the color that means *Stop—Danger*. White, the color that means *All Clear—Go ahead*.

Here and there, spotted about the room, were quiet watchful individuals, whose smiles were a little strained, whose laughter rang false. . . . They sat and minded their own business, while the rest of the guests raised the roof. They kept their heads slightly lowered, making geometric arrangements with the silverware or drawing designs on the tablecloths; they were taut, waiting for something.

Ten of them in all—no more than two at the same table. And no fizz at those tables, just black coffee and dozens, scores of cigarettes, chain-lighted, one from the last.

That stocky man standing beaming just inside the main door must be Graham, for he had an air of proud ownership, and he looked everyone over that came in, and twice Fisher had seen the maitre-d'hotel step up to him for unobtrusive instructions.

Suddenly the lights went down all over the place; the lighted rooster outside peered ruddily through the window outlines. People shifted expectantly in their chairs. Fisher murmured to himself: "Here she comes now. What a chance I'd be taking, if I didn't know I could count on her!"

He settled back.

There was a rolling build-up from the drums. Twin spotlights, one red, one green, leaped across the polished floor, found the door at the rear that led to the dressing room. Joan stepped out into the green spot, and a gasp of appreciation went all around the big silent place.

Chapter 8

When Satan Sings

HE thought he'd never seen anything, anyone, so weirdly beautiful in his life before. But something like a galvanic shock had gone through him just now, had all but lifted him an inch above his chair for a moment. As though some forgotten chord of memory had been touched just then. Something about Joan reminded him of someone else, made him think he was seeing someone else. Before his eyes, a ghost from the past came to life and walked about in full sight.

Wait, that French mannequin, Belden's girl in Paris—that was it! No—that woman on the *Gascony*, that Mrs. Travis, that was who it was! But could it be both? And yet it seemed to be both. Stranger still, Joan didn't look in the least like either one of them, not even at this moment.

The red spot remained vacant, yet followed her around the room; the idea—and a fairly clever one at that—being that it contained the invisible tempter whom she addressed in her song, over her shoulder.

Slowly she circled the room from table to table, filling the place with her rich, lovely voice, making playful motions of

warding off, equally playful ones of leading on. Then as she reached Fisher's table, suddenly she wasn't playful any more. She stiffened, seemed to glare; there was a noticeable break in her song.

The perimeter of the green spotlight fell across him too, revealed his face like a mask. He smiled up at her a little, admiringly, encouragingly. She answered—and yet there seemed to be menace, malice, in the parody of a smile that pulled her lips back clear of her teeth more like a snarl than anything else. Unaccountably he could feel the hairs at the back of his neck bristling. . . .

Get Thee Behind Me, Satan—
Stay where you are, it's too late!

Her bell-like voice, singing the Irving Berlin tune, throbbed down upon him; but its tone wasn't silver any more, it was bronze, harsh and clanging. He could see her bosom moving up and down, as though rage and fury were boiling in it.

She started to move backward toward the door by which she had entered, bowing to the thunderous applause that crashed out. But her eyes never once left his face as she did so. They were beady and hard and merciless. And that smile was still on her face, that grimace of derision and spite and undying hostility.

The lights flared up and as she stood there a moment by the exit door, her eyes finally left his face to travel the length of the room to the opposite doorway. He followed their direction, and saw Graham over there, pounding his pudgy hands together to show that he liked her.

Fisher looked back to her just in time to catch the beckoning toss of the head she sent Graham's away. Then she slipped through the door.

It was so obvious what that signal meant, and yet he couldn't believe it. No, not Joan. She wanted to ask Graham's advice about an encore; something like that, that was all. For more thoroughly than he realized, he had, in Nurse Wellington's words, learned the difference between a woman and a fire-hydrant these past few weeks, and he couldn't unlearn it all in a flash, couldn't teach himself to mistrust something he had learned to trust—any more than Belden could have in

Paris, or Travis on the boat. Men's loyalty to their women dies hard—and almost always too late.

Graham was making his way around the perimeter of the room, to follow her back to her dressing room where she had called him. The background music kept on vamping, waiting for her to return and pick up her cue. A pale pink and a faint green ghost of the spotlights hovered there by the door, ready to leap out into full stength again as soon as the house lights went down.

The quiet, sullen men he'd noticed before didn't move their palms, their heads or their eyes. One of them glanced at his wrist-watch, without raising his arm. One of the gaudy women with them yawned in boredom. Outside, the rooster's red beak kept opening, closing, as its head and neck wavered back and forth, current passing from one circuit of lights to another, then back again.

Fisher kept pinching the bridge of his nose, groping, baffled. Why had Joan reminded him of two other women—one dead, one vanished into limbo—as she stood before his table a moment ago? Why had he thought he was seeing Mimi Brisard, and the Travis woman, when she didn't in the slightest resemble either one of them physically—nor had they resembled each other either, for that matter. Why had she seemed to be evil incarnate, the spirit of all wickedness, when he knew her to be just the opposite? It was more than just clever acting to go with her song; the very pores of his skin had seemed to exude her animosity, her baleful hatred. They couldn't be mistaken; that was an instinct going far back beyond man's reasoning power to the jungle ages.

ONLY a very few seconds went by; how hurried her whispers to Graham out there must have been! Graham came out again, sideward, his head still turned to where she must be standing, unseen behind the door. His face was whiter than it had seemed just now. His glance, as he turned to face the room again, arched over Fisher, purposely avoiding looking at him directly. He didn't return to where he had been. He went casually to the nearest table where a group of those silent, waiting men was. He lingered a moment, then moved on to another table. The flamboyant woman who had been

the tablemate of the man he had spoken to, stirred, got up, moved slowly toward the entrance as though she had been told to leave. Her companion kept his eyes lowered; but as the woman neared the door she couldn't resist throwing a casual little look over at Fisher.

He didn't see it. Graham had signaled the band, and Joan had come back. The lights went down again and Graham's movements, and the mass-exodus of the lady-friends of the "deep thinkers," were concealed by the darkness, while she sang.

She started her routine in reverse this time, began at Fisher's table instead of going around the other way and ending up at it. Began, yet ended there too, for she didn't move on, stayed there by him while the sultry, husky song enveloped him.

He sat there motionless, while she moved in closer, came around the table to his side. Slowly her bare arm slipped caressingly around his shoulder, inched affectionately down the satin-faced lapel toying with the white carnation in his buttonhole.

And again Fisher saw Mimi Brissard writhe her snakelike way up the stone steps of the Bal au Diable, the tiny little train wriggling after her—saw her stop and look back at him after she had betrayed her man. Again the heady, musk perfume of Mrs. Travis was in his nostrils; she seemed to stand beside him in the *Gascony's* deck. . . . Was he going crazy? Had those bullets done something to his mind? Was it just the colors of the dress—red and black—the cut of it—or was it something more?

The caressing hand had traveled a little lower than the flower now, was turning insinuatingly in under his coat. And the audience chuckled, thinking she was pretending to be a gold-digger, playfully pretending to pick his pocket. There was a momentary break in the spotlight-beam, as though the switch had been thrown off then on again. For an instant or so they were blacked-out, he and Joan. Then the green glare came on again. Her hand wasn't inside his jacket any more, it was held stiffly behind her back, hidden from the room at large. A white shirtfront gleamed there in the dimness as Graham approached her from behind, then ebbed away into the dimness again.

Fisher's hand reached upward, came to rest on her shoulder. He touched the fabric of her gown. A surge of unreasoning hatred welled through him. That too seemed to be a memory out of the past. He remembered doing this, turning his hand back like this, turning the lining of a gown—

She tried to pull away, and he held her fast. The shoulder of her dress turned over as he pulled, and on it was a little silk cachet. In the flickering green light he made out dim lettering.

I'm Dangerous Tonight—Maldonado, Paris.

THE yell that came from his throat drowned out the music, silenced it. His chair reeled backward with a crash, and he was erect, facing her. "It's the same one!" they heard him shout. "*Now I know! Now at last—!*"

The green spot sputtered out. The lights flared up. People jumped to their feet all over the room, staring petrified at the incredible sight taking place there in full view of everyone. For the man the girl had been teasing seemed to have gone suddenly mad, was growling like a hydrophobic dog, tearing, clawing at her gown. It came off in long, brutally-severed tatters, revealing strips of white skin that grew and grew before their very eyes, until suddenly she stood there all but nude, trembling, statuelike.

They were shouting: "Stop him! He's crazy. . . !" But a mad, panic-stricken rush for the door had started on the part of all the other celebrants, that couldn't be stemmed, that hampered those who were trying to reach the attacker and his victim. Other women were screaming while their men pushed and jostled, trying to clear a way for them.

She alone hadn't screamed through the whole thing. She stood there facing him quietly now, given a moment's grace while Graham and all his silent men tried to force their way to them.

He took his coat off and threw it around her. The tattered remnants of the dress lay on the floor behind her. There was a look on her face impossible to describe—the stare of a sleep-walker suddenly awakened—then she let out a low, fearful cry.

"I've betrayed you, Frank! I've killed you. I told them what you were—and what you were here for—"

His hand instinctively jabbed toward his exposed shoulder-holster. It swayed empty at his touch.

"I took that too," she gasped, "while I was singing—I gave it to Graham just now—"

She was suddenly thrust aside, and they were ringed about him—ten of them and Graham, their guns bared and thrusting into his body.

Outside, the enormous rooster was slowly pivoting on its base, turning its white-lighted side inward, toward the road-house—and the Sound. White—that meant *All Clear—Go ahead*. Far across the water sounded the faint bleat of a steamer's whistle, two short ones and a long one, that seemed to end in a question-mark: "*Pip? Pip? Peep?* Are you ready?" Some lone night-bound vessel, furtively prowling these inner waters of the Sound instead of sticking to the shiplane that led up through the Narrows.

"No, not in here."

Graham's crisp command stopped death, forced it back from the very muzzles of ten guns. "Take him out where he can get the right treatment," he said and grinned a little.

Through the encircling ring of his enemies Fisher had eyes for only one thing—the face of the girl who had done this to him. She was wavering there in the background, like a sick, tormented creature, his coat still around her. He saw her clasp her hands, hold them out toward him in supplication, unseen by all the others. As though trying to ask for pardon. The coat slipped off her shoulders, fell unheeded to the floor.

He stared at her without emotion. She might have been a stone or a tree stump. She was beneath his anger. To them, scathingly, he said: "Well, get it over with. Make it fast. . . ."

One of the guns reversed, chopped down butt first, caught him across the mouth. His head went back, came forward again. A drop of blood fell, formed a splashy scarlet star.

Graham said with almost comic anxiety: "Not on my floor here! What's the water for?"

"Who's so smart now?" the girl behind them shrilled vindictively. "Use me for a stepping-stone, will you! You're going to get it now, and I hope you get it good!" She had changed

again. The tattered dress was nowhere near her, its remnants lay kicked far out on the deserted dance-floor, and yet she had changed back again—to all she had been before, as though the very core of her being had become corroded with hate and malice.

Graham patted her commendingly on the shoulder. "You're worth your weight in gold, honey. You wait for us here, put something over you so you don't catch cold. Graham's going to get you a mink wrap for this, and a diamond bracelet, too, if you want. You're riding back to town tonight in my own private car. We won't take long. If you hear any screaming out on the Sound, don't pay no never mind. It'll just be the wind coming over the water. All right, boys."

As they hustled him toward the entrance, in what was almost an exact replica of the old "flying wedge" at Jack's, he glanced back over his shoulder. Again she had clasped her hands, was holding them out tremblingly toward him.

They hurried down a long slope to where black water lapped whisperingly against the gray sand. "Okay, left," Graham said tersely. They broke up into Indian file, except for the pair gripping Fisher grimly each by an arm bent stiffly backward ready to be broken in its socket at the first sign of resistance. The Sound was empty of life, not a light showing anywhere. Their footsteps moiling through the soft sand were hushed to a hissing sigh.

"Flirt a little," Graham's voice came from the rear.

Somebody took out a pocket torch, clicked it on, off, on, off again. There was an answering firefly-wink straight ahead, on the shore itself. "There they are. They landed a little off-center."

THE white blur of a launch showed up, seemingly abandoned there at the water's edge; there was not a soul anywhere in sight. But a human voice crowed like a rooster somewhere near at hand. *Kri-kirri-kri-kre-e-e-e-e.*

Graham called out impatiently, "Yeah, yeah, it's us, you fools!"

Dark figures were suddenly swarming all over the lifeless launch; their trousers were rolled up to their knees. They

started passing small-size packages, no bigger than shoe-boxes, to those on shore.

"Come on, reach! Come out closer. Don't be afraid to get your feet wet."

Fisher spoke for the first time since they'd hauled him out of the club-house. "Pick-up and deliver. Nice work."

There was a sudden stunned silence, tension in the air. "Who's that? Who you got with you?"

"Dead man," answered Graham tonelessly. "He's going out to the ship when we get through."

"Wait a minute! I know that voice!" One of the men jumped down into the water with a splash, came wading in, stood before Fisher. A torch mooned out, upward, between them, illumining both faces.

Fisher said, almost inaudibly, "Belden. So you came back, couldn't stay away. Glad you did. You came back to your death. They can kill me ten times over, but I'm still going to get you, murderer, somehow!"

Belden lunged, grabbed Fisher by the throat with both hands, sobbing crazily: "What does it take to kill you? What does it take to make you *stay* dead?"

They had to pry him away. Graham yelled: "No, no, no. Not here. On the boat. C'mon. Break it up."

Eight of those that had come with him were toiling back, Indian file, each with a shoe box under each arm.

"Tune her up!" A motor started to bark and cough, the boat to vibrate. Graham said something about his fifteen-buck patent-leathers, went wading clumsily out, scrambled aboard. Fisher was dragged floundering backward through the shallow water, caught at the hands and feet, hauled up over the side. He watched for the moment when his legs were freed as his spine slipped up over the rim of the boat; buckled one, shot it out full-length into one of the blurred faces.

The man dropped like a log, with a long-drawn exhalation that ended in a gurgle. They floundered around in the water over him. A voice exclaimed, "Holy—! He's busted Mickey's jaw and nose with that hoof of his! Pull him up out of there!"

Vengeful blows from the butt of a gun were already chopping Fisher down to his knees; in another second he'd gone flat on his face. He went out without a sound somewhere at

the bottom of the little launch. The last thing he heard from far off, was Graham's repeated cry: "Wait, can't you—and do it right? I got ideas—"

BELDEN was saying, in the lamplit cabin of the motionless ship, "You can give the instructions, but I'm laying it on him personally. You can even take it out of my cut if you want to, I'll pay for the privilege, that's how bad I want it!" Fisher opened his eyes with a groan.

"So you're awake, stupid!"

Fisher said, trying to stem the weakness in his voice: "Just how personal do you want it, louse? 'Cause I want it personal too. You remember Jimmy Fisher, don't you?"

"Yep," Belden said, "we made him run the gauntlet down the stairs of an old five-story brownstone house. On every landing we put another bullet in him, but not where it would kill him. He started to die on the fourth landing from the top, so we rolled him the rest of the way with our feet."

Fisher's eyes rolled idly upward to the oil-lamp dangling on a hook. "Jimmy's all right," he said thoughtfully, "all a guy can do is die once. The big difference is whether he dies clean—or dirty—"

His arm suddenly swept out from the shoulder in a long downward arc. The hoop of the oil lamp sprang from the hook, there was a tinny crack and a crash of glass where Belden's face had been, and then he was lathered with lazy little flame points, giving off feeble light as if he were burnished with gold paint.

They tried to grab him, hold him, beat the flats of their hands against him. He gave a hoot-owl screech, turned and bolted out the door, and the cabin turned dark behind him. Fisher sprang after him with a quickness he hadn't thought he'd be able to muster; left all his contusions and his gun-butt bruises and his aching human weariness behind him where he'd been, and shot out to the deck after that flickering squawking torch like a disembodied spirit of revenge.

Belden was poised on the rail, like a living torch. He went over with a scream, and Fisher went over after him, hurdling sidewise on one wrist. They must have both gone in at about the same spot. He got him below the surface, collided with

him as Belden was coming up, and got the hold he wanted on his neck with both arms. They came up again together—not to live, but to die.

Fisher sputtered: "Now this is for Jimmy! This!" The throb that came when Belden's neck snapped went through him. They went down again together.

When he rose to the surface again he was alone. The launch was chugging around idly near him, and angry pencils of light from torches came to a focus on his head, as he threw it back to get some air in. "There he is!"

"It's taken care of, Jimmy," he panted. "You can sleep tight."

"Save it till you get to him—you'll be right down to hell yourself!" The pencils of light now were suddenly orange, and cracked like whips, and made the water spit around his head.

Graham's voice said, "I can get him. It's a pushover," and he stood up in the bow of the circling launch. Fisher could see the white of his shirtfront.

A violet-white aurora borealis suddenly shot up over the rim of the water—behind the launch—and Graham was an ink-black cut-out against it. Then he doubled over and went in, and something banged in back of him. A voice megaphoned: "Throw 'em up or we'll let you have it!"

Distant thunder, or a high roaring wind, was coming up behind that blinding pathway of light.

Fisher wished it would get out of his eyes, it was putting the finishing touch to him. He flopped his way over to the near side of the launch to get out of the glare, caught the gunwale with one hand, and hung there like a barnacle, tired all over.

THERE were shoe-boxes stacked up on the tables next to overturned champagne-glasses, and a line of men were bringing their hands down from over their heads—all but Graham and a man sitting back-to-front on a chair, wrapped in an automobile-laprobe, watching everything, looking very tired, very battered—and very eager. And, oh yes, a girl crumpled forward over one of the little tables, her blond head buried between her arms. Outside the rooster was black against the dawn; the current had been cut and they were pulling it

down with ropes. Chanticleer would never crow again to dream-laden ships out on the Sound.

None of it mattered very much to the bundled-up man in the laprobe just then: the questioning or the taking-down of statements or Trilling's staccato machine-gun firing of orders right and left. Only two things were important: an ownerless badge lying there on a table, and the tortured, twisted fragments of a dress huddled on the dance-floor.

They came to the badge first. Trilling took time off between orders to glance at it. Then he brought it over, held it out. "What're you waiting for?" he said gruffly, "It's yours."

Fisher took it with both hands and held it as a starving man would hold a crust of bread. Then he looked up and grinned lopsidedly. "Washington?" he said.

"Washington wants results," Trilling snapped. "Well, look around you. This whole job is yours. Don't try to act hard about that hunk of tin either. I know you're all mush inside." He glanced at the girl and said, "What's *she* crying about? She got us out here in time, didn't she?"

They came to the other thing last. "Fire extinguishers?" said Trilling as he was ready to leave in the wake of the captives, "What do you want fire extinguishers trained on the floor for? There's no fire."

"There's going to be," said Fisher.

He stepped forward with a tense, frightened face, struck a match, dropped it on what lay coiled there like something malign, ready to rear and strike at whatsoever ventured too near it. He retreated and put his arm around the girl, and she turned her face away and hid it against his chest. "I think I—see," she said.

"Never mind. Just forget it," Fisher murmured, "That's the only out for both of us."

A glow lit up the dance floor of the Chanticleer. There was a hissing like a pit of snakes or a vat of rendering fat. There wasn't any smoke to speak of, just a peculiar odor—a little like burnt feathers, a little like chemicals, a little like sulphur or coal gas. When the flames they had fed on were reduced to crumbling white ash, the fire died down again, sank inward. Then at the very last, just as it snuffed out altogether, a solitary tongue—thin as a rope and vivid green—darted straight

up into the air, bent into the semblance of a question-mark, poised motionless there for a split second. Then vanished utterly without a trace.

A gasp went up. "Did you see that? What was it?" A dozen pair of trained eyes had seen it.

Trilling answered, after a long horrified silence. "Some chemical substance impregnated in the material the dress was made of, that's all, A dye or tincture of some kind—"

Fisher just stood there lost in thought, without saying anything. There is always a rational explanation for everything in this world—whether it's the true one or not. Maybe it is better so.

All-American Fiction, November 1937

GUN'S, GENTLEMEN



VERY young lad has his hero. Sometimes it's a football player, sometimes a baseball star or a world's heavyweight champion. Or maybe it's just the policeman down on the next corner, or the bully from over the

tracks. But every young lad has his hero.

Stephen Botillier's was a different kind of a hero from most. Stephen Botillier's hero was a heavy gilt frame, up on the wall of the picture gallery that formed an extension to the porticoed, white-columned old bayou mansion, in its setting of pepper trees and Spanish moss.

He first saw him when he was nine. His father took him through there. Oh, he'd been in and out of there before, of course, but those dim faces on the walls had been just "ole pitchers," a part of his surroundings. His father made them come alive for him. "It's time you learned who we Botilliers were." He said that last word just a little regretfully; a grownup might have understood something by that, a kid of nine couldn't possibly. And yet, a grownup might have failed to understand, too, what there was to regret. They had money, they had influence, their ships came into port from three continents; this beautiful ancestral place that sheltered them had been carefully preserved, was in good repair, alive, lived-in; not a decayed relic like so many others of its kind. They were the biggest, most flourishing import-and-export house in New Orleans, sir. And yet there was that faint nostalgia in his father's eyes as he led him slowly hand in hand from frame to frame, as though there once had been better

things for Botilliers to occupy themselves with than invoices and bills-of-lading and profits-and-losses.

"This man here was once the King of France's lieutenant governor—before this was a State, before there were any States. Just think, young Stephen, his word was law, from the Delta to the Great Lakes and the forests of Minnesota."

Stephen Botillier stared solemnly up at the glistening steel cuirass, the curly shoulder-length perruque, and couldn't get any fellow feeling out of it. The picture stayed as dead as the cuts of Marquette and La Salle in his school histories.

"This man here left his home and his family and friends, gave up wealth and position, endured cold and hunger and privation, finally met death, for an ideal: liberty. He fought for what is now our country, though it wasn't his yet in those days. He was on Washington's staff."

The boy squinted gravely at the buff-and blue uniform, the pigtailed white hair. Again, somehow, he couldn't feel that that man up there had ever been alive; all he was reminded of was a two-cent stamp.

"This man here was a naval officer under Decatur. He sailed against the Barbary pirates, then he came back and helped defend our city in the Battle of New Orleans—"

Pirates—that sounded a little more exciting—but it was still a lot like the things your teachers told you about in school.

"And this one here—" His father pointed to the name plate set into the bottom of the frame. *Stephen Botillier, 18—, 18—*. "His name was the same as yours. He was your great-grandfather's younger brother—"

It might have been the similarity of name, to begin with—yet the others had all been Botilliers too—but the boy had a sudden sense of kinship come over him as he gazed up at the long-dead boyish face before him. The crackling black eyes seemed to look into his understandingly, as though they knew all about one another, would have made a perfect pair. He was younger than the others—that might have helped the impression too.

"He was hardly more than a boy when he died," Stephen's father admitted. "Twenty-five, about." But there was sneaking admiration in the way he said it, not regret or disap-

proval. And, more to himself than to the boy beside him, he murmured, "That's better than growing old in a counting-house—"

Stephen couldn't tear himself away; those whimsical, humorous, reckless eyes seemed to hold him. The picture had come alive with a vengeance. A psychologist would have said, "Nine is the most impressionable age in life. Telling a boy things like that is of doubtful value." Psychologists don't know everything.

"What'd *he* do?" Stephen breathed reverently.

"I can't tell you much. He lost his life away from home, in a foreign country. He died as a gentleman should—"

Stephen Botillier moved onward along the gallery, hand clasped in his father's, but his head was turned backward toward that young face on the wall that had somehow struck a responsive chord. The rest of it went over his head, scarcely heard. A man in the flattened kepi of the Mexican War, a man in the butternut gray of Lee's army. And then—the doors at the opposite end of the gallery, leading out to the present, and cargoes and shipments and invoices and bills-of-lading, and a stifled pang in the hearts of men who had never known their birthright.

"So now you know what it was to be a Botillier. Remember what I've shown you. That's the most I can do for you." His father let go of his hand and touched him fondly on the top of the head.

The boy went back along the gallery, stopped midway down it, pointed. "I'm going to be like *him*," he said. Again that sense of familiarity, of merged identity, as the black eyes looked into his, alive, compelling, infinitely understanding, with a comradely "Hello, there!" down the generations.

Stephen Botillier had found his hero.

It wasn't a transitory schoolboy thing that passed as he grew older. It stayed with him from that day on, became a part of the web of his living. It was an everyday thing, and yet it was a special thing, set apart. But there was nothing strange, other-worldly or mystical about him in the least. He was as normal, healthy, boisterous a young animal as any other boy his age. He went to school and hated it, played truant and got soundly shellacked for it when he was found

out. Tossed a baseball through somebody's store window and got trounced for that. Went swimming in the summer without permission, came home with his clothes dripping and got in trouble for that. But there was always this alter ego to draw consolation from, to stand before with a smarting back and an equally smarting sense of injustice and sulkily admit: "I guess they did that to you too, didn't they, Steve?" And that feeling of kinship, of a commonly shared experience, would somehow make it all right.

That was the first place he went after all his fights. To report triumphantly, "I licked the stuffing out of him, Steve," and demonstrate his prowess and his special, secret blows, shadowboxing against an imaginary adversary. Or, if he'd come out second-best, to lick his wounds, salve his pride, show cause why he hadn't been able to do any better. "He had a longer reach than me, Steve. You know how it is, I couldn't get in under it; you must have had that happen to you too." And the dark young eyes on the wall seemed to crackle and to try to say appreciatively, "I sure enough did!"

He never thought of him as old, as dead and gone, never thought of him as his great-grandfather's younger brother. It was as though they were twins, as though they were one and the same, as though the fellow on the wall was—how to put it?—his mascot, his scout leader, his lucky charm. He'd never been old anyway, maybe that was why. He'd passed into Time at twenty-five, just the right age for a hero to be; stayed as young through all eternity as he was eternally young on the canvas.

Stephen Botillier shot up like a cornstalk, passed through the awkward age; the boy became a youth. He finished prep school in his home city, and his father entered him in the Southern university all the Botilliers had gone to. Small, provincial maybe, compared to some of the colossi up North, but tradition-laden. The picture stayed upon the wall, but he took this thing with him that had become inextricably a part of himself. For this was no hero to be admired from afar; this was something in the heart and blood that had nothing to do with mere outward emulation.

Kissing his first girl, in the roadster his father had given him, in a mossy lane under a golden harvest moon, the thing

somehow became less a maiden effort than a remembered experience. It was as though he'd felt this mixture of nervousness, bashfulness and daring before. And even in that moment he could whisper deep in his heart, unheard by the fluffy little coed in the crook of his arm, "Is that the way you felt about it too, Steve?"

They hadn't had little roadsters in those days, or coeds either, but what was the difference? A moss-silvered lane, a harvest moon, a demure little miss—those things didn't change. A horse and carriage, maybe, with the chuckling darky coachman sent off about his business for a while. He could almost hear the plink of a ghost banjo from some nearby slave quarters, where now the radio of his roadster simmered softly, *You're the Top*.

Or when, for the almost unnecessary as yet first time, he passed that badge of manhood, the razor, across his face—he thought of Stephen Botillier, the other Stephen Botillier. "Wonder if he nicked himself like that—the first time?" And again—the trappings were different but not the kernel of the experience. They hadn't had safety razors in those days yet, nor creams that didn't require brush and water. But the pride, the sense of maturity it gave you, the haste to be at it before it was really indispensable—those things had always been and always would be.

So he lived with him, through all the hours of all his days. It was not an obsession, not a fanatical thing. It was a warm, human, down-to-earth, companionable thing. Sitting stumped before some tricky question on a midterm exam, his instinctive plea for help went out to Stephen Botillier. Or running for a touchdown, with the interference closing in on him ahead and bound to head him off. Or even being stuck with a lemon on the dance floor at the prom, unable to get her off his hands. No one, not father nor brother nor bosom friends, could come as close to him as this man dead a century, whose only trace was a square of canvas within a gilded frame.

He got through as his father had before him, not with flying colors, just got through. They had never been bookish men, the Botilliers. And the old world, dead and gone now, had felt that a gentleman didn't need to be a scholar. Even today it didn't matter. The mercantile house of Botillier and Son was

well established enough, flourishing enough, to allow for that; it didn't require a pedant for its purposes.

He was twenty-four and a half years old, six months short of his namesake's age at the time of his death, when he came home from college for the last time. Ready now—and there was the rub—for what? Gone were the things the faces along that picture gallery spoke of, the blood-stirring things, the bright sharp jewel-like patterns of individual lives, no two quite alike. Oh, there were still wars, true enough. Unclean, impersonal things now, horrid mechanical butcheries carried out by automatons. But the old world was gone, and its codes had been swept away with it. Botillier and Son, Imports and Exports, was waiting to claim the rest of his life. That was all the world of today had to offer.

His father seemed to understand, although Steve had said not a word, given not a sign, that it went against the grain. His father said, "It's June, and the firm has got along without you for seventy years. It can get along without you for a few more months, Steve. You're only young this once, and once you take up the reins you'll never be able to let go of them again. They'll fasten themselves tighter around you each year. I know, I found that out myself. I'm sending you away on a trip first, before you join me at the office. Take your time, go where you want to go, take a good look at the world, before you come back ready to buckle down. How'll that be?"

"That," said Stephen Botillier quietly, "will be great."

He drifted into the picture gallery, from old habit and present necessity, sauntered partway down it and stopped there. The rest were just moldy ancestral pictures on a wall. They looked at each other. They were nearly of an age now; and Steve, the living Steve, stood there, six months the other's junior.

You can look into your mirror every day of your life, and still you will not know the real appearance of your own face, for you cannot see it as others see it. His father had come in after him; he stopped short there in the doorway, as though something had stunned him for a minute. He was looking from Steve to the picture on the wall, pointing at it.

"You're the dead image of him—I never saw anything like it! I never noticed it myself until now—your face must have

been changing all along, little by little." He detached a framed mirror, held it out, "Look at that. It could almost be a picture of yourself, in fancy dress."

Steve, with his back to the wall, could see his own features and those on the canvas side by side. It was true; the proportions of both heads, the width of the foreheads and cheekbones, the shape of the noses, mouths and chins were alike. And more than anything else, the clear, alert, black eyes. It might have been the same man, in all the things that mattered. The only differences were superficial, man-made—the trim of the hair, the neck-apparel.

Something made Stephen Botillier glow with inner satisfaction as he noted it. It gave him a sense of personal completion, as though, had he looked otherwise, he would have felt lacking in some way, having failed to measure up to what he should have been.

His father set the mirror down still amazed, shaking his head. "Uncanny. And they say there's no such thing as heredity! It must skip generations." He himself was of an entirely different coloring and appearance. So, he informed Steve as they walked outside again, had his own father been. Steve glanced back over his shoulder at the square upon the wall, narrowed now to an oblong by perspective. Yet even now the black eyes seemed to be still upon him—in appraisal and approval—just as the eyes in any portrait follow one about, no matter in which direction one moves, if the artist has painted them fixed upon him.

"He's always been your favorite out of the lot, hasn't he?" his father said knowingly.

"Something seems to draw me to him," Steve admitted. "Hard to say what."

He started out on his trip a week later. No parting admonitions, no stuffy advice from his father. The Botilliers were supposed to be able to think for themselves. Just some letters of introduction, a hard handshake and a grip on the shoulder. "If you feel like using them, use them—if not throw them away. If you run short of funds you know where to reach me. Get all you can out of it, young Steve. It's the best we can do for ourselves nowadays. *They* had all the breaks." No need to ask whom he meant by they.

New York first, as jumping-off place. He'd been there before, and he didn't linger there now; it was a beehive of offices and trade, symbol of the same sort of life that awaited him later on. Then a boat to Europe. London and Paris for a while, but they didn't interest him much. From there, by easy stages, further and further off the beaten track, into nooks and crannies of the Mediterranean Basin. Strange scenes, strange people and customs; strange, that was the right word—never seen by him before.

He woke up in his cabin on the morning of his twenty-fifth birthday, and the lack of motion told him the ship had dropped anchor sometime during the night. They had told him the next port of call was going to be Danubia, and this must be it. The itinerary was complicated, a little hard to keep track of, so he couldn't be positive. He'd never heard of the place before. It was just a name on a map as far as he was concerned, and—perhaps like the other Stephen Botillier before him—he was no avid porer-over of maps, no guidebook tourist.

He took his time about dressing, without bothering to glance out the porthole to see what the place was like, and only went up on deck when he was good and ready, for the novelty of these incessant halts was beginning to wear off.

There was an officer at the rail, and he stopped casually beside him, hands in pockets. "Danubia, this one?" he wanted to know idly. Then before the other man could answer, "Yes, sure, there's the Tower of Skulls over there on that headland, see it?" He was pointing to a dazzling white turretlike structure that dominated the harbor.

The officer turned to him sharply, eyes wide. "How did you know that?"

Stephen Botillier looked at him vacantly, surprised himself. "I don't know," he said slowly. "Did I give it its right name?"

"Yes, its old one. They forbade the use of it over fifty years ago, changed it to the Tower of Roses to make Danubia more attractive to visitors. In fact we're not allowed to mention it to our passengers—that's part of our working arrangement with the port authorities. So you didn't hear it abroad this ship. And I thought you said you'd never been here before?"

"I never have," Steve Botillier told him. "This is my first trip out of the United States."

"Well, you picked it up somewhere." What he wanted to say was that Steve hadn't struck him as being a very bookish person until now, hence this bit of antiquarian lore was totally unexpected.

"Guess I must have." But he tried to remember where and couldn't. He'd never even heard the name of the little vest-pocket country until two days after they'd sailed, and if, as the officer said, the discarded name of the structure was strictly taboo among the personnel of visiting ships, how had he been able to dig it out of the oblivion of half a century before—and identify it at sight, moreover? There were several other similar landmarks it could easily have been confused with along the shoreline—a lighthouse, a fort, etc.

Must have pulled it out of thin air, he thought. And yet he realized that one just doesn't pull the right name for a place out of thin air, out of all the possible name combinations in the language. And it had a haze of familiarity spread over it, in some vague way that he couldn't analyze. Tower of Skulls, Tower of Skulls—it seemed to roll down the soundwaves of the past, into the drums of his ears. Dazzling white, reflected upside-down in the blue-green waters about its base, it seemed to focus itself down the vistas of the past, into the irises of his eyes. He put his hand up beside them, baffled; let it go—he had to.

In the launch going ashore with the second relay of the sight-seeing party, he sat by the gunwale on the left-hand side. A remembered sense of blue-green water, level with his eyes like this, warm under a blue sky, came over him overpoweringly. He looked down at his own form in surprise, as though startled to find himself in a white linen suit, as though expecting to see skintight buff trousers, caught under the arches of his shoes by straps, a powder-blue jacket, cut away in front, tailed in back. He absently raised a hand to his throat as at remembered tightness of a linen stock in the hot sun, and there was only a low, negligible modern collar. He had, momentarily, almost a sense of loss, as though he'd misplaced part of his attire.

The gentle chugging of the motor, too, sounded out of true,

refused to blend in with the scene; there should have been the slop of oars, the boat should have floated on less of an even keel, risen and fallen more at prow and stern. And a great patch of the sky behind his shoulder, when he turned to look, showed startlingly blank, as though empty of some great creamy sail. The denuded, slantwise smokestacks of the ship failed utterly to make up for this impalpable sense of loss.

But—translucent green water under a glazed blue sky, and the Tower of Skulls dazzling white across the horn-shaped harbor, those things harmonized in his senses like the music of the spheres. It was going to feel as warm and thick as rice gruel when he let his hand drop in, and yet a thread of coldness was going to run through it. . . . He let his hand trail idly over the side, and it felt as warm and thick as rice gruel, yet a thread of coldness ran through it. He wondered how he'd known that beforehand. Judged by its appearance, he supposed. But he knew that wasn't true—

The word "splinter" flashed through his mind at this point, in from nowhere, out into nowhere again. He drew his hand in out of the water, and because it was dripping across his shoes, flung his fingertips downward to shake off the water. They grazed the gunwale of the boat as he did so, and a sliver of rotted wood skewered under the nail of one with a little stab of pain. He drew it out, and a drop of blood formed. He put the finger to his mouth and effaced it. But he was too surprised to lower it again, kept it there at his lips like a wondering child. The sense of repetition the incident gave was agonizingly elusive. Going ashore in a small boat, hand in water, water warm as rice gruel, splinter in finger—Where, when had that happened to him before, in just that sequence? It was on the tip of his mind's tongue, and yet he couldn't bring it forth—it slipped back, evaded him. . . .

The age-old stone quay, the greasy moss-covered landing-steps set into it at right angles to their line of approach were somehow lacking in that utter strangeness, that complete foreignness previous ports had had. It was as though he had arched his legs like this before, straddling the gap between boat and steps. He should have felt a tightness at his calves, a pulling of skintight trousers, but the funnel-like things he

had on—they were wearing trousers wider in London this year—hung slackly all around his outstretched legs.

There was a young girl in the party already hurrying up the steps, ahead of the others, on ridiculous high heels. He called up warningly, "Look out, that third one down from the top wobbles—it's liable to throw you." They all looked at him, and again the officer in charge said, "I remember that now, from the last time we touched here. They haven't repaired this landing stage in a hundred years. But how did you know which one?"

Stephen Botillier answered lamely, "I imagined it would, by the looks of it. It must have looked that way to me from the boat—" But he knew he hadn't been looking at it at all, so how could he have told? He tested it himself with his own foot from the one above it, and it shook treacherously back and forth on its base, unsupported by any mortar, enough to throw anyone who wasn't on guard.

Ashore, the strangeness of familiarity left him for a while and the familiarity of strangeness that he'd had in other ports took its place. The commercial and business section of the town was largely modern; there had been a devastating earthquake thirty years ago, their guide explained, and it had been largely rebuilt since then. Like a hundred other such places, it called itself "a little Paris," and then did its utmost to live up to the self-assumed title. An occasional creaky tramcar, sidewalk cafés, advertisement kiosks, and a single electric sign that proudly proclaimed *Pernod* after dark sufficed to stake out its claim to being one of the little Parises. The rest was semi-Oriental bazaars, colorful Balkan and gypsy and Levantine costumes on the streets, onion-domed Greek Orthodox churches, smelly lanes and byways, and officers everywhere. The whole army seemed to consist of officers; it was a caste-ridden little country if there ever was one. Always by twos, never singly; shaven-skulled, wearing monocles, white caps with black visors, open-tailed Russian blouses over their braided trousers. Demanding right of way from other pedestrians, even women, and glaring their scorn of mere civilians.

To Stephen Botillier it seemed ridiculous the way the little

group he was part of split in two time after time to form a lane down which a pair of these humorless automatons would stride without so much as an acknowledgement. "Custom of the country," explained their guide tactfully. "Saves trouble in the long run to do as everyone else does. They're an arrogant lot, these gentry."

Later, turning away from a stall at the mouth of a narrow alley, where he had lingered behind the others to examine some fancy leatherwork, he met a brace of these demigods face to face, coming his way. There was no sidewalk; the entire passage was too narrow to permit three people passing one another abreast without stepping down into an open drain that ran down the middle of it. Stephen Botillier had no idea of doing this for any other man on two feet; he was getting a little tired of standing aside by now, anyway.

His immobility had brought them up short in surprise. There was comic disbelief on their faces. Both their mouths opened slightly like goggling fish. One even dropped his monocle, caught it mechanically in his cupped hand, twisted it in again. His mate made a contemptuous half-gesture whose meaning could not be mistaken—stand aside.

Stephen Botillier, eyes flashing angrily, gave them the same gesture back and followed it up by striding through between them himself, shoving them apart by the passage of his shoulders, flattening one against the wall, compelling the one on the outside to thrust a foot into the drain to keep his balance.

He kept going, too scornful of their childish pretensions to stand there and bother any more about them. The ship's officer in charge of his own party, who had been up ahead with the others, flashed by him, face aghast. Steve turned, then, and stood there looking on. One, in the act of drawing his dress-sword, was being held by the officer's restraining hand on his arm. The officer was talking fast and soothingly, too low for Steve to catch what he was saying.

That hand on sword-hilt, that restraining hold on the arm, that sulky juvenile mask of wounded pride his face wore—it should have been taken as a parody, a laughable bit of comic opera or of movie pantomime. By all the canons of the world of today it should have been something to be derided. The

man was making a fool of himself, that was all. To meet him on his own ground was to make an equal fool of oneself.

Yet Stephen Botillier, eyes attentively on that hand gripping the sword-hilt, said to himself, "If he draws it all the way out of the scabbard I'll have to step back there and resent it." He wondered why, and yet he knew it was so. He had never been taught there was any difference between a fully drawn sword and a quarter-drawn one or a half-drawn one. Why should a senseless gesture with a toylike sliver of steel be able to draw him like a magnet into a quarrel, where no word had been said, no blow exchanged? Those were the modern world's challenges, and neither had been given.

The hilt dropped back under the persuasion of the officer's urgent eloquence, the two bantams drew themselves up stiffly, turned on their heels and went on their way. The incident was over.

The officer, coming back, wiped his forehead and said, "That's the time you nearly did it! I explained that you were an American sight-seer, just off the ship, weren't familiar with the etiquette of the streets here in Danubia—"

"You needn't have taken it upon yourself to apologize for me!" Botillier blurted out, and half angrily took a step back after them. "If I'd known that was what you were doing—"

The officer quickly caught him by the shoulder, held him fast. "You've got to adjust yourself to these local vagaries. Please don't make my assignment any more difficult for me than it already is, Mr. Botillier."

Steve shrugged, relented, smiled a little, rejoined the others with him. The other Steve, he reasoned, would have let it go by like that the first time too, in good-natured tolerance of their childish swagger. But it was more like an echo of the past than a thought of his own. "Pick something worth fighting about, you two, and I'm your man!" Had he shouted that scornfully back at them just now? Obviously not—and yet somehow the words seemed to hang suspended in the stagnant alley-shaft over him, as though they had just issued from his mouth.

At sundown, from the top of the Tower of Skulls, Danubia lay spread below them on all sides like a varicolored carpet.

But while some pointed to their ship, lying out in the roadstead, and others to the square and streets they had traversed earlier that afternoon, Stephen Botillier's eyes were drawn to a distant point out beyond the confines of the city, where a speck of white peering through the foliage of the countryside marked some suburban villa or residence. It seemed to tug at him with a sense of compulsion, like a bird's-eye view of one's destination when one has come a long way.

The setting sun was still hotly red all over Danubia, yet he caught himself thinking, Blue in the moonlight—it looks blue with the moonlight on it, and it smells of roses and of pines. . . .

"Care for a closer look through the glasses?" the officer invited.

Stephen Botillier smiled and shook his head. No, he thought, I know what it looks like—And one doesn't spy on the secret places of the heart.

He must have said it aloud. The officer nearly dropped the glasses he was holding out to him. "Oh," he said, giving him a curious look. Not a doubting look, just a searching one. "You do? But outsiders aren't allowed near there, from what I've heard. That's the Moravath estate—historic place."

Stephen Botillier hardly heard what he was saying. He nodded impatiently, as if to say "Tell me my own name, tell me of the beat of my heart."

"And all that green," he murmured, pointing, "from the shoreline way over to there, halfway around the compass, those are its gardens."

"You seem to be a step ahead of me all the time."

A step? he wondered. Or a lifetime?

He lingered up there on the tower-roof after all the others had gone down again. Something welling up inside him at sight of that single white speck far off down there. Some yearning, longing, that he had never known before. Like a wanderer in sight of his homecoming, like a bereaved man in sight of his lost love. A single star stood out above it in the deepening purple sky, arrow-straight above it, like a beacon, like a marker. "Yes," he said slowly, "I'm coming—" though those below at the foot of the tower had not called to him.

They returned to the stone quay, and he stood there in their

midst watching them clamber down into the launch one by one. "Coming, Mr. Botillier?" the officer asked when all the rest had seated themselves in the boat.

He shook his head and smiled a little. "No," he said, "I'm staying."

The officer thought he understood. "Oh—ah, you bet," he said, came a little closer and dropped an eyelid at him, whispered with sudden new-found camaraderie, "The hell with this rubberneck sight-seeing, don't blame you. Try Tanya's, off the main square, where they have that bear chained up at the door—can't miss it. May see you there later on myself. But don't forget, we're sailing at daybreak."

Steve just stood there and looked at him, as though he were talking a foreign language.

The launch went put-putting across the darkening harbor, gleaming like patent leather now with the lights of the town caught in its depths. He stood there looking after it until its little red stern-light was swallowed up in the maw of the night and the open roadstead, out beyond the breakwater. Then he turned and went back into the town he'd never been in before.

His feet seemed to carry him along without his willing it or knowing it, and there was a look on his face of a man walking in his sleep. Sights and lights and an evening crowd all around him, and he didn't see any of it. His eyes were fixed blankly, questioningly ahead, on nothing.

A chausseur caught at his sleeve, began to jabber ingratiatingly, trying to draw him within a lighted doorway through which balalaika music was streaming. He noticed a small live bear chained up beside it, begging on its hind paws from the passers-by. He shook off the cajoling doorkeep. "No," he said, "no," and motioned him away. Then, as though reminded by this of his real purpose, he threw up his hand at a droshky passing just then, a small one-horse vehicle of the type they had in Russia before the war.

He seated himself, and the man turned around to look at him inquiringly. Stephen Botillier pointed straight before them. "That way," he said.

The modern, showcase part of the town gave way to its older, more characteristic part. The electric street lights

changed to the yellow-green of oil wicks flickering behind glass shields, one to a whole street. The houses turned in upon themselves with the secretiveness of the Orient, became blank walls built around inner gardens. The past was closer here, the sense of familiarity grew stronger with every turn of the wheels under him.

He spoke suddenly to the driver, and the language was not English. Yet he knew no other and wondered where these words came from. "Hurry," he said, "I want to buy a single rose from the old flower woman, in front of the fountain ahead, and she goes home at ten."

She was furling her mats and collecting her watering cans when they swept into sight around a long curved alley.

"Mariushka," he said, leaning out, "the finest white rose in all Danubia—just one. You saved it for me?"

The toothless old crone looked at him frightenedly, crossed herself. "Mariushka was my grandmother," she quavered, "I am Annushka." She snatched up a single perfectly formed white rose, held it tremblingly out to him.

Coins chinked on the cobbles, the droshky drove on.

They were climbing upward now, out of the town. The last houses, the last cobbles, dropped behind them. There were no more oil lamps, only the moon, coming up topaz, in an enormous wagon wheel. The dirt road branched in two before them. "That way," he said again, pointing to the right.

The driver glanced around uneasily. "That one goes nowhere, except past the Moravath place. There is nothing at the end of it—"

"There is—everything at the end of it," said Stephen Botil-lie softly. He was holding the stalk of the rose flat across one palm, the other tenderly supporting its head, to keep the jolting of the carriage from shaking its petals free.

A ten-foot stone wall zigzagged out from the left to join them, ran parallel to that side of the road, endlessly, as far as the eye could see. The foliage of treetops was like the dark plumage of marching warriors behind it. The odor of roses was in the air, thousands of roses from some hidden garden nearby.

"The Moravath domain," said the coachman guardedly, as though even to mention its name was risky.

A grilled gate streamed up to them, and through it as they flashed past Steve caught a glimpse of a vast sprawling house, set far in the background and blue in the moonlight. There was a sentry box on the inside of the gate, and a soldier sprang out at the sound of their passing, carbine under arm. He craned his neck suspiciously after them as they went careening down the road in a cloud of blue moonlit dust.

The coachman had whipped up his horse, to hurry by as quickly as possible. "Slower!" Steve rapped out. "You'll miss it! There's a postern-gate ahead somewhere, screened by vines—"

The coachman whined, "Tovarich, don't try to get in there—you'll get in trouble! *I'll* get in trouble for bringing you out here—"

"Here's for your trouble, then." Steve flung money at him. "Now stop here—it's just ahead somewhere. You get off the road and wait under that clump of trees over there. And when you hear me whistle see that you come and get me—I'll have someone with me."

He climbed down, stood there waiting in the middle of the road until horse and driver had vanished under the gloom of a thick copse of overhanging trees. He could still hear the coachman sighing dolorously at the madness of it. Midnight was striking faintly from one of the far-off belfries in town.

He turned and started walking close in along the wall, the rose carefully cradled across the crook of one arm. A thick patch of vines, black in the moonlight, mottled the wall's whiteness ahead. When he'd reached there he began to probe through the vines, sounding with the back of his hand. The toneless impact of stone suddenly gave way to the deep resonance of wood. He tore the leafy screen out of the way bodily, and a shower of small leaves fell about him like black confetti; he made a gap wide enough to reveal part of a low, narrow, age-old wooden insert in the stonework. He felt down the edge of it for something to catch hold of. A slight protuberance, pear-shaped, marked a blotted-out keyhole.

He dropped to his heels suddenly as though he had just remembered something, began clawing at the damp moldy earth just before the barrier with his bare fingernails. Finally he picked up a stick and dug deeper with that. When his hand

was wrist-deep in topsoil he pulled it out again, holding a moldy bone-shaped object, unrecognizable in outline. He freed it of the adhering earth and revealed a long-stemmed key. He had to clear the keyhole itself out next, for it was tightly packed with the dust of decades.

He inserted the key finally, turned it, strained. The mechanism resisted for a long time. Then suddenly something long-disused squealed, there was a sharp click, and the whole barrier sprang back before him as though it were too large to fit into its frame.

Before he did anything he carefully cleaned his soil-caked fingertips on a handkerchief, picked up the rose he had put down, then lowered his head and stepped through to the other side of the wall, partly closing the barrier behind him.

He started walking down a finely sanded path without any hesitancy, though it wound in and out, crossed and recrossed a labyrinth of others, all identical. In the remote background, across the vast private park, the house with its spreading wings was like a low blue cliff. The odor of roses was in the air, mingled with the sharper tang of pine. A fish plopped lazily in a hidden pool or basin somewhere near at hand. Overhead was that single bright star he'd seen from the Tower of Skulls. Face slightly tilted toward it, his lips formed the words, "Be kind to me."

A low domelike shape, blue like the house but nearer at hand, peered over the top of an ink-black hedge. He went toward it and, as the hedges opened out, stood before a little pergola or summerhouse, simply a circular roof supported by six columns. He was in shadow now, and the moonlight was a blue belt all around outside. Someone was sitting on a marble bench inside it, perfectly still, as though listening to his approaching tread. It might have been mistaken for a statue ensconced there under the pergola.

He stopped short and spoke, said softly, "Did I frighten you?"

The figure moved, stood up before him with a stir of soft garments, and a girl's voice answered in his own language, English, "How could you frighten me, Stephen, when I know your step so well, when that's all I've been sitting here wait-

ing for, the past half-hour?" The only trace of accent was in the way she pronounced his given name—Steffen.

He held out the rose to her, and both her hands met both of his, in a sort of double knot, with the rose at its center.

He said, "It's the finest one in Danubia—outside these gardens. You have a thousand here, I know, but they're not mine to give you."

"But not white ones. They won't grow here, I don't know why. The peasants say it's because our family has had such a bloody past. Red, pink, yellow—but when our gardeners try to plant white ones they wither and die. The very soil must be cursed."

"That's why I want to take you away from here, that's why I want you to come with me."

Head close to his shoulder, like someone unutterably weary, she whispered, "I've waited so long."

"I have a carriage outside under the trees, and there's a ship in the harbor. Will you come with me tonight?"

"Right now—without a backward look."

They came out from under the sheltering pergola side by side, she moved swiftly along beside him down the sanded path, like a blue and white flame in the moonlight. The fine sand crunched beneath them; they were not ghosts. He could hear her breath quicken with her hurrying, he could feel the quickened beat of his own heart in his breast. The ink-black hedges came forward to meet them, walling them in; their heads and shoulders seemed to glide along the tops of them like moths.

They reached the postern gate, and he caught at it and pulled it back. Then they stopped dead, and she shrank closer to him with a wordless inhalation of fear.

A man was standing there framed by the wall opening. Its low top cut him off at shoulder level, so that he seemed headless at first glance. Steve glimpsed the braided trousers, tunic, sword and sword belt, of the military clique. The hands were clasped behind the body in an attitude of ironic patience. The mirror-polished boots were flexing up and down on their toes as an expression of the same attitude. An eight-inch native cigarette fell smoldering beside them on the

ground; one of them inched aside and trod it out. His shoulders dipped and he came through to the inside, straightened up again, hands still behind his back as if in mocking inquiry.

She breathed, "Basil!"—something like that. Steve, staring into the supercilious, monocled face as the moonlight fell across it, recognized one of the two he had jostled in the narrow streets of the town that afternoon.

There was a slight stir behind them in the garden itself, and three more detached themselves from the shadows of the hedge, where they had been waiting. Not furtively, but with an air of smug satisfaction, as though their concealment had been eminently successful. One of these was the second of the two from that afternoon.

Steve and the girl turned back again to face their first accoster. He unnoticeably detached her grasp on his arm, guided her a little aside, out of harm's way.

The man in the gateway saluted her smartly, inclining at the waist, heels swiveling together with a click. "Who is this man, Irina? You must know I cannot soil my gauntlet on the cheeks of unknown American moujiks. Speak! Is it a matter of a flogging by my orderlies or can it be settled between gentlemen?"

Steve answered for her. "My ancestors were grandees of Louisiana when yours were still roaming the woods in bearskins, eating roots. I am Stephen Botillier of New Orleans."

The other continued to address the girl. "Forgive me for seeming to doubt your taste and judgment, but it was important not to lose caste. And now if you will excuse us. The night air in the park is very damp."

She answered in a throaty pleading voice, as much to Steve as to the other: "I stay, until I know—what becomes of me. Oh, have it over quickly, gentlemen, don't torture me!"

"A word from you is a command." He turned to Steve then. "Allow me, Mr. Botillier. Count Basil Moravath."

Steve inclined his head, like an actor who has played his part so many times before his cues come to him without thinking about them. "Moravath," he acknowledged briefly.

The other brought his right hand up, flicked the two loose gloves it held past Steve's mouth. The contact was little better than a perfunctory flirt. Steve's hands didn't move in re-

taliation, as the code of the modern world had taught them to; some older code, in full possession of him now, held them motionless at his sides, inclined his head in a second brief nod of acquiescence.

"It is understood that this is a matter of your making me step down into a gutter this afternoon—" Moravath glanced briefly aside at the motionless girl—and nothing else."

"My discretion is equal to any man's," was Steve's cold answer.

One of the others came forward. "May I offer myself as your second?" and gave his name.

"I appoint you mine," Moravath said to his companion of the afternoon walk.

The two seconds strolled off down one of the paths, smoking confidentially together. Steve and Moravath conscientiously turned their backs on one another, separated, stood apart. The girl remained alone, close to the wall, head bowed as if in silent prayer.

Every move was as rigidly formalized as in a minuet, as in a game of chess. The modern world would have said, "The gate is unguarded, the carriage is still out there somewhere, there is just this one fellow here; clip him one and be on your way with her—don't be an ass." An echo from an older world, in his heart, said, "Thus, and only thus, does a gentleman act." He could no more have disregarded it than he could have flown through the air. It was as inexorable as the laws of the Medes and the Persians. It was too strong in his blood to be disobeyed. He stood there, smoking a Lucky Strike but living a code of the Middle Ages.

The two seconds returned by a different path than the one along which they had departed. They too separated. Steve's came over to him. "Pistols," he reported, "as soon as there is enough daylight to see by at twenty paces. On the edge of the bluff overlooking the sea, up the road from here a way. Is that satisfactory?"

"Why, is he a better shot than swordsman?" Steve laughed mirthlessly.

"On the contrary, he is equally at home with both. His second and I agreed that perhaps an American would not be the best swordsman in the world."

"I appreciate your fairness, although it was unnecessary in this case. Pistols then."

The age-old ceremonial played itself out to its penultimate step. The two seconds came together briefly again, reported the consent of their principals, separated once more until the final meeting. Moravath, his second and the third officer filed out through the postern one by one, each with a bow toward the oblivious tear-blinded girl. Steve overheard him say, from the other side of the wall, "If it were not such a mucky climb down, I would enjoy a before-dawn dip in the sea, before the meeting."

He understood that attitude. It didn't surprise him, he felt that way about it himself. A meeting like theirs was to be taken as a matter of course, as a necessary part of a man's existence. Never to be disregarded or evaded, no—but on the other hand to be taken for granted, as part of one's normal routine. So that when his own second, like a host doing his best to entertain a guest, suggested they kill time by playing with a deck of cards he happened to have about him, he willingly agreed. There would not, the other explained, be time enough for him to go back to town and then come out again by daylight. As for remaining alone with the girl, etiquette forbade that. They both ignored her, as though she were not in the garden at all, while they squatted down and used the fine sand of the path for a playing table. Steve, in his white London suit with a radium-dialed watch upon his wrist, thought, This is the way the old world went. And wondered why he felt so thoroughly at home in it.

They stood up when a first film of dirty gray showed along the top of the wall. "Your winnings," said Steve, motioning to the pile of coins on the ground.

"Unlucky at cards—" smiled his second pleasantly. He went outside first, and Steve stopped a moment by the girl. She hadn't moved in that whole time. She raised her head now, looked into his face. Her arms crept partly up his shoulders.

"Stephen, I've waited so long. Don't leave me."

He knew what she meant—not that he should not go out there now to the bluff but that he should not fail to come back afterwards. "It has been a long time for me too, Irina, so don't doubt that I'll come back."

She held his hand in both of hers until he had gone through the postern, then trailingy released it.

It was dark under the trees, for the moon had gone long ago and the dawn wasn't strong enough to filter through yet. His second, as if to apologize for the inconvenience, assured him: "It's an ideal spot. You'll admire it the minute you see it. I have all mine there, too."

There was a whiff of salt air through the trees, sharp and cool as a knife, and suddenly the landscape opened out and two of them were facing a long narrow strip of grassy tableland, which at its opposite edge dropped down hundreds of feet into the gray bowl of the sea. Far down below on the blurred roadstead he could make out the small almond-shaped cluster of twinkling lights that was his ship, due to sail at seven.

The others had already arrived, bringing a doctor, with his satchel and dressings and long cape, and the necessary witnesses. The two seconds met, the case of weapons was opened, examined, the choice made. Even here in the open the scene was still hazy with imperfect visibility.

"Is the light satisfactory to you, Count Moravath, at twenty paces?"

"I have perfect eyes."

"And you, Mr. Botillier?"

"The gentleman's white tunic is easy to see."

"Then, there is no point in waiting any longer. Count Moravath, as the injured party, has first shot. Stand here, please, back to back. At the command 'forward' you will each take twenty paces in a straight line. You will halt. At the command 'turn' you will both turn and face one another. At the command 'fire' you will level your pistol and fire, Count Moravath. At the second command 'fire,' if uninjured, you will level yours and fire, Mr. Botillier. Proceed.

Steve could feel Moravath's shoulder blades touching his own; they were nearly the same height. A flurry of white broke the dark line of the trees to his left, deflected his eyes over that way momentarily. The girl had followed them, was standing there crouched against a tree-trunk, one hand to her throat. He turned his eyes away again, ignored her presence as though he hadn't seen it.

"Forward." The contact of their shoulders parted and he struck out slowly, counting as he went, forearm and pistol uptilted. The grass felt slippery with dew under his feet. Twenty. He brought his left foot into line with his right, came to a halt with a slight click of the heels.

"Turn." He wheeled around and looked over and across at Moravath. The white of his uniform tunic showed up splendidly in the surrounding grayness that still soft-focussed the scene. I can kill him easily, he thought, unless he gets me first in the head or heart.

"Fire!" He never saw Moravath's right forearm drop down. There was a crack as though a large bough had broken off one of the trees, and something hissed sharply past his head.

Five seconds ticked off. Moravath didn't move, straightened a little—that was all.

"Fire!"

He thought, "I don't want his life. All I'm interested in, now that he's missed me, is over there—by the trees." He kept his pistol perpendicular, pulled the trigger. It flashed upward into the gray vault over him with a sharp, clean-sounding detonation.

He threw the pistol down and started over to where she was. She was coming forward to meet him now, face radiant, arms half outstretched. They hovered about him, touched his face, a lock of his hair that the stiff breeze had dislodged. "You came back! Stephen, you came back! My wait was rewarded at last! Stephen, what joy awaits us now—nothing can ever part us again!"

As they turned and went off together, arm in arm, along the edge of the bluff, he gave a look back. The others had disappeared, were already gone. There was a still form lying there on the grass where he had been just now. A form encased in a white linen London suit, 1949 cut. The dial of a wrist watch glinted on the back of one out-thrust hand. Something unrecognizable for what it was, a squat, slide-rule modern revolver, lay just beyond the spread fingers. Far down below the cluster of twinkling lights was moving out toward the open sea; a puff of white came from one of its smokestacks, then moments later a faint bleat followed.

"Our love was so strong, Stephen," she murmured. "How could anything have hoped to end it?"

They turned and went off together, arm in arm.

Argosy, December 1937

JANE BROWN'S BODY



THREE o'clock in the morning. The highway is empty, under a malignant moon. The oil drippings make the roadway gleam like a blue-satin ribbon. The night is still but for a humming noise coming up somewhere behind a rise of ground.

Two other, fiercer, whiter moons, set close together, suddenly top the rise, shoot a fan of blinding platinum far down ahead of them. Headlights. The humming burgeons into a roar. The touring car is going so fast it sways from side to side. The road is straight. The way is long. The night is short.

The man hunched at the wheel is tense; his eyes are fixed unblinkingly on the hem of the black curtain that the headlights roll up before him. His eyes are like two little lumps of coal. His face is brown; his hair is white. His figure is gaunt, but there is power in the bony wrists that grip the wheel, and power in the locked jaws that show white with their own tension.

The speedometer needle flickers a little above eighty. . . .

The rear-view mirror shows a very tired young woman napping on the back seat. Her legs are tucked up under her, and the laprobe has been swathed around her from the waist down. One black-gloved hand is twisted in the looped cord dangling from the side of the car; it hangs there even as she sleeps, of its own weight. She sways with a limpness, a lack of reflex-resistance, that almost suggests an absence of life.

She has on a tiny pillbox hat with a fine-meshed veil flaring out all around below it. The wind keeps pushing it back like

a film across her face. The contact of her nose makes a funny little knob on it. It should billow out at that point with her breathing, at such close contact. It doesn't, just caves in as though she were sucking it through parted lips. She sleeps with her mouth slightly open.

The moon is the only thing that keeps up with this careening car, grinning down derisively on it all the way, mile after mile, as though to say, "I'm on to you!"

A scattering of pinpoint lights shows up in the blackness ahead. A town or village straddling the highway. The indicator on the speedometer begins to lose ground. The man glances in his mirror at the girl, a little anxiously as if this oncoming town were some kind of test to be met.

An illuminated road sign flashes by.

CAUTION!

MAIN STREET AHEAD—SLOW UP

The man nods grimly, as if agreeing with that first word. But not in the way it is meant.

The lights grow bigger, spread out on either side. Street lights peer out here and there among the trees. The highway suddenly sprouts a plank sidewalk on each side of it. Dark store-windows glide by.

With an instinctive gesture, the man dims his lights from blinding platinum to just a pale wash. A lunch-room window drifts by.

The lights of a big bus going his way wink just ahead. He makes ready to swerve out and get past it. And then there is an unlooked-for complication. A railroad right-of-way bisects the main street here. Perhaps no train has passed all night until now. Perhaps no other will pass until morning. Five minutes sooner, five minutes later, and he could have avoided the delay. But just as car and lighted bus approach, side by side, a bell starts ringing, zebra-striped barriers weighted with red lanterns are slowly lowered, and the road is blocked off. The two cars are forced to halt abreast while a slow procession of freight cars files endlessly by. Almost simultaneously, a large milk-truck has turned in behind him from the side road, sealing him in.

The lights of the bus shine into the car and fall on the sleeping woman. There is only one passenger in the bus, but he is on the near side, and he looks idly out the window into the neighboring machine. His eye drops to the sleeping woman and remains there, as any man's would.

There is a terrible rigidity about the man at the wheel now. White shows over his knuckles. His eyes are glued on the mirror, in which he can see the bus passenger gazing casually into the rear of his car. A shiny thread starts down his face, catches in one of its leathery furrows. Sweat. A second one follows. His chest is rising and falling under his coat and he breathes as if he has been running.

The man at the bus window keeps looking at the woman, looking at her. He doesn't mean anything by it, probably. There's nothing else for him to look at. Why shouldn't he look at a woman, even a sleeping one? She must be beautiful under that veil. Some men are born starers-at-women, anyway.

But as the endless freight cars click by ahead, as the long scrutiny keeps up, one of the white-knuckled hands on the wheel is moving. It leaves the polished wooden rim, drops to its owner's lap. The whiteness goes out of it. It starts crawling up under his coat, buries itself between the buttoned halves, comes out again, white over the knuckles again, gripping an automatic.

His eyes have never once left the rear-view mirror, never once left the reflection of the bus-passenger's face. He acts as if he is waiting for some expression to come into it. Some certain, telltale expression. He acts as if, then, he will do something with that gun on his lap.

But the caboose has finally terminated the endless chain of freight cars, the bell stops ringing, the barriers slowly rise. The bus driver unlumbers his clutch, the line of lighted windows start to edge forward. The gun vanishes, the hand that held it returns to the wheel empty. A moment later bus, and passenger, and face have all spurted ahead. The touring car hangs back a moment, to give it a good start. The milk truck signals impatiently for clearance, then cuts out around the obstacle, lurches ahead.

The leathery-faced man at the wheel has his under lip thrust out, expelling hot breath of relief up past his own face.

He touches the two liquid threads the drops of sweat left on his face, blots them.

He goes on into the night, along the arrow-straight highway, under the peering moon. The lady sways and dreams, and puckers her veil in.

A long slow rise begins, and now the car starts to buck when he gives it the accelerator. He looks at the gauge; his gas is dwindling fast. The tan washes out of his face for a moment. He's on a main road, after all. All he has to do is pull over, wait for a tow-line, if he runs out of gas. Why that fleeting panic on his face?

He nurses the car forward on the dregs of gas remaining. Zigzags it from side to side of the highway, to lessen the incline that might defeat it. It goes by fits and starts, slower all the time, but he's near the crest now. If he can only reach it, he can coast down the dip on the other side without an engine.

The car creeps up over the rise, hesitates, about to stall. Before him the road dips downward under the moon for miles. In the distance a white glow marks a filling station. He maneuvers the wheel desperately in and out, the momentum of the descent catches at the machine, and a moment later it's coasting along at increasing speed.

The filling station blazes nearer, an aurora borealis in the middle of the dark countryside. He dare not go past, yet he's very tense as the car rolls within the all-revealing light. He glances anxiously in the mirror. He wonders about the window shades, but leaves them the way they are. There's nothing that draws the human eye quicker than a suggestively lowered shade.

He turns aside, inches up the runway, brakes to a stop. An attendant jumps over.

"Five," he says, and sits there watching the man hook up the pipeline. Watching him with utter absorption. The gun is in his lap again, bedded under the hem of his coat.

The grease monkey approaches the front window. "Wash your windows, chief?"

The driver stretches his lips into a grin. "Leave 'em."

The monkey grins back, and his eyes wander on past the driver to the girl in the back of the car, rest there for a minute.

"Dead tired," the man at the wheel says. "Here's your money; keep the change." The car moves out of the yellow radiance into the sheltering gloom again. Secrecy wells up into its interior once more, like India ink.

The flabbergasted attendant is shouting something after him. "Hey, mister, that's a twenty-dollar bill you—"

The car is racing along again now. The man at the wheel tenses. What's that peppering sound coming up behind him? A small, single beam of light is seesawing after him. If the man was frightened by the bus and by the filling station, what word can describe the look on his face now, as his mirror shows him a state policeman on his tail? Teeth bared in a skull-like flash, he fights down an impulse to open up, to try to race for it. He pulls over to the side, slows, stops. Again the gun comes out, and again it is bedded under his thigh with the butt protruding in readiness on the side away from the window. Then he sits grinding his fist into the hollow of his other hand.

The motorcycle flashes by, loops awkwardly around, comes back. The rider gets off, walks over, planks his foot down heavily on the runningboard. He ducks his head, leers in at him, beetle-browed.

"What's your hurry, fellow? I clocked you at eighty."

"Eighty-four," corrects the leathery-faced man, with a dangerous quietness that cannot be mistaken for humility.

"Well, fifty's the limit around here. Lemme see your license."

The driver takes out his license with his left hand; the right is lying idly beside his right thigh, on cold black metal.

The state cop reads by the dashboard-light, leaning even further in to do so. His own weapon is way out behind at his hip; the window frame would block his elbow in a sudden reach. "Anton Denholt. Doctor, eh? I'm surprised at you, all the more reason you oughta have more sense! Next state, too, huh? You people are the ones give us the most trouble. Well, you're in my state now, get that; you didn't quite make that state-line marker down there—"

Denholt glances along the road as if he hadn't seen the marker before. "I didn't try to," he says in that same toneless voice.

The cop nods thoughtfully. "I guess you could have at that," he admits. "What were you doing eighty-four for—?"

Perhaps Denholt can't stand waiting for the man to discover the girl sleeper in back, perhaps his nerves are so frayed by now that he'd rather call attention to her himself and get it over with. He jerks his head toward the back seat. "On her account," he says. "Every minute counts."

The cop peers back. "She sick, Doc?" he asks, a little more considerably.

Denholt says, "It's a matter of life and death." And again he is speaking the absolute truth, far more than the trooper can guess.

The cop begins to look apologetic. "Why didn't you say so? There's a good hospital at Rawling. You must have passed by there an hour ago. Why didn't you take her there?"

"No. I can make it where I'm going, if you'll only let me be on my way. I want to get her home before the baby—"

The cop gives a low whistle. "No wonder you were burning up the road!" He slaps his book closed, hands Denholt back his license. "You want an escort? You'll make better time. My beat ends at that marker down there, but I can put in a call for you—"

"No, thanks," says Denholt blandly. "I haven't much further to go."

The touring car glides off. There is a sort of fatalism in Denholt's attitude now, as he urges the car back to high speed. What else can happen to him, after what just did? What else is there to be afraid of—now?

Less than forty miles past the state line, he leaves the great transcontinental highway and turns off into a side road, a "feeder." Presently it begins to take a steady upgrade, into the foothills of a chain of mountains. The countryside changes, becomes wilder, lonelier. Trees multiply to the thickness of woodlands. The handiwork of man, all but the roadway itself, slowly disappears.

He changes his course a second time, leaves the feeder for what is little better than an earth-packed trail, sharply tilted, seldom used. The climb is steady. Through occasional breaks in the trees of the thickly wooded slopes that support the trail, he can see the low country he has left below, the ribbon

of the trunkroad he was on, an occasional winking light like a glowworm toiling slowly along it. There are hairpin turns; overhanging branches sway back with a hiss as he forces his way through. He has to go much slower here, but he seems to know the way.

A barbed-wire fence leaps suddenly out from nowhere, begins to parallel the miserable road. Four rungs high, each rung three strands in thickness, viciously spined, defying penetration by anything but the smallest animals. Strange, to want privacy that badly in such an out-of-the-way place. A double gate sidles along in it, double-padlocked, and stops abreast of him as his car comes to a halt. A placard beside it reads in the diamond-brightness of the headlights: "Private Property. Keep Out." A common-enough warning, but strange to find it here in this mountain fastness. Even, somehow, sinister.

He gets out, opens both padlocks, edges the freed halves of the gate inward with his shoe. Instantly a jarring, jangling sound explodes from one of the trees nearby. An alarm bell, wired to the gate. Its clang is frightening in this dark silence. It too spells lack of normality, seems the precaution of a fanatic.

The car drives through, stops while the man closes and fastens the prickly gate behind it. The bell shuts off; the stillness is deafening by contrast. The car goes on until the outline of a house suddenly uptilts the searching headlight-beams, log-built, sprawling, resembling a hunting-lodge. But there's no friendliness to it. There is something ominous and forbidding about its look, so dark, so forgotten, so secretive-looking. The kind of a house that has a maw to swallow with—a one-way house, that you feel will never disgorge any living thing that enters it. Leprous in the moonlight festering on its roof. And the two round sworls of light played by the heads of the car against its side, intersecting, form a pear-shaped oval that resembles a gleaming skull.

The man leaves the car again, jumps up under a sort of a shed arrangement sheltering the main entrance. Metal clashes and a black opening yawns. He vanishes through it, while pulsing bright-beamed car and sleeping lady wait obediently outside.

Light springs up within—the yellow-green wanness of coal-oil, shining out through the door to make the coal-black tree-trunks outside seem even blacker. The place looks eerier than ever now.

Homecoming?

The man's shadow lengthens, blacks out of the doorway, and he's ready to receive the patient lady. He kills the engine, opens the rear door and reaches in for her with outstretched arms. He disengages her dangling wrist from the intertwined support-strap, brushes off the laprobe, cradles her body in upturned arms, and waddles inside with her, like someone carrying something very precious. The door bangs shut behind him at a backward thrust of his heel, and darkness swallows up the world outside.

2

He carries her through the building into an extension hidden from view from the outside. There is a distinct difference between it and the rest of the rambling structure. Its walls are not log, but brick, covered with plaster, that must have been hauled to this inaccessible place at great trouble and expense. It's wired for electricity, current supplied by a home-made generator. Dazzling, clinical-white light beats down from above in here. And there are no chairs here, no rough-hewn tables, anything like that. Instead, retorts and bunsen-burners. A zinc operating table. Solution pans. A glass case of instruments. And across one entire side of the room, a double tier of mesh cages, each containing a rabbit.

He comes in swiftly with his burden, puts her down on the zinc table. She never stirs. He turns back and closes the door, bolts it both at top and at bottom. He strips off coat and shirt and undershirt, slips into a surgeon's white jacket. He takes a hypodermic needle out of the instrument case, drops it into a pan of antiseptic solution, lights a flame under it. Then he goes back to the table.

The girl's figure has retained the double-up position it held all during the long ride; it lies on her side, legs tucked-up under her as they were on the car-seat, arm thrust out, wrist

dangling just as the strap held it. Denholt seems to have expected this, yet he frowns just a little. He tries to straighten out the stiffened limbs; they resist him. Not all his strength can force them into a straight line with the torso. He begins to do what he has to do with frantic haste, as if every moment was both an obstacle and a challenge.

This is so. For rigor is setting in; the sleeping lady has been dead the better part of the night. . . .

Denholt tears her things off arm over arm, with motions like an overhand swimmer. Hat and veil, black dress, shoes, hosiery, fall about the floor.

The girl was evidently pretty; she must have been quite young too. The rouge she put on in life still frames her parted lips. Her figure is slim and shapely, unmarred by wounds. There is no blood on her at all. That is important. Denholt races up with a jar of alcohol, douses it all over her with a great slapping splash.

He seizes the hypo from the scalding pan, hurriedly fills the barrel at a retort of colorless liquid, turns the huddled dripping figure over on its face, sweeps the nape-hair out of the way with one hand. He poises the needle at the base of the skull, looks briefly at the whitewashed ceiling as though in prayer, presses the plunger home.

He stands back, lets the hypo fall with a clash. It breaks, but that doesn't matter; if it has failed, he never wants to use one again.

The needle's tiny puncture doesn't close up as it would in living tissue; it remains a visible, tiny, black pore. He takes a wad of cotton, holds it pressed there, to keep the substance just injected from trickling out again. He is trembling all over. And the seconds tick into minutes.

Outside it must be dawn, but no light penetrates the sealed-up laboratory. It must be dawn, and the last breath went out of this body on the table—how long before? Irretrievably gone from this world, as dead as though she had lived a thousand years ago. Men have cut the Isthmus of Panama and joined the two oceans; they have bored tunnels that run below rivers; built aluminum planes that fly from Frisco to Manila; sent music over the air and photographs over wires; but never, when the heart-beat of their own kind has

once stopped, never when the spark of life has fled, have they been able to reanimate the mortal clay with that commonest yet most mysterious of all processes; the vital force. And this man thinks he can—this man alone, out of all the world's teeming billions!

Five minutes that are centuries have gone by. There has been no change in her face or body. He lifts the wad of cotton now because his thumb and forefinger ache from holding it so steadily. And then—

The black puncture has vanished. The indented skin has closed up to erase it. Denholt tries to tell himself that this is due to the moisture of the serum itself or to the pressure of his fingers; but he knows that only life can do that—neither moisture nor pressure if there isn't life. Shrinking from facing disappointment, he whispers aloud: "It's still there; I don't see it, that's all. My eyes aren't sharp enough."

Tottering, he moves around the zinc table, picks up a small mirror, comes back with it. He turns her head slightly, holds the glass to the rigid mouth. Something wavers across it, too nebulous for the eye to discern at first. It comes again, stronger. Like a flurry. The glass mists, then clears. Then it mists once more, unmistakably now.

"The nervous exudation of my own fingers, holding it," he whispers. But he knows better. He drops the mirror as he did the needle. It clashes and shivers into pieces. But it has told him all it could.

There remains the heart to go by. If breath has done that to the glass, the heart will show it. Without the heart, no breath.

He turns her over completely now, on her back once more. His hand slowly descends to her chest, like a frightened bird spiraling to rest. It leaps up again spasmodically, as though it has received a galvanic shock at what it felt. Not alone a vibration, but warmth. Warmth slowly diffusing around the region of the heart; a lessening of the stone coldness that grips the body elsewhere. The whole chest cavern is slowly rising and falling. The heart is alive, has come back to life, in a dead body. And life is spreading, catching on!

Awed almost beyond endurance—even though he has given up his whole life for this, believing he *could* accomplish it, believing some day it *would* happen—he collapses to his

knees, buries his head against the side of the table, sobs broken-heartedly. For extreme joy and extreme sorrow are indistinguishable beyond a certain point. Denholt is a very humble, a very terrified man, at the moment, almost regretting what he has done—he has set God's law at bay, and he knows it. Pride, triumph, the overweening egotism that spells complete insanity will come later.

He rouses himself presently. She still needs help, attention, or he may lose her again. How often that happened with the rabbits until he learned what to do. The warm radiations from the heart have spread all over the body now, and it is a greater warmth than that of his own body. A ruddy flush, a fever-redness, has replaced the dead-white hue, especially over the heart and on the face and throat. It needs a furnace-temperature like this to cause the once-stagnant blood to circulate anew. He snatches up a thermometer, applies it. One hundred and five degrees, high enough to kill her all over again a second time. But death must be burned out and new life infused at molten heat, for this is not biological birth—but pure chemistry.

He must work fast.

He opens the door of the electric refrigerator, removes a pail of finely chopped ice he had prepared. The fearful heat of almost-boiling blood must be offset or it will destroy her before she has begun again to live. He wraps a rubber sheet around her, packs her body with the chopped ice, rolls her tightly up in it. He tests her temperature repeatedly. Within five minutes it has gone down considerably. The ice has all melted, as if placed on a hot stove. As he opens the sheet streams of water trickle out of the four corners. But the heart and the lungs are still going, the first danger has been met and overcome, the process of revivification has not in itself destroyed her. A delirious groan escaping her lips is the first sound she makes in this second life of hers; a feverish tossing from side to side the first movement. She is in full delirium. But delirium is the antithesis of death; it is the body's struggle to survive.

The laboratory has done all it can for her; from now on it is a matter of routine medical care, nursing, as in an ordinary illness. He wraps her in a thick blanket, unbolts the door, re-

moves her from the cold zinc table and carries her to a bed in a room in another part of the house.

All through the long hours of the day he sits by her, as a mother sits by her only child in mortal illness. counting each breath she takes, feeling her pulse, helping her heart-action with a little digitalis, pouring a little warm milk and brandy down her parched throat from time to time. Watching, waiting, for the second great mystery to unfold itself. A mystery as great or greater than the one he has already witnessed. Will reason return full-panoplied, or will the brain remain dead or crippled in an otherwise living body? Will she be some inarticulate, idiot thing better left unrevived? Or will she remember who she was, what went before—be the first human to bridge the gap of death, to tell the living what awaits them on the other side of the shadowy border?

All through the day the fever-reaction induced by the serum continues—and unconsciousness with it—but she lives. Undeniably she lives! At nightfall the fever increases a little, but then all fevers do; any doctor knows that. At midnight of the second night, a full twenty-four hours after she died, there is a sudden, unexpected break in her heavy breathing, and before the watcher has quite realized it, her eyes are wide open for the first time. She has regained consciousness! For the first time he sees the color of her eyes—blue—as the lids go up. Blue eyes, that have seen death, now looking into his. Calmly, undilated, unfrightened, peaceful.

He hastily takes her temperature. Normal. The serum has at last been accepted by her system. All that remains now is the answer to the second mystery. In medieval terms, has he saved her soul as well as her body? In modern scientific ones, have the accumulated memories of the past existence been carried over into this one, or were her brain cells damaged beyond repair?

The blue eyes fix themselves on him, stare unblinkingly. He says softly, almost afraid of the sound of his own voice, "Good evening." The blue eyes continue to stare. He waits, trembling. He knows that she was an American, knew the language. He whispers it over again, "Good evening, young lady."

A change is coming over her face. The staring blue eyes fill with tears that presently overflow and stream down her face.

The eyes themselves narrow in a squint. The lips that knew rouge, cigarettes, and men's kisses, pucker into infant's whimper. A feeble bleating cry, the wail of a new-born child, escapes from her. The wordless, pitiful sound that any nursery knows.

The shock, the disappointment, is terrific; his gaunt face pales, he clutches his chair to keep from slumping off it, lets out a long sighing breath. Then presently, somewhat recovered, he takes out a shiny gold watch from his pocket, dangles it before her eyes. The light flashes from it. The tears stop, the wailing breaks off short. Her eyes sparkle with interest. She reaches toward it with ten fingers whose nails still bear adult nail lacquer; her mouth wreathes in an infantile grin. She says, "Da!" and crows with pleasure. Reason is back—at least in its primary stages. For if she were a new-born infant, this would be a highly precocious reaction. Her faculties are intact. It is not as bad as he thought.

He will have to teach her to speak, to walk all over again, as one does any child, that is all. Intelligence has returned, but not memory. Her memory went into the grave. He murmurs to himself, "Her body is twenty-two, but she is in the infancy of a second life. I will call her Nova, the New One." He rubs his hand over his eyes.

Exhausted by his long vigil he slumps to the floor beside the bed, goes to sleep with his head resting against its edge. Above him the resurrected woman's hands stray gropingly to his thick white hair, clutch playfully at it like a child in its crib. . . .

3

The plane is a hopeless wreck, and even in the act of crawling out into the blinding rain, Penny O'Shaughnessy wonders dazedly why he's still alive. Dazedly, but briefly. O'Shaughnessy is not the kind to waste time wondering. Just one more lucky break, he supposes. His whole adult life has been an unbroken succession of them. His given nickname itself is a token

of this, dating from the time he was sighted flying in from the open Caribbean after a particularly devastating hurricane had turned half the Lesser Antilles upside down.

"I just went up over it and waited till it went by below," he explained, alighting midst the splinters of the airport hangar.

"A bad penny always turns up," someone muttered incredulously.

Who else had ever met the business-end of a bolt of lightning in midflight, as he had just now, flying blind through a storm, lost a wing, managed to come down still alive even if it is on a wooded mountainside, to cut the contact at the moment of crashing so that he wasn't roasted alive, and crawl out with just a wrenched shoulder and a lot of cuts and bruises? He couldn't bail out because he was flying too low, hoping for a break through the clouds through which to spot something flat enough to come down on; he doesn't like bailing out anyway, hates to throw away a good plane.

This one lying all over the side of the mountain around him is not so good any more, he has to admit. The first thing he does is feel in his pocket, haul out a rabbit's foot, and stroke it twice. Then he straightens up, hobbles a short distance further from the wreck, turns to survey it. Almost instantly the lightning, which already stunned him once in the air, strikes a nearby tree with a bang and a shower of sparks. It cracks, comes down with a propeller-like whirr of foliage, and flattens what's left of his engine into the ground.

"All right, you don't like my crate," O'Shaughnessy grumbles, with a back-arm swing at the elements in general. "I believed you the first time!"

He trudges off, neck bowed against the rain, which forms a solid curtain around him. He hasn't the faintest idea where he is, because he was flying blind a full forty minutes before the crash. There is no visibility to speak of, just a pall of rain and mist, with the black silhouettes of trees peering through all around. The sharp slant of the ground tells him he's on the mountainside. He takes the downgrade; people, houses, are more often to be found in valleys than on mountains.

The ground is muddy soup around him; he doesn't walk as much as skid on his heels from tree trunk to tree trunk, using

them as brakes to prevent a headlong fall. Rain water gets in between clothes and skin; the cuts and welts tingle; the wrenched shoulder pounds, and the thickening of the gloom around him tells him it is night.

"All set," he mutters, "to spend a quiet evening at home!"

The tree trunks blend into the surrounding darkness, and it gets harder to aim for them each time; he has to ski-jump blindly and coast with outspread arms, hoping one will stop him before he lands flat on his face. He misses one altogether—or else it isn't there in the first place—goes skittering down in axle-grease mud, wildly spiraling with his arms to keep his balance, and finally flattens into something that rasps and stings. A barbed-wire fence.

All the air has been knocked out of his stomach, and one of the wicked spines just missed his left eye, taking a gouge at his brow instead. But more than that, the jar he has thrown into the thing has set off an electric alarm bell somewhere up in one of the trees nearby. Its clamor blasts through the steady whine and slap of the rain.

His clothing has caught in ten different places, and skin with it in half of them. As he pulls himself free, swearing, and the vibrations of the obstacle lessen, the alarm breaks off. He kicks the fence vengefully with his foot, and this elicits an added spasm or two from the bell-battery, then once more it stops.

He is too preoccupied for a minute rubbing his gashes with his bare hands and wincing, to proceed with an investigation of this inhospitable barrier. Suddenly a rain-washed glow of murky light is wavering toward him on the other side of the fence, zigzagging uncertainly as though its bearer were picking his way.

"What the—" Somebody living up here in this forsaken place?

The light stops flush against the fence directly opposite where he is standing and behind it he can make out a hooded, cloaked figure. O'Shaughnessy must be practically invisible behind the rain-mist and darkness.

"That yours?" he growls, balling a fist at the fence. "Look what it did to me! Come out here and I'll—!"

A musical voice from below the hood speaks softly: "Who are you? Why are you here?"

"A girl!" O'Shaughnessy gasps, and the anger leaves his voice. "Sorry, I couldn't make you out. Didn't mean to tear loose that way, but I'm clawed up." He stares at her for a long minute. Twenty-three, pretty, he can see that much. Blue eyes gaze levelly back at him from under the hood she is wearing as he steps up closer to the fence. "I cracked up further back along the mountain, the plane came down—"

"What's a plane?" she asks, round-eyed.

His jaw drops slightly and he stares at her with disapproval, thinks she is trying to be cute or something. He keeps waiting for the invitation to shelter that a dog would be given, in such weather, at such an out-of-the-way place as this. It isn't forthcoming.

"Got a house back there?" he says finally.

She nods, and drops of rain fly off her hood. "Yes, straight back there." Just that, answered as asked.

He says with growing impatience, "Well, won't you let me in a few minutes? I won't bite you!" The reason he thinks she's playing a part, knows better, is that her voice is city bred, not like a mountain girl's.

She says helplessly, "It's locked and *he* has the keys. No one ever came here before, so I don't know what to do. I can't ask him because he's in the laboratory, and I'm not allowed to disturb him when he's in there."

"Well, haven't you got a telephone I can use at least?"

"What's a telephone?" she wants to know, without a trace of mockery.

This time O'Shaughnessy flares up. Enough is enough. "What kind of a person are you anyway? All right, keep your shelter. I'm not going to stand here begging. Would it be too much to tell me which direction the nearest road or farmhouse is from here, or would you rather not do that either?"

"I don't know," she answers. "I've never been outside this"—indicating the fence—"never been out there where you're standing."

It's beginning to dawn on him that she's not trying to make fun of him. He senses some mystery about her, and this whole

place, but what it is he can't imagine. "Who lives here with you?" he asks curiously.

"Papa," she answers simply.

She's already been missed, for a voice shouts alarmedly: "Nova! Nova, where are you?" And a second lantern looms toward them, zigzagging hurriedly through the mist. A blurred figure emerges, stops short in fright at sight of the man outside the barrier, nearly drops the lantern. "Who's that? Who are You? How'd you get here?" The questions are almost panic-stricken.

"Papa," thinks O'Shaughnessy, "doesn't like company. Wonder why?" He explains his situation in a few brief words.

The man comes closer, motions the girl back as though O'Shaughnessy were some dangerous animal in a zoo-cage. "Are you alone?" he asks, peering furtively around.

O'Shaughnessy has never lacked self-assertiveness with other men, quite the reverse. "Who'd you think I had with me, the Lafayette Escadrille?" he says bluntly. "Why so cagy, mister? Got a guilty conscience about something? Or are you making mash back there? Did you ever hear of giving a stranger shelter?" He swipes accumulated raindrops off his jaw and flicks them disgustedly down.

The hooded girl is hovering there in the background, looking uncertainly from one to the other. The man with the lantern gives a forced laugh. "We're not trying to hide anything. We're not afraid of anything. You're mistaken," he protests. A protest that rings about as true as a lead quarter to O'Shaughnessy's experienced ears. "I wouldn't for the world want you to—er, go away from here spreading stories that there's anything strange about this place—you know how folks talk, first thing you know they'll be coming around snooping—"

"So that's it," says O'Shaughnessy within his chest.

The man on the other side of the fence has taken a key out, is jabbing it hurriedly at the padlocks. So hurriedly that now he almost seems afraid O'Shaughnessy will get away before he can get the gate open. "Er—won't they send out and look for you, when they find out you're overdue at the airport?"

O'Shaughnessy snaps briefly, "I wasn't expected anywhere. I was flying my own time; the crate belonged to me. What

d'ye think, I'm sombody's errand-boy, or one of these passenger-plane pilots?" He expectorates to show his contempt, his independence.

The black shoe-button eyes opposite him gleam, as though this is an eminently satisfactory situation, as though he couldn't ask for a better one. He swings the gate-halves apart. "Come in," he urges with belated insistence. "Come in by all means! Get back in the house, Nova, you'll get soaked—and see that you close *that* door! I'm Doctor Denholt, sir, and please don't think there's anything strange about us here."

"I do already," says O'Shaughnessy, bluntly, as he steps through the enclosure. He cocks his head at the renewed blare of the alarm bell.

Denholt hastily closes and refastens the gate, shutting off the clangor. "Just an ordinary precaution, we're so cut off here," he explains.

O'Shaughnessy refrains from further comment; he is on this man's domain now. He has one iron-clad rule, like an Arab: Never abuse hospitality. "I'm O'Shaughnessy," he says. They shake hands briefly. The doctor's hand is slender and flexible, that of a skilled surgeon. But it is soft, too, and there is a warning of treachery in that pliability.

He leads his uninvited guest into the lamp-lighted house, which looks mighty good to O'Shaughnessy, warm and dry and cheerful in spite of its ugly, rustic furniture. The girl has discarded her cape and hood; O'Shaughnessy glimpses her in the main room, crouched before the clay-brick fireplace readying a fire, as Denholt ushers him into his own bedroom. Her hair, he sees now, is long and golden; her feet are stockingless in home-made deerskin moccasins, her figure slim and childlike in a cheap little calico dress.

At the rear of the room is a door tightly closed. The flyer's trained eyes, as they flicker past it, notice two things. It is metal, specially constructed, unlike the crude plank-panels of the rest of the house. A thread of platinum-bright light outlines it on three sides, too intense to be anything but high-voltage electricity. Electricity in there, coal-oil out here.

He hears the girl: "He's in the laboratory, I'm not allowed to disturb him when he's in there."

He hears the man: "See that you close *that* door."

He says to himself: "I wonder what's in back of there."

In Denholt's sleeping-quarters he peels off his drenched things, reveals a bodyful of livid welts, barbed-wire lacerations, and black grease smudges. His host purses his lips in long-forgotten professional inspection. "You *are* pretty badly scraped up! Better let me fix up some of those cuts for you, that barbed-wire's liable to be rusty. Just stand there where you are a minute." He takes the water-logged clothing outside to the girl.

O'Shaughnessy crooks a knowing eyebrow at himself, waiting there. "Why not in the laboratory, where he keeps all his stuff and the light's better? See no evil, think no evil, I guess."

Denholt hurries back with hot water, dressings, antiseptic. O'Shaughnessy flinches at the searing touch of it, grins shamefacedly even as he does so, "Can't take it any more, I guess. In Shanghai once I had to have a bad tooth pulled by a local dentist; his idea of an anaesthetic was to have his daughter wave a fan at me while he hit it out with a mallet and steel bar."

"Did you yell?"

"Naw. Ashamed to in front of a girl."

He catches Denholt staring with a peculiar intentness at his bared torso and muscular shoulders. "Pretty husky, aren't you?" the doctor remarks, offhandedly. But something chilly passes down the flyer's back at the look that goes with the words. O'Shaughnessy wonders what it means. Or do all doctors look at you that way, sort of calculatingly, as though you'd do nicely for some experiment they had in mind?

"Yep," he answers almost challengingly, "I guess I can take care of myself all right if I have to."

Denholt just looks at him with veiled guile.

4

Outside afterward, at the rough pine-board table set in the cheerful glow of the blazing hearth, Denholt's borrowed clothes on him, he has a better chance to study the girl at closer range. There is nothing strange about her in the least; she is all youthful animation, her face flushed with the excite-

ment of having a stranger at their board; sits there devouring him with her eyes, as if she never saw an outsider before. But in her talk and in her movements there is perfect rhythm, harmony, coordination, balance, call it what you will; she is an utterly normal young girl.

The old man on the other hand—O'Shaughnessy characterizes him mentally thus—the old man has this brooding light in his eyes, is spasmodic and disconnected in his talk and gestures. The isolation, the years of loneliness, have done that to him perhaps, O'Shaughnessy thinks.

"All right," he says to himself, "that's his own business. But why does he keep a lovely kid like that cooped up here? Never heard of a plane, a telephone. What's he trying to do to her? Darned shame!"

Denholt catches him watching the girl. "Eat," he urges, "eat up, man. You need strength after what you went through."

The flyer grins, obeys. Yet something about the way it was said, the appraising look that went with it, makes him feel like a fowl being fattened for slaughter. He shakes his head baffledly.

Lightning keeps flaring like flashlight-powder outside the windowpanes every half-minute or so; there is an incessant roll of celestial drums all up and down the mountainside, so deep that O'Shaughnessy can feel it in his chest at times; the rain on the roof sounds like a steak frying.

Denholt is staring abstractedly into his plate, fingers drumming soundlessly on the table. O'Shaughnessy turns to the girl, to break the silence. "Have you lived here long?"

"Two years."

His eyebrows move a little, upward. She doesn't know what a plane is, a phone? "Where'd you live before then?"

"I was born here," she answers shyly.

He thinks she's misunderstood. "You look older than two to me," he says with a laugh.

The point seems to baffle her too, as if it has never occurred to her before. "That's as far back as I can remember," she says slowly. "Last spring, and the spring before, when I was learning to talk and walk—that's two years, isn't it? How long ago did you learn to talk?"

He can't answer; a chunk of rabbit has gone down whole;

he's lucky he doesn't choke, But it isn't the bolted rabbit that stiffens the hairs on the back of his neck, puts a needle of fear through his heart.

"That'll do, Nova," says Denholt sharply. There's a strain around the eyes. His fork drops with a clash, as if he has just had a fright. "You'll find—er, some cigarettes in a drawer in my bedroom for Mr. O'Shaughnessy." And as soon as she's left the table, he leans forward confidentially toward the flyer. "I'd better give you a word of explanation. She's not quite—right." He touches his own head. "That's why—the fence and all that. I keep her secluded up here with me, it's more humane you know. Don't take anything she says too seriously."

O'Shaughnessy won't commit himself on this point, not even by a monosyllable. Just looks at his host, keeps his own counsel. It sounds reasonable enough, Lord knows, but he can't forget the girl's clear, sane eyes, nor Denholt's hungry, probing, almost gloating, stare. If anyone is crazy in this house—the little chill plays on his spine once more, and his flesh crawls under the borrowed clothes.

They have very little to say to one another, after that, while they sit there puffing away and the fire in the hearth slowly dies down into itself. The girl is in the adjoining room, washing the dishes. The waning fire throws the two men's shadows on the walls, long and wavering. Denholt's in particular, looks like that of a monster breathing smoke out of its nostrils. O'Shaughnessy grins a little at the idea.

He crushes out his cigarette. "Well," he says, "looks like the storm'll keep up all night. Guess I better make a break for it."

Denholt stiffens, then smiles. "You're not thinking of leaving *now*? You'll spend the rest of the night wandering around in circles out there in the dark! Wait till daylight at least, maybe it'll let up by then. There's an extra room back there, you won't be any trouble at all."

The girl says from the doorway, almost frightenedly, "Oh, please, don't go yet, Mr. O'Shaughnessy! It's so nice having you."

She waits for his answer.

O'Shaughnessy gives them both a long look in turn. Then he uncrosses his long legs, recrosses them the other way around. "I'm staying, then," he says quietly.

Denholt gets up. "I've a little work to finish—something I was in the midst of when—er, your arrival interrupted me. If you'll excuse me for a few minutes—You can go to bed any time you feel like it." And then, with a covert glance toward the kitchen doorway, "Just bear in mind what I said. Don't take anything she says too seriously."

The girl comes in after the doctor has gone, sits shyly down on the opposite side of the cleared table. That strange hungry look of hers rests steadily on his face, as if she never had seen anyone like him before.

"I'm glad you're staying," she murmurs finally. "I wanted you to because—well, maybe if you're here, I won't have to take my injection."

O'Shaughnessy droops his lids a little. "What kind of an injection?" he says with almost somnolent slowness.

She turns her hand up, down again. "I don't know, I only know I have to take them. About once a month. He says it's bad for me if I miss any. Tomorrow would be the day, if you hadn't come." She screws up her eyes at him pathetically. "I don't like them, because they hurt so, and they make me feel so ill afterward. Once I tried to run away, but I couldn't get through the fence."

There's something a little flinty in O'Shaughnessy's eyes that wasn't there before. "And what'd he do when he caught you?" His own hand on the table flexes a little.

"Oh nothing. Just talked to me, told me I had to have them whether I liked it or not. He said it was for my own sake he gives them to me. He said if I went too long without getting one—"

"What would happen?"

"He didn't say. Just said something pretty awful."

O'Shaughnessy growls to himself deep in his throat. Drug-ging, eh? Maybe that's why she can't remember further back than two years, and why she says such weird things from time to time. But on second thought, it can't be that, either. The infrequency of the injections argue against it. There wouldn't be pain, if it were some kind of a drug. And if it were something able to affect her memory of the far past, why not the recent past as well? O'Shaughnessy's no medical man, but he's knocked around enough to know a little something;

in the Orient and South America he's seen the telltale traces of almost every known narcotic under the sun. There is absolutely no sign of it about Nova. She is as fresh as that rain falling from the sky outside.

He only asks her one question, to make sure. "Do you dream—dream about pretty things—after you've had one of these shots?"

"No," she shudders, "I feel like I'm all on fire. I woke up once and there was all ice around me—"

Not a drug, then. Maybe he has Denholt all wrong; maybe she really does need these treatments—vaccine or serum it sounds like—maybe she had some ghastly illness that robbed her of her memory, the use of her limbs, two years ago, and these injections are to speed her recovery, guard her against a relapse. Still, Denholt did try to pass her off as mentally unbalanced, when she isn't at all. No, there's something the man is up to—something secret and—and ugly. The barbed-wire fence, the alarm-bell show that too. Why bring her way up here when she could have far better care and attention—if she needs any—at a hospital in one of the big citities?

"Did you really mean what you said about only learning to walk and talk the spring before last?"

"Yes," she says. "I'll show you one of the copy-books he taught me out of." She comes back with a dog-eared primer.

He thumbs through it. "C is for Cat. Does-the-Cat-see-the-Rat?" He closes it, more at sea than ever.

"Were you as big as now when he taught you to walk?"

"Yes. I wore this same dress I have on now, that's how I can tell. I learned by myself, mostly. He used to put me down on the floor over there by the wall, and then put a lump of sugar on a chair all the way across the room, and coax me to walk over to get it. If I crawled on my hands and knees, he wouldn't let me have the sugar. After awhile I got so I could stand up straight—"

"Stop!" he says, with a sudden sharp intake of breath. "It's enough to make a person go crazy just trying to figure out! There's—there's craziness in it somewhere! And I know on whose part. Not yours! God knows what he did to you the first twenty years of your life to make you forget everything you should have known—"

She doesn't answer. She can't seem to understand what he means. But her eyes show fright at the force of his speech. He sees he may do more harm than good by telling her other people aren't like she is. She's grown up, and she's been held here in some kind of mental thralldom—that's the closest he can get to the answer. And the man that would do that to another human being is a monster and a maniac.

His voice hoarse with pity and anger, he says, "Tell me now, did you ever see any other man but me and the doctor before in your life?"

"No," she breathes, "that's why I like you so much."

"Didn't you even ever see another girl—have someone like yourself around you to talk with?"

"No," she murmurs again. "Only him. No one else at all."

He rises as if he can't stand any more of it, takes three quick turns around his chair, raises it, bangs it down again.

She watches him timidly, not speaking, with just that fright in her eyes. He slumps down in his chair again, looks at her broodingly. Somehow he knows he's going to take her with him when he leaves, and he wonders if he has any right to. What'll he do with her afterward—turn her loose like a lamb among wolves? Drag her around with him from bar to cantina to bistro, when he's not up in the air risking his neck for some Chinese war lord or Nicaraguan outlaw? His kind of a life—At least she has peace here, and a sort of security.

The bolts shoot back behind the laboratory door. He sees her glance past him, but doesn't turn his head to look. On the wall opposite Denholt's long wavering silhouette appears more ominous now than before. Madman, criminal, samaritan—which? Playing the role of God to this girl—in some obscure way that O'Shaughnessy cannot fathom even yet—which he has no right to do. Better the cantinas and the tropical hell-holes of his own life. If she has anything in her, she'll rise above them; this way she hasn't even a chance to do that.

Her quick whisper reaches him while Denholt is in the act of closing the door after him. "Don't let him give me another injection. Maybe if *you* ask him not to he'll listen to you!"

"You've had your last!" O'Shaughnessy says, decisively.

Denholt approaches the table, looks suspiciously from one to the other. Then a smile crosses his face. "Still up, eh? How

about a nice hot toddy for both of us before we turn in?" Nova makes a move to leave her chair and he quickly forestalls her. "I'll fix it myself."

O'Shaughnessy doesn't miss that. He stares up into the other's face, takes his time about answering. "Why not?" he says, finally, jutting out his chin.

Denholt goes into the kitchen. O'Shaughnessy can see him pouring whiskey into two tumblers, spooning sugar, from where he is. The doctor keeps looking obliquely out at him from time to time, with a sort of smirk of satisfaction on his face.

O'Shaughnessy says quietly to the girl, sitting there feasting her eyes on him with a doglike devotion: "Go over there to my coat, hanging up over the fireplace. You'll find an oil-silk packet in the inside pocket, full of papers and things. Take the papers out and just bring me the folder. Don't let him see you."

He thrusts the moisture-proof oblong down just under the collar of his shirt, buttons the neck over it, stretches the collarband out as far as it will go, to create a gap. Then he bends forward a little, sticks his elbows on the table, rests his chin on his hands. His upthrust arms obscure his chest and neck. He drawls something she doesn't understand—one more of the many incomprehensible things he is always saying: "I can smell a Mickey a mile away."

Denholt comes in with the two toddies, says to her, "You'd better go to your room now, Nova, it's getting late, and you're going to need all your strength. *Tomorrow*, you know."

She shivers when she hears that, slowly withdraws under the compulsion of Denholt's stare, sending appealing looks at O'Shaughnessy. A door closes after her somewhere in the back.

Denholt has noticed the telegraphic communication between them. "I don't know what my ward has been telling you—" he begins.

O'Shaughnessy is not showing his cards yet. "Not a thing, Doc," he says. "Not a thing. Why? Is there something she *could* tell?"

"No, no, of course not," Denholt covers up hastily. "Only—er, she gets delusions about injections and things. That's why

I don't allow her in the laboratory any more. She caught me giving a rabbit an injection one day, and she'd be perfectly capable of telling you that it was *she* I gave it to, and what's more, believing it herself. Let's drink up, shall we?"

He hands his guest one of the two glasses. O'Shaughnessy takes it with one hand, keeps the other cupped along the line of his jaw. He hoists it an eighth of an inch. "Here's to *tomorrow*."

Denholt's piercing gaze transfixes him for a minute. Then he relaxes into a slow, derisive smile. "Here's to *tonight*," he contradicts, "tomorrow will take care of itself."

O'Shaughnessy thrusts the rim of his glass up under his lower lip, slowly levels it until it is horizontal—and empty. The forked hand supporting his chin is between it and Denholt. He's a sloppy drinker, the collar of his shirt gets a little wet. . . .

THE yellow-green of the doctor's oil lamp recedes waveringly from the doorway of the bedroom O'Shaughnessy is to occupy. Pitch blackness wells up all around, cut by an occasional calcium-flare of lightning outside the high, small window. The flashes are less frequent now and the rain has let up.

O'Shaughnessy is lying flat on his back, on the rickety cot. He has left on his trousers and shirt. Denholt said, perhaps with ghastly double meaning, "I'm sure you'll be dead to the world in no time at all!" as he went out just now. The first thing the flyer does, as the waning lamp glow finally snuffs out altogether and a door closes somewhere in the distance, is to take out the bulging waterlogged oil-silk envelope from his shirt and let its contents trickle silently onto the floor.

The rustle of the slackening rain outside begins to lull his senses before he knows it. The ache of his wrenched shoulder lessens, is erased by oncoming sleep. The lids of his eyes droop closed. He catches them the first time, holds them open by sheer willpower. Not a sound, not a whisper comes to help him keep awake. The lonely mountain house is deathly still; only the rain and the far-off thunder sound outside. The girl's story begins to take on a dream-like quality, unreal, remote, fantastic—

The muffled creak of a pinewood floor-board, somewhere just beyond the open door of his room, jerks his senses awake. At first he thinks he's still at the stick of his plane, makes vague motions to keep from going into a tailspin. . . . Then he remembers where he is.

Twenty minutes, half an hour, an hour maybe, since Denholt's murky lamp-glow flickered away from the door. Maybe even more than that. O'Shaughnessy swears at himself mentally for fading out like this. But it's all right; if this is it now—

It must be deep in the night. There's no rain now any more, just the plink of loose drops as they detach themselves one by one from the eaves. A pale silver radiance, little more than a phantom glint, is coming through the window up over him. Dawn? No, a late moon, veiled by the last of the storm clouds.

The creak is repeated, closer at hand, a little more distinct this time. He can hear breathing with it. Outstretched there on the cot, he begins drawing up his knees closer to his body, tensing himself for the spring. What'll *he* have—a knife, a gun, some viciously-keen surgical instrument? O'Shaughnessy widens his arms, into a sort of simulation of a welcoming embrace. The dark hides the great fists, the menacing grin at his mouth.

Something comes over the threshold. O'Shaughnessy can *sense* the stirring of air at its furtive passage, rather than see or hear anything. There's a whispered footfall within the room itself. A blur of motion glides momentarily through the wan silvery light, which isn't strong enough to focus it clearly, into the concealing dark on his side of it.

There's a clang from the bucked cot-frame, the upward fling of a body, a choked sound of fright as a pair of arms lash out in a bear-hug. In the soft purring tones of a tea-kettle O'Shaughnessy's voice pours out unprintable maledictions.

Her softness warns him just in time, before he's done more than pinion her arms fast and drive all the breath out of her body. "Don't," she pants, "it's me." His arms drop away, he blows out breath like a steam-valve, the reaction staggers him back a step to the wall, off balance. "You! Why didn't you whisper a warning? I was—"

"I was afraid he'd hear me. He's in the laboratory. He left

the door open behind him and I've been watching him from outside in the dark—"

"What's he think he's going to do, give you one of them shots again?"

"No, it's you—he's going to do something to you, I don't know what! He took your coat in there, and took all the papers in it and burned them. Then he—he lit flames under all those big glass things, and put a needle in a pan to soak, like he does with me. But this time he has a silk cord in there with him, and he made a big loop in it and measured it round his own neck first, then took it off again and practiced throwing it and pulling it tight. He's got a big black thing in there too, you hold it this way and point it—"

"A gun," says O'Shaughnessy softly, mockingly. "He's not missing any bets, is he? Knockout drops, a noose, a positive. How's he fixed for hand grenades?"

She puts the flats of her hands against his chest. "Don't stay, please! I don't want—things like that to happen to you! Go before he gets through! He's awfully quick and strong, you ought to see how he ran after me that time when I tried to get to the fence! Maybe you can sneak by outside the door without his seeing you, or get out one of the windows—Don't stand there without moving like that! Please don't wait. That's why I came in here to you. There's steam coming from the pan the needle's in already. I saw it!" And then, in a low heartbroken wail, "Aren't you going to go?"

Instead he sits down on the edge of the cot, leisurely puts on the soiled canvas shoes Denholt has lent him. Reaches toward her, draws her over, and stands her before him.

"Nova, d'you like me?" he says.

"I like you very much."

He rubs his hair awry with one hand, as though at his wits' end. "Don't be givin' me any blarney now. D'you want to marry me?"

"What's marry?"

"I ought to be shot," he says softly to himself. "Well—d'you want to be with me always, go wherever I go, tell me how good I am when I'm good, buck me up when I'm down in the dumps—and one of these days, pretty soon, wear black for me?"

"Yes," she says softly, "I want to be near you. If that's to marry, then that's what I want."

He puts out his hand at her. "Shake, Mrs. O'Shaughnessy! Now let's get out or here." He goes over to the door, looks out at the distant bar of light escaping across their path from the open laboratory-door. "Got anything you want to bring with you? You're standing in the middle of your wardrobe right now, I guess. Got any idea where he keeps that key?"

"The one to the padlock on the gate outside? In the pockets of his coat, I guess; he always seems to reach in there for it. He hasn't got it on, though; he's got on that white thing he wears in the laboratory. It must be in the room where he sleeps."

"Okay, we'll try lifting it. I wouldn't mind roughing that bird up, only I don't want anything to happen to you. He's probably got an aim, with that gun of his, like a cockeyed nervewreck with palsy. Stick close behind me."

5

They glide through the velvety dark, O'Shaughnessy in the lead, the girl behind him, keeping contact with her fingers resting lightly against the back of his shoulder. The vague outline of the room doorway seems to move toward them, not they toward it, to come abreast, to slip past. Ahead there is just that bar sinister of bleaching whiteness, falling across the floor of the main room and leaping up one wall.

"Gotta watch these boards," he breathes across his shoulder, "you woke me up getting in here, and you don't weigh what I do." The touch of her fingers against his back tells him she's shaking all over. "It's all right. You're with me now."

A board whimpers a little, and he gets off it with catlike litheness before it goes into a full-bodied creak. The gash of laboratory whiteness comes slowly nearer, outlining the angles of things even beyond its own radius. This house, he thinks, is as black physically as it is in spirit. Little tinkering, puttering sounds become audible from the still-distant laboratory, magnified in the stillness. Mania at its preparations.

She signals with her fingertips, abreast of an open door. "In

here?" he whispers. They turn aside and glide through. "Stand here right beside the door where I can find you again. I'll see if I can locate his coat."

He does after a lot of cautious circling and navigation; it is hanging from a peg in the wall. He finds the key very quickly, though to her it must seem forever that he's standing there fumbling with the coat. He slips back to her, jaunty with his own peculiar jauntiness even in this eerie situation. "Got it. Now here we go."

Outside again. Step by step through the silence and the blackness, the triangular wedge of white ahead the only visible thing. A board barks treacherously under him, this time before he can withdraw his foot. They stand rigid, while the echoes move into the night. The tinkering has stopped abruptly. Questioning silence from the laboratory now. O'Shaughnessy nudges her with his elbow, and they draw in against the wall.

Not a sound from the laboratory. The bar of escaping light, narrow as a candlestick until now, slowly, insinuatingly, broadens out fan-shaped as the door behind it silently widens. A silhouette bisects it, Denholt's outline thrown before him over the floor and up the wall, rigid, standing just within the opening, listening.

The grin has come back to O'Shaughnessy's face; he reaches behind him and squeezes her throbbing wrist reassuringly. It seems so long ago that he was last afraid of anything. Seventeen, was he then? Eighteen? Sometimes he thinks he's missing a lot by being like this—fear gives life a fillip. He wonders how it is he lost it all, and what there is—if anything—ever to bring it back.

One thing's sure, she's being afraid for the both of them, and plenty left over; her pulse is a whipcord under the thumb that is holding her wrist.

The silhouette moves at last, begins to recede within the lighted room. The noise that conjured it up, like a genie out of a bottle, hasn't been repeated. The tinkerings and drip-pings resume where they left off. Only the path of light remains wider than before, a ticklish gap to bridge undiscovered. When they are almost abreast of it and can hear Denholt's breathing inside. O'Shaughnessy stops, gropes be-

hind him, draws Nova around in front of him. He transfers the padlock key to her palm, closes her fingers over it. "I want to be sure you make that gate, no matter what. Take a deep breath and get across that lighted place. Don't be afraid, I'm right here backing you up."

She edges forward, cranes her neck toward the open door. Apparently Denholt's back is toward it. She takes a quick soundless sidestep, with instinctive feminine deftness, and is on the other side of the luminous barrier. He can see her there anxiously waiting for him to join her.

A moment later he is beside her again, bringing with him a quick bird's-eye glimpse of white-coated form bent over, laboriously pouring something from a retort into a hypodermic-barrel. In the background a pair of operating tables, not just one. One an improvised one—planks bridging two chairs, with a rubber sheet draped over them. "Double-header coming up," thinks O'Shaughnessy. "Rain—no game."

She is tugging insistently at his arm, but he is suddenly resistant, immobile. She turns her face up toward his. "O'Shaughnessy, come on! Any minute he's—"

"My rabbit's foot. He's got it in there with him, in my coat. I couldn't go without it—"

"O'Shaughnessy, he'll kill you."

"Him and what sextet? Get over there to the door, kid, and start working on it. I want you in the clear in case that gun of his starts going boom. I've got to go in after my lucky paw, no two ways about it." He has to jog her, push her slightly, to get her to tear herself away from him. Finally she slips off in the dark with a little whimper of protest. He waits there until a faint clicking comes from the main door. Then a bolt grates miserably as she clears it, and there is sudden, startled silence from within the gleaming laboratory.

O'Shaughnessy, muscles taut as wires, rounds the angle of the doorframe, unhurried, casual. Digs a thumb at the man in the white jacket who has just whirled to face the door. "My coat, Doc. I'm leaving."

Denholt has just finished putting down the loaded needle he was preparing. The gun the girl mentioned is on the table, but under his hand already.

"So you think you're leaving? You're very foolish, my

friend. It would have been easier to sleep, the way I meant you to. No fright, no last-minute agony. You would not have seen your own death."

"No fright, no agony this way either." O'Shaughnessy calmly reaches for his coat, extracts the charm, stuffs it into his trouser pocket. "Don't be so handy burning my identification papers next time," he says, "or I'll slap your head all the way around your neck—"

The gun is up now, level with his chest.

Behind them in the darkness the heavy outer door swings open with a grinding whirr. Denholt takes a quick step forward. O'Shaughnessy doesn't move from before him, blocking his way. He's flexing his wrists slightly, in and out.

A patter of quick, light footsteps recedes outside in the open, flying over the clayey rain-wet ground.

"Who's that?"

"Who should it be? That's the girl. I'm taking her with me."

Denholt's face is a sudden mask of dismay. "You can't!" he cries shrilly. "You don't know what it means, you fool! You can't take her out into the world with you! She's got to stay here, she needs *me*!" He raises his voice to a frenzied shout. "Nova! Come back here!"

"That's your story and you're stuck with it." O'Shaughnessy raises his own voice, in a bull rumble. He shifts dead-center in front of the leveled gun, to keep Denholt from snaking past around him.

"Get out of my way, or I'll shoot you dead. I didn't want to puncture your skin, damage any vital organ, but if I have to, you're the loser! Nothing can bring you back then, do you hear me, nothing can bring you back! You'll *stay* dead!"

O'Shaughnessy just stands, crouched a little, measuring him with his eyes. O'Shaughnessy is a gambler; he senses a reluctance on Denholt's part to shoot him, and he plays on it for what it's worth. Instead of giving ground before the weapon, he takes a sidling step in, and another.

The alarm-bell begins ringing somewhere off in the dripping trees. . . . She's got the last barrier open, she's made it.

A sudden taut cord down the side of Denholt's neck reveals to O'Shaughnessy the muscular signal sent down to his unseen trigger finger. He swerves like a drunk. A foreshortened

bar of orange, like a tube-light, seems to solder the two of them together for a second. Noise and smoke come later. O'Shaughnessy isn't aware of pain, only knows that he's been hit somewhere and mustn't be hit any more. He has the gun hand in his own now, ten fingers obeying two different brains, clutching a single weapon. It goes off again, and again, and again—four, five, six times.

O'Shaughnessy is hitting Denholt on the side of his head with his free arm, great, walloping, pile-driver blows. The two of them stagger together, like partners in a crazy dance. Glass is breaking all around them. Gray smoke from the six shots, pink-and-white dust from the chipped brick-and-plaster walls, swirl around them in a rainbow haze. Something vividly green flares up from one of the overturned retorts, goes right out again. O'Shaughnessy tears the emptied gun away, flings it off somewhere. More breaking glass, and this time a tart pungent smell that makes the nostrils sting. The crunch of pulverized tube glass underfoot makes it sound as if they were scuffling in sand or hard-packed snow.

O'Shaughnessy can't hit with his left arm, he notices; the shoulder blocks off the brain-message each time. He just uses that arm to hold Denholt where his right-hand blows can find him. He has lost track of the other's left hand for a moment, it comes back again around his body from somewhere, with a warning flash to it. Scalpel or something.

O'Shaughnessy dives, breaks, puts space between them. A downward hiss misses his chest barrel, he pounces, traps the arm before it can come up again, vises it between his own arm and upthrust thigh, starts forcing it out of joint. The thing drops with a musical ting! He scuffs it aside, takes a quick step back to get driving-force, sends a shattering hay-maker in. Denholt topples, skids through broken tube-glass, lies there stunned, tilted on one elbow.

O'Shaughnessy, his shoulder throbbing with pain like a bass drum, pants grimly: "Now—got it through your head I'm taking her?" He turns and shuffles unsteadily toward the door.

Denholt is trying to struggle up, gabbling: "You're taking her to her death!"

The alarm bell keeps pealing, waiting. O'Shaughnessy

stumbles out of the laboratory, on through the darkness toward the front door. Cool, dank, before-dawn air swirls about him. He turns and sees Denholt outlined there behind him in the lighted doorway, where he has dragged himself, hanging weakly onto the frame, holding up one arm in imprecation—or in warning.

"Remember what I'm saying. You're dooming her. This is the thirtieth of June—remember this date, remember it well! You'll know, you'll know soon enough! You'll come crawling back to me—with her—begging me to help you! You'll get down on your bended knees to me, you'll grovel at my feet—that'll be my hour!"

"Have another shot—on me," O'Shaughnessy growls back from the darkness under the trees.

"You're not taking her out to life, you're taking her out to her death—the most awful death a human being ever experienced!"

The shrieking, maddened voice dwindles away behind him in the house, and he can make out Nova waiting tremblingly for him at the opened barbed-wire barrier. He stumbles to her through the mud of the storm-wrack, holding his bullet-seared shoulder. He grins and drawls in that quiet way of his above the slackening noise of the exhausted alarm-bell: "H'lo, Mrs. O'Shaughnessy. Shall we go now?"

He takes her arm.

6

O'Shaughnessy, dickering with a man named Tereshko at the bar of the Palmer House, Chicago, excuses himself, steps into a booth to call his North Side flat.

"Why not have your wife join us for dinner?" Tereshko says. "Say, at the Chez Paree. We can talk business to music just as well as here."

"Great," says O'Shaughnessy. Business after all is a form of warfare; you bring all your available weapons to bear. If you don't you're a fool. You could call Nova O'Shaughnessy's illuminating beauty that of a star-shell. If he uses it to help

dazzle this wary gentleman he is trying to dent, it doesn't mean he values it any the less himself.

So he says into the phone: "Nova, I want you to meet me at Chez Paree. I've got a man with me. He's looking for a pilot, and he's talking big money, so be as beautiful as you can. Take a cab, honey." Nova is still new to the city streets. "Just one thing. Any offer under seventy-five hundred and you give me a look, much as to say, 'Isn't he funny?' Get it? And not a word about—that place on the mountain, of course."

At the Paree they order a table for three. They've been drinking a good deal, and Tereshko is beginning to show it. He isn't drunk but he loses some of his caginess. Loosens up, so to speak.

"You had much experience locating mining claims from the air?" he resumes.

"No, just flying. But as I understand it, all you want is to be piloted up there, so you can look them over yourself. I can guarantee to do that for you. All I need's the general direction and plenty of gas."

It's obvious that money isn't the hitch. This Tereshko has that written all over him, in a flashy uncouth sort of way. His hesitancy—and O'Shaughnessy is a good judge of men's motives—seems to stem from caution, as though he wants to make sure whom he's dealing with first before he puts all his cards on the table. He can't doubt by now that O'Shaughnessy's an experienced enough flier to get him anywhere he wants to go, after the clippings and documents he's been showing him all afternoon long.

"Of course," Tereshko feels his way, offering the applicant a cigarette out of a platinum case with an emerald catch, "what I'm mainly interested in is to see that the whole undertaking is kept strictly between ourselves. I don't want known to anyone what its object or destination is. No one at all, is that clear? Not even after it's been wound up."

"I can give you a guarantee on that too. I'm no loud-speaker."

"No, you seem like the sort that minds his own business—that's why I approached you in the first place." He—very unwisely—signals for another drink.

Tereshko relaxes still further. "I don't mind telling you," he

admits, "that that whole mine-location business was just camouflage. What I'm looking for is already mined and minted, only it was put back in the ground. And it's all the way around the compass from where I said. Not British Columbia at all, but in one of the Florida keys, we think. Maybe one of the Bahamas. I suppose that gives you the clue. Well, it looks like you're our man, so there's no harm in your knowing."

"Pirate stuff, eh?"

"Yes and no," says Tereshko. "Certainly was a pirate all right, but he dates from prohibition days and not Captain Kidd's time. Guess you know who I mean now."

O'Shaughnessy doesn't, but it doesn't cost anything to let the other think so.

"He won't get out until, let's see—" A pecan-sized diamond flames as he figures on his fingers. "1948, or is it '50? Hell, he was a great guy and all that," he goes on by way of self-excuse, "but you can't blame the rest of us. After all, we're getting older every day. He got his, why shouldn't we get ours? He's served two years of his sentence—why should we wait?"

"Then you have no right to it?"

"Any more than he had!" snaps the other. "It's nobody's money. It don't even belong to the saps he got it from, because he gave 'em needle-beer for it at four bits a throw."

"One way of looking at it," says O'Shaughnessy non-committally.

"What other way of looking at it is there? Is it doing anybody any good lying where it is in the ground? We wouldn't have to go to all this trouble only—you see banks were no good, nor safe-deposit boxes nor anything else, because his trouble was—Government trouble. He musta seen it coming up. We didn't, but he musta, because we all remember how just before it happened he went off on a cruise down Florida waters in his motor yacht. Just him and a small crew to run the thing for him and, oh yes, some girl he was playing around with at the time. None of *us*, not one of *us*. We all thought that was funny, too, because he was a guy loved company. Until then he'da caught cold without the bunch of *us* being around him all the time. Well funnier still, just before turning back they touch at Havana. Him and this dame go

ashore and nobody else's allowed to leave the boat. Then, on very sudden orders from him, the yacht leaves Havana—without him and the girl coming back to it. It's supposed to pick them up later at Bimini or something. It was never seen in one piece again. A piece of charred wood was picked up later with its name on it. Must have been destroyed at sea by an explosion, and not a soul aboard escaped alive. Funny, huh, to send it on ahead like that, when it could have waited right in the harbor for them? They were the only two it had to cater to."

"Funny is right, but not for laughing," O'Shaughnessy agrees.

"Just when we were getting out our black neckties and armbands, a cable comes from him. 'Hope you're not worried, I'm okay, taking the next plane north, and wasn't that a terrible accident?' Thirty days later to the hour, Uncle Sam jumps on his neck and—" He pinches his fingers together, kisses them, flies them apart. "How much turned up, when the smoke had cleared away? Five grand. Why, he used to carry as much as that around in his pocket for change! Does it look like I'm right, or does it look like I'm right? Every other lead we've had since then has petered out. It took us long enough to tumble, but now I think we've got it added up right. Now, d'you think you can help us swing it?"

O'Shaughnessy shrugs. "What's hard about it? I can taxi you around for a month, two months, as long as it takes you to locate it. An amphibian is the answer, of course. Now there's this: you'll have to stake me to the plane. I banged my own up week before last—that's when I got this busted shoulder. Don't get the idea I can't fly—lightning butted in, that was all."

"We'll provide you with the plane," Tereshko assures him. "You shop around and pick up what you think you'll need, and you can keep it, as an extra bonus, when we get back."

"Just how long will I last after that to enjoy the use of it?" wonders O'Shaughnessy knowingly. But that isn't really a deterrent—people have thought they'd get rid of him, once he's served his purpose, before now—and haven't made a go of it. These fellows'll find that out too.

"The wren would come in handy for a guide—did you ever think of contacting her?" he says thoughtfully.

"Did we think?" scoffs the other. "His cell door wasn't closed behind him yet before we started to put on the pressure. Well we put it on too heavy. We had her figured all wrong. It just happens she was one of those innocent babes, hadn't known what it was all about until the lid blew off—musta thought he made his dough in stocks and bonds or something."

O'Shaughnessy makes that derisive sound with his lips commonly known as the raspberry.

"No, that's what we thought too," Tereshko assures him, "but it was on the level. He used to tell us everything was on the up-and-up between them—you know what I mean, and she wasn't really his moll. . . . He called her his madonna—"

"Machine-gun madonna," chuckles O'Shaughnessy.

"He was going to marry her. She was only a kid, seventeen or something like that. Well, between the shock of finding out who she'd been mixed up with, and us putting the pressure on her, the poor dame never had a chance. She claimed she didn't know anything that went on during that cruise. So then we lock her up in a dark garage overnight, to frighten her into talking. We frightened her all right, but not into talking. Just our luck—he'd never let her cut her hair, said she looked like an angel with it long. So she has a hairpin to unlock the engines of all the cars in there—and there was about six of them—and starts them all turning over and breathes the monoxide until she's gone. With a kitten he gave her still in her arms."

"Fine note." O'Shaughnessy scowls sympathetically. Not with them, but with the harried, friendless girl in the garage.

Tereshko grins.

"Yeah, ain't it? Of all the dirty tricks! We had to leave her lie in there all next day. Then we sneaked her out after dark, carried her miles away, and planted her somewhere else. I never even read about them finding her. If they did, they never tumbled to who she was, not a word about it came out in the pa—"

"Here's my wife," O'Shaughnessy interrupts, standing up.

He's sighted her across Tereshko's shoulder as she comes in from the street just then, stands there a second, looks around. She's something to look at, as she locates them, starts over toward them, with a smile for him on her face.

Tereshko, whose chair is facing the other way, follows him to his feet, turning around to greet her as he does so.

O'Shaughnessy is saying, "Nova, meet Mr. Vincent Tereshko."

There's a tinkle as Tereshko's cocktail glass hits the floor. There's a peculiar hiss at the same time, like an overheated radiator, or an inner tube deflating. Tereshko sort of reels back, the low top of the chair he has just risen from catches him across the spine, he goes over it, dumping the back of his head onto the soft padded seat, and then he and chair alike roll over sideward to the floor. Instantly he scrambles up again, gives a hoarse cry that sounds like, "No! Get away from me! You're not real."

He makes flailing motions with both arms, buffeting the air before him, then turns and runs through the foyer and out into the street.

They come out of their trance after awhile, not right away. "Well, I'll be a—Did you see that? What bit him? A minute ago he's sitting here chatting with me, then all at once he goes haywire."

"It was—me," she says wonderingly, still staring after Tereshko.

He flips his head impatiently at such an idea. "Nah, how could it have been you? Talk sense. You're not used to crowds yet, every time anyone looks at you you think something's the matter." He can't, after all, really tell who or what Tereshko saw.

"It was, O'Shaughnessy," she insists troubledly. "He was looking right at me, right into my face. Something must be the matter with me! Is there anything wrong with the way I look? Because that's the second time tonight that's happened—"

He turns to her, startled. "Second! What d'you mean?"

"Just now, outside the door. There was a man sitting waiting in a limousine for someone, and as I got out of my cab, he turned around and looked at me, and then he—he gave a yell

like this one did, and started off, tearing down the street a mile a minute as if he'd seen a ghost—"

O'Shaughnessy looks puzzled.

"Turn around a minute. Lemme see," he says. Then as she slowly revolves before him: "You're okay from every angle. I don't see anything about you to scare grown men out of their wits. He musta seen somebody or something in back of you that did that to him. The heck with it. Let's go home. It looks like the deal's off, and I'm just as satisfied. It had a bad smell to it from the beginning."

Seventy-two hours go by, the lull before the storm. Then, the third night after that, he happens to come back to the flat earlier than usual. He's down to his last few dollars, and he's been tramping around all day trying to make connections. But free-lance pilots, flying soldiers of fortune, don't seem to be in great demand at the moment. He has her to look after now. . . .

He spots her standing at the curb in front of their house, as he rounds the corner. She's looking for a taxi. She signals one, and just as she's on the point of getting in, he shouts: "Hey Nova! What's the idea?" and comes running up just in time.

She seems astonished to see him. Not confused, just astonished.

"I'm sorry it took me so long. I didn't mean to keep you waiting like that. Is that why you changed your mind and came back here instead? You're not sore, are you, O'Shaughnessy?"

He says: "What're you talking about? Sore about what?"

"Why, because I'm half an hour late in meeting you."

"Who told you to meet me?"

She's more astonished than ever. "Why, you did! You telephoned me over an hour ago and said to take a taxi and come out and meet you at—"

He takes a look around him up and down the street. "Come on upstairs," he says crisply. "Never mind, driver, we don't want you." And upstairs: "What else did I say?"

"You told me to come as quickly as I could, that's all."

"Don't you know my voice on the wire?"

"I've never heard anybody else's but yours, so I thought it was you again. You sounded a little far-off, that's all."

"Well it wasn't me. And I'm wondering who it was. Listen, Nova, honey, don't go out any more by yourself after this. I'll give you a password over the phone from now on. Barbed wire, how'll that be? If you don't hear me say barbed wire, you'll know it isn't me."

"Yes, O'Shaughnessy."

The following evening, when he comes back, he has trouble getting in. His latchkey works, but she has something shoved up against the door on the inside, a chair inserted under the knob, maybe. It doesn't hold him very long, and she's standing there in the middle of the room shaking like a leaf.

"What'd you do that for?" he asks. "And how'd that hole get in the door, over the lock?"

She runs over and hangs on tight. "They called again. They said it was you, but I knew it wasn't because they didn't say barbed wire."

"They try to get you to come out again?"

"No, they didn't. They said, 'We've got a message for you from Benny.' Who's Benny?"

O'Shaughnessy just looks at her, eyes narrowing.

"Then they said, 'Oh, so your torch went out?' Then they laughed and they said, 'Where'd you get hold of the mick?' What's a mick?"

"Me," he says slowly, wondering. "Anything else?"

She shakes her head dazedly. "I couldn't make head or tail out of it. They said, 'You sure put one over on us, didn't you? It was a good gag while it lasted, but it's run out now. We'll be seeing you.'"

"Then what?"

"Oh, O'Shaughnessy, I was so scared. I didn't know where to get hold of you, except you were downtown in the Loop somewhere. I locked the door and I hid in the closet, just left it open on a crack. In about half an hour, all of a sudden I could see the doorknob slowly turning, as if someone was out there trying it. Then when that wouldn't work the bell started to ring, and a voice said thickly, 'It's me, babe. Let me in, I forgot my key.' But I knew it wasn't you. I got way in the far corner of the closet and pulled all the clothes over me—"

Meanwhile he's taken his gun out of the valise where he

keeps it and is checking it over, his wrists trembling a little with rage. That's a man's vital spot, the helpless thing he loves.

She goes on:

"Then something went *pokk* right into the door and came through on this side. I couldn't stand it any more, I was afraid they'd come in and get me. I ran out of the closet and climbed out that window there onto the fire escape and got into the flat next door and begged the lady to hide me. I told her someone was trying to break into our flat, and she started to call the police, but by that time they'd gone. I could hear feet scuttling down the stairs, a whole lot of them, and a big car driving off outside—"

Walking back and forth, trying to dope it out, tapping the muzzle of his gun against his palm, he says, "Listen kid, I don't know what we're up against, it may be just a false alarm, but—Shooting a bullet-hole through your door in broad daylight makes it look like the McCoy. If I could only figure what it was all about! It's no one in *my* life. I've made enough enemies, heaven knows, but not in this country. Nova, tell me the truth—were you ever in Chicago before?" He stands still and looks at her.

"Never, O'Shaughnessy, never, until we came here two weeks ago. I don't know anyone here but you. I've never spoken to anyone but you the whole time we've been here. You've got to believe me!"

He does, how could he help it?

But then, what is it? What would you call it anyway? If he had anything, he'd say it had the earmarks of an attempted snatch, for ransom. Mistaken identity? Yes, but who do they take her to be? The whole thing's a maze. He wonders if he ought to give it to the police to handle for him. But then, what can he tell them? Somebody impersonated me on the phone to my wife, somebody tried to break into my flat while I was out. It doesn't stack up to much when you put it that way. And he's an individualist, anyway, used to being on his own. When it comes to anything threatening Nova, he'd rather take care of her himself.

Tereshko rings up unexpectedly that night. "This is Te-

reshko, O'Shaughnessy," he says. "I'm down on lower State Street. I'd like to conclude that transaction we were talking over. Can you run down and meet me for ten minutes or so?"

"What happened to you the other night? Something seemed to frighten you."

A phony laugh. "Me? Not at all. I got kinda sick all of a sudden, and beat it for the street."

O'Shaughnessy motions Nova over, puts the receiver to her ear and whispers: "This the same voice you heard the other times?"

She listens, shakes her head.

So he says into the phone: "Frankly, the deal's off, count me out."

Tereshko doesn't seem very perturbed, perhaps he doesn't realize how much he revealed that night. "Sorry you feel that way, but you know best. Come down anyway for a drink, to show there's no hard feeling. Come alone."

O'Shaughnessy decides then and there that he will, to see what this is all about. That first night Tereshko was all for having Nova join them. Tonight he wanted O'Shaughnessy to come down alone. Does Tereshko want Nova left alone in the flat? Is *he* the one behind all this? Nothing like finding out. He says, "Get your hat." And on the street, a couple of blocks away: "You've never been to a movie, have you? Well, you're going to one now."

He buys two seats, takes her in, finds a place for her. "Now don't move from there till I come back and get you!" As if she were a child.

"Yes, O'Shaughnessy."

There is no sign of Tereshko at the taproom where they were supposed to meet. O'Shaughnessy waits ten minutes, leaves, goes back and gets Nova. He fingers the gun in his pocket as they near their flat. "So now," he says to himself grimly, "I think I know *who* I'm up against—if not why."

The flat door falls back unfastened before them. They give one another a look. "I thought—I saw you lock it after us when we left," she whispers.

"You thought right," he says grimly. He goes in first, gun bared.

No one there. "Must have blown open," he says. "Maybe sneak thieves."

This alarms her. "My clothes! All the pretty things you gave me!" He grins a little at the woman of it, while she runs to the closet to find out. She comes out again as puzzled as ever.

"Anything missing?"

"No, but—I don't remember *this* being on here before." She's holding one up to show him. A large lily is pinned to the front of it!

"Maybe it came that way and you've forgotten it."

She strokes it with her fingers. "But it's alive. They don't put *live* ones on them."

Even he knows that. He also knows what lilies stand for as a rule. He softly starts to whistle a bar or two. "Chicago, Chicago, I'll show you around—"

7

Some church-belfry on the other side of the river bongs twelve times. "Got everything in?" he says quietly. "I'll carry the bags down. You put out the lights."

She tiptoes submissively down the stairs after him. "I don't know how far we can get on five bucks," he remarks, "but it's a cinch I can't leave you up there by yourself any more in the daytime, and I can't drag you all over town with me either. Maybe we can get a room on the other side of the city—"

Just inside the doorway he puts down the bags, motions her to stand by them a minute. He saunters out ahead, carefully casual. Peers up one way, down the other. Nothing. The street's dead to the world.

Then suddenly, from nowhere, *ping!* Something flicks off the wall just behind him, flops at his feet like a dead bug. He doesn't bend down to look closer, he can tell what kind of a bug it is all right. He's seen that kind of bug before, plenty of times. No flash, no report, to show which direction it came from. Silencer, of course.

He hasn't moved. *Fsssh!* and a bee or wasp in a hurry strokes by his cheek, tingles, draws a drop of slow blood. An-

other *pokk!* from the wall, another bug rolling over. The insect-world seems very streamlined, very self-destructive, to-night.

He takes a wary step back, slips inside the doorway again, still facing front. If he could only spot the flash, see where it was coming from, he could send them a few back. Meanwhile, he's half-in, half-out of the iron-grilled, thick, glass street door.

There's an anvil-like sound, and the warped spokes of a wheel show up in the glass, centering in a neat, round hole. Powdery stuff like dandruff dusts his shoulder. Another bug has dropped inside the hallway.

Hands are gripping at his coat, pulling at him from behind. "O'Shaughnessy, don't—you'll kill yourself standing there like that! Think of *me!*"

"Douse that bulb back there, swat it with your handbag—I want to see if I can catch the flashes."

But she won't do it, and that traps him into going back and doing it himself. Then her arms wind around him when she gets him back there at the far end of the hallway, and she clings for dear life.

"No! No! I won't let you—What good'll you be to me dead? What'll become of me?" He gives in at last—it's either that or drag her bodily after him back to the entrance clinging like a barnacle.

"All right, all right. There must be a back way out of here."

But, at the outlet to the electric-lighted basement passageway, as he emerges in advance of her—there are again winged insects on the loose, spitting off the wall. "Wait a minute!" he says, cutting short her plaintive remonstrances. "I think I caught the flash that time! Along the edge of the roof on that next house. Wait'll it comes again." And cuts his hand at her backhand. "The bulb. The bulb." This time she obeys, blackness inks the passage behind him.

He draws and slowly raises his gun, standing perfectly still, face tilted to the sky. Gambler's odds: his life against the chances of hitting a powder-flash six stories up. His left thumbnail scrapes past the rabbit foot imbedded in his vest-pocket, half absent-mindedly.

A winking gleam just over the cornice up there, a flare from

his own gun as fire draws fire. A chipping of the stonework just over and behind his head, and then something black and gangling falling clumsily down six stories, a blur against the gray gloom of the walls. A sickening thud against cement, just out of sight behind the eight-foot dividing fence.

More flashes up there, six in a row, and a sound like hail or gravel down where they are. But O'Shaughnessy's already back inside the sheltering passageway. "It won't work. There's still a second one up there, and we could never get over that eight-foot fence alive. They seem to be doing this up in style. Come on back up to the flat."

She goes up the inner stairs with her hands shielding her face. "That fall. I hope he was dead before—he landed."

"That evens the score a little," he says unsentimentally. "They that live by the sword—"

Night in a Chicago flat. He says: "The door's locked, and I'm here with Buster. You try to get a little sleep, honey, your old man'll look after you."

"But promise me you'll stay up here with me, you won't go down there again."

"I promise."

So, fully dressed, she lies there on the bed, and after awhile she sleeps, while he stands guard at the shade-drawn window, gun in hand, the spark of his cigarette held carefully behind his back.

A milkman comes and never dreams the muzzle of a gun is four inches away from his head on the other side of the door as he stoops to set down a bottle of milk. Nova sleeps on, like a child. Night in a Chicago flat.

Three hours after daylight they're ready to leave. There are enough people on the streets now to give them a chance. If they don't get out now, they never will. This net that's been meshed loosely around them all night will be pulled tight by the time darkness comes a second time. They want him out of the way, but they want her alive. That much he's sure of.

Just before they go, he murmurs, "There's a cab been standing there ever since dawn, probably all night, just past the next corner. There's no public hack-stand at that spot, either."

"Do you think that's—them?"

"I don't give a hoot whether it is or not, I can't breathe in

here any more, I've got to get out in the open! Stick close behind me, and if I tumble, you keep going. I've been shot at before. I'm a bad penny that always turns up again."

But then, as he puts his hand out to the doorknob, a sudden rigidity, as though some indefinable sound has reached him from outside it. "There's someone out there," he breathes.

She winces. "We're too late."

He motions her behind him, shielding her; reaches out and does something to the lock, levels his gun. "It's open," he calls out. "Come in at your own risk."

Nothing for a minute. Then very slowly it starts to fall back toward them.

"Quicker than that or I'll shoot!" He kicks it the rest of the way with the edge of his foot.

The tremblingly upraised arms are the first things they see. And the empty background behind the solitary figure. O'Shaughnessy takes a step backward, propelling her with him, not in retreat but to give himself elbow-room.

The face is Oriental, Chinese. Spectacles and close-cropped hair. Hat fallen off just now at the unexpected welcome.

O'Shaughnessy: "This is the place you wanted?"

"Yes, if you will permit me to mop my forehead—"

"You warm?"

"No, but my reception was."

"All right, close the door behind you. We've been a little draughty here all night."

The visitor bows nervously. "Allow me to introduce myself—"

"You're on the air."

"I am Lawrence Lee, American name. I have come to offer you interesting proposition—"

"I just had one, thanks, a couple days ago."

"I had great trouble finding you—"

"You're going to have even greater losing me, if this is a come-on."

"I represent the illustrious Benevolent-Wisdom Yang. His recruiting-agent in United States. He has ordered a shipment of lovely planes, and needs someone who will know how to make them work. Your reputation has reached our ears. Can I offer you post on generalissimo's staff?"

O'Shaughnessy, gun still bared, sticks his left hand in his pocket, pulls it out again, lets the lining trail after it. "You make it sound interesting—up to a point."

"Five hundred dollars American, a week."

"I'm no greenhorn, I've been in China before. I'm O'Shaughnessy of Winnipeg, he can't get another like me. The coolies used to bow down and worship in their rice-paddies whenever I passed overhead." That he can stand and bargain like this, when both their lives are hanging by a thread, is—well, just part of his being O'Shaughnessy.

"Two thousand, p'aps?"

"More like it." He turns to her, still huddled behind him. "Shall we do it, just for the fun of it?" Then, with a grin to the emissary, "Yang would not, I take it, be interested in a dead pilot?"

The agent, with Oriental lack of humor: "Dead pilot could not handle planes satisfactory."

"Well, I may have a little trouble getting through alive from here to the Northwest Station. I can't promise you I will." She shudders at this point, clings closer. "However, that's my look-out. You leave two through tickets for Frisco on tap for us at the ticket office, and if I don't show up to claim them, you can always get a refund from the railroad—and another pilot."

"Today-train agreeable? Shall do. Boat-tickets will be waiting in Frisco at N. Y. K. Line office. And for binder, one thousand advance suitable?"

O'Shaughnessy says in Chinese, "I could not wound your generosity by refusing." Then in English, "Carry your hat in your hand leaving here, so your face can be seen clearly."

The envoy bows himself out. "Happy comings-down."

When they're alone once more, he says to her: "Shanghaiho. The Coast Limited leaves at eleven, so we've got just one hour to make it."

"But how are we going to get out of here?"

"I don't know yet, but we are." He goes back to the window, peers narrowly down through the gap of the drawn shade. "There goes Confucius without anyone stopping him; I guess they didn't tie him up with me." Then, "Who's that fat woman walking up and down out there with a poodle?"

"Oh, that's the lady in the rear flat I climbed into yesterday. She always airs her dogs like that regularly every morning."

"Dogs?" She's only got one there."

"She's got two in the flat. She has to take them down in relays because they fight."

"I've got it now!" he says. "Wait'll she comes upstairs again."

"What are you going to do?"

"You're going to take the next one down. I'm going to see that you get to the station and safely aboard that train first of all. I'll stall them off here; you call me back as soon as you get there. Then I'll make a break for it myself—"

"Leave you—?" she wails.

"I'm giving the orders in this ground crew. Here she comes now." He goes to the door, stops her, brings her in with him. She's globular and baby-faced, with carefully gilded hair under a large cartwheel hat that flops around her face.

"Do you want to do something for us? I've got to get my wife out of the building and I can't do it openly—we're being watched. Will you lend her your hat and coat and dog? Your other dog."

"I'll gladly lend my hat and coat, but Fifi—my little Fifi—who'll bring her back?"

"She'll turn her over to the station master for you, you can call for her later. I tell you her life's in danger. Do this, won't you?"

"Yes," she says, looking at Nova. "I think I understand. I was sure I'd seen your face somewhere before—in the paper, you know. Tell me, what was he like? Was he as bad as they said? I heard he used to make people stand with their feet in buckets of cement—"

"Skip it," says O'Shaughnessy, "you've got your wires crossed."

It only takes a couple of minutes for the change. The wide-brimmed concealing hat hides everything but Nova's chin. He ties a couple of pillows around her with cord, one in front and one in back, under the coat, apologizing, "No offense," to the woman as he does so.

"That's all right," she sighs. "I know I've filled out."

The fat lady stays up in their flat; she thinks it will be a good idea to give them a glimpse of her passing back and forth behind the windows. Make them think Nova's there. For this purpose they raise the shades once more. He goes down to the lower hall with Nova and the dog. Their parting is a mixture of comedy and tension. "I'll be standing here behind the door covering you with my gun. Don't be frightened. Imitate her waddle. Walk slow and keep your eye on the dog, like she does. Give yourself a good two blocks before you jump for it. And don't drop those pillows to the sidewalk, whatever you do!"

"Oh, O'Shaughnessy, if you don't show up, I'm going to die."

"I'll be there with bells on."

The bulky, padded figure eases out through the door, minces after the dog, straining at its leash. He edges up slantwise against the door, screened by an abutment of the hall wall, peering out after her, gun ready, until she passes from his radius of vision. Then quickly chases upstairs where the window will give him a wider perspective.

The dog stops. The figure under the concealing hat brim stands patiently by. They go on again a few yards. They stop again. "Darn dog!" he chafes, sweating with impatience in the hollows of his hands. Finally, almost imperceptibly, by fits and starts, she's progressed around the corner and out of sight.

He glues his eyes on the motionless taxi now. That street she just went up is a continuation of the one it's on. If it makes a move, starts out after her suddenly, he'll know—

Slow tense minutes. She must be a block away now. The cab's still standing. She ought to be off the streets by this time, safely installed in a cab, whirling toward the station. They've put it over!

He takes a deep breath of released tension, steps back into the room away from the window. The worst's over, she's made it. All that's left now is to sit tight until she calls him to let him know she's reached the station. Fifteen minutes ought to do the trick, making every allowance for traffic-hitches and lights.

He sits there smoking calmly, waiting. The fat lady is still

there in the flat. This, to her, is romance with a capital R. She's enjoying it more than a box of marshmallows. She's eating it up.

And then in a flash, before he quite knows how it's happened, seventeen minutes have passed, and the call is two minutes overdue, and the calmness is going out with every noseful of smoke he's expelling.

Twenty minutes. He throws down his cigarette, and takes three or four quick turns around the room. "She should have called by now," he says.

"Yes, she should have," agrees the fat lady. "It doesn't take that long to get from here to the Northwest Station."

Twenty-five minutes, half an hour. "Maybe the phone's out of order—" But he's afraid to get on and test it, afraid to block her call. He shakes his fist at it helplessly.

He's prowling back and forth like a lion with distemper now. There's a shiny streak down one side of his face. "I shouldn't have let her go ahead—I ought to be hung! Something's gone wrong. I can't stand this any more!" he says with a choked sound. "I'm starting now—"

"But how are you—"

"Spring for it and fire as I go if they try to stop me." And then as he barges out, the fat lady waddling solicitously after him, "Stay there; take it if she calls—tell her I'm on the way—"

He plunges straight at the street-door from all the way back in the hall, like a fullback headed for a touchdown. That's the best way. Gun bedded in his pocket, but hand gripping it ready to let fly through lining and all. He slaps the door out of his way without slowing and skitters out along the building, head and shoulders defensively lowered.

It was the taxi, you bet. No sound from it, at least not at this distance, just a thin bluish haze slowly spreading out around it that might be gas-fumes if its engine were turning; and at his end a long row of dun-colored spurts—of dust and stone-splinters—following him along the wall of the flat he's tearing away from. Each succeeding one a half yard too far behind him, smacking into where he was a second ago. And they never catch up.

He rounds the corner unscathed, spins like a dervish on one

leg, brakes with the other, snaps a shot back at the cab, mist-haloed now, which is just getting into gear; and slipping out away from the curb. Glass tinkles faintly back there—he got the windshield maybe—and he sees the cab lurch crazily for a minute, as though more than glass got the bullet.

Then he sprints up the street without waiting to see any more. His own shots make plenty of noise, and the vicinity is coming to shocked life around him. Nothing in sight though that's any good to him—a slow-moving truck, a laundry-wagon. But music somewhere ahead—a cab radio—and he steers toward the sound, locates it just around the next corner, is in and on the way almost between two notes of a single bar. At the wheel himself.

The driver rears up in consternation in the back, holding a handful of pinochle cards, shrieks, "Hey! what's the—"

"All right, climb around here and take it—I'm in a hurry, got no time to lower the gangplank!"

"What about these other guys?" The back of the cab is alive with shanghaied card-playing cab drivers.

"They'll have to come along for the ride." Two blocks behind the other cab has showed up, is putting on a burst of speed. O'Shaughnessy warns, as the driver crawls over his lap: "I want you to keep that cab back there where it belongs—zig-zag, I don't care what you do—but lose it. It means your back-tires if you don't!"

The rear-view mirror suddenly spatters into crystal confetti.

"See, what'd I tell you? Left, left, get offa here, don't stay in a straight line with 'em!"

The driver says, "What *you* done? I don't like this!" He takes a turn that nearly lands them axle-shafts in air.

A series of two-wheel turns, and a combination of lights in their favor—the rabbit's foot must be working again—closing down after them like portcullises each time. They shake them off.

It's twelve-and-a-half minutes before train time when he jumps down at the Northwest Station, slaps one of Lawrence Lee's sawbucks in through the cab-window and dives inside.

At the barrier: "Tickets, please!"

"Wasn't one left here for me with you?"

"Nope."

"My wife must have taken them through to the train with her, then. Didn't you see her—pretty blonde, big floppy hat—?"

"All blondes are pretty to me, haven't seen a bad-looking one so far today—"

"Buddy, I'm not interested in your love life, I wanna get through here to see if I can find her—"

"Hey, come back here!"

The agony of that wild, headlong plunge into car after car, calling: "Nova! Nova!" from the vestibule of each one. No sign of her. Upstairs again at a mile a minute, nearly knocking over the gateman a second time—eight minutes to train-time now.

At the ticket-window, "Two for the Coast—O'Shaughnessy—were they picked up?"

"Nope, here they are waiting for you."

Uncalled for! She never got here, then! Seven minutes to find her, in a city of four million people! Outside again, and looking around him dazed. Dazed—and dangerous—and yet helpless. Ready to give this town something to be tough about, but not knowing where to start in—Instinctively touching the rabbit's foot, that habit of his. And then—like a genie at the summons of Aladdin's lamp—a redcap, haphazardly accosting him in line of duty. One out of the dozens swarming all over the place, but the right one, the right one out of all of them!

"Cab, boss?"

"No. Wait, George—blonde lady, big droopy hat, did you see anyone like that drive up here at all the past half-hour or so?"

"Li'l dog with a haircut 'cepting on its ankles?"

"Yes! Yes!" He grabs the guy by both shoulders. "Hurry up and tell me, for Pete's sake!"

The redcap shows his teeth.

"That sho' was a dirty trick that lady have played on her. She done come away without bringin' no change fo' her cab fare, and the driver he wouldn't listen to her no-how, he turn around and take her to the police station."

"Which?"

"Neares' one, I reckon."

And there she is when he tears in a couple minutes later, sitting on a bench under the desk-sergeant's eye, dog and all. Driver, too.

"We've been trying to reach you, young fellow." The sergeant clears his throat meaningly, winks at O'Shaughnessy to show he won't give him away. Wife starting on a vacation, somebody else answering the phone; *he* understands. "Couldn't seem to get you."

"How much is it? We've got a train to make."

"Two dollas and twenny cents," says the driver.

"Here it is. And here's a little something extra—" Wham! and the driver nearly brings down the rear wall of the room as he lands into it.

Then he's outside with her again, minus dog and pillows now, in another machine, tearing back to the station. Three minutes to spare. He doesn't notice as he jumps down that the cab ahead of theirs, the one that's just pulled into the driveway before them, has a shattered windshield.

They don't have to be mind-readers, these others, to figure out where he and she will head for. If they're on their way out of town, that means one of the stations. They've cased the La Salle Street Station first, now this one.

He starts her through the big vaulted place at a quick trot. Then suddenly a shout somewhere behind them, "There they are!" and five men are streaming in after them, one with a bloody bandage over his head.

O'Shaughnessy daren't shoot; the station's alive with people crisscrossing the line of fire. His pursuers can't either; not that the risk of hitting somebody else would deter them, but they're sprinting after him too fast to stop for aim. A red-cap goes keeling over, and one of the rodmen topples over a piece of hand-luggage the porter dropped, goes sliding across the smooth floor on his stomach. And above it all the amplifier blaring out remorselessly, "Coast Limited—Kansas City—Denver—Salt Lake City—San Francisco! 'Board!"

He wedges her through the closing barrier, throws the tickets at the gateman. A shot, and looking back he can see the uniformed figure at the gate toppling, even while the gateman still tries to wedge it closed. A young riot is taking place

back there, shouts, scuffling, station-guards' clubs swinging. But one figure squeezes through, detaches itself, comes darting after him, gun out. Tereshko.

O'Shaughnessy shoves her into a car vestibule. "Get on, kid. Be right with you." The train is already giving its first few preliminary hitches—forward.

Tereshko's gun flames out as he comes on; the shot hits the L of El Dorado, the Pullman's gold-lettered name, slowly slipping past behind O'Shaughnessy's back. Tereshko never had a chance for another shot. O'Shaughnessy closes in bare-handed; his fist swings out, meets Tereshko half way as he crashes into it, lands him spread-eagled on the platform. The gun goes flying up in a foreshortened arc, comes down again with a clank, and fires innocuously.

O'Shaughnessy flicks him a derisive salute from over one ear. "I gotta make a train, or I'd stay and do it right!" He turns and catches the hand-rail of the next-to-the-last vestibule as it glides by, swings himself aboard. Tereshko stands staring blurredly down his own nose at the dwindling observation-platform of the Coast Limited.

O'Shaughnessy sinks wearily down in the seat beside Nova, and as she shrinks into the protective angle of his outstretched arm, he tells her grimly: "You're O'Shaughnessy's girl for keeps. Let 'em try to take you away from me now!"

8

O'Shaughnessy, minutes after his Bellanca has kissed the hard-packed earth of the Shanghai municipal airport, is already on one of the airport phones asking for the Broadway Mansions. Seven weeks out of Shanghai, seven weeks back in the red mountains of Szechuan, China's "wild west," piloting the great General Yang around, dropping a few well-placed bombs for him, and trans-shipping machine-gun parts inland from below Ichang, which is as far as the river boats can go. No commission in Yang's fighting-forces, nothing like that—just his own crate, his own neck, payment in American gold dollars, and a leave of absence whenever he feels like it,

which happens to be right now. Seven weeks is a plenty long time.

He's still in the crumpled slacks and greasy khaki shirt he left the interior in, but under them a triple-tiered money-belt, twice around the chest and once across the waist, packed with good solid chunky gold eagles, outlawed at home now but as good as ever over here. Fifteen-thousand dollars' worth; two thousand a week salary, and a thousand bonus for obliterating a caterpillar tank that General Yang didn't like the looks of. Not bad, two thousand a week. But seven weeks is still a long time, any way you look at it.

Her voice comes over the wire throbbing with expectancy; every time it's rung she's hoped it was he—and now at last it is.

"O'Shaughnessy." A love song in one word. She's never called him by anything but that.

"Just grounded. I've brought back fifteen-thousand-worth of red paint with me. Turn the shower on, lay out my dude-clothes, and get ready for a celebration!"

He just lingers long enough to see his plane put to bed properly, then grabs a cab at the airport-gate. "The Settlement," and forgetting that he's not inland any more, that Shanghai's snappier than Chicago, "Chop-chop."

"Sure, Mike," grins the slant-eyed driver. "Hop in."

A change has come over the city since he went away, he can feel that the minute they hit the outskirts, clear the congested native sections, and cross the bridge into the Settlement. Shanghai is already tuning-up for its oncoming doom, without knowing it. A city dancing on the brink of the grave. There's an electric tension in the air, the place never seemed so gay, so hectic, as tonight; the roads opening off the Bund a welter of blinking, flashing neon lights, in ideographs and Latin letters alike, as far as the eye can see. Traffic hopelessly snarled at every crossing, cops piping on their whistles, packed sidewalks, the blare of saxophones coming from taxi-dance mills, and overhead the feverish Oriental stars competing with intercrossed searchlight beams from some warships or other on the Whang-poo, Just about the right town and the right night to have fifteen thousand bucks in, all at one time.

He says: "Hold it, Sam," in front of a jewelry store in Bub-

bling Well Road, lopes in, comes out again with a diamond solitaire in his pocket.

The skyscraper Mansions shows up, he vaults out, counts windows up to the tenth floor, three over from the corner. Brightly lighted, waiting for him. Shies a five-dollar bill at the driver.

The elevator seems to crawl up; he feels like getting out and pushing. A pair of Englishmen stare down their noses at his waste rag outfit. The rush of her footsteps on one side of the door matches his long stride on the other.

"I'd recognize your step with cotton in my ears!"

"Watch it, you'll get fusel-oil all over you!"

They go in together in a welter of disjointed expressions, such as any pair might utter. "I thought you were never coming back this time!"

"Boy, you certainly made time getting dressed. All set to go, aren't you?"

As a matter of fact she isn't, it's her gloves that mislead him. She has on a shimmery silver dress, but no shoes. Her hair is still down too.

He laughs. "What do you do, put on your gloves before your shoes?"

A shadow of something passes across her face. Instantly she's smiling again. "Just knowing you were back got me so rattled—"

He takes a quick shower, jumps into his best suit. Comes in on her just as she is struggling into a pair of silver dancing-shoes—just in time to catch the expression of livid agony on her pretty face. She quickly banishes it.

"Matter—too tight? Wear another pair—"

"No, no, it isn't that. They're right for me—my feet got a little swollen wearing those Chinese things all day."

He lets it go. "Come on, where'll it be? Astor House, American Club, Jockey Club?" He laughs again as she drenches herself with expensive perfume, literally empties the bottle over herself. "Incidentally, I think we'll move out of here. Something seems to be the matter with the drains in this apartment, you can notice a peculiar musty odor inside there—decay—"

The haunted look of a doomed thing flickers in her eyes.

She takes his arm with desperate urgency. "Let's—let's go. Let's get out into the open, O'Shaughnessy. It's such a lovely night, and you're back, and—life is so short!"

That air of electric tension, of a great city on the edge of an abyss, is more noticeable than ever at the White Russian cabaret called, not inappropriately, "New York." You wouldn't know you were in China. An almond-eyed platinum-blonde has just finished wailing, with a Mott Street accent, "You're gonna lose your gal."

O'Shaughnessy leads Nova back to the table apologizing. "I knew I wasn't cut out for dancing, but I didn't know how bad I was until I got a look at your face just now. All screwed up like you were on the rack. Kid, why didn't you speak up—"

"It wasn't you, O'Shaughnessy," she gasps faintly. "My—my feet are killing me—"

"Well, I've got something here that'll cure that. We don't get together often, Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, but when we do—the sky's the limit." He takes the three-thousand-dollar ring out of his pocket, blows on it, shows it to her. "Take off your glove, honey, and lemme see how this headlight looks on your finger—"

Her face is a white, anguished mask. He reaches toward her right hand. "Go ahead, take the glove off."

The tense, frightened way she snatches it back out of his reach gives her away. He tumbles. The smile slowly leaves his face. "What's the matter—don't you want my ring? You trying to cover up something with those gloves? You fixed you hair with them on, you powdered your nose with them on—What's under them? Take 'em off, let me see."

"No, O'Shaughnessy. No!"

His voice changes. "I'm your husband, Nova. Take off those gloves and let me see your hands!"

She looks around her agonized. "Not here, O'Shaughnessy! Oh, not here!"

She sobs deep in her throat, even as she struggles with one glove. Her eyes are wet, pleading. "One more night, give me one more night," she whispers brokenly. "You're leaving Shanghai again in such a little while. Don't ask to see my hands. O'Shaughnessy, if you love me. . . ."

The glove comes off, flops loosely over, and there's suddenly horror beating into his brain, smashing, pounding, battering. He reels a little in his chair, has to hold onto the edge of the table with both hands, at the impact of it.

A clawlike thing—two of the finger extremities already bare of flesh as far as the second joint; two more with only shriveled, bloodless, rotting remnants of it adhering, only the thumb intact, and that already unhealthy-looking, flabby. A dead hand—the hand of a skeleton—on a still-living body. A body he was dancing with only a few minutes ago.

A rank odor, a smell of decay, of the grave and of the tomb, hovers about the two of them now.

A woman points from the next table, screams. She's seen it, too. She hides her face, cowers against her companion's shoulder, shudders. Then he sees it too. His collar's suddenly too tight for him.

Others see it, one by one. A wave of impalpable horror spreads centrifugally from that thing lying there in the blazing electric light on O'Shaughnessy's table. The skeleton at the feast!

She says forlornly, in the stunned stillness: "You wanted me to wear your ring, O'Shaughnessy—" and slips it over that denuded bone protruding like a knobby spine from her hand. Loosely, like a hoop, it falls down to the base of the thing, hangs there, flashing prismatically, in an inconceivable horror. Diamonds for the dead.

The spell breaks; the glitter of the diamond perhaps does it, shattering his hypnosis, freeing him. So lifelike there, so out of place. Not a word has passed between them, but for that one lament of hers. He seizes her to him suddenly, their two chairs go over, their champagne glasses crash to the floor. He pulls out a wing of his coat, wraps it concealing around the thing that was once her hand, clutches it to him, hurries her out of the place, his arm protectively about her. The flash of a silver dress, a whiff of gardenia, a hint of moldy, overturned earth, as they go by, and the dead has been removed from among the living. The ring drops off the insufficient bone-sliver that carries it, rolls unheeded across the floor.

"Not so fast, O'Shaughnessy," she pleads brokenly. "My feet

too—they're that way. My knees. My side, where the ribs are. It's coming out all over me."

And then, in the cab hurtling them through the mocking constellations that were the Bund an hour ago, she says: "Life was swell, though, while it lasted. Just knowing you has made—well, everything."

He says again what he said before: "No one is going to take you away from me!"

The English doctor says, "Looks rather bad, y'know, old man."

O'Shaughnessy, white-lipped, growls out something. . . .

The German doctor says, "Neffter before haff I such a thing seen. This case will become zenzational—"

"The case will, but what about her, that's what I want to know?"

"My *gut* man—"

"I get it. Send the bill around—!"

The American doctor says, "There's just a slim chance—what you might call a thousand-to-one shot, that chaulmoo-gra oil might benefit her."

"I thought you said it wasn't leprosy?"

"It isn't. It may be some Chinese disease none of us have ever heard of before. She seems to be *dying alive*. Her bodily functions are unimpaired, the X-rays show; whatever it is seems to be striking on the surface. If it continues unchecked—and there doesn't seem to be anything we can do to stop it—the whole skeletal structure will be revealed—you'll have an animated corpse on your hands! And then of course . . . death."

The French doctor—the French, they are a very logical race and make good doctors—says: "M'sieu, they have all been on the wrong track—"

O'Shaughnessy's wan face lights up. "What can you tell me?"

"I can tell you only this: there is no hope. Your wife is lost to you. If you are a merciful man—I do not give you this advice as doctor, I give it to you as one husband to another—you will go to one of the opium houses of Chapei, buy a quantity sufficient for *two* at least—"

O'Shaughnessy says in a muffled voice, "I'm no quitter. I'll beat this rap."

There's pity in the Frechman's face. "Go to Chapei, *mon ami*. Go tonight. I say this for the sake of your own sanity. Your mind will crumble at the sight of what it will have to behold in a few more weeks."

O'Shaughnessy says the name of his Maker twice, puts his arm up swiftly over his face. The doctor's hand comes to rest on his shoulder. "I can see what led them astray, the others. They sought for disease. There is no disease there. No malady. No infection. It is not that; it is the state of death, itself, that has her. How shall I say? This flesh that rots, drops away, is, paradoxically, healthy tissue. My microscopes do not lie. Just as, let us say, a person who has been shot dead by a bullet is otherwise a healthy person. But he lies in his grave and nature dissolves his flesh. That is what we have here. The effect without the cause—"

O'Shaughnessy raises his head after a while, gets up, moves slowly toward the door. "You, at least," he says, "are a square shooter. All right, medical science tells me she's as good as dead. I'm not licked yet. There's a way."

The doctor shrugs gloomily. "How? What way is there? Lourdes, you are thinking of?"

"An awful way," O'Shaughnessy says, "but a way."

He stumbles out into the bright sunlight of the Concession, roams around hopelessly. Along the Avenue of the Two Republics, bordering the French Concession, he finds himself beginning to tremble all over, suddenly.

Fear! Fear again, for the first time since his 'teens. Fear, that he thought he would never know any more. Fear that no weapon, no jeopardy, no natural cataclysm, has ever been able to inspire until now. And now here it is running icily through him in the hot Chinese noon. Fear for the thing he loves, the only fear that can ever wholly cow the reckless and the brave.

Fear of the Way, the Way that he mentioned to the doctor. Fear of the implication involved in it. A mad voice howling in the darkness sounds in his ears again: "You'll come crawling back to me, begging me to help! *That'll be my hour!*" Oh, not that his own life will assuredly be forfeit as part of the bar-

gain, that isn't what makes him tremble. Nor any amount of pain and horror that vindictive mania can devise. He can stand it with a smile, to give her an hour, a day, or a week of added life. It's what will come after, what she must face alone without him, once he's out of the way. The barbed-wire fence—cooped up with a madman; kept trapped like an animal in a cage, after having known the world. Better if he'd left her as he'd found her. . . .

But that's the Way, and there is no other. And once his mind's made up, the trembling and aimless walking stops, and he can look doom in the face without flinching.

He has their boat-tickets in his pocket when he goes back to the Mansions. All down the corridor, from the elevator-shaft to their door, there's that cloying odor of perfumery—to conceal another, different one.

She's propped up in bed, a native *amuh* sitting by her fanning her. He stops short in surprise. The screwy clock of this bedevilment seems to have spun backward again to that awful night, when he first came out of the interior—and didn't know yet. For she's beautiful there, composed, placid again, expressionless as a wax doll, the stigma of the knowledge of approaching doom erased from her face.

"The mask came," she says through it, in a slightly resonant voice. Her own features, reproduced by a clever Chinese craftsman, at her terrified request—before anything happens to them. Not for herself, this, for the man who stands there looking at her—the man whom life and love have laughed at, the man to whom life and love and laughter, too, have been denied.

He gestures the Chinese woman out of the room.

When they're alone Nova asks, as tonelessly as though she were asking what the weather was like, "Any hope?"

"Not here." It's not the first time it's been asked and answered that way, so there's no shock to it any more.

He sees a small canvas bag upon the table beside her bed. "What's that?"

"Another agent of Yang was here while you were out. He left this bag of gold, and a thinly veiled threat that your tea will be bitter if you don't report back soon. They think you've run out on them. Better go back, O'Shaughnessy."

"Not a chance, darling. I've sold my plane. We're taking the early morning back to the States. I'm taking you back to Denholt."

She is silent for a long minute. He can see her shivering through the thick, brocaded, Chinese jacket, pretty much the way he was, out in the sun-baked streets.

He sits down close beside her. "You've knocked around with me now for almost a year. You've talked to lots of other girls your age. You must have found out by now that none of them learned to walk and talk as late as you did. Something happened to you, and there's only one man alive knows what it was and what's to be done about it. Those injections—can't you see that he was keeping you alive in some way? It's our only chance, we've got to go back there, we've got to get more of his stuff." And bitterly, as he hauls out a valise and tosses up the lid, "O'Shaughnessy wasn't so smart. O'Shaughnessy knows when he's licked. . . ."

Down the Whangpoo to the Yangtse, and out into the China Sea. A race against time now. A race against death. And the odds are so tall against them. The widest body of water in the world to cross. Then a whole continent afterward from west to east. Three weeks at the very least. Can she hold out that long by sheer will-power? Or have they waited too long, like fools? Then too, how can he be sure there is help waiting at the end of the long journey, even the help that they both dread so? Suppose Denholt is gone. How to locate him again in time? He may be in a strait jacket at this very moment, unable to tell a serum from a split of White Rock. The odds are pretty steep. But—at least there *are* odds.

She sits in a deck chair covered up to her chin in a steamer rug; her beautiful masked face above it never smiles, never frowns, never changes—just the eyes alive and the voice. He haunts the chart that marks their daily progress. Comes back to it a hundred times a day, says prayers before it while it lengthens a pitiful notch at a time, in red ink across the graph.

Kobe. Bad news. A Japanese English-language paper has picked up the story from something that must have come out in Shanghai after they left. Fright sounds through the mask. "It's—it's leaked out already. Here. Beautiful girl stricken

with living death. First case of its kind on record. Being rushed home by husband'—"

She makes a small, plaintive sound. "Don't you see? The papers in America will pick it up, follow it through, play it up. And your name's here. *They*, whoever they were, they'll know it means us, they'll find out we're coming back. They'll be waiting for us to land, they'll—we'll never make it. Oh, let's turn back, O'Shaughnessy! Let me die in China—what's the difference where it is? I've brought you enough grief, don't let me be the cause of—"

He takes her in his arms and holds her tight. "You don't seem to think much of my ability to take care of us."

She makes a thoughtless gesture to reach out and clasp his hand understandingly; but she remembers and draws the gloved claw back again.

Days pass. The story has circulated now, and turned the ship into a buzzing beehive of curiosity. People find excuses to go by her on the deck, just so they can turn and stare. O'Shaughnessy overhears two men bet that she won't reach Frisco alive. She tries to smoke a cigarette through the lips of the mask one afternoon, to buoy up his spirit a little. Smoke comes out of her hair-line, under her chin, before her ears. A steward drops a loaded bouillon-tray at the sight of her. Nova stays in her cabin after that.

9

Three thousand years later they're at Honolulu. Leis and steel guitars above deck; and below, something that scarcely stirs, that lies still now, saturated with cologne, smothered with fresh-cut flowers as though she were already on her bier. It's too painful to force the fleshless footbones to support her tottering body any more, even swathed in bandages, except for a few moments at a time. Reporters try to get in to see her; O'Shaughnessy has to swing his fists to get them to keep their distance.

Out to sea again, on the last leg of the trip. Sometimes he bends down, whispers low, like a prizefighter's second in his corner when the bout's going against him: "You can make it."

Just a little longer, honey. Do it for O'Shaughnessy." Sometimes, in the depths of night, he goes up on the boatdeck, shakes his fist—at what? The ship, the limitless ocean, the elusive horizon that never comes any nearer, the stars overhead that don't give a rap?

The rabbit's paw has hardly been out of his palm the whole way over. All the pelt's worn off it with his stroking. His thumb has developed an ineradicable habit of turning inward on itself, circling his palm. "You and me," he says to it grimly. "We'll do the trick."

Frisco at last. And the anchor plunges into the waters of the bay—they've made it—!The three of them, he and she and the rabbit's foot. There's still a voice behind that mask—faltering, weak, but alive. Still living eyes behind those immobile eyeholes with their double tier of lashes—real and artificial.

He's wirelessly ahead from the Islands for a cabin plane, and it's tuned up and waiting at the airport over in Oakland. He gets Nova through the gang of reporters clogging the deck, has her carried down the gangplank on a stretcher while flashlights go off around her like a constellation. Into a car outside the Customs House, while the newsmen like a pack of hounds in full cry swarm around them, yapping. But there's one man who doesn't pepper him with questions, doesn't say a word—just takes a good look at the beautiful graven face being transferred from stretcher to car, and then dives into the nearest phone-booth. O'Shaughnessy isn't near enough to overhear him ask for long-distance. . . .

And then the plane, with a relief pilot to spell O'Shaughnessy. Up and due east. "And we don't come down again for snow or rain or fog or engine-trouble until you hit Louisville," says O'Shaughnessy.

All through the day they hurl through space. "You got that Kentucky map I asked you to get hold of?"

He locates the mountain on it finally, draws a big ring around it. "Here's where we come down, inside that circle."

"But on what? How do we know what's there? It'll be dark long before we make it," the relief pilot protests.

"Here's where we come down," is O'Shaughnessy's remorseless answer, "if we splinter into match wood. Here, right on

the perimeter, where this feeder branches off from the trunk-highway on the west and climbs up. That's as close as we can get."

"Radio ahead, contact one of the towns near there to have something waiting for you at that point, otherwise you may be held up for hours."

"Yeah, that's it," nods O'Shaughnessy. He starts calling the county seat.

Nova shakes her head. He bends down close to hear what she wants to say. "That may bring *them* down on us, if you mention the place—tip them off where we're going to land."

"How can they beat our time in, unless they're already somewhere around there?"

"But that's it, they may be. You wirelessly him from Honolulu and mentioned a chart of this one county. They may have intercepted that message. They're likely to be within reach of your set, and this'll bring them right to the exact spot."

"Then that'll bring them grief!" is all he says. He fiddles with the dials "Hello, Wellsville? This is a private chartered plane coming your way, with a desperately ill passenger on board. We need ground transport badly. . . ."

"Hello, this is Wellsville. This is Wellsville. There are no facilities here."

"I'm not asking for hospitalization. All I want is ground transport. I want a car where Route 19 bisects the highway."

"Well—I dunno—"

"Have you been reading the papers lately?" O'Shaughnessy barks. "This is Penny O'Shaughnessy—Yes, yes, the 'Dying-Alive Girl,' if you insist! Now do I get a car at that particular spot?"

"I'll start out now."

"We don't want any publicity. Come alone. We should be there by ten. Tilt your headlights upward to guide us, keep snapping them off and on at two-minute intervals, we're going to have to land in pitch-darkness. If we live through it, be ready to start off at a moment's notice. Don't let us down, there's a human life at stake. This is her last chance."

Louisville, an hour after dark, is a carpet of gilt thumb-tacks below them, with straight, twinkling lines like strings

of beads leading out from it. Southeastward now, toward the Tennessee state-line.

At nine a continuous line of little pinpoints, stretched straight as an arrow, shows up below. They follow it, flying so low now the twinkling lights of an occasional car crawling along it seems to be right under them. Then, in thirty, forty minutes, a firefly down there in the dark fields, going off, on, off, on.

O'Shaughnessy clutches his pilot jubilantly by the shoulder. "See it? Here, gimme the controls—I *couldn't* go wrong, not this late in the game!"

Around and around in a narrowing spiral. Then way out, and around, and in again in a straight swoop that barely seems to skim the roof of the waiting car. "Hold on!" he warns, and slaps the pocket holding the rabbit's foot. The earth comes up flat like a blackboard. A jolt, a rise, a dip, another bump, a short stretch of wobbly taxiing, a shudder, and he cuts off his engine.

The car, waiting off across the field, has lowered its headlights to guide them. Carrying her between them they waver toward it up a thinly-talcumed path of light-motes. A rail fence shows up. "All right, driver! You in the car!" shouts O'Shaughnessy. "Come out here and give us a hand over this!"

A figure jumps out, hurries to meet them on the outside of the fence.

They ease her over the top rail, the newcomer holding her in both arms until O'Shaughnessy can scramble over and relieve him.

They pass her into the back of the car. Then suddenly, a dark motionless outline shows up a little way up the side-road, under shadowing trees that all but blot it out—materializes into a second car, unlighted, stalled, apparently deserted.

The plane pilot, who has been standing off to one side, looking on, cries out: "Hey, there's a guy lying here at the side of the road, out—"

"Take it easy, pal," an unseen voice purrs. An orange hyphen flicks toward the pilot from somewhere just behind the car. A report shatters the crossroads' stillness, and the pilot leans

over toward the road, as though he saw a coin lying there and was languidly about to pick it up.

O'Shaughnessy doesn't wait for him to complete the fall. He whirls back toward Nova, flings out his arms to keep her from going into this car that is a trap. The blurred oval of a second face, not that of the man who helped to carry her to it, looms at him in the dark, above her body.

"No you don't," a voice says blandly, "she's coming with us—we're taking up where we left off that night—and she ain't fooling us this time!"

A second red-orange spearhead leaps straight at O'Shaughnessy. The whole world seems to stand still. Then the gun behind it crashes, and there's a cataclysm of pain all over him, and a shock goes through him as if he ran head-on into a stone wall.

A voice from the car says blurredly, while the ground rushes up to meet him, "Finish him up, you guys! I'm getting so I don't trust their looks no more, no matter how stiff they act!"

Three comets seem to dart down at him as he lies there on the ground. Asphalt-grits fly up beside his skull. A hot wire creases his side while something that feels like a mallet pounds his shoulder. He can feel his mouth opening; he must be trying to say something.

Far away, from some low-flying soundless plane in the skies, a pair of voices reach him. "Did you hear where they were headed for?"

"Yeah, and it sounds like a swell idea—"

High up over him the chattering motor swells into a roar, the air he is trying to breathe is sucked away from him along the ground, grit and road-dust swirl over him. God, they're flying low! What're they trying to do—? Looking down his own body he can see a red light poised momentarily on the toe of his shoe. Then it dips below it, and it's gone. And he's alone there, with the unconscious pilot lying a little way off for company, and some other guy he's never even seen, only spoken to over the radio.

He wants to sleep so badly—dying they call it—and he can't. Something's bothering him to keep him awake. Some-

thing that won't let him alone. Not about Nova, not about the still pilot either. Something about this other, strange guy.

And then he remembers. The guy has a car, that's what it is. The guy brought a car here. The guy is dead now, but the car is still standing there, back a little ways under some trees. He saw it himself.

He's got to get into that car. He may be half dead, but cars don't die; it'll get him wherever he wants to go, good as ever. And where he wants to go is just where Nova is, no matter where.

He rolls over on his face first. And a lot of hot wet stuff comes out on his shoulder and his chest and hip. That makes everything come alive again and hurt like blazes. He starts pulling himself around the other way, with his good arm and shoulder for a propeller, like something maimed that ought to be put out of its misery with a big stick.

Then when he gets all the way around in a half circle, there's the car, with the pilot and the other guy for milestones leading to it. He starts dragging himself toward it. He can tell it's no use trying to get up on his feet.

He comes up to the pilot first, rests full length beside him a minute, reaches out, shakes him a little.

Frazier moans a little—almost a bleat—stirs a little.

O'Shaughnessy inches on toward the car. Like a caterpillar goes, contracting in the middle, expanding again, contracting, expanding. Like a caterpillar someone's stepped on, though. He leaves a moist trail behind him along the asphalt roadbed.

It's easy to rear up as high as the running-board, but above that there's a long unbroken stretch of glossy tonneau up to the door handle. He makes it, on the heels of his hands and the points of his elbows, using them for grips, like vacuum cups. The window's down, luckily, and a hand on the sill of the frame keeps him up. He falls, sprawling, into the seat.

Light funnels out of the dead headlights again, across the two men on the ground. He jockeys slowly around, then straightens out.

The rush of air through the open windows clears some of the cobwebs from his bullet-stunned mind. He knows where

they went, and where to follow. "Did you hear where they were heading for?" the first voice had said. And the second answered, "Sounds like a swell idea."

The dirt-packed mountain-detour branches off at last, and the new-made treads of the car ahead are plainly visible along it. It's a hard trail to tackle, with just one good arm to steady the wheel by, and a grade like a loose plank tilted before your face, and obscuring branches and foliage whistling in at you through the windows.

The barbed-wire fence starts up beside him after awhile. He wonders if Denholt still lives behind it. The scooped-out hollows of their ruts are still before him, plain as day, and broken branches hanging down at right-angles. The fence suddenly crumples into the ground, and a big gap torn in it where the gate used to be, where he remembers it, shows him how they got in.

He turns in after them, brakes only when their own car, broad side to him, blocks further progress. Beyond, the house shows palely against his partly-deflected headlights. He gets out, bangs the car door after him out of habit, lurches over to their car, steadies himself against it for a moment. Caution is for the healthy. He laughs sort of crazily and stamps onto the wooden porch. He hangs onto the door-frame for a minute, then goes on through the unguarded opening.

They haven't even closed the door after them, they're so sure they've left all opposition dead behind them where the highway crosses Route 19. That white light from the laboratory is streaming out to guide him. They're in there, all of them; he can hear their voices as he comes draggingly nearer. One voice, raised above the others, strident, threatening.

"Don't tell us you don't know what we mean! Why the barbed-wire fence and all the trimmings, if it ain't around here somewhere? Why was the Brown girl, here, heading this way so fast with that guy she calls her husband? And a nifty place, if there ever was one! Here we was thinking it was somewhere down in the Florida keys all the time! That's just like the Boss, goes off on a cruise in one direction to cover up, sends the do-re-mi in another. He was always smart that way, always doing things like that. Now *you* be smart."

"There's no money here. I don't know who you are, what brings you here, but there's no money here. Only the—the results of a lifetime of—For God's sake, be careful!"

That's Denholt's voice. Already O'Shaughnessy has reached the threshold by now and stands there looking in at them like an apparition, unnoticed. Their backs are all to him, even Nova's, gripped cruelly between two of them, held upright. Only Denholt is facing his way, at bay against the far wall.

Even from behind, O'Shaughnessy can spot one of those backs, Tereshko.

10

He is standing near a retort filled with colorless fluid; as Denholt's frantic warning singles it out, his elbow has just grazed it, caused it to teeter. The plea has exactly the opposite effect it was intended to; it is something precious to that old crank standing there before him, so his impulse is to destroy it forthwith. He deliberately completes the shove, sweeps it off the trestle it rests on. "Nuts with all this junk y'got here! This is a phony front. Who y'think y'kidding?"

The retort shivers into pieces on the floor. Its contents flood out, spread, dissipate beyond recovery.

Denholt lets out a hoarse, anguished cry. And leaps at the wanton destroyer of his whole life's work. Tereshko's gun raps out almost perfunctorily; smoke blooms between them; Denholt staggers, turns around the other way, then goes down to his knees slowly like a penitent in prayer.

They hear him say, in the brief silence: "Yes, it's better this way—now." Then he falls forward on his face.

O'Shaughnessy's leap for Tereshko crashes through the rear-guard, sends the four behind Tereshko lurching off-balance. Nova released, totters aside, keeps herself from falling against the edge of the operating table. They whirl, see who faces them and forget, in their utter disbelief, to use their guns. Tereshko goes down backward, his neck caught in the grip of O'Shaughnessy's arm, while the Irishman's other fist is pounding, flailing, slashing, into the side of Tereshko's head and ribs.

The struggle doesn't last long; it's too unequal. Their momentary surprise overcome, they close in on him. The well-directed slice of a gun-butt slackens the good arm; it's easy to pry the disabled one from around the racketeer's collar.

Tereshko is trembling with his anger. "Now *him* again!" he protests, as though at an injustice. "All they do is die and then get up and walk around again! What's a matter, you guys using spitballs for slugs? No, don't kick at him, that'll never do it—I think the guy has nine lives!"

"Wait!" The mask has spoken, and they turn in awe at the impassive face looking at them. Face that lies now if it never did before—so calm, so untroubled, so serene, at the scene before it. "What is it you want of us—of me? Why do you hound us like this? What have we ever done to you?"

Tereshko sneers, "You're Benedetto's girl, ain't you? You're Jane Brown, ain't you? You oughta know what we want of you. We did his dirty work for seven long years, you just come in on the pay-off at the end. Where's the profits of those seven years, when two bits out of every fifty-cent glass of beer drunk east of the Mississippi went into his pockets? Where's the million and a quarter dollars in gold and Federal Reserve notes that dropped from sight when he was arrested?"

"I never saw or knew Benedetto," says the mask slowly.

"You lying tomato! I'm looking right at the face he used to kiss in front of all of us. I'm looking right at the face that stood in a diamond frame on his bureau, every time I went in there to make a report. I'm hearing the voice that used to call him Benny-boy, I'm seeing the eyes that cried when he got sent away—Oh no! You're Jane Brown, all right."

Gloved hands rise from the enfolding cloak, undo tiny straps behind the ears, below the golden hair on top of the head. "Look closer still—and tell me if I'm Benedetto's girl—if I'm Jane Brown!" The face drops off—a shell—and yet repeats itself, identical, still unravaged, only paler, beneath.

They gasp in surprise. And then in the midst of a deep silence, Tereshko says: "All right, that's a mask—so what?" but his voice trembles a little.

Her hands flutter up and down the cloak fastenings, seize it to throw it open. "Look closer," she says, "and tell me if you know me!"

"No, Nova—don't!" O'Shaughnessy cries from the floor.

She says softly: "Close your eyes, O'Shaughnessy, and keep them closed, if you love me. For no love could survive this—no love in all the world."

Dumbly obedient, he holds his hands there in front of his eyes. A rustle of Nova's cloak, a swirl of air as it flies back. A choking sound from someone near him. A gun thudding to the floor. Then a wild, terrible scream—a sudden rush of feet, five pairs of them, around and past him and toward the door. A stampede of mortal terror.

"Get away from me! What—are you?"

Above it all, her voice, serene, sepulchral. "Now—am I Benedetto's girl—am I anyone's girl any more?"

Across the wooden floor of the front of the house rushes the retreat of scuffling shoe-leather. A door bangs. The motor of their car comes to life—gears clash and scream. The car sound dies away—then suddenly comes a far-off crash carried thinly on the still night. One dim, final cry of pain and death—and dead silence drops at last like a curtain on a play. Within the room, for long minutes, there is no movement.

"They must have gone off the road," O'Shaughnessy says tautly. His hands fall from before his eyes, and Nova's cloak is closed again. How close to death she must be, he thinks, to drive the living to their own deaths in wild flight just from the look of her.

A gun, dropped there on the laboratory floor, is all that's left of them. O'Shaughnessy toes it aside and it skitters across the room. Painfully, inch by inch, he hauls himself over beside Denholt, lifts the scientist's head and shoulders in his arms. Denholt's eyes, still alive, turn toward him.

O'Shaughnessy's voice rasps like a file. "You've got to save her. Got to! Kill me if I've wronged you—but I've brought her back to you—you're the only one who can do anything. . . . Denholt, can you hear me?"

The dying man nods, points helplessly to the shattered retort, the evaporating stain on the floor.

"Was that it—?" O'Shaughnessy shakes him wildly in his fright. "There must be more. That can't be all! Can't you tell me how to make more?"

A sigh filters through the parted lips. "No time."

"Haven't you got it written down?"

A feeble shake of the head. "Afraid to—Jealous someone else would steal it from me—"

O'Shaughnessy's bony hands claw at Denholt's shoulders. "But you can't mean—that she's got to die. That there isn't anything you with your knowledge or I with my love can do for her—anything at all—?" Something, like a cold hand, closes his throat. Something else, like little needles, pricks his eyes until the lashes are moistened. Nova, standing there motionless, slowly droops her head.

A thin tensile hand grips O'Shaughnessy's arm to arrest his attention. A hand that must have been very strong once. "Wait. Lean down closer, so you can hear me—I was filling a hypo—for one of the rabbits—when they broke in. I don't remember what became—Look around, see if you can find it—Enough for one injection, if it's intact—hurry, it's getting dark, I'm going fast."

But before he does look for it, before he makes a move, he remembers to touch that mascot in his pocket, the rabbit's foot. "Help me," he says to her then, "you know what it looks like, you used to see enough of them—"

She raises her head, steps aside—and there it is behind her, lying on the operating table. A previous liquid glinting within its transparent barrel.

Then he's down again beside the dying man, holding it before his dimming eyes.

"Yes, that's it. All there is left now. It'll be lost forever in a few more minutes when I go. I'm taking it with me—after what I've seen tonight of human nature, too much power for evil in it—it's better, for our own sakes, the way Nature ordered it—"

"Shall I lift you up, do you think you can stand long enough to—"

"No time." He motions to Nova, weakly. She draws near. "Recline on the floor here, where I can reach you—" Then to O'Shaughnessy, "Sweep the hair from the base of her head. Hold my arm at the elbow, steady it—"

The needle falls, emptied.

O'Shaughnessy murmurs, staring dully at the floor: "A month more—this'll give her. Maybe I'm a fool to have done

it. What torture that month is going to be—knowing now our only chance is gone. Well, maybe that French doctor was right. . . .”

Again that hand on his arm. “Listen—She will be ill, very ill, for twenty-four hours. The reaction. Keep ice packed around her until the temperature goes down. Then—after that—the injection will arrest it for a while. It can’t mend what’s already happened—but it will give you that one month. Maybe a little—longer. I am sorry that I can’t give you more—or any real hope at all.”

Then whatever was human and compassionate in Denholt dies out, and the scientist replaces the man. “I want you to know why I failed. I must tell someone. I brought everything in her to life—but the blood. That was dead, stayed dead. As it circulated in her veins it carried death through her body. The injections I gave her held that flowing decay at bay—no more.

“I didn’t realize that—I do now. The chemical composition of the blood changed in death—nothing I have done restored it. It would always defeat the serum—eventually. She was not really alive in her own right; she was being kept alive by a sort of artificial combustion introduced into her system at periodic intervals.”

O’Shaughnessy’s eyes glare dully. “You had no right,” he says. “You had no right to do it. It wasn’t fair to her or to me—or”—and he smiles ruefully—“even to those fear-crazy gunmen who are smeared all over your mountainside right now. You tried to bring life, Denholt—and you’ve got nothing but death on your hands.”

The pale, almost lifeless lips flicker in a ghastly smile. “My death, too,” he whispers. He struggles to rise in O’Shaughnessy’s arms. And there is a pitiful attempt at self-justification. “If you hadn’t come along, O’Shaughnessy—who can say? None of this—would have been. And yet, you represented the human element—the thing I didn’t reckon on. Yes. It was the blood that defeated me—the passionate warm blood of men and women, hungry and greedy and alive—the blood I couldn’t put into Jane Brown’s body. . . .”

O’Shaughnessy’s shoulder still throbs with pain and there

is blood trickling down the arm inside the sleeve, coming out below the cuff, oozing over his wrist and his hands. O'Shaughnessy stares at it dully and remembers Denholt's last words; and then suddenly strength comes to him to do the thing he must do. There is a car outside and down below a plane waiting. And there is Nova, her pale face flushed and hectic with the fever, her eyes flickering closed, her breathing labored. And here—here, you crazy gods of Fate, is O'Shaughnessy, the man who hasn't been afraid, not for himself anyway, since he was eighteen. Yes, all the pieces of the mosaic are here to hand, and the pattern has just fallen into place in O'Shaughnessy's mind.

He is a little light-headed, and giddy, but there is a hard core of will in his brain. He can stand now, where before he could only crawl like a snake with its spine crushed. He scoops Nova up in his arms, totters for one step with her, before his walk is firm and steady.

Nova's head stirs against his shoulder. Her eyes are open. "What are we to do now?" she murmurs, with the fever heat thickening her tones.

"What does it matter?" O'Shaughnessy says. He doesn't want to tell her, doesn't want her to know. "I'm with you, Jane."

He says that to show her that he can call her by her right name without feeling, that he doesn't hold Jane Brown against her. But she won't let him. That name isn't hers.

"My name," she says, childlike, "is Nova. Nova—O'Shaughnessy."

She doesn't speak again all the time he is putting her into the car, where she slumps against the cushions like a rag doll, no more than half conscious, or while they are driving down the mountainside, or even while he carries her to the plane that is still standing there.

He goes, a little more unsteadily now, to kneel beside the wounded pilot.

"How you feeling?" O'Shaughnessy's words are jerky.

The pilot nods. "I'm okay, I guess. Feels like just a nick."

"That's all right, then," O'Shaughnessy says. He pushes a wad of bills into Frazier's hand, helps the man to sit up. "I'm

going to take your plane. I'm glad you're feeling okay, because I'd have to take the plane anyway—only it's nice that I don't have to leave you here dying. You can use the car there."

Wrinkles of worry blossom at the corners of the relief pilot's eyes. "You sound kinda crazy to me—what happened up there? What's this money for?"

"That's to square you for the plane—in case. . . . Well, just in case."

Then he is gone, weaving across the uneven ground. Frazier gets up and wobbles after him. "Hi, wait a minute. The propeller—"

In a few minutes, his hands are on the blades and from inside the plane-cabin O'Shaughnessy's voice is calling, "Contact," and Frazier yanks, the propeller spins. Frazier falls back and the plane taxis jerkily with a sputtering roar of the engine.

O'Shaughnessy somehow negotiates a take-off from an impossibly tip-tilted angle, and Frazer stands there watching, jaw dropped, until the black of the sky and the distance have inked out the tiny plane lights.

"Screwball," he mutters and paws the sweat from his face.

O'Shaughnessy's hard-knuckled hands grasp the stick hard. Thunder rumbles above the roar of the motor; lightning stabs the darkness. Rain begins to slash down around the plane.

O'Shaughnessy remembers another storm, another plane, another night; and he glances at the girl beside him. She seems to sense his gaze upon her, her eyes open; her lips would speak but the fever that is burning through her won't let the words come. They are in her eyes, though, as plain as any words could be, and her whole heart is with them. No question there at all, just courage and confidence.

"I brought you into this," he says—to those eyes. "Now I'm taking you out of it. There's no place in it for us any longer."

Her fingers inside the glove tighten on his hand convulsively as if to say: "Alone, O'Shaughnessy? Must I go alone?"

At least that's the way he figures it, for he says quickly: "With me, honey. Together."

The pressure of the fingers relaxes, then tightens, but more steadily this time, reassured and reassuring. That's her way of saying:

"All right, O'Shaughnessy. It's all right with me."

Her face blurs in O'Shaughnessy's eyes; he begins to whistle a silly tune that even he can't hear, and somehow it is comforting. Lightning again and a louder crash of thunder. A gust of wind rocks the plane. The black bulk of a granite ridge that looks like a giant comber whipped up by a typhoon and frozen by the hands of God shows up ahead and a little below.

O'Shaughnessy's hand blunders out to take Nova's gloved one in his own. She whimpers a little, and stirs. O'Shaughnessy slides the stick forward, the plane tilts sharply down; the mountainside, rocky and desolate, seems to be reaching up for them, but in these seconds they are alone, the two of them, with the sky and the storm.

It takes will power and nerve to hold the stick that way, to keep his eyes open and watch the rocky face of the cliff, pine-bearded, rush up at them. O'Shaughnessy's mouth flattens, his face goes white. And then in that final fraction of a moment, he laughs, a little crazily—a laugh of defiance, of mocking farewell, and, somehow, of conquest.

"Here we go, baby!" he shouts, teeth bared. "Now I'm going to find out what it really feels like to fly into the side of a mountain! . . ."

There is only the storm to hear the smash of the plane as it splinters itself against the rock—and the storm drowns the sound out with thunder, just as the lightning turns pale the flame that rises, like a hungry tongue, from the wreckage.

All-American Fiction, March-April 1938

THE MOON OF MONTEZUMA



HE hired car was very old. The girl in it was very young. They were both American. Which was strange here in this far-off place, this other world, as remote from things American as anywhere could be.

The car was a vintage model, made by some concern whose very name has been forgotten by now; a relic of the teens or early twenties, built high and squared-off at the top, like a box on wheels.

It crawled precariously to the top of the long, winding, sharply ascending rutted road—wheezing, gasping, threatening to slip backward at any moment, but never doing so; miraculously managing even to inch on up.

It stopped at last, opposite what seemed to be a blank, biscuit-colored wall. This had a thick door set into it, but no other openings. A skimpy tendril or two of bougainvillaea, burningly mauve, crept downward over its top here and there. There were cracks in the wall, and an occasional place where the plaster facing had fallen off to reveal the adobe underpart.

The girl peered out from the car. Her hair was blonde, her skin fair. She looked unreal in these surroundings of violent color; somehow completely out of key with them. She was extremely tired-looking; there were shadows under her blue eyes. She was holding a very young baby wrapped into a little cone-shaped bundle in a blanket. A baby not more than a few weeks old. And beside the collar of her coat a rosebud was pinned. Scarcely opened, yet dying already. Red as a glowing

coal. Or a drop of blood. She looked at the driver, then back to the blank wall again. "Is this where?"

He shrugged. He didn't understand her language. He said something to her. A great deal of something.

She shook her head bewilderedly. His language was as mysterious to her. She consulted the piece of paper she was holding in her hand, then looked again at the place where they'd stopped. "But there's no house here. There's just a wall."

He flicked the little pennant on his meter so that it sprang upright. Underneath it said "7.50." She could read that, at least. He opened the creaking door, to show her what he meant. "Pay me, Señorita. I have to go all the way back to the town."

She got out reluctantly, a forlorn, lost figure. "Wait here," she said. "Wait for me until I find out."

He understood the sense of her faltering gesture. He shook his head firmly. He became very voluble. He had to go back to where he belonged, he had no business being all the way out here. It would be dark soon. His was the only auto in the whole town.

She paid him, guessing at the unfamiliar money she still didn't understand. When he stopped nodding, she stopped giving it to him. There was very little left—a paper bill or two, a handful of coins. She reached in and dragged out a bulky bag and stood that on the ground beside her. Then she turned around and looked at the inscrutable wall.

The car turned creakily and went down the long, rutted road, back into the little town below.

She was left there, with child, with baggage, with a scrap of paper in her hand. She went over to the door in the wall, looked about for something to ring. There was a short length of rope hanging there against the side of the door. She tugged at it and a bell, the kind with hanging clapper, jangled loosely.

The child opened its eyes momentarily, then closed them again. Blue eyes, like hers.

The door opened, narrowly but with surprising quickness. An old woman stood looking at her. Glittering black eyes, gnarled face the color of tobacco, blue reboso coiled about her head to hide every vestige of hair, one end of the scarf

looped rearward over her throat. There was something malignant in the idol-like face, something almost Aztec.

"Señorita wishes?" she breathed suspiciously.

"Can you read?" The girl showed her the scrap of paper. That talisman that had brought her so far.

The old woman touched her eyes, shook her head. She couldn't read.

"But isn't this—isn't this—" Her tired tongue stumbled over the unfamiliar words. "Caminode. . . ."

The old woman pointed vaguely in dismissal. "Go, ask them in the town, they can answer your questions there." She tried to close the heavy door again.

The girl planted her foot against it, held it open. "Let me in. I was told to come here. This is the place I was told to come. I'm tired, and I have no place to go." For a moment her face was wreathed in lines of weeping, then she curbed them. "Let me come in and rest a minute until I can find out. I've come such a long way. All night long, that terrible train from Mexico City, and before that the long trip down from the border. . . ." She pushed the door now with her free hand as well as her foot.

"I beg you, Señorita," the old woman said with sullen gravity, "do not enter here now. Do not force your way in here. There has been a death in this house."

"¿QUÉ PASA?" a younger, higher voice suddenly said, somewhere unseen behind her.

The crone stopped her clawing, turned her head. Suddenly she had whisked from sight as though jerked on a wire, and a young girl had taken her place in the door opening.

The same age as the intruder, perhaps even a trifle younger. Jet-black hair parted arrow-straight along the center of her head. Her skin the color of old ivory. The same glittering black eyes as the old one, but larger, younger. Even more liquid, as though they had recently been shedding tears. There was the same cruelty implicit in them too, but not yet as apparent. There was about her whole beauty, and she was beautiful, a tinge of cruelty, of barbarism. That same mask-like Aztec cast of expression, of age-old racial inheritance.

"¿Si?"

"Can you understand me?" the girl pleaded, hoping against hope for a moment.

There was a flash of perfect white teeth, but the black hair moved negatively. "The señorita is lost, perhaps?"

Somehow, the American sensed the meaning of the words. "This is where they told me to come. I inquired in Mexico City. The American consul. They even told me how to get here, what trains. I wrote him, and I never heard. I've been writing him and writing him, and I never heard. But this must be the place. This is where I've been writing, Camino de las Rosas. . . ." A dry sob escaped with the last.

The liquid black eyes had narrowed momentarily. "The señorita looks for who?"

"Bill. Bill Taylor." She tried to turn it into Spanish, with the pitiful resources at her command. "Señor Taylor. Señor Bill Taylor. Look, I'll show you his picture." She fumbled in her handbag, drew out a small snapshot, handed it to the waiting girl. It was a picture of herself and a young man. "Him. I'm looking for him. Now do you understand?"

For a moment there seemed to have been a sharp intake of breath, but it might have been an illusion. The dark-haired girl smiled ruefully. Then she shook her head.

"Don't you know him? Isn't he here? Isn't this his house?" She pointed to the alongside. "But it must be. Then whose house is it?"

The dark-haired girl pointed to herself, then to the old woman hovering and hissing surreptitiously in the background. "Casa de nosotros. The house of Chata and her mother. Nobody else."

"Then he isn't here?" The American leaned her back for a moment hopelessly against the wall, turning the other way, to face out from it. She let her head roll a little to one side. "What am I going to do? Where is he, what became of him? I haven't even enough money to go back. I have nowhere to go. They warned me back home not to come down here alone like this, looking for him—oh, I should have listened!"

The black eyes were speculatively narrow again, had been for some time. She pointed to the snapshot. "Hermano? He is the brother of the señorita, or—?"

The blonde stranger touched her own ring finger. This time

the sob came first. "He's my husband! I had to pawn my wedding ring, to help pay my way here. I've got to find him! He was going to send for me later—and then he never did."

The black eyes had flicked downward to the child, almost unnoticeably, then up again. Once more she pointed to the snapshot.

The blonde nodded. "It's his. Ours. I don't think he even knows about it. I wrote him, and I never heard back. . . ."

The other's head turned sharply aside for a moment, conferring with the old woman. In profile, her cameo-like beauty was woven more expressive. So was the razor-sharpness of its latent cruelty.

Abruptly she had reached out with both hands. "Entra. Entra. Come in. Rest. Refresh yourself." The door was suddenly open at full width, revealing a patio in the center of which was a profusion of white roses. The bushes were not many, perhaps six all told, but they were all in full bloom, weighted down with their masses of flowers. They were arranged in a hollow square. Around the outside ran a border of red-tiled flooring. In the center there was a deep gaping hole—a well, either being dug or being repaired. It was lined with a casing of shoring planks that protruded above its lip. A litter of construction tools lay around, lending a transient ugliness to the otherwise beautiful little enclosure: a wheelbarrow, several buckets, a mixing trough, a sack of cement, shovels and picks, and an undulating mound of misplaced earth brought up out of the cavity.

There was no one working at it now, it was too late in the day. Silence hung heavily. In the background was the house proper, its rooms ranged single file about three sides of the enclosure, each one characteristically opening onto it with its own individual doorway. The old houses of Moorish Africa, of which this was a lineal descendant, had been like that: blind to the street, windowless, cloistered, each living its life about its own inner, secretive courtyard. Twice transplanted—first to Spain, then to the newer Spain across the waters.

Now that entry had at last been granted, the blonde girl was momentarily hesitant about entering. "But if—but if this isn't his house, what good is it to come in?"

The insistent hands of the other reached her, drew her,

gently but firmly, across the threshold. In the background the old woman still looked on with a secretive malignancy that might have been due solely to the wizened lines in her face.

"Pase, pase," the dark-haired girl was coaxing her. Step in. "Descansa." Rest. She snapped her fingers with sudden, concealed authority behind her own back, and the old woman, seeming to understand the esoteric signal, sidled around to the side of them and out to the road for a moment, looked quickly up the road, then quickly down, picked up the bag standing there and drew it inside with her, leaning tottering against its weight.

SUDDENLY the thick wall door had closed behind her and the blonde wayfarer was in, whether she wanted to be or not.

The silence, the remoteness, was as if a thick, smothering velvet curtain had fallen all at once. Although the road had been empty, the diffuse, imponderable noises of the world had been out there somehow. Although this patio courtyard was unroofed and open to the same evening sky, and only a thick wall separated it from the outside, there was a stillness, a hush, as though it were a thousand miles away, or deep down within the earth.

They led her, one on each side of her—the girl with the slightest of forward-guiding hands just above her waist, the old woman still struggling with the bag—along the red-tiled walk skirting the roses, in under the overhanging portico of the house proper, and in through one of the doorways. It had no door as such; only a curtain of wooden-beaded strings was its sole provision for privacy and isolation. These clicked and hissed when they were stirred. Within were cool plaster walls painted a pastel color halfway up, allowed to remain undyed the rest of the way; an equally cool tiled flooring; an iron bedstead; an ebony chair or two, stiff, tortuously hand-carved, with rush-bottomed seats and backs. A serape of burning emerald and orange stripes, placed on the floor alongside the bed, served as a rug. A smaller one, of sapphire and cerise bands, affixed to the wall, served as the only decoration there was.

They sat her down in one of the chairs, the baby still in her arms. Chata, after a moment's hesitancy, summoned up a sort

of defiant boldness, reached out and deliberately removed the small traveling-hat from her head without asking permission. Her expressive eyes widened for a moment, then narrowed again, as they took in the exotic blonde hair in all its unhampered abundance.

Her eyes now went to the child, but more as an afterthought than as if that were her primary interest, and she leaned forward and admired and played with him a little, as women do with a child, any women, of any race. Dabbing her finger at his chin, at his button of a nose, taking one of his little hands momentarily in hers, then relinquishing it again. There was something a trifle mechanical about her playing; there was no real feeling for the child at all.

She said something to the old woman, and the latter came back after a short interval with milk in an earthenware bowl.

"He'll have to drink it with a nipple," the young mother said. "He's too tiny." She handed him for a moment to Chata to hold for her, fumbled with her bag, opened it and got out his feeding-bottle. She poured some of the milk into that, then recapped it and took him up to feed him.

She had caught a curious look on Chata's face in the moment or two she was holding him. As though she were studying the child closely; but not with melting fondness, with a completely detached, almost cold, curiosity.

THEY remained looking on for a few moments; then they slipped out and left her, the old woman first, Chata a moment later, with a few murmured words and a half-gesture toward the mouth, that she sensed as meaning she was to come and have something to eat with them when she was ready.

She fed him first, and then she turned back the covers and laid him down on the bed. She found two large-size safety pins in her bag and pinned the covers down tight on either side of him, so that he could not roll off and fall down. His eyes were already closed again, one tiny fist bent backward toward his head. She kissed him softly, with a smothered sob—that was for the failure of the long pilgrimage that had brought her all this way—then tiptoed out.

There was an aromatic odor of spicy cooking hovering di-

sembodiedly about the patio, but just where it was originating from she couldn't determine. Of the surrounding six doorways, three were pitch-black. From one there was a dim, smouldering red glow peering. From another a paler, yellow light was cast subduedly. She mistakenly went toward this.

It was two doors down from the one from which she had just emerged. If they were together in there, they must be talking in whispers. She couldn't hear a sound, not even the faintest murmur.

It had grown darker now; it was full night already, with the swiftness of the mountainous latitudes. The square of sky over the patio was soft and dark as indigo velour, with magnificent stars like many-legged silver spiders festooned on its underside. Below them the white roses gleamed phosphorescently in the starlight, with a magnesium-like glow. There was a tiny splash from the depths of the well as a pebble or grain of dislodged earth fell in.

She made her way toward the yellow-ombre doorway. Her attention had been on other things: the starlight, the sheen of the roses; and she turned the doorway and entered the room too quickly, without stopping outside to look in first.

She was already well over the threshold and in before she stopped short, frozen there, with a stifled intake of fright and an instinctive clutching of both hands toward her throat.

The light came from two pairs of tapers. Between them rested a small bier that was perhaps only a trestled plank shrouded with a cloth. One pair stood at the head of it, one pair at the foot.

On the bier lay a dead child. An infant, perhaps days younger than her own. In fine white robes. Gardenias and white rosebuds disposed about it in impromptu arrangement, to form a little nest or bower. On the wall was a religious image; under it in a red glass cup burned a holy light.

The child lay there so still, as if waiting to be picked up and taken into its mother's arms. Its tiny hands were folded on its breast.

She drew a step closer, staring. A step closer, a step closer. Its hair was blond; fair, golden blond.

There was horror lurking in this somewhere. She was sud-

denly terribly frightened. She took another step, and then another. She wasn't moving her feet, something was drawing them.

She was beside it now. The sickening, cloying odor of the gardenias was swirling about her head like a tide. The infant's little eyes had been closed. She reached down gently, lifted an eyelid, then snatched her hand away. The baby's eyes had been blue.

Horror might have found her then, but it was given no time. She whirled suddenly, not in fright so much as mechanistic nervousness, and Chata was standing motionless in full-center of the doorway, looking in at her.

THE black head gave a toss of arrogance. "My child, yes. My little son." And in the flowery language that can express itself as English never can, without the risk of being ridiculous: "The son of my heart." For a moment her face crumbled and a gust of violent emotion swept across it, instantly was gone again.

But it hadn't been grief, it had been almost maniacal rage. The rage of the savage who resents a loss, does not know how to accept it.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know—I didn't mean to come in here—"

"Come, there is some food for you," Chata cut her short curtly. She turned on her heel and went down the shadowy arcade toward the other lighted doorway, the more distant one her self-invited guest should have sought out in the first place.

The American went more slowly, turning in the murky afterglow beyond the threshold to look lingeringly back inside again: I will not think of this for a while. Later, I know, I must, but not now. That in this house where he said he lived there is a child lying dead whose hair is golden, whose eyes were blue.

Chata had reappeared in the designated doorway through which she wanted her to follow, to mark it out for her, to hasten her coming. The American advanced toward it, and went in in turn.

They squatted on the floor to eat, as the Japanese do. The

old woman palmed it, and Chata palmed it in turn, to have her do likewise, and to show her where.

She sank awkwardly down as they were, feeling her legs to be too long, but managing somehow to dispose of them with a fanned-out effect to the side. An earthenware bowl of rice and red beans was set down before her.

She felt a little faint for a moment, for the need of food, as the aroma reached her heavy and succulent. She wanted to crouch down over it, and up-end the entire bowl against her face, to get its entire contents in all at one time.

The old woman handed her a tortilla, a round flat cake, paper-thin, of pestled maize, limp as a wet rag. She held it in her own hand helplessly, did not know what to do with it. They had no eating utensils.

The old woman took it back from her, deftly rolled it into a hollowed tube, returned it. She did with it as she saw them doing with theirs; held the bowl up closer to her mouth and scooped up the food in it by means of the tortilla.

The food was unaccustomedly piquant; it prickled, baffled the taste-buds of her tongue. A freakish thought from nowhere suddenly flitted through her mind: I should be careful. If they wanted to poison me. . . . And then: But why should they want to harm me? I've done them no harm; my being here certainly does them no harm.

And because it held no solid substance, the thought misted away again.

She was so exhausted, her eyes were already drooping closed before the meal was finished. She recovered with a start, and they had both been watching her fixedly. She could tell that by the way fluidity of motion set in again, as happens when people try to cover up the rigid intentness that has just preceded it. Each motion only started as she resumed her observation of it.

"Tienes sueño," Chata murmured. "¿Quieres acostarte?" And she motioned toward the doorway, without looking at it herself.

Somehow the American understood the intention of the words by the fact of the gesture, and the fact that Chata had not risen from the floor herself, but remained squatting. She was not being told to leave the house, she was being told that

she might remain within the house and go and lie down with her child if she needed to.

She stumbled to her feet awkwardly, almost threatened to topple for a moment with fatigue. Then steadied herself.

"Gracia," she faltered. "Gracia, mucho." Two pitiful words.

They did not look at her. They were looking down at the emptied food bowls before them. They did not turn their eyes toward her as when somebody is departing from your presence. They kept them on the ground before them as if holding them leashed, waiting for the departure to have been completed.

She draggingly made the turn of the doorway and left them behind her.

The patio seemed to have brightened while she'd been away. It was bleached an almost dazzling white now, with the shadows of the roses and their leaves an equally intense black. Like splotches and drippings of ink beneath each separate component one. Or like a lace mantilla flung open upon a snowdrift.

A raging, glowering full moon had come up, was peering down over the side of the sky well above the patio.

That was the last thing she saw as she leaned for a moment, inert with fatigue, against the doorway of the room in which her child lay. Then she dragged herself in to topple headlong upon the bed and, already fast asleep, to circle her child with one protective arm, moving as if of its own instinct.

Not the meek, the pallid, gentle moon of home. This was the savage moon that had shone down on Montezuma and Cuauhtemoc, and came back looking for them now. The primitive moon that had once looked down on terraced heathen cities and human sacrifices. The moon of Anahuac.

Now the moon of the Aztecs is at the zenith, and all the world lies still. Full and white, the white of bones, the white of a skull; blistering the center of the sky well with its throbbing, not touching it on any side. Now the patio is a piebald place of black and white, burning in the downward-teeming light. Not a leaf moves, not a petal falls, in this fierce amalgam.

Now the lurid glow from within the brazero had dimmed, and is just a threaded crimson outline against contrasting

surfaces, skipping the space in between. It traces, like a fine wire, two figures coiled with rebosos. One against the wall, inanimate, like one of the mummies of her race that used to be sat upright in the rock catacombs. Eyes alone move quick above the mouth-shrouded reboso.

The other teetering slightly to and fro. Ever so slightly, in time to a whispering. A whispering that is like a steady sighing in the night; a whispering that does not come through the muffing rebosos.

The whispering stops. She raises something. A small stone. A whetstone. She spits. She returns it to the floor again. The whispering begins once more. The whispering that is not of the voice, but of a hungry panting in the night. A hissing thirst.

The roses sleep pale upon the blackness of a dream. The haunted moon looks down, lonely for Montezuma and his nation, seeking across the land.

The whispering stops now. The shrouded figure in the center of the room holds out something toward the one propped passive against the wall. Something slim, sharp, grip foremost. The wire-outline from the brazero-mouth finds it for a moment, runs around it like a current, flashes into a momentary highlight, a burnished blur, then runs off it again and leaves it to the darkness.

The other takes it. Her hands go up briefly. The reboso falls away from her head, her shoulders. Two long plaits of dark glossy hair hang down revealed against the copper satin that is now her upper body. Her mouth opens slightly. She places the sharp thing crosswise to it. Her teeth fasten on it. Her hand leaves it there, rigid, immovable.

Her hands execute a swift circling about her head. The two long plaits whip from sight, like snakes scampering to safety amidst rocks. She twines them, tucks them up.

She rises slowly with the grace of unhurried flexibility, back continuing to the wall. She girds her skirt up high about her thighs and interlaces it between, so that it holds itself there. Unclothed now, save for a broad swathing about the waist and hips, knife in mouth, she begins to move. Sideward toward the entrance, like a ruddy flame coursing along the wall, with no trace behind it.

Nothing is said. There is nothing to be said.

NOTHING was said before. Nothing needed to be said. Dark eyes understood dark eyes. Dark thoughts met dark thoughts and understood, without the need of a word.

Nothing will be said after it is over. Never, not in a thousand days from now, not in a thousand months. Never again.

The old gods never had a commandment not to kill. That was another God in another land. The gods of Anahuac demanded the taking of human life, that was their nature. And who should know better than the gods what its real value is, for it is they who give it in the first place.

The flame is at the doorway now, first erect, then writhing, the way a flame does. Then the figure goes down on hands and knees, low, crouching, for craft, for stealth, for the approach to kill. The big cats in the mountains do it this way, belly-flat, and the tribe of Montezuma did it this way too, half a thousand years ago. And the blood remembers what the heart has never learned. The approach to kill.

On hands and knees the figure comes pacing along beside the wall that flanks the patio, lithe, sinuous, knife in mouth perpendicular to its course. In moonlight and out of it, as each successive archway of the portico circles high above it, comes down to join its support, and is gone again to the rear.

The moon is a caress on supple skin. The moon of Anahuac understands, the moon is in league, the moon will not betray.

Slowly along the portico creeps the death-approach, now borax-white in archway hemisphere, now clay-blue in slanted support-ephemera. The knife-blade winks, like the little haze-puff of white dust, then the shadow hides it again.

The rose dream, the well lies hushed, not a straggling grain topples into it to mar it. No sound, no sound at all. Along the wall crawls life, bringing an end to life.

Past the opening where the death-tapers burn all night. She doesn't even turn her head as she passes. What is dead is gone. What is dead does not matter any more. There were no souls in Anahuac, just bodies that come to stir, then stop and stir no longer.

What is dead does not matter any more. The love of a man, that is what matters to a woman. If she has not his child, she

cannot hold his love. If she loses his child, then she must get another.

And now the other entrance is coming nearer as the wraith-like figure creeps on. Like smoke, like mist, flickering along at the base of a wall. It seems to move of its own accord, sidling along the wall as if it were a black slab or panel traveling on hidden wheels or pulleys at the end of a drawcord. Coming nearer all the time, black, coffin-shaped, against the bluish-pale wall. Growing taller, growing wider, growing greater.

AND then a sound, a small night sound, a futile, helpless sound—a child whimpers slightly in its sleep.

But instantly the figure stops, crouched. Is as still as if it had never moved a moment ago, would never move again. Not a further ripple, not a fluctuation, not a belated muscular contraction, not even the pulsing of breath. As the mountain lioness would stop as it stalked an alerted kill.

The child whimpers troubledly again. It is having a dream perhaps. Something, someone, stirs: Not the child. A heavier, a larger body than the child. There is a faint rustling, as when someone turns against overlying covers.

Then the sibilance of a soothing, bated voice, making a hushing sound. "Sh-h-h. Sh-h-h." Vibrant with a light motion. The motion of rocking interfolded arms.

A drowsy murmur of words, almost inchoate. "Sleep, darling. We'll find your daddy soon."

The moon glares down patiently, remorselessly, waiting. The moon will wait. The night will wait.

Seconds of time pass. Breathing sounds from within the doorway on the stillness now, in soft, slow, rhythmic waves. With little ripples in the space between each wave. Breathing of a mother, and elfin echo of her arm-cradled child. The shadow moves along the wall.

The open doorway, from within, would be a sheet of silver or of mercury, thin but glowing, if any eye were open there upon it. Then suddenly, down low at its base, comes motion, comes intrusion. A creeping, curved thing circles the stone wall-breadth, loses itself again in the darkness on the near

side. Now once again the opening is an unmarred sheet of silver, fuming, sheeny.

Not even a shadow glides along the floor now, for there is no longer light to shape one. Nothing. Only death moving in invisibility.

The unseen current of the breathing still rides upon the darkness, to and fro, to and fro; lightly upon the surface of the darkness, like an evanescent pool of water stirring this way and that way.

Then suddenly it plunges deep, as if an unexpected vent, an outlet, had been driven through for it, gurgling, swirling, hollowing and sinking in timbre. A deep, spiralling breath that is the end of all breaths. No more than that. Then evaporation, the silence of death, in an arid, a denuded place.

The breathing of the child peers through again in a moment, now that its overshadowing counterpoint has been erased. It is taken up by other arms. Held pressed to another breast.

IN the room of the smouldering brazero the other figure waits; patient, head inclined, roboso-coifed. The soft pad of bare feet comes along the patio-tiles outside, exultant-quick. No need to crawl now. There are no longer other ears to overhear. Bare feet, proud and graceful; coolly firm, like bare feet wading through the moon-milk.

She comes in triumphant, erect and willowy, holding something in her arms, close to her breast. What a woman is supposed to hold. What a woman is born to hold.

She sinks down there on her knees before the other, the other who once held her thus in turn. She turns her head slightly in indication, holds it bent awkwardly askance, for her hands are not free. The old woman's hands go to her coil-wound hair, trace to the back of her head, draw out the knife for her.

Before her on the floor stands an earthenware bowl holding water. The knife splashes into it. The old woman begins to scrub and knead its blade dexterously between her fingers.

The younger one, sitting at ease now upon the backs of her heels, frees one hand, takes up the palmleaf, fans the brazero

to a renewed glow. Scarlet comes back into the room, then vermilion. Even light orange, in splashes here and there upon their bodies and their faces.

She speaks, staring with copper-plated mask into the orange maw of the brazero. "My man has a son again. I have his son again. I will not lose my man now."

"You have done well, my daughter. You have done as a woman should." Thus a mother's approbation to her daughter, in olden Anahuac.

She places the baby's head to her breast, the new-made mother, and begins to suckle him.

The moon of Montezuma, well-content, is on the wane now, slanting downward on the opposite side of the patio. Such sights as these it once knew well in Anahuac; now its hungering loneliness has been in a measure assuaged, for it has glimpsed them once again.

The moon has gone now; it is the darkness before dawn. Soon the sun will come, the cosmic male-force. The time of women is rapidly ending, the time of men will be at hand.

They are both in the room with the trestle bier and the flowers and the gold-tongued papers. The little wax doll is a naked wax doll now, its wrappings taken from it, cast aside. Lumpy, foreshortened, like a squat clay image fashioned by the soft-slapping hands of some awkward, unpractised potter.

The old woman is holding a charcoal sack, black-smudged, tautly wide at its mouth. She brings it up just under the bier, holds it steady, in the way of a catch-all.

Chata's hands reach out, scoop, roll something toward her.

The bier is empty and the charcoal sack has swelled full at the bottom.

The old woman quickly folds it over and winds it about itself. She passes it to Chata. Deft swirling and tightening of Chata's reboso about her own figure, and it has gone, and Chata's arms with it, hidden within.

The old woman takes apart the bier. Takes down the two pitiful planks from the trestles that supported them. A gardenia petal or two slides down them to the floor.

"Go far," she counsels knowingly.

"I will go far up the mountain, where it is bare. Where the

buzzards can see it easily from overhead. By the time the sun goes down it will be gone. Small bones like this they will even carry up with them and scatter."

The old woman pinches one taper-wick and it goes out.

She moves on toward another and pinches that.

Darkness blots the room. In the air a faint trace of gardenias remains. How long does the scent of gardenias last? How long does life last? And when each has gone, where is it each has gone?

They move across the moonless patio now, one back of the other. The wooden door in the street wall jars and creaks back aslant. The old woman sidles forth. Chata waits. The old woman reinserts herself. Her finger flicks permissive safety toward the aperture.

The girl slips out, just an Indian girl enswathed, a lump under her reboso, the margin of it drawn up over her mouth against the unhealthful night air.

It is daybreak now. Clay-blue and dove-gray, rapidly paling with white. The old woman is sitting crouched upon her haunches, in patient immobility, just within the door.

She must have heard an almost wraith-like footfall that no other ears could have caught. She rose suddenly. She waited a bated moment, inclined toward the door, then she unfastened and swung open the door.

Chata slipped in on the instant, reboso flat against her now. No more lump saddling her hip.

The old woman closed the door, went after her to deeper recesses of the patio. "You went far?"

Chata unhooded her reboso from head and shoulders with that negligent racial grace she was never without. "I went far. I went up where it is bare rock. Where no weed grows that will hide it from the sailing wings in the sky. They will see it. Already they were coming from afar as I looked back from below. By sundown it will be gone.

The old woman nodded. "You have done well, my daughter," she praised her dignifiedly.

Beside the well in the patio there was something lying now. Another mound beside the mound of disinterred earth. And

alongside it, parallel to one side of the well, a deep narrow trough lay dug, almost looking like a grave.

The rose bushes had all been pulled out and lay there expiring on their sides now, roots striking skyward like frozen snakes.

"They were in the way," the old woman grunted. "I had to. I deepened it below where they left it when they were here last. The new earth I took out is apart, over there, in that smaller pile by itself. So we will know it from the earth they took out when they were last here. See, it is darker and fresher."

"He liked them," Chata said. "He will ask why it is, when he comes back."

"Tell him the men did it, Fulgencio and his helper."

"But if he asks them, when he goes to pay them for the work, they will say they did not, they left them in."

"Then we will plant them in again, lightly at the top, before they come back to resume their work. I will cut off their roots short, so that it can be done."

"They will die that way."

The old woman nodded craftily. "But only after a while. He will see them still in place, though dead. Then we will say it was the work of the men did it. Then Fulgencio and his helper will not be able to say they did not do it. For they were alive when the work began, and they will be dead when it was done."

CHATA did not have to ask her to help. With one accord, with no further words between them, they went to the mound beside the mound of earth. The mound that was not earth. The mound that was concealing rags and bundled charcoal sacking. One went to one end, one to the other. Chata pried into the rags for a moment, made an opening, peered into it. It centered on a red rosebud, withered and falling apart, but still affixed by a pin to the dark-blue cloth of a coat.

"She wore a rose upon her coat," she hissed vengefully. "I saw it when she came in last night. She must have brought it with her from Tapatzingo, for there are none of that color growing here. He must have liked to see them on her." She

swerved her head and spat into the trough alongside. "It is dead now," she said exultingly.

"As she is," glowered the old woman, tight-lipped.

"Let it go with her, for the worms to see."

They both scissored their arms, and the one mound overturned and dropped, was engulfed by the other. Then Chata took up the shovel the workmen had left, and began lessening the second mound, the mound that was of earth. She knew just what they did and how they went about it, she had watched them for so many days now. The old woman, spreading her reboso flat upon the ground nearby, busied herself palming and urging the newer fill over onto it, the fill that she herself had taken out to make more depth.

When it was filled, she tied the corners into a bundle and carried it from sight. She came back with the reboso empty and began over again. After the second time, the pile of new fill was gone.

Chata had disappeared from the thighs down, was moving about as in a grave, trampling, flattening, with downbeating of her feet.

In midmorning, when Fulgencio and his nephew came, languid, to their slow-moving work, the white roses were all luxuriating around the well again, with a slender stick lurking here and there to prop them. Everything was as it had been. If the pile of disinterred earth they had left was a little lower, or if the depression waiting to take it back was a little shallower, who could tell? Who measured such things?

The old woman brought out a jug of pulque to them, so that they might refresh themselves. Their eyes were red when they left at sundown, and their breaths and their sweat were sour. But it had made their work go quicker, with snatches of song, and with laughter, and with stumblings of foot. And it had made the earth they shoveled back, the hollow they filled, the tiles they cemented back atop, the roses they brushed against and bent, all dance and blur in fumes of maguey.

But the task was completed, and when the door was closed upon their swaying, drooping-lidded forms, they needed to come back no more.

Seven times the sun rises, seven times it falls. Then four-

teen. Then, perhaps, twenty-one. Who knows, who counts it? Hasn't it risen a thousand years in Anahuac, to fall again, to rise again?

Then one day, in its declining hours, there is a heavy knocking of men's hands on the outside of the wooden door in the street wall. The hands of men who have a right to enter, who may not be refused; their knocking tells that.

They know it for what it is at first sound, Chata and the old woman. They have known it was coming. There is another law in Anahuac now than the old one.

Eyes meet eyes. The trace of a nod is exchanged. A nod that confirms. That is all. No fear, no sudden startlement. No fear, because no sense of guilt. The old law did not depend on signs of fear, proofs and evidences, witnesses. The old law was wise, the new law is a fool.

The old woman struggles to her feet, pads forth across the patio toward the street-door, resounding now like a drum. Chata remains as she was, dexterously plaiting withes into a basket, golden-haired child on its back on the sun-cozened ground beside her, little legs fumbling in air.

The old woman comes back with two of mixed blood. Anahuac is in their faces, but so is the other race, with its quick mobility of feature that tells every thought. One in uniform of those who enforce the law, one in attire such as Chata's own man wears when he has returned from his prospecting trips in the distant mountains and walks the streets of the town with her on Sunday, or takes his ease without her in the cantina with the men of the other women.

THEY come and stand over here, where she squats at her work, look down on her. Their shadows shade her, blot out the sun in the corner of the patio in which she is, are like thick blue stripes blanketing her and the child from some intangible serape.

Slowly her eyes go upward to them, liquid, dark, grave, respectful but not afraid, as a woman's do to strange men who come where she has a right to be.

"Stand. We are of the police. From Tapatzingo, on the other side of the mountain. We are here to speak to you."

She puts her basket-weaving aside and rises, graceful, unfrightened.

"And you are?" the one who speaks for the two of them, the one without uniform, goes on.

"Chata."

"Any last name?"

"We use no second name among us." That is the other race, two names for every one person.

"And the old one?"

"Mother of Chata."

"And who is the man here?"

"In the mountains. That way, far that way. He goes to look for silver. He works it when he finds it. He has been long gone, but he will come soon now, the time is drawing near."

"Now listen. A woman entered here, some time three weeks ago. A woman with a child. A *norteña*, a *gringa*, understand? One of those from up there. She has not been seen again. She did not go back to where she came from. To the great City of Mexico. In the City of Mexico the consul of her country has asked the police to find out where she is. The police of the City of Mexico have asked us to learn what became of her."

Both heads shake. "No. No woman entered here."

He turns to the one in uniform. "Bring him in a minute."

The hired-car driver shuffles forward, escorted by the uniform.

Chata looks at him gravely, no more. Gravely but untroubledly.

"This man says he brought her here. She got out. He went back without her."

Both heads nod now. The young one that their eyes are on, the old one disregarded in the background.

"There was a knock upon our door, one such day, many days ago. A woman with a child stood there, from another place. She spoke, and we could not understand her speech. She showed us a paper, but we cannot read writing. We closed the door. She did not knock again."

He turns on the hired-car driver. "Did you see them admit her?"

"No, Señor," the latter falters, too frightened to tell anything but the truth. "I only let her out somewhere along here. I did not wait to see where she went. It was late, and I wanted

to get back to my woman. I had driven her all the way from Tapatzingo, where the train stops."

"Then you did not see her come in here?"

"I did not see her go in anywhere. I turned around and went the other way, and it was getting dark."

"This child here, does it look like the one she had with her?"

"I could not see it, she held it to her."

"This is the child of my man," Chata says with sultry dignity. "He has yellow hair like this. Tell, then."

"Her man is gringo, everyone has seen him. She had a gringo child a while ago, everyone knows that," the man stammers unhappily.

"Then you, perhaps, know more about where she went, than these two do! You did bring her out this way! Take him outside and hold him. At least I'll have something to report on."

The policeman drags him out again, pleading and whining. "No, Señor, no! I do not know—I drove back without her! For the love of God, Señor, the love of God!"

He turns to Chata. "Show me this house. I want to see it."

She shows it to him, room by room. Rooms that know nothing can tell nothing. Then back to the patio again. The other one is waiting for him there, alone now.

"And this pozo? It seems cleaner, newer, this tiling, than elsewhere around it." He taps his foot on it.

"It kept falling in, around the sides. Cement was put around them to hold the dirt back."

"Who had it done?"

"It was the order of my man, before he left. It made our water bad. He told two men to do it for him while he was away."

"And who carried it out?"

"Fulgencio and his nephew, in the town. They did not come right away, and they took long, but finally they finished."

He jotted the name. "We will ask."

She nodded acquiescently. "They will tell."

He takes his foot off it at last, moves away. He seems to be finished, he seems to be about to go. Then suddenly, curtly, "Come." And he flexed his finger for her benefit.

For the first time her face shows something. The skin draws back rearward of her eyes, pulling them oblique.

"Where?" she whispers.

"To the town. To Tapatzingo. To the headquarters."

She shakes her head repeatedly, mutely appalled. Creeps backward a step with each shake. Yet even now it is less than outright fear; it is more an unreasoning obstinacy. An awe in the face of something one is too simple to understand. The cringing of a wide-eyed child.

"Nothing will happen to you," he says impatiently. "You won't be held. Just to sign a paper. A statement for you to put your name to."

Her back has come to rest against one of the archway supports now. She can retreat no further. She cowers against it, then sinks down, then turns and clasps her arms about it, holding onto it in desperate appeal.

"I cannot write. I do not know how to make those marks."

He is standing over her now, trying to reason with her.

"Valgame dios! What a criatura!"

She transfers her embrace suddenly from the inanimate pilaster to his legs, winding her arms about them in supplication.

"No, patrón, no! Don't take me to Tapatzingo! They'll keep me there. I know how they treat our kind. I'll never get back again."

Her eyes plead upward at him, dark pools of mournfulness.

He looks more closely at her, as if seeming to see her face for the first time. Or at least as if seeming to see it as a woman's face and not just that of a witness.

"And you like this gringo you house with?" he remarks at a tangent. "Why did you not go with one of your own?"

"One goes with the man who chooses one."

"Women are thus," he admits patronizingly. *Asi son las mujeres.*

She releases his pinioned legs, but still crouches at his feet, looking questioningly upward.

He is still studying her face. "He could have done worse." He reaches down and wags her chin a little with two pinched fingers.

She rises, slowly turns away from him. She does not smile. Her coquetry is more basic than the shallow superficiality of a smile. More gripping in its pull. It is in the slow, enfolding way she draws her reboso tight about her and hugs it to her shoulders and her waist. It is in the very way she walks. It is

in the coalescing of the sunlit dust-motes all about her in the air as she passes, forming almost a haze, a passional halo.

In fact, she gives him not another look. Yet every step of the way she pulls his eyes with her. And as she passes where a flowering plant stands in a green glazed mould, she tears one of the flowers off. She doesn't drop it, just carries it along with her in her hand.

She approaches one of the room-openings, and still without turning, still without looking back, goes within.

He stands there staring at the empty doorway.

The old woman squats down by the child, takes it up, and lowers her head as if attentively waiting.

He looks at the policeman, and the policeman at him, and everything that was unspoken until now is spoken in that look between them.

"Wait for me outside the house. I'll be out later."

The policeman goes outside and closes the wall-door after him.

Later she comes out of the room by herself, ahead of the man. She rejoins the old woman and child, and squats down by them on her knees and heels. The old woman passes the child into her arms. She rocks it lulling, looks down at it protectively, touches a speck from its brow with one finger. She is placid, self-assured.

Then the man comes out again. He is tracing one side of his mustache with the edge of one finger.

He comes and stops, standing over her, as he did when he and the other one first came in here.

He smiles a little, very sparingly, with only the corner of his mouth. Half-indulgently, half-contemptuously.

He speaks. But to whom? Scarcely to her, for his eyes go up over her, stare thoughtfully over her head; and the policeman isn't present to be addressed. To his own sense of duty, perhaps, reassuring it. "Well—you don't need to come in, then, most likely. You've told me all you can. No need to question you further. I can attend to the paper myself. And we always have the driver, anyway, if they want to go ahead with it."

He turns on his heel. His long shadow undulates off her.

"Adios, india," he flings carelessly at her over his shoulder, from the wall door.

"Adios, patrón," she murmurs obsequiously.

The old woman goes over to the door in his wake, to make sure it is shut fast from the inside. Comes back, sinks down again.

Nothing is said.

IN the purple bloodshed of a sunset afterglow, the tired horse brings its tired rider to a halt before the biscuit-colored wall with the bougainvillea unravelling along it. Having ridden the day, having ridden the night, and many days and many nights, the ride is at last done.

For a moment they stand there, both motionless, horse with its neck slanted to ground, rider with his head dropped almost to saddle-grip. He has been riding asleep for the past hour or so. But riding true, for the horse knows the way.

Then the man stirs, raises his head, slings his leg off, comes to the ground. Face maghogany from the high sierra sun, golden glisten filming its lower part, like dust of that other metal, the one even more precious than that he seeks and lives by. Dust-paled shirt opened to the navel. Service automatic of another country, of another army, that both once were his, bedded at his flank. Bulging saddle-bags upon the burro tethered behind, of ore, of precious crushed rock, to be taken to the assay office down at Tapatzingo. Blue eyes that have forgotten all their ties, and thus will stay young as they are now forever. Bill Taylor's home. Bill Taylor, once of Iowa, once of Colorado.

Home? What is home? Home is where a house is that you come back to when the rainy season is about to begin, to wait until the next dry season comes around. Home is where your woman is, that you come back to in the intervals between a greater love—the only real love—the lust for riches buried in the earth, that are your own if you can find them.

Perhaps you do not call it home, even to yourself. Perhaps you call them "my house," "my woman." What if there was another "my house," "my woman," before this one? It makes no difference. This woman is enough for now.

Perhaps the guns sounded too loud at Anzio or at Omaha Beach, at Guadalcanal or at Okinawa. Perhaps when they stilled again some kind of strength had been blasted from you that other men still have. And then again perhaps it was some

kind of weakness that other men still have. What is strength, what is weakness, what is loyalty, what is perfidy?

The guns taught only one thing, but they taught it well: of what consequence is life? Of what consequence is a man? And, therefore, of what consequence if he tramples love in one place and goes to find it in the next? The little moment that he has, let him be at peace, far from the guns and all that remind him of them.

So the man who once was Bill Taylor has come back to his house, in the dusk, in the mountains, in Anahuac.

He doesn't have to knock, the soft hoof-plod of his horse has long ago been heard, has sent its long-awaited message. Of what use is a house to a man if he must knock before he enters? The door swings wide, as it never does and never will to anyone but him. Flitting of a figure, firefly-quick, and Chata is entwined about him.

He goes in, faltering a little from long weariness, from long disuse of his legs, she welded to his side, half-supporting, already resting, restoring him, as is a woman's reason for being.

The door closes behind them. She palms him to wait, then whisks away.

He stands there, looking about.

She comes back, holding something bebundled in her arms.

"What happened to the roses?" he asks dimly.

She does not answer. She is holding something up toward him, white teeth proudly displayed in her face. The one moment in a woman's whole life. The moment of fulfilment. "Your son," she breathes dutifully.

Who can think of roses when he has a son?

Two of the tiles that Fulgencio had laid began to part. Slowly. So slowly who could say they had not always been that way? And yet they had not. Since they could not part horizontally because of the other tiles all around them, their parting was vertical, they began to slant upward out of true. At last the strain became too great. They had no resiliency by which to slant along the one side, remain flat along the other. They cracked along the line of greatest strain, and then they

crumbled there, disintegrated into a mosaic. And then the smaller, lighter pieces were disturbed still more, and finally lay about like scattered pebbles, out of their original bed.

And then it began to grow. The new rosebush.

There had been rosebushes there before. Why should there not be one there now again?

It was full-grown now, the new rosebush. And he had gone and come again, Bill Taylor; and gone, and come again. Then suddenly, in the time for roses to bloom, it burst into flower. Like a splattering of blood, drenching that one particular part of the patio. Every rose as red as the heart.

He smiled with pleasant surprise when he first saw it, and he said how beautiful it was. He called to her and made her come out there where he was and stand beside him and take the sight in.

"Look. Look what we have now. I always liked them better than the white ones."

"I already saw them," she said sullenly. "You are only seeing them now for the first time, but I saw them many days ago, coming through little by little."

And she tried to move away, but he held her there by the shoulder, in command. "Take good care of it now. Water it. Treat it well."

In a few days he noticed that the sun was scorching it, that the leaves were burning here and there.

He called her out there, and his face was dark. His voice was harsh and curt, as when you speak to a disobedient dog. "Didn't I tell you to look after this rosebush? Why haven't you? Water it now! Water it well!"

She obeyed him. She had to. But as she moved about it, tending to it, on her face, turned from him, there was the ancient hatred of woman for woman, when there is but one man between the two of them.

She watered it the next day, and the next. It thrived, it flourished, jeering at her with liquid diamonds dangling from each leaf, and pearls of moisture rolling lazily about the crevices of its tight-packed satin petals. And when his eyes were not upon her, and she struck at it viciously with her hand, it bit back at her, and tore a drop of blood from her palm.

Of what use to move around the ground on two firm feet, to be warm, to be flesh, if his eyes scarce rested on you any more? Or if they did, no longer saw you as they once had, but went right through you as if you were not there?

OF what use to have buried her in the ground if he stayed now always closer to her than to you, moving his chair now by her out there in the sun? If he put his face down close to her and inhaled the memory of her and the essence of her soul?

She filled the patio with her sad perfume, and even in the very act of breathing in itself, he drew something of her into himself, and they became one.

She held sibilant conference with the old woman beside the brazero in the evening as they prepared his meal. "It is she. She has come back again. He puts his face down close, down close to her many red mouths, and she whispers to him. She tries to tell him that she lies there, she tries to tell him that his son was given him by her and not by me."

The old woman nodded sagely. These things are so. "Then you must do again as you did once before. There is no other way."

"He will be angered as the thunder rolling in a mountain gorge."

"Better a blow from a man's hand than to lose him to another woman."

Again the night of a full moon, again she crept forth, hands to ground, as she had once before. This time from his very side, from his very bed. Again a knife between her teeth blazed intermittently in the moonlight. But this time she didn't creep sideward along the portico, from room-entry to room-entry; this time she paced her way straight outward into mid-patio. And this time her reboso was twined tight about her, not cast off; for the victim had no ears with which to hear her should the garment impede or betray; and the victim had no feet on which to start up and run away.

Slowly she toiled and undulated under the enormous spotlight of the moon. Nearer, nearer. Until the shadows of the little leaves made black freckles on her back.

Nearer, nearer. To kill a second time the same rival.

Nearer, nearer. To where the rosebush lay floating on layers of moon-smoke.

THEY found her the next morning, he and the old woman. They found the mute evidences of the struggle there had been; like a contest between two active agencies, between two opposing wills. A struggle in the silent moonlight.

There was a place where the tiled surfacing, the cement shoring, faultily applied by the pulque-drugged Fulgencio and his nephew, had given way and dislodged itself over the lip of the well and down into it, as had been its wont before the repairs were applied. Too much weight incautiously brought too near the edge, in some terrible, oblivious throe of fury or of self-preservation.

Over this ravage the rosebush, stricken, gashed along its stem, stretched taut, bent like a bow; at one end its manifold roots still clinging tenaciously to the soil, like countless crooked grasping fingers; at the other its flowered head, captive but unsubdued, dipping downward into the mouth of the well.

And from its thorns, caught fast in a confusion hopeless of extrication, it supported two opposite ends of the reboso, whipped and wound and spiralled together into one, from some aimless swaying and counter-swaying weight at the other end.

A weight that had stopped swaying long before the moon waned; that hung straight and limp now, hugging the wall of the well. Head sharply askew, as if listening to the mocking voice whispering through from the soil alongside, where the roots of the rose bush found their source.

No water had touched her. She had not died the death of water. She had died the death that comes without a sound, the death that is like the snapping of a twig, of a broken neck.

THEY lifted her up. They laid her tenderly there upon the ground.

She did not move. The rosebush did; it slowly righted to upward. Leaving upon the ground a profusion of petals, like drops of blood shed in combat.

The rosebush lived, but she was dead.

Now he sits there in the sun, by the rosebush; the world forgotten, other places that once were home, other times, other loves, forgotten. It is good to sit there in the sun, your son playing at your feet. This is a better love, this is the only lasting love. For a woman dies when you do, but a son lives on. He is you and you are he, and thus you do not die at all.

And when his eyes close in the sun and he dozes, as a man does when his youth is running out, perhaps now and then a petal will fall upon his head or upon his shoulder from some near-curving branch, and lie there still. Light as a caress. Light as a kiss unseen from someone who loves you and watches over you.

The old woman squats at hand, watchful over the child. The old woman has remained, ignored. Like a dog, like a stone. Unspeaking and unspoken to.

Her eyes reveal nothing. Her lips say nothing. They will never say anything, for thus it is in Anahuac.

But the heart knows. The skies that look forever down on Anahuac know. The moon that shone on Montezuma once; it knows.

Fantastic, November–December 1952

SOMEBODY'S CLOTHES- SOMEBODY'S LIFE

Scene One



IN the gambling room at the Casino in Biarritz, seven or eight backs stand shoulder to shoulder, so that they conceal the roulette table they are lined against. The middle one is unclothed, that of a woman in a backless white evening gown. Immediately behind her a maid is seated on a straight-backed gilt chair. She is plainly dressed, wears a pair of old-fashioned rimless glasses and is crocheting a strip of lace. On her lap in addition is a taffeta draw-bag. She pays no attention to the proceedings. A clicking sound is heard, as the little ball spins around and around. It stops with a little snap, like a wooden matchstick being broken, as the ball drops into the slot.)

CROUPIER: Seventeen, black!

(There is a low murmur of mingled voices like the humming of a swarm of bees, combining resignation, disappointment, annoyance, surprise, and satisfaction.)

CROUPIER: Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen.

(The woman in the backless white gown suddenly thrusts her arm behind her, toward the maid, with three fingers held out to show how much she requires. The maid immediately interrupts her crocheting, pries into the draw-bag, counts out three banknotes, and places them in the waiting hand. The arm returns to the table again.)

CROUPIER: Nothing more goes. Nothing more.

(Again the clicking sound, again the little snap.)

CROUPIER: Eleven, red!

(Again the low murmur of mingled voices.)

CROUPIER: Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen.

(Again the arm is thrust out toward the maid. This time all five fingers are extended. They close, then open again, in a grasping motion, to show their owner is impatient. The maid shakes her head to herself. She opens the draw-bag, takes out five banknotes, places them in the waiting hand. The arm twists back to the table again.)

CROUPIER: Nothing more goes. Nothing more.

(Again the clicking sound.)

CROUPIER: Sixteen, black!

(Again the murmuring voices.)

CROUPIER: Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen.

(Again the insatiable arm extends itself, all fingers out, fluttering. The maid inserts her whole hand into the drawbag this time, as one would try on a glove. She turns the bag inside-out. It is empty.)

MAID: It's all gone, madame. There's no more left.

(The arm slowly wilts, drops down to its owner's side like a withered vine. Then the woman slowly turns and forces her way out from between the other players. She is a handsome woman, in her forties or early fifties, but now her face is haggard, drawn. A lock of her silvery hair has fallen down over one eye. She staggers, almost as if she were drunk. The maid quickly rises, puts aside her crocheting, and puts an arm around her waist to support her.)

MAID: Lean on me, madame. The fresh air will help you pull yourself together.

COUNTESS: Haven't you any money of your own you could let me have? I could give it back to you tomorrow.

MAID (wryly): I never carry money of my own with me when I go out with madame in the evening. I learned not to long ago.

COUNTESS (dazed): What'll I do?

MAID: Come away now, madame. Come back to your hotel. You've been in here since it first opened, hours ago.

COUNTESS (lifts her arm, looks at a diamond bracelet she is wearing as though having forgotten she had it on): Oh—This—

MAID (quickly stops her by putting her hand over it): You know they won't accept jewelry at the table, madame. You've tried before.

COUNTESS: Maybe I could sell it to someone in the room here.

MAID (pleading): Madame. Madame. It's the last of all the beautiful pieces you once had.

(She picks up her crocheting from the chair seat, stuffs it into the draw-bag.)

MAID (in a choked voice): I can't bear to watch much more of this, I just can't stand it. It does something to me. I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave you, madame, at the end of the week.

(Countess doesn't answer, as though she hasn't heard her. Stands there looking around avidly, licking her lips as if in search of a possible source of money.)

MAID: This is a fever.

COUNTESS (indifferently): And there is no quinine for it.

MAID (coaxing her gently, as if she were a child): Come, madame. Come away now.

(They walk slowly across the large room, the countess leaning exhaustedly against the maid. The Casino doorman, standing motionless to one side of the glass doors leading out, stiffens to attention, pulls one of the two glass doors open, holds it that way in readiness, touches two fingers to the visor of his uniform cap.)

DOORMAN (respectfully, ducking his head): Goodnight, madame. Goodnight, mademoiselle.

(As though this has suddenly attracted her attention to him, the countess raises her head, stops, looks at him, frees herself from the maid, takes a step over toward him.)

COUNTESS: Young man—my friend—I wonder if by any chance you could lend me—

MAID (horrified): Madame!

(She quickly places herself between the two of them, tactfully turns the countess away, guides her to the door, which he has continued to hold open for them, and out through it.)

MAID: Madame, consider what you are doing.

(The maid looks around over her shoulder at the doorman. She shakes her head to him, pityingly. He nods his head in agreement with her, also pityingly. He lets the door ease closed again, holding it so that it doesn't swing. . . .)

Scene Two

(Living room of a villa. It is furnished in rather old-fashioned, mediocre, overcrowded taste. In the center of the room there is a round table and two chairs. The doorbell rings. The woman who goes to the door is past middle-age but still lithe. Her hair is worn in the Slavic fashion, in a braid wound circularly around her head like a coronet, and she wears a Russian peasant blouse, white-bordered with colored embroidery. She opens the door. The countess is standing before it.)

ROULETTE-PLAYER: You are the clairvoyant?

CLAIRVOYANT: I prefer to call myself a consultant. I am not a fortune-teller, whatever you may think. I give advice, but I do not make predictions.

ROULETTE-PLAYER: Forgive me.

CLAIRVOYANT: You are the lady who telephoned for a private appointment? Countess—?

COUNTESS (stopping her with a slight gesture of her hand): I am. No names are necessary.

CLAIRVOYANT: I understand. Come in, won't you please? (*Closes the door*) Sit down, madame. May I offer you some tea?

COUNTESS: It may make me less nervous.

CLAIRVOYANT (pausing on her way out): You are nervous of me?

COUNTESS: Just nervous altogether.

(Clairvoyant raises her brows, then goes out. Countess, waiting, is extremely restless. Drums her fingers on tabletop. Takes out a cigarette, lights it with noticeably shaky hands, takes only a puff or two, then gets rid of it again. Clairvoyant re-enters left, carrying a samovar.)

COUNTESS: You are Russian, aren't you?

(Clairvoyant places samovar on table. While the next few remarks are being exchanged, she pours tea, each of them

takes a swallow or two, then pushes it aside. The clairvoyant takes up a deck of cards, shuffles them, and begins to deal them out before her, very slowly, as if engaged in playing solitaire. Their conversation meanwhile has continued without a break.

CLAIRVOYANT: I was, when there was still a Russia. Now I am a person without a country. They used to call us White Russians. Today even that name is forgotten.

COUNTESS: I have a pressing need of guidance, of advice.

CLAIRVOYANT: I know.

COUNTESS: Then you know also the subject on which I need it?

CLAIRVOYANT: The casino.

COUNTESS (nodding): The casino. How did you know?

CLAIRVOYANT: Your nervous gestures. The way in which your eyes almost seem to burn.

COUNTESS (somerly): It is that easy to tell. I didn't realize.

CLAIRVOYANT: I have lived many years in this world, my friend. (*Staring at her intently*) You *must* play?

COUNTESS: While I live, I must play. If I were to lock myself in my room and throw the key out of the window, still somehow I would find myself beside that table that very same night.

CLAIRVOYANT (almost contemptuously, with the contempt that a non-drinker has for an alcoholic): I have heard it is this way.

COUNTESS (wearily): Then you've heard right.

CLAIRVOYANT: And you want my advice. And yet I know and you know, we both know, that you won't take it. Still, here it is. I give it anyway. (*Slowly, with heavy emphasis*) *Do not play.*

COUNTESS: As well ask me to stop breathing. (*Leaning toward her, in desperation*) You must help me. You must. I don't want to be lectured, I want to be helped.

CLAIRVOYANT: Let us go back, then, before we go forward. Have you ever won, at any time? Think, now.

COUNTESS: Many times. Oh, many times. But I didn't stop soon enough, that was the only trouble. I went on playing too long, after I should have stopped, and—

CLAIRVOYANT: There is no "too soon," there is no "too

long." There is only one terminal point in this, and that is the point at which you *did* stop. Now let me repeat: when you stopped, had you won?

COUNTESS (In a low, hopeless voice): Never.

CLAIRVOYANT: Judge by that then. The past is the future that lies behind us. The future is the past that lies before us. They are one and the same. Only fools think they can divide them down the middle. You have never won. You never *will* win. Not tonight, not a week from now, not a year from now. There is something about your personality, your being, let us call it your aura, that attracts only bad luck at the gambling-table. I have seen it in these cards here. The money cards, the diamond suit, have all consistently avoided your own card, which is this one here.

COUNTESS (skeptically): Are they infallible?

CLAIRVOYANT: Ask yourself that, not me. Have you ever won? Then they *are* infallible. It is something about you, it is inexplicable, but there it is.

COUNTESS: But what am I to do? I know that I'll go back there again. I can't stay away.

CLAIRVOYANT: Have somebody else place your bets for you. But remember one thing, the selection must be theirs, not yours. It won't help any if you tell them which plays to make. That is still you playing, then.

COUNTESS: I couldn't! I couldn't do it! Not play myself? Just watch while somebody else plays for me? It's the excitement, the urge, to play myself that drives me on. If I am thirsty, and you give the water to someone else, will that quench *my* thirst?

CLAIRVOYANT (spreading her hands resignedly): Well, there you have it. That's all I can tell you.

COUNTESS: You say it's my aura, my personality. Couldn't I alter it in some way, hide it, disguise it, and so change my luck?

CLAIRVOYANT: You mean tamper with your own destiny? For that is actually what you would be doing. That can be dangerous, madame.

COUNTESS: Let it be. Anything at all would be better than this.

CLAIRVOYANT: You could try. But I guarantee nothing.

COUNTESS: I ask no guarantee. I wouldn't bet on a sure thing even if I could, for then it would have no attraction for me. It's the risk I like. All I ask is the outside chance.

CLAIRVOYANT (laughing ruefully): Even in this you bet. You not only bet on the game itself, but you bet on the betting on the game.

COUNTESS: And is this all you can do for me?

CLAIRVOYANT: No. Since the consultation is not gratis, I can amplify it, I can dress it up. All you wish. Very well, let's garnish it, then. *Everything about you must be different.* That goes much deeper than just the clothes you wear, the way you wear your hair, or the perfume you use. Inside yourself is where the real change must be. And can you do that, madame?

COUNTESS: I can try.

CLAIRVOYANT: Your thoughts must be the thoughts of someone else. The way you move, the very way you breathe, must be the way of somebody else. In your own mind you must *be* somebody else, you must believe you *are* somebody else. You must not even think of your own name or tell yourself what it is. It is no longer your name, it is the name of a stranger, who has nothing to do with you. Those whom the old you knew, no matter how closely, the new you no longer knows. Those whom the new you knows, if any, will be those whom the old you did not know. And—all this is impossible to accomplish. Humanly impossible. No, it cannot be done. And if it could, it might be better not to. You might damage yourself, destroy yourself in some way.

COUNTESS (growing more excited): I can try! I can try!

CLAIRVOYANT (drily): Let me wish you luck, madame. *Bonne chance.*

COUNTESS (fervently): I *will* do it! I will! I don't know how, yet, but I will accomplish it.

CLAIRVOYANT (dubiously): Let us hope.

(She rises to her feet. The countess follows suit. The latter opens her handbag, brings out a handful of currency, places it on the table.)

COUNTESS: With your permission.

CLAIRVOYANT (shrugging matter of factly, as she ushers

her visitor to the door, opens it for her): One's time was given up, granted.

COUNTESS (suddenly seizing the other's hand and kissing it with gratitude): You don't know how you've helped me! You don't know how!

CLAIRVOYANT (inscrutably): Have I . . . ?

Scene Three

(The base of the Rocher de la Vierge, a rocky promontory jutting out high over the ocean at Biarritz. Around the base runs an iron guardrail, and flanking this a paved walk. Along this walk slowly moves the countess. Her aspect is that of a woman in despair, who does not notice where she is going and does not care. She has evidently been gambling again, and with the usual result. The direction she comes from is that of the casino, and she is again wearing the spreading white dress. She stops and rests her back against the waist-high rail, one arm akimbo against it. She remains motionless thus for some time. . . .

(Suddenly some sort of cloth, a garment, light-colored, drifts down from above, dangles over the rail for a moment, finally settles down to the ground near her. She notices it, stares. She steps over to it, picks it up, holds it extended at arms' width. It is a woman's cheap dress, plain, ordinary. Another garment floats down. Something in the nature of an undergarment, this time. Still holding the first once, she goes toward this, then stops and looks upward, to the top of the rock. On it, pale against the dark night sky, is the undraped figure of a woman, hair streaming in the wind, who is about to throw herself into the churning, rock-spraying water far below.

(Horror and incredulity are stamped on the upturned face of the countess. A scream is heard, long-drawn and gradually fading away, as when someone falls from a great height. The top of the rock is empty now. . . . The countess, still holding the original garment she picked up, finally lowers her head

and folds her arm in front of it, as if to wipe out what she has just seen.)

COUNTESS (to herself): That is what I should do, but I haven't her courage.

(She removes her arm from before her face at last, goes to the remaining garments which have fallen and picks them up, one at a time.)

COUNTESS: Be someone else, she said to me. (*Looks at the garments*) What better way?

(She follows the path around the turn of the rock, and off camera. When she returns, she is in the clothing of the unknown woman who has just taken her life. She stops against the rail a moment, face to camera.)

COUNTESS: I can go back there now. I can go back and win. Win back everything I lost earlier tonight. That, and perhaps more. (*Passes her hands slowly down her sides*) Now I'm someone else. In clothes still warm from someone else's body. Still reeking with her thoughts, her hopes, her fears. Almost, I can still feel her blood coursing within these clothes, her heart beating. (*Shields her eyes a moment*) I must not think who I am, what my name is. Was. (*Uncovers them again*) I must keep thinking, I am she. (*Slowly*) I am she. (*More slowly still*) I am she. (*Moves away from railing*) I must go back there now. I must go back—Where? I've forgotten. There was somewhere I wanted to go. But I've forgotten—where.

(Her head droops, as if she were dozing on her feet. Suddenly she lifts it, as if recalling.)

COUNTESS: Oh, yes, I must go—Home. Home to him. He's waiting. Waiting for me to come home.

(Opens the other woman's shabby handbag, takes out a lipstick, passes it across her mouth just once, puts it back again.)

COUNTESS: Just one more touch. Just one more try. Just one more, before I quit. And then I'm going home. Home to him.

Scene Four

Night. The promenade des Tamaris, overlooking the shore. A paved walk, and a stone balustrade or parapet, no more than

waist-high. A pool of light from a street lamp falls on the center of the walk and of the balustrade. On the balustrade, picked out by the light, the remains of a tattered movie-poster. Only the title still visible on it the rest a blur. "Jeux Interdits." The black silhouettes of tamarisk leaves, dangling from the branches lost in the dark above.

(She enters, perches slantwise atop balustrade, one leg touching ground, one dangling clear. The position of her body effectively covers up the movie-poster, or at least the title on it. . . . "Forbidden Games." She takes a cigarette from her bag, lights it, takes a single puff, then frugally stamps it out against the stone surface she is sitting on, and carefully retains it for further use.

(She glances down the walk, sees a man approaching, and immediately relights the cigarette, her manner expectant. The man comes nearer, his head slightly lowered, hands in his pockets, not too well-dressed. He walks tiredly. He doesn't raise his head to look at her from first to last, as he passes her.)

GIRL (in a peculiar, almost infantile sing-song, more like the squeak of a mechanical doll than the voice of a living person, as though she has made this salutation countless numbers of times, and it has long ago lost all meaning to her): Evening, dear.

MAN (surlily, and without breaking pace): Get out of here. Don't bother me.

(He goes on. She puts out the cigarette again, carefully retains it for further use. . . . A moment later she sees someone else coming, from the same direction as the last time. She relights the cigarette, again staring expectantly while doing so. Another man enters, this time better dressed, almost dapper, more alert to his surroundings.)

GIRL (in same sing-song): Evening, dear.

MAN (pauses, turns his head, and looks at her): Oh, it's you again. We've met before, haven't we?

GIRL (noncommittally): I know.

MAN (patronizingly): Well, I can spend a moment's time—if you can.

(She slips down from the parapet with alacrity, and links her arm in his. With the arm away from her, he surrepti-

tiously removes a billfold from his rear pocket and transfers it to the inside pocket of his coat, where it will be more inaccessible. They walk off together. The poster, restored to view now that she has stood up, remains conspicuously visible for a moment in the center of the low stone wall. "Jeux Interdits.")

Scene Five

(A strip of sidewalk along one of the main shopping streets of the town. At this hour however it is deserted. Standing before a corrugated iron shutter drawn down over some anonymous shop-window, is a solitary gendarme. The girl approaches him, passes by quickly, her head held down as though he inspires her with a guilty, or at least timorous feeling. As she goes by, he turns his head slowly, following her with his eyes. He stands there like that for several moments, as if watching to see what she will do or where she will go.)

GENDARME (finally, raising his voice with curt authority): Hey, you! Come back here a minute. (*Pause*) Come back here, I said! I want to talk to you.

(She reenters scene at right, goes up close to him, stands there obviously frightened, her head still hanging.)

GIRL (meekly): Yes, Captain?

GENDARME (rocking back and forth on his heels, for emphasis): I thought I told you girls to stay off the main streets, like this one, here in this town.

GIRL: Yes, Captain.

GENDARME: Then what are you doing on it?

GIRL (submissively): I'm sorry, Captain.

GENDARME: I have my orders from the higher-ups, just like I give mine to you. And don't try to win me over by calling me Captain every other moment, it won't get you anywhere. Now, I don't care if you want to hang around down by the seafront-walks, where you aren't likely to attract attention, but don't let me catch you again on one of these brightly-lighted streets in this part of town. It gives the town a very bad name. Respectable people don't like it, they complain. This is the last time I'm going to warn you. If I come across you again, I'm going to run you in.

GIRL: I was just on my way home, that was all. I live just down there, lower end of the Rue Mazagran. The only way I can get to it is by crossing through here.

GENDARME (gruffly): That's what you told me last night too. What's your name? (*As she takes a moment to answer*) What's the matter, don't you know your own name?

GIRL (vaguely): I do, but just for a moment I couldn't think. I'm tired. Paule's my name. Paule.

GENDARME: Paule what?

GIRL (backs her hand across her eyes for a moment, dazedly): Paule Moret.

GENDARME (nodding approval): All right. That's what you told me last night too. All right, Paule, now you listen to me if you want to stay out of trouble—(*Stares at her more closely*) What did you do to your face? You don't look quite the same to me, somehow.

GIRL (meekly): Nothing, *patron*.

GENDARME: Something different about you, I could swear. I don't know exactly what.

GIRL (placatingly): I'm just like always.

GENDARME (shrugging): Well, that's your own affair, I suppose. (*More severely*) Anyway, don't make me talk to you again, understand?

GIRL (docilely): I won't. I promise.

GENDARME: All right, go ahead.

GIRL (obsequiously): Thank you, *patron*.

(She hurries off, the sound of her hasty footsteps dying away down the street. He stands looking after her, fingering his mustache in perplexity.)

GENDARME: I suppose that's all they have, those poor devils, their faces. That's why they're always fiddling around with them, trying to change them and improve them. I can't tell what it was, but there was something different about her. (Turns, finally, and strolls off, left.)

Scene Six

(The scene is dark, as an unlighted room would be. Footsteps climbing stairs are heard under. One flight, then a pause at the landing. Then the next flight. Growing louder as they

come higher and nearer. Then a pause as if before a door and the sound of a key being put into it. Then the door opens. A sweep of light from the stairs outside passes swiftly across a wall as it does so. The door closes again and the sweep of light goes out.)

MAN (in a sigh of inexpressible content, as when one has waited for hours): At last.

GIRL (sighing too): Back again.

MAN: You stood there outside it a minute or two, before you came in. I could tell. What was it?

GIRL: Nothing. The stairs. My breath.

MAN: The beat of my heart told me it was you.

GIRL: Shall I put up the light?

MAN: You'd better have it, for yourself. You'll need it.

(Sound of a switch clicking. The scene becomes a room. A man is sitting there on a straight-backed chair placed flat against the wall. He is crouched over his own lap, as if he had been sitting there like that for a long time. His hands dangle limply down, inside his thighs. His head is raised, though, and he is staring straight before him. Eyes that are open, but do not move. The kind of eyes that do not see.)

(At his elbow, also flat against the wall, is a small, narrow wooden table with a cheap clock on it. A diagonal crack runs down the plaster of the wall, from upper-right to lower-left.)

(She does not enter the scene at once, but her shadow passes back and forth a number of times across the wall before which he sits.)

MAN (wistfully): It's late—again.

GIRL: Later than it should be. Every night the same story. They keep me working on overtime.

(He picks up the little clock, which has no glass over its face. Does not look at it but explores the hands delicately with his fingertips, holding it down flat over his lap instead of upright as others would.)

MAN: We talk to each other, this little clock and I, all through the lonely hours of waiting. Its conversation is limited. But then—(*smiles across the room at her*)—so is my vision. We come out about equal. I say to it, 'Will she be here soon?' and it answers me, 'Tikk.' That stands for yes. I say to

it, 'Is that her step out there now, far off down the quiet street?' and it answers me, 'Tokk.' That stands for maybe. That's all it ever says, yes and maybe, never no. But that's something, don't you think?

(Her outline on the wall stands still for a moment, lowers its face, covers it with both hands.)

MAN: I put my fingers to it, and I can hear its little heart going inside, beating for someone like mine does.

(She enters the scene, back to camera, going toward him. And then she turns. Her clothes are the clothes of the woman who leaped from the rock, whose life this is. Her face is the face of the woman who stood at the roulette-table, of the woman who consulted the clairvoyant. She takes down a small cannister from the shelf. She takes something from out of the top of her stocking and puts it into the cannister, giving him a quick look as she does so.)

HE: They paid you tonight at the factory?

GIRL (softly, and with a shudder): Yes.

HE: It was getting very empty in there, wasn't it?

GIRL (with despair): Very. Did you . . . ?

HE: Yes, I shook it once, when you were out. I knew you were worried. I'd heard you pick it up and put it down again, twice, before you left, but without opening it.

(Her hand goes into the cannister. It brings out several metal bolts and washers, holds them up in its palm. Drops them in again. They clink like coins would.)

GIRL: But now it isn't empty any more. It's all right now. Bread. Those little sausages. The wine for the meals. Maybe even a package of Caporals for you—

(Her voice trails off disconsolately.)

HE (leaning forward expectantly, face held up, trying to find her): Aren't you going to kiss me? You haven't yet.

GIRL (wincing, backing her hand to her mouth as though to keep it from him, looking away from him as she does so): This minute. This very minute. First, just let me—

(Goes off. Sound of a little water being poured into a wash-basin. Then sound of it trickling off someone's fingers. She enters again, drawing a cloth across her lips. Back and forth, over and over again, as though she could never get them

clean enough. Throws it away behind her, goes to him, drops to her knees, tilts her face up toward his, and their lips meet in a long, desperate kiss, like two lost souls.)

HE (slowly, as their lips finally part): My darling. My sweetheart. My wife.

GIRL (slowly): My love. My husband. My life.

HE: Why are there drops on your cheeks like that?

GIRL: It's the water from the basin. My face gets grubby from—the factory.

HE: But we only have cold water—and these are warm.

GIRL: Is the loneliness over now? That's all that matters.

HE: I can't remember it. What was it like?

GIRL: Shall I fix you something?

HE: I don't want food. I don't need food—now. Just stay here close. Close to me. Close. The time we have is so little. The terrible loneliness of love. (*His fingers lightly trace and stroke her hair.*) Love is loneliness. Even if I had eyes, it would still be loneliness.

GIRL: A cigarette?

HE: You're here with me. I need no third thing to intrude upon us.

GIRL: Did the little boy from downstairs come and take you out as usual?

HE: He found a nice bench for me, around where the fishing boats lie. I sat there in the sun. Then he came back for me and brought me home again when it got dark.

GIRL: He's a good little boy. He's kind.

HE: He told me his older sister works there at the same factory you do. She hasn't seen you there in over a month.

(She closes her eyes. Keeps them closed for a moment. Finally opens them again)

GIRL (quietly): She works days, I work nights, that's why. You know that. They transferred me to the night shift about a month ago. I told you at the time. Some they let out altogether, but me—I work nights now. (*Her voice trails off*) I work nights now. (*She drops her head suddenly, as if overcome, then raises it again*) Don't talk to the neighbors in the house too much. They mean no harm, but—People are people. Some-

times people say things that might hurt you. I don't want anyone to hurt you.

HE: They're just voices I pass on the stairs. Voices without faces. No one exists for me, only you. (*His fingers explore her face, lightly passing over her forehead, her cheeks, the turn of her chin*) You haven't changed. You're still the same. Still the same as that last time I ever saw you, before the light went out.

GIRL: Everything changes. Everything has to. Only one thing never does. Never does. Love. But even the very one who loves, even she changes too.

HE: Not you. You'll always be as you were in the beginning. When love was new, and I was a brand-new husband, and you were my brand-new wife. And we had the brand-new little house, remember? I'd come back at the end of the day, and you'd meet me out in the garden, holding newly cut flowers in your arms. Something so clean and fresh about the way you looked, always. So unspoiled.

GIRL (pleading): Not those words. Some others. Any others. Gay. Youthful. Even beautiful, if you want. Not those.

HE: But it was that about you, always that, more than anything else. You were not the most beautiful girl in the world. Anyone can be that. A red crayon at the mouth, a black one at the eyes, can make that. You were the freshest-looking—what other word can I use?—the cleanest-looking vision that ever appeared before the eyes of a man in love—

GIRL (moans): Don't. Not that word.

HE: Clean as sunlight on dew. Clean as a crystal water-fall cascading into a rock-pool. Clean as little puff-ball clouds after a summer shower has washed the sky. When you came into a room, the April breeze came in with you. Clover came in with you. That was the girl my love was, that was the girl my love is.

(A long pause follows)

HE: What is it? You're so still. You almost don't seem to breathe—There's distress, pulsing at me, beating at me. I can feel it.

(She crumples, slides gradually downward to the floor,

crouches there on hands and knees, her head hanging over. His hand that had been caressing her hair remains extended, empty. As if so stricken she cannot raise, she begins to pull herself away from him, still along the floor on hands and knees. She reaches the door and pulls herself upright against it by grasping the knob with trembling hands. First her back is to the room, to him. Then with great effort, still holding onto the door, she turns to face him.

(His face gives a half-turn to this side, a half-turn to that, trying to locate her.)

HE (bewildered): What have I said? Only tell me, tell me, and I'll unsay it, I'll take it back!

GIRL: It's too late. You've pulled me apart with just one word, just one. Now nothing can ever put me together again.

HE (with mounting alarm): You're standing by the door now. I can hear your voice sound against the wooden panel. What are you thinking of, where are you going?

GIRL (softly): Good-by, my love.

HE (fully frightened now, terrified): Paule, the door is open now! I hear the emptiness of the stairs in back of your voice!

GIRL (more softly than before): Good-by, love.

HE (shouting): Paule, the light's going out again! Don't take my light away, the only light I have! (*Crying out wildly*) Paule, *don't leave me in the dark!*

GIRL (in a whisper): Good-by.

(The doorway is standing empty. The sound of her footsteps running down the stairs comes from the other side of it, gradually diminishing in the distance.)

HE (screaming in despair): Paule, don't go! The little clock and I, we want you here! Paule, come back! Come back! The dark! The dark! The terrible dark!

(A closed door on a lower landing of the stair suddenly opens and a woman sticks her head out. Just as she does so, the girl reaches the landing, slows momentarily to make the turn, but without stopping altogether.)

WOMAN (severely): Will you kindly be more quiet! All that shouting up there! And running down the stairs like that at this hour! People are trying to sleep, you know.

GIRL (turning her head for just an instant as she goes by):

Be patient, madame. Just a moment or two, and I won't make another sound. I'll be still forever after.

(She continues running on down the next flight. Woman stares after her, mouth open, as if not knowing whether she understood rightly what she just heard.)

(At the parapet along the Promenade des Tamaris, the movie poster is still in its center, "Jeux Interdits." The girl runs by it. She is tottering now from exhaustion. As she passes, she is struggling with her dress, trying to get out of it.)

The dress flutters down from the tops of the Rocher de la Vierge, flutters down among the rocks, catches there, flickering in the wind. Then another garment. Then finally another. A flash of lightning bleaches the scene for a moment.

GIRL: I *will* be clean! I *will* be clean once more, just as I was before, just as he thinks of me still!

(Her head is upraised toward the night sky, her hair streaming in the wind. Another flash of lightning reveals her features even more clearly. Her face is definitely the face of the woman who stood at the roulette-table, who earlier stood at the foot of this same rock in a white dress, looking up.)

GIRL (eyes turned upward, in prayer): Forgive me, Holy Mother. For myself, nothing. I have no claim, I make none. But for him—be merciful, have pity. Don't let him hurt too much. Don't let him call my name too much. Don't let him linger alone in the dark too long.

(As she finishes praying, she lowers her head and turns it to give one last look below and behind her, from where she climbed.)

(At the base of the rock, the discarded garments are still lying there where they fell. But now a woman in a spreading white gown is standing there, looking upward toward the top of the rock. Her face expresses horror. A flash of lightning reveals it even more vividly. *Her* face is just as definitely the face of the woman who stood by the roulette-table, and at the foot of this rock the time before. . . . As she looks, she hears a long-drawn scream, dwindling into the silence, as when

someone is falling from a great height. A flash of lightning illuminates the top of the rock once more. It is empty. The woman in white, looking upward, transfixed.)

WOMAN (in a trance-like voice): Which is you? Which is I?

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WOOLRICH

WOOLRICH

By Barry N. Malzberg

1903–1968. September 25, 1968. At the end, in the last year, he looked thirty years older. The booze had wrecked him, the markets had wrecked him, *he* had wrecked him; by the time friends dragged him out in April to St. Clare's Hospital where the gangrenous leg was cut off he had the stunned aspect of the very old, where there had been the edges there was now only the gelatinous material that when probed would not rebound. Nonetheless if the booze had stripped all but bone it had left his eyes open and moist, curiously childlike and vulnerable. In the open coffin, surrounded by flowers sent by the Chase Manhattan Bank, he looked young once more, the young man who in the late twenties had suspired within the ballrooms and written of the dance. There were five names in the guest book. It was hideous the day of his funeral, not a good day to go to the ceremony. Leo and Cylvia Margulies, the publishers of *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine* were the first names in the guest book. Leo died in 1975. Cylvia sold the magazine shortly thereafter; she is now in ill health.

He died in print. The April 1968 *Escapade* had a story; *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* had published his "For the Rest of Her Life" in May of that year; Ace Books had embarked upon an ambitious program of reissue which brought *The Bride Wore Black*, *Rendezvous in Black*, *Phantom Lady*, others back into the mass market. Truffaut's *The Bride Wore Black* had been released. The Ellery Queen hardcover mystery annual had a story. Now, more than a decade later, he is almost out of print; an item for the specialty and university presses, an occasional republication in an Ellery Queen annual. Ace let the books go a long time past: poor sales. There are no other paperbacks. The hardcovers—what few copies remain—are for the collectors.

"It isn't dying I'm afraid of, it isn't that at all; I know what it is to die, I've died already. It is the endless obliteration, the knowledge that there will never be anything else. That's what I can't stand, to try so hard and to end in nothing. You know what I mean, don't you? . . . I really loved to write."

HIS mother, Claire, died in 1957. Shortly thereafter his own work virtually ceased. A novel—never published—found with his effects; it had been rejected all over New York in the early sixties. A few short stories for *Ellery Queen* and *The Saint Mystery Magazine*. His relationship with his mother had been the central—it is theorized that it was the only—relationship of his life; they had lived together continuously for her last fourteen years. When she died he lived alone in one room on the second floor of the Sheraton-Russell Hotel in Manhattan surrounded by cases and cases of beer cans and bottles of whiskey and invited the staff to come up and drink with him and watch television. Sometimes he would sit in the lobby, more occasionally he would take a cab to McSorley's Tavern in the village. The gangrene which came from an ill-fitting shoe and which untreated turned his left leg to charcoal, slowly, from early 1967 to April of 1968, ended all that; he would stay in his room and drink almost all the time and stare at the television looking for a film from one of his novels or short stories which came on often enough and usually after 2 A.M.; between the movies and the alcohol he was finally able to find sleep. For a few hours. Until ten or eleven in the morning. When it would all start again. At the end he had almost none of his books left in the room; he had given them all away to casual visitors. Bellboys. Maids. The night manager. An employee of his literary agent. He could not bear to have his work around him any more.

"I got six hundred dollars from Alfred Hitchcock for the movie rights to *Rear Window*. That's all that I got; it was one story in a collection of eight that was sold in the forties by the agent, H. N. Swanson for five thousand dollars, he sold *everything* for five thousand dollars, that's why we all called him five grand Swannie. But that didn't bother me really; what bothered me was that Hitchcock wouldn't even send me

a ticket to the premiere in New York. He knew where I lived. He wouldn't even send me a ticket."

THE novels were curiously cold for all of their effects and mercilessly driven but the characters, particularly the female characters who were the protagonists of many of them were rendered with great sensitivity and were always in enormous pain. That was one of the mysteries of Woolrich's work for the editors and writers who knew him: how could a man who could not relate to women at all, who had had a brief and terrible marriage when he was 27, and later annulled, who had lived only alone or with his mother since . . . how could such a man have the insight into women, write of them with such compassion, make these creatures of death and love dance and crumple on the page? Some theorized that the writer could identify with these women because that was the terrible and essential part of him which could never be otherwise acknowledged. Others simply called it a miracle; a miracle that a lonely man in a hotel room could somehow create, populate, and justify the world.

"I tried to move out. In 1942 I lived alone in a hotel room for three weeks and then one night she called me and said, 'I can't live without you, I must live with you, I need you,' and I put down the phone and I packed and I went back to that place and for the rest of her life I never spent a night away from her, not one. I know what they thought of me, what they said about me but I just didn't care. I don't regret it and I'll never regret it as long as I live."

HE began as a minor imitator of Fitzgerald, wrote a novel in the late twenties which won a prize, became dissatisfied with his work, stopped writing for a period of years. When he came back it was to *Black Mask* and the other detective magazines with a curious and terrible fiction which had never been seen before in the genre markets; Hart Crane and certainly Hemingway were writing of people on the edge of their emotions and their possibility but the genre mystery markets were filled with characters whose pain was circumstantial, whose resolution was through action; Woolrich's gallery was of

those so damaged that their lives could only be seen as vast anticlimax to central and terrible events which had occurred long before the incidents of the story. Hammett and his great disciple, Chandler, had verged toward this more than a little, there is no minimizing the depth of their contribution to the mystery and to literature but Hammett and Chandler were still working within the devices of their category: detectives confronted problems and solved (or more commonly failed to solve) them, evil was generalized but had at least specific manifestations: Woolrich went far out on the edge. His characters killed, were killed, witnessed murder, attempted to solve it but the events were peripheral to the central circumstances. What I am trying to say, perhaps, is that Hammett and Chandler wrote *of* death but the novels and short stories of Woolrich *were* death. In all of its delicacy and grace, its fragile beauty as well as its finality.

Most of his plots made no objective sense. Woolrich was writing at the cutting edge of his time. Twenty years later his vision would attract a Truffaut whose own influences had been the philosophy of Sartre, the French *nouvelle vague*, the central conception that nothing really mattered. At all. But the suffering. Ah, that mattered; that mattered quite a bit.

"I wasn't that good you know. What I was was a guy who could write a little publishing in magazines surrounded by people who couldn't write at all. So I looked pretty good. But I never thought I was that good at all. All that I thought was that I tried to tell the truth."

INEVITABLY, his vision verged toward the fantastic; he published a scattering of stories—most included in this volume—which appeared to conform to that genre at least to the degree that the fuller part of his vision could be seen as "mysteries." For Woolrich it *all* was fantastic; the clock in the tower, hand in the glove, out of control vehicle, errant gunshot which destroyed; whether destructive coincidence was masked in the "naturalistic" or the "incredible" was all pretty much the same to him. *Rendezvous in Black*, *The Bride Wore Black*, *Nightmare* are all great swollen dreams, turgid constructions of the night, obsession and grotesque outcome; to

turn from these to the “fantastic” was not to turn at all. The work, as is usually the case with a major writer was perfectly formed, perfectly consistent, the vision leached into every area and pulled the book together. “Jane Brown’s Body” is a suspense story. *The Bride Wore Black* is science fiction. *Phantom Lady* is a gothic. *Rendezvous in Black* was a *bildungsroman*. It does not matter.

“I’m glad you liked *Phantom Lady* but I can’t help you, you see. I can’t accept your praise. The man who wrote that novel died a long, long time ago. He died a long, long time ago.”

At the end, amidst the cases and the bottles and the empty glasses as the great black leg became turgid and began to stink there was nothing at all. The television did not help, the whiskey left no stain, the bellhops could not bring distraction. They carried him out to St. Clare’s and cut off the leg in April and sent him back in June with a prosthesis, the doctors were cheerful, “he has a chance” they said. “It all depends upon his will to live.” At the Sheraton Russell they came to his doors with trays, snacks, food, messages, advice. They took good care of him. They helped him down on crutches to the lobby and put him in the plush chair at the near door so that he could see the traffic from the street. They were unfailingly kind. They brought him into the dining room and they brought him out. They took him upstairs. They took him downstairs. They stayed with him. They created a subterranean network of concern: the Woolrich network in the Sheraton Russell.

In September, like Delmore Schwartz, he stroked out in a hotel corridor; in September, like Delmore Schwartz in an earlier August, he died instantly. In September he lay in the Campbell Funeral Parlor in a business suit for three days surrounded by the respectful flowers of the respectful bank which was his executor.

His will left \$850,000 to Columbia University to establish a graduate creative writing program in memory of Claire Woolrich. He had been a writer of popular fiction, had never had a serious review in the United States, had struggled from cheap pulp magazines to genre hardcover and paperback.

Sure, he wanted respectability: a university cachet. Sure, why not? Who wouldn't?

"LIFE is death. Death is in life. To hold your one true love in your arms and to see the skeleton she will become; to know that your love leads to death, that death is all there is, that is what I know and what I do not want to know and what I cannot bear. Don't leave me.

"Don't leave me now, Barry."

19 April 1980: New Jersey



(Continued from front flap)

the true," Satan delivers a dress to Madame Maldonado. In this garment, good women become fiends, killing, betraying, rejoicing in treachery.

"Guns, Gentlemen": Trapped into retracing the footsteps of an ancestor, Stephen Botillier "stood there, smoking a Lucky Strike, but living a code of the Middle Ages." The plot unravels predictably, comfortably—until a bizarre twist burns the story into the reader's memory.

"Jane Brown's Body": A suspense story of crime, greed, love, and the mistakes of a scientist willing to tamper with Nature. Woolrich sets the tone: "Two other, fiercer, whiter moons set close together suddenly top the rise, shoot a fan of blinding platinum far down ahead of them. Headlights. The humming burgeons into a roar. The touring car is going so fast it sways . . . The road is straight, the way is long. The night is short."

"The Moon of Montezuma": Woolrich describes "A baby not more than a few weeks old. And beside the collar of [his mother's] coat a rosebud. . . . Scarcely opened, yet dying already. Red as a glowing coal. Or a drop of blood." This story of ritual murder evolves into a tale of revenge from the grave.

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Francis M. Nevins, Jr., adviser to the estate of Cornell Woolrich, is a Professor at the St. Louis University School of Law. He has written novels, stories, and nonfiction.

Barry N. Malzberg has more than 75 novels to his credit. Martin H. Greenberg is editor or author of more than 40 books.

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