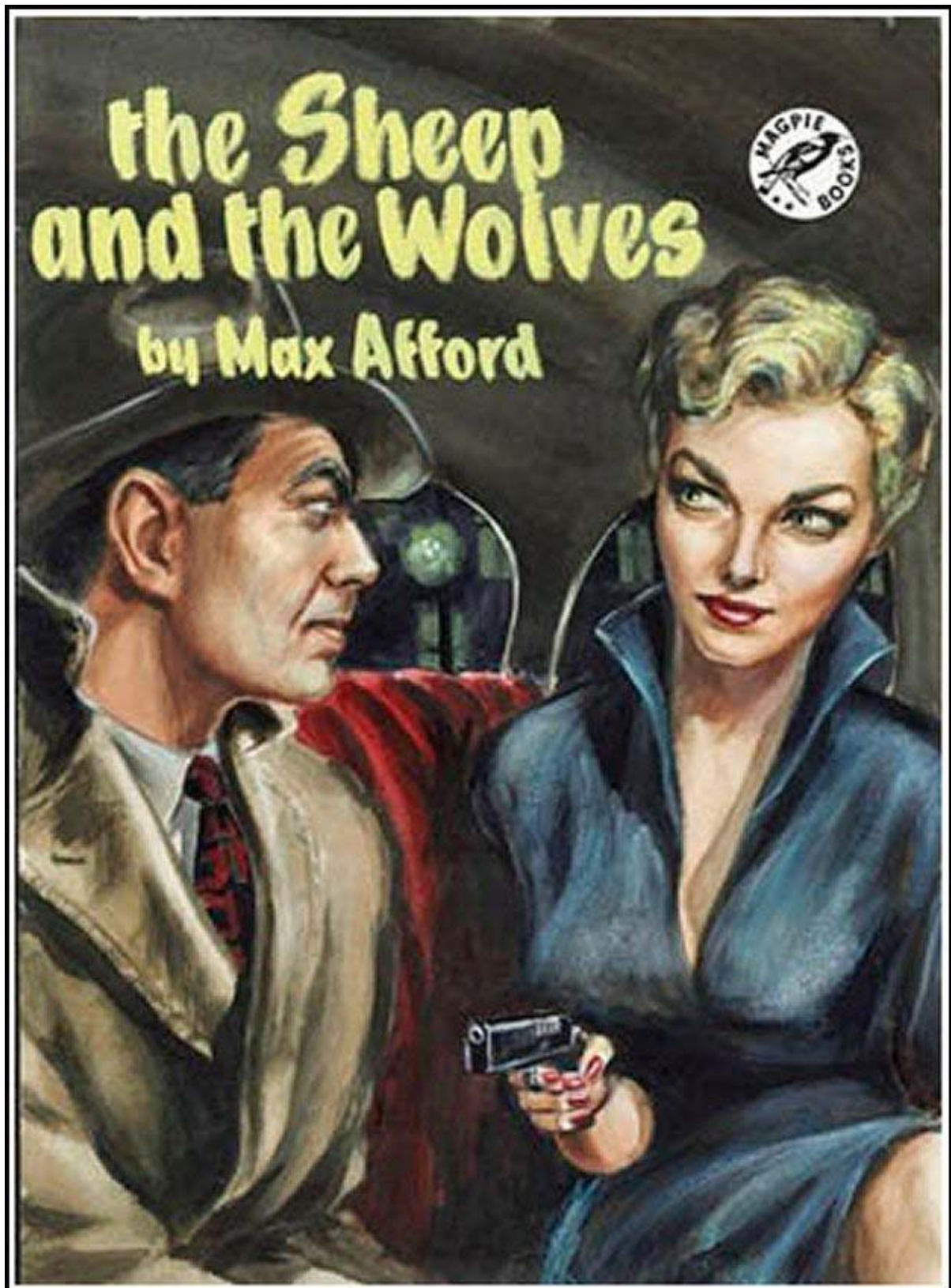




THE SHEEP AND THE WOLVES

Max Afford

1906-1954

1942

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Book One: The Casket

"I'VE READ SOMEWHERE," observed Elizabeth Blackburn, "that the gentleman should always rise when a lady enters the room."

Jeffery, stretched full length on the couch, reached out and took her fingers. They were warm and soft and faintly sticky. He said casually, "Dame called Edith Post wrote it. Along with something about a lady never perspiring."

"Then that lady never opened a garden party at Staines on an August afternoon!" Elizabeth freed the hand and dragged at her hat, shaking her head to release the blonde curls. "Darling, you are the complete bottom! At least you might have come with me."

"Nuts!" grunted Jeffery. "How was the clambake?"

"Rather a wash-out. Endless fuss and only fifty pounds raised."

"Sounds quite a set-up!"

She was clicking her lighter. "To cap everything, when I got outside, I found the Rover had a flat."

"How did you get back?"

Elizabeth Blackburn blew a perfect smoke-ring. "Mr. Stewart-Riggs drove me in his Bentley."

There was, she noticed, a half-filled liquor bottle partly concealed under the couch. A brittle hardness crept into her tone. "Nobody you know."

"Just as well." His mouth twisted. "Sounds another pansy-pants to me."

It was coming. She knew it was happening again and she strove to keep her voice steady, almost casual when she replied.

"As a matter of fact, I'd never met him myself until this afternoon. He's an acquaintance of Ella Halversham's— they met in Switzerland just after the war. He's travelled a lot. Now he's come to England to settle down. Bought a big estate in Kent— place called Holmedale near Sevenoaks."

She reached for the ash-tray as she added, "He asked me down there."

"Matey sort of guy, isn't he?"

She gave a hard little smile. "Darling, Mr. Stewart-Riggs hasn't the slightest interest in me."

She rose and crushed out her cigarette, striving to keep the irritation out of her voice. "Aren't you being just a little childish, Jeffery? Taking a dislike to a person you've never seen."

He muttered. "The jerk attends garden parties— that's enough for me!" He stood up, swaying a little. "What's this guy like, anyhow?"

She was reaching for her shoes. Now she looked up.

"Know those men of distinction in the whisky ads? That's Stewart-Riggs to the life. Fiftyish, well-dressed and greying in the polished diplomatic manner." Something of the old flippancy came back into her tone. "And so very well-bred that our drive home was duller than a choir-girls' picnic!" She had crossed to him. Now she reached up and tweaked his ear.

"Jeffery."

Moodily he turned.

"I cleared the afternoon mail as I came up." She tossed four envelopes on to the table and took up the drinks. As she handed one across she noticed he had retrieved the bottle from beneath the couch. She raised her glass.

"Here's to crime!"

He stood with his drink in his hand, not tasting it.

"Baby?"

At the term, her eyes came up. He went on. "How would you like to see New York again?"

He saw her face tighten.

"So that's the reason you've been giving at the seams lately! You've still got that she-wolf clawing at your heart."

He frowned. "Don't get the meaning."

She slapped the envelopes together almost irritably. "Who else but Muriel Armarti!"

He said shortly, "You're on the wrong beam." He drained his glass and held it, caressing the smooth surface with his fingers. "Muriel Armarti doesn't figure anywhere in this. That's all in the past." He reached out for the bottle and tilted it over his glass. Then, very deliberately, he downed his drink and tossed the empty glass on to a chair. He was almost to the door when the girl cried out.

"Where are you going?"

"Out!"

But she was in front of him, the letters fallen and splayed across the carpet.

"Darling, what's the matter with us?"

Face set, lips compressed, he stared at her without speaking.

"We've got to have this out," she said desperately. "Everything will seem all right, just as it was when I first came in. And I think, 'Thank God, we're back on the rails again.' Then suddenly this bickering starts and goes on and on."

Under the black bars of his brows, the glitter had died. She watched his face relax.

"I've told you how it is. This place is driving me psycho— I've got to get free. Guess I'm not built to stay penned up in an expensive apartment. Some

guys maybe, but not me." Across his broad back, she could see the material of his coat crushed and wrinkled where he had lain in it all the afternoon. "It doesn't need a crystal ball to figure what's gone out of life. I'll give it to you in one word— excitement!"

She said quietly, "And you expect to find it in New York?"

He wheeled on her. "What do you figure I did in Moratti's agency? Played kiss-in-the-ring?"

It came out before she could check it. "Surely that depended on the sex of your clients!"

He jerked savagely at the curtains and the westerning sun poked a finger into Elizabeth's hair, turning it pure gold. She stood smoothing her frock over her small neat breasts. And then she spoke.

"I'm sorry I said that, Jeffery." There was no answer. "But if I you're sickening for the El Morocco and the view from the Rainbow Room, you'd better get it out of your system pretty soon." She swallowed something in her throat.

"When do you want to leave?"

He turned. "We go together."

"I told you I didn't like New York." She lowered her eyes, avoiding his dark face. "In your present mood, it's much better if you fly solo." She hesitated before she asked, "When would you like to go?"

He gave her a glance that was as curt and cold as his reply.

"A plane leaves tomorrow afternoon."

"All right— you'll be on it."

"What will you do?"

"Stay with Mother and Dad at Chippingmarle." Her tone was determinedly casual. "It's months since I've been home."

A short silence. "Beth," he began. But she held up both hands, palms outward. "Let's not talk about it any more, Jeffery. We've made a decision— it isn't going to do either of us any good to go back on it." Her eyes were still on the carpet and for the first time she seemed to see the four white rectangles patterned across it. Abruptly she stooped.

"Whom do we know staying at the Dorchester?"

"Search me!"

She straightened and held out the envelope, a finger underlining the embossed address.

She was beginning to tear at the gummed flap when suddenly she paused. "Do you mind?"

"Don't give it a thought! Muriel Armarti can't afford to stay at the Dorchester either!"

Elizabeth Blackburn said quietly, "All right, Jeffery. Now we're quits!" She slit the flap and drew out a sheet of furry note paper. It rustled luxuriously when she opened it.

Jeffery took the letter. Attached by clip pin to the top corner was a card. It bore an address: "Fosdyke Museum of Antiquities, 86th West Street, New York City" and beneath it a name—"Otis T. Peterson, Representative."

Under the engraved address of the hotel, the message ran.

"Mr. Otis Peterson would be very grateful if you could call the above address at your earliest convenience. He has a proposition which he thinks may interest you. He also requests that you keep this correspondence in the strictest confidence."

It was signed—"Henry Lessing, private secretary."

He looked up. "Know anything about this guy Peterson?"

Elizabeth said promptly, "He's a buyer or a collector for the Fosdyke family. Travels around the world picking up bits and pieces for the museum. That's why he's in London— probably trying to bid for the Crown Jewels!"

Jeffery turned the letter over in his fingers.

"I wonder if the old bird would be interested in buying a few antiques from this family? A .45 automatic, rusty through disuse, an unused set of brass knuckles and an out-of-date private eye, sound in wind and limb except for a pickled liver!"

"Why not give the secretary a buzz now?"

"And get an assignment routing among the junk stores in Kensington Church Street?"

"Don't be a fool, Jeff!" She came close to him, looking up and seeing his face etched strongly against the light. "Peterson wouldn't bother you with anything like that."

He had crushed out his cigarette and was standing loosely, fingers scraping his jaw, his whole attitude one of irresolution. For just another few minutes his wife hesitated, then she crossed to the telephone.

"Why is it I can never remember the number of the Dorchester?" He said, "No, baby. I'm leaving for the States..." But beyond that, he made no movement to restrain her as she picked up the directory and began flicking through the pages.

"There's all tomorrow morning to put in somehow," she reminded him. "The plane doesn't leave until the afternoon."

Henry Lessing said, "Sit down, Mr. Blackburn."

The private secretary was a gaunt young man, with butter yellow hair and eyebrows so fair that their existence was assured only after a second glance. He gestured to a deep arm-chair near the window.

"Mr. Peterson won't keep you waiting very long," he added.

Jeffery glanced at his wrist-watch. "The appointment was for ten-forty-five," he grunted.

Lessing said pleasantly, "There's been an unexpected caller— another collector." He moved to the small desk and picked up a card from the blotter, "Archdale Stewart-Riggs." He looked up. "Perhaps you know him?"

Blackburn shook his head.

"She's not a large island but she holds a whale of a lot of folk." He lit a cigarette and let his eyes wander over the desk with its leaf-calendar marking the date— Thursday, August twenty-third. A small row of books was set behind it. Jeffery read the titles absently, not interested but just filling in time. A Guide to London and Suburbs, a slim Geographia map of the city, Hamilton's "The Roman Way," Walling's "Egyptian Antiques and their History," and next to this— incongruous in such a setting— an obviously American edition of "Balanced Diets for Diabetics." He caught the secretary's glance and muttered.

"Your boss some kind of invalid?"

Lessing looked surprised. "Oh, no," he said. "His arthritis hasn't progress as far as that. Only in his hand..." He paused as Jeffery grunted something and turned away.

He noticed that his fingers were trembling and wondered what excuse he could find to ask for a drink.

Over the last few weeks he had grown almost reconciled to grey awakenings, but on this particular morning his mood of depression was unusually black and bitter. As he had phoned the air depot for a reservation, Elizabeth had packed his suit-case, working with an air of quiet detachment that only served to put an edge to his temper. He realised now that this break affected him more than he dared admit for he had an instinctive feeling that this time it would be for keeps.

It was while Elizabeth was gathering old newspapers for wrapping his shoes she had come across a photograph of Otis Peterson and passed it over to him. The spotty newsprint showed a small plump man in his mid-fifties— eggheaded and balding. He wore rimless glasses below a domed forehead but the scholarly impression was belied by a tight rat-trap mouth above a jutting authoritative jaw. The chin of a person used to giving orders and having orders obeyed.

Blackburn looked at his watch again. In his irritable impatient mood, this waiting irked him. Who was this other guy taking up his time? What name had the pin-eyed secretary mentioned?

Stewart-Riggs...?

Blackburn's fingers, drumming on the arm of the chair, stopped.

Surely this was the bird Elizabeth had mentioned. It had taken all this time for his mind to register. But that's how it was with him these days— his mind as slow as his muscles were loose. Maybe Beth was right. Maybe the booze had got him for keeps.

The buzzer on Henry Lessing's desk shrilled. The secretary stood up.

"Mr. Peterson will see you now, Mr. Blackburn."

Side by side they paced the carpeted corridor. Turning a corner, they almost collided with another man coming into the opposite direction. A tall, slim, immaculate grey man— hair, eyebrows, tie and suit all blending into a monotone.

Henry Lessing nodded.

"Would you mind waiting in the office, Mr. Stewart-Riggs? I'll be back in a moment."

A well-bred voice said, "Thank you." Blackburn stared at the visitor, taking in a face that was somehow wrong and unbalanced. Two pale eyes raked him from head to foot and soundlessly, Archdale Stewart-Riggs passed on.

Jeffery muttered, "Something wrong with that guy."

Lessing said, in that slightly supercilious aloof manner. "Curious colouring. Almost albino." A few paces further along he paused and tapped politely on a door. A metallic voice answered. Then Jeffery found himself inside and Lessing was speaking obsequiously.

"Mr. Blackburn, sir."

Otis Peterson did not rise. With crooked fingers, he pushed a silver box across the desk.

"Smoke?"

Blackburn shook his head.

"A drink?" The spectacles were full on his face as Jeffery wiped the back of his hand over his lips again. Then the tubby representative of the Fosdyke museum nodded to the glass and chromium cabinet. The young man rose, striving to control the shaking of his fingers as he poured himself a lavish Scotch. He swigged it quickly, felt it spread warm and soothing through his stomach, then he refilled the glass and returned to his chair. Otis Peterson said: "Jeffery Blackburn. Aged thirty-four. Irish-Italian extraction. Flight Commander with the R.A.F. during the war. Then travelled to the United States, spending five years there. Became an oilfield roughneck, a chauffeur to a wealthy widow in Florida, then a test pilot at Murac in California—"

The visitor stared. "What's the pay-off?"

Without a change of inflection in his voice Peterson went on: "Crashed a 974 over the Mojave Desert and spent the next three months in hospital at Las Vegas. Recuperated in Canada and became a lumberjack. Back to the States

joining a group of loggers at Clearwater, Idaho. Then went to New York, joining the Louie Moratti private detective agency. Wounded in shoulder during a raid at the Roebuck Hotel in Chicago. Returned to London and married Elizabeth, only daughter of Sir Charles and Lady Bickford, of Chippingmarle, Berks. Couple met originally when Elizabeth Bickford was in charge of a cipher department during the war. Marriage reported far from successful..."

"Chief allergy— snoopers!" Jeffery thrust back his chair. "Thanks for the two drinks."

"Have another."

"Forget it!" He was half-way across the room. "Haven't got time." Behind the desk, the collector remained stone still.

"I'm giving you a chance, Blackburn— a chance to do some special inquiry work in an assignment that is right up your street. If you succeed, there's a cheque for a thousand dollars attached to it."

The other stared at the ovoid head, at the lips moving in that frozen face, choking down the taunt, saying nothing.

"If I've checked on you, I have two good reasons. One is because this could be a very dangerous business and I want to be sure of my man. I want to have faith in him."

Blackburn's lip curled. "I'm getting dewey-eyed!"

"The other is because I never buy a pig in a poke. I like to have every single detail in black and white— whether it's hiring a man..." the voice slowed a trifle "...or buying ten thousand dollars worth of mischief!"

There was no sound in the room save the tapping of the collector's fingers on the manila folder.

"If it wasn't for certain additional details here, I'd say you were finished, Blackburn. Pushed completely over the edge. But seeing you and hearing you talk, I feel there's still a spark of something there. The something that sent you crawling down the ventilating shaft of the Roebuck Hotel when you got Ferdie the Bat in Chicago—"

The other man snapped into his words.

"Moratti!" The slow fire in his voice was reflected in his flushed face as he took a step forward. "Louie Moratti, the two-timing punk! He gave you this dope on me!"

Peterson's voice took on a sudden rasp. "Yes, Moratti! The best friend you have in the States. Before you start calling him names, Blackburn, think back! When you ran up against that patch of trouble in New York almost twelve months ago, Moratti was no two-timing punk!"

The younger man stiffened and his tone was cautious.

"Patch of trouble?"

"Your disgraceful affair with the woman known as Bianca Milland—" The collector stopped abruptly, the words choked by the expression on the other man's face.

Then Blackburn said very softly, "Just what do you know about Bianca Milland?"

Another three seconds passed...then the collector shrugged.

"But of course, you're married now. You've put all that kind of thing right behind you."

(But not nearly far enough. The picture, all these months forced into the recesses of his mind, swam into sharp focus, seeming even clearer than on the night he had first entered the apartment with the mirrored ceiling supported by pillars of black and gold. The picture of her body stretched on the white ermine rug.)

The collector was watching him.

"Moratti told me in confidence of the incident. Naturally, I'm prepared to honor the confidence— under certain conditions."

The plump little man sat down, then leaned forward so that his image was reflected in the surface of the desk. He was dipping a hand into his pocket, dragging at a key ring. There was a click and the slide of a drawer. Then he was holding something swathed in wash-leather, holding it gently, carefully, placing it on the glass surface and laying aside the soft folds until the object was revealed.

"It's not to be touched," he warned.

It was a tiny rectangular casket, the palest turquoise in color, tooled and faceted on the four sides. Jeffery raised his head.

"Nice trinket."

"Ten thousand dollars," said Otis Peterson. He was revolving the gem-like object by turning the wash-leather mat slowly at the edges. "A month ago we were staying at Shepherd's in Cairo— my niece Susan Ann, Henry Lessing and myself. A Greek named Cassamattis came to see me one morning. He showed me this casket, offering it for sale.

"His story seemed quite genuine. A friend of his had been in charge of the laborers opening up tombs in the San el Hagar valley for Professor Pierre Montet of the University of Stratsbourg. One of the laborers had been caught stealing the casket; the friend had confiscated it. Thus it had come into the Greek's possession. So far so good!"

"Good enough to hand over ten thousand dollars?"

Peterson lifted his eyes from the desk.

"I've told you I'm not a man to buy blind. Before I even discussed business with Cassamatis, I got in touch with a man from the British School of

Archaeology in Egypt. I paid him a handsome commission and three days later, he brought me the full history of the casket.

"Something else made the casket even more valuable. The Egyptians of that time believed that every man possessed a Ka— a spirit double, a vital force born as counterpart with the body, living with it and accompanying it into the next world. Sometimes the Ka was housed in a statue, sometimes in an ornament. Or a casket of skilled workmanship such as you see here."

Jeffery turned, glancing at his wrist.

"Is there much more of this? Time's running short. I'm leaving for the States this afternoon."

Peterson said curtly, "Have a drink."

The young man hesitated a moment. Then he nodded. "Thanks. Might steady my nerves. You're beginning to scare me." He crossed to the cabinet and then turned, holding a brimming glass.

"With restraint, I can make this last five minutes. Go ahead, Peterson."

"I had Lessing get in touch with the Greek. He made only one stipulation—the money was to be paid in cash. I was expecting this— cheques, especially foreign ones, are too easily traced. Cassamatis arrived at the hotel on the following morning. He seemed very nervous and on edge, I remember. The deal went through and I locked the casket in the safe deposit at the hotel.

"Later that afternoon, Lessing came to me while I was resting, saying a visitor outside wanted to see me. Henry wouldn't have disturbed me, except that the caller was an odd person calling himself Menena and he wanted to talk about the casket. I followed Lessing out. Waiting for me was a character straight from the Arabian Nights— an elderly man in a tarboosh, burnoose and slippers. He was bearded like a prophet. I asked him his business and his reply just about took my breath away.

"He told me that the casket had been stolen from his house. It was the property of his ancestor and its value was beyond reckoning. So, to save further trouble, would I please return it to him! The cool request staggered me and I lost my temper. I told him I'd paid a tidy sum for that object and he'd come to the wrong shop. He wanted the police department! The old boy just shook his head. I told Lessing to throw him out. I guess Henry was a bit rough, but the apparition wasn't a mite ruffled. He only said that maybe I'd change my mind when I saw him again."

Peterson was swathing the casket in its foldings. There was a scrape of a drawer and a click as he locked it away.

"The police found the Greek's body that same night— strangled— with something that could have been a silken cord!"

A pause. Then Blackburn made a harsh chuckling sound.

"Comic strip crap! What are you trying to sell me?"

"Cassamatis was murdered—"

"By some of his snotty-nosed buddies in Skid Row! He had ten grand in cash!"

The collector had not moved from his desk. "He wasn't killed in the slums and the money wasn't touched. The police found it all, folded neatly as his clothes—"

Jeffery's hand was on the door-knob. "Clothes?"

"You're so impetuous, Blackburn. You don't give me time to explain. The Greek was found dead in a house on the Mena road, his body completely naked and lying on a large white ermine rug...and nearby the police found a male scarab beetle, impaled through the back but still alive."

He stood frozen and facing the smooth panels of the door, not seeing them, not feeling the planes of the knob under his hand, yet feeling too much, with his whole body trembling and his skin prickling and tight with a forbidden memory.

"Blackburn."

Fingers, moist, hot, dropped away from the door.

Blackburn came forward. Peterson moved to the cabinet, standing before it, bandy legs apart and his hands clasped behind his back.

"The following day we left for Port Said where we were to join a twelve passenger freighter for London. We had three days to wait. On the second evening, I came face to face with Menena in the hotel foyer; he nodded and thrust an envelope into my hand before he passed by. When I opened it, I found a piece of paper on which was written a date: August 25th.

"I suspected monkey business and dismissed the whole incident from my mind. On the morning we were due to sail, however, Susan Ann called me from her bedroom. When I went in, she was standing with Lessing, staring at the row of strapped and packed suitcases against the wall. On the largest of the grips, a piece of paper had been pasted— bearing a date. August 25th. Sue declared it hadn't been there when she left the room ten minutes earlier.

"We sailed that same afternoon. On the following evening, Lessing came to me, saying that Menena was on the ship. When I said that this was unlikely, Henry vowed he had seen him walking down one of the corridors. I don't mind saying I was mighty sceptical— until dusk next day. I came out of the dining saloon and there on the deck ahead of me was a figure in fez and burnoose. When I got to the spot where he'd stood there was nothing there except an envelope.

"I picked it up. It was addressed to me and inside, the same paper with the same date." The little man paused and gave a short barking cough.

"I wasn't putting up with this kind of hanky-panky for very long! Henry and I went to the skipper. He told us what I'd half begun to suspect— that there was no one of that name or description on the passenger-list. In the end, we demanded a search, but we might just as well have saved our time. No person even faintly resembling Menena was on board.

"On the evening before we berthed at Tilbury, I was talking to Sue on deck when Henry came up. He was white-faced and panting. He'd come out of his cabin just in time to see Menena go into mine— and had locked the door on him. The three of us went below. When Lessing threw open the door, the cabin was empty. Unless our persistent friend had crawled through a tiny porthole there was no way he could have escaped. But on the wall over my bunk a date had been written in black chalk. Yes— the same date!"

Little hard eyes blinked in the glare of the light from the unshaded window.

"We saw Menena twice after that. As Sue, Henry and I were stepping off the boat train at Charing Cross my niece gave a little cry and pointed along the platform. A white-robed, turbanned figure was disappearing among the crowd..." The speaker breathed on rimless lenses and polished vigorously. "Yesterday morning, I happened to pass Lessing's office. The door was open. He was standing by the window staring down into Park Lane. He called me across. Standing near those gates into the park was Menena, apparently quite unconcerned by the glances of the passing folk, Menena in burnoose and slippers, smack here in the heart of London!"

Otis Peterson hooked his spectacles back into place, reached across and picked up a desk calendar, holding it in clawed fingers.

"See today's date? August twenty-third. That gives you three days to get to the bottom of all this hocus-pocus!" He shot back a cuff. "Eleven-fifteen! From now on you're part of my pay-roll!"

Jeffery spoke very quietly.

"Keep talking."

In the act of replacing the calendar, the collector's head twisted.

"That's all."

A steady voice said, "What about the house in Mena Road?"

The small mouth sneered. "A high-class brothel!"

"What else?"

"How should I know?"

"You're still lying!"

Something ugly and dangerous had crept into the room. Blackburn had risen, shoulders hunched and straining at the material which bound them, head thrust forward, eyes narrow and glittering. Very softly he repeated, "You're still lying, Peterson."

For three tight seconds their glances locked. Then the squat man made a fluttering, placatory little gesture.

"Why the devil don't you listen!" But the bark was curiously hollow. "I told you, Blackburn! We left on the following morning. There was no time..."

"How did you know it was a brothel?"

"The police..." Rimless glasses were askew and a hand flew to straighten them. "But I can't see what this has to do with the present assignment."

A hard mouth said, "Can't you?"

"I've given you all necessary details..."

"A bed-time story about a gypso bogey-man and a family curse! They've stopped dishing that up even for the Sunday supplements! If this bird's getting in your hair, why not dial Whitehall 1212?" He kicked back his chair. "As an assignment I wouldn't touch it with a forty-foot pole! Thanks for the three drinks, Peterson, but don't expect me to return the hospitality. Check 'em up to a wasted hour when—"

The scream from the corridor beyond had the harsh shrillness of a pencil drawn across slate. Peterson jerked and his round face went blank and foolish with sudden panic. "Susan Ann!"

"Uncle Otis! Henry! He's here!"

Peterson was making little mewling noises and groping blindly for the door. Jeffery shouldered him aside and grasped the knob, flinging wide an entrance. Almost opposite a young girl in her mid teens stood rigid in the doorway, one hand at her throat, the other jabbing the air in the direction of the corridor. Blackburn's head swivelled. At the far end and just disappearing around the corner was an outlandish figure, robed and slippered. Then the collector pushed past and was running to the girl.

Jeffery was already half-way down the passage, his footsteps thudding into the carpet. At the bend, he ran almost full tilt into a wild-eyed Lessing, coming from the direction of his study.

He panted, "Not that way! Can't get out— I've locked the door!"

Jeffery pulled to a halt.

"I saw the guy turn—"

Lessing indicated a right-angle opening just ahead. "This way!"

But when they reached the corner, the passage stretched before them blank and bare. Two doors broke the uniform panelling.

"My bedroom," the secretary explained as they loped along. "The other's just a junk-room— cabin trunks and grips." As they halted he swung open the nearest door and his companion glimpsed a small neat room so spartanly furnished as to provide no cover for the quarry they sought. Then Jeffery had

crossed and was stalking among the labelled trunks in the box-room. When he re-appeared, his face was grim.

"Neat little vanishing trick!"

Lessing was mopping a flushed and sweating face. He said hopelessly, "It's happened before. Once on the ship coming across. Just disappeared into smoke. Incredible— like, like witchcraft, almost!"

When they reached the main corridor, the doorway was empty. They moved into the room. Susan Ann was standing by the long mirror, being very grown up and applying a geranium lipstick to her soft, immature mouth. Her uncle, perched on the satin-covered bed, rose quickly as the two men entered.

"No trace, sir," Lessing said briefly.

Before his employer could comment, Jeffery said brusquely, "What happened in here?"

Sue Peterson dipped her golden head, ostensibly to examine her handiwork but he knew she was summing him up.

"You're Jeffery Blackburn, aren't you? Uncle's told me all about you."

He said shortly, "Okay, okay, chicken! But what happened?"

She turned, fitting the lip-stick into its golden container and by the awkwardness of the movement, he sensed that this was a fairly new routine.

"I was resting up before lunch..." she indicated the glossy-faced movie magazines on the bed. "I guess I must have fallen asleep. When I came to, there was a sort of crazy sound out there in the corridor. I couldn't figure out what it was— not at first."

She paused and looked at him. Jeffery nodded.

"Go on."

"So I got up and crossed and opened the door..."

Her voice rose half a tone.

"And I just about dropped dead from shock! I was so close I could have touched him— his old beard and face weren't more than a foot away from me."

"*What's this?*"

It was Henry Lessing and he was stabbing a finger at the swinging door.

A square of paper was fixed to the centre panel with cellulose tape. On it was drawn the date, August 25th, enclosed by a crude design of a looped cord. Otis Peterson gave a gasp.

"Now do you believe me, Blackburn! Now will you act?"

Three faces stared at him, one globus and sweating, one young and pink and tight and the third a pair of wide beseeching eyes. Jeffery was looking at Sue Peterson as he answered.

"Don't rush me. I've got to figure this thing out."

BIG BEN was striking midday when the taxi dropped Jeffery in Whitehall. He strolled through the gates of Scotland Yard, traversed a shadowed lane and climbed a flight of stairs. Pausing outside a door marked "Chief Inspector," he heard the rattle of a typewriter within.

"Don't get your finger caught!"

Chief Inspector William Read looked up as his door opened.

"Jeff!"

"Howdo, Chief?"

"Take a pew, son."

"Thanks. I'd rather prowl..."

"Haven't seen you around, son." Read tossed a charred match into the ash-tray. "Been busy?"

"No. Just lazy. How's things with you, Chief?"

"Quiet enough. Anything on your mind, son?"

"Care to give me some advice?"

The other nodded.

Jeffery pulled his chair closer.

"Got anything on a murder in Cairo about a week ago?"

The Chief Inspector's teeth wedged his cigar. "Big place Cairo...big crowd of people..."

Jeffery said, "Habeas corpus was a bird named Cassamatis— a Greek. Found dead in a house on the Mena Road." He crushed out his cigarette. "Stark mother naked!"

Grey brows rose a fraction. Read said grimly, "What kind of house?"

"A joint, but high-class." Jeffery sat back, clasping his hands behind the chair.

"Shot?"

"Strangled."

"Marks?"

Blackburn shook his head. "Choked with a cord. Some kind of silk according to rumor."

Read was watching him. "Any particular details?"

Jeffery's reply was a shade too casual. "I'd like a line on the owner of the joint, or the tenant or what have you."

The cigar ash glowed brightly. "Run across something interesting, Jeff?"

"Chief..."

"Yes, son?"

"Ever heard of a bird named Stewart-Riggs?"

"Not on our books." Read was studying his companion's face, noting the tiny beads of perspiration forming on the short upper lip.

"Friend of yours?"

"No. Beth's met him."

Read nodded. "How is she these days?"

The other said simply, "Right now she's come out in a rash of garden parties. Opened another at Staines yesterday."

Read said dryly, "Enjoy yourself?"

"No, Chief. I let Beth tackle it alone. Not my dish at all. Crawling with titles just the way Lady Halversham likes it!"

"Who's she?"

"Offspring of two first cousins, I'd say! Zany is the word for Ella." Jeffery gave a tight grin and ran a hand through his crisp black curls. "But the peeve's quite mutual. She thinks I'm a maverick..."

The comment was expressionless. "That so, son?"

"A maverick." Jeffery's faintly olive face, a heritage of so many mixed blood, was as dark as his voice was moody. "Something apart from the herd, irresponsible, footloose, never satisfied. Seeking something in one place, running like hell to find it, when discovering it was away back behind..." the words slowed. He was staring at the brand of his burning cigarette. "Quite the wrong type to marry— especially with a swell kid like Beth..."

Chief Inspector Read said quietly, "How long is it now?"

"Six months."

"Then give it a chance, son."

The answer was mocking. "Sure, doctor!"

Read stabbed his cigar across the desk. "That's your trouble! You've knocked around the world, got yourself caught up in all kinds of excitement. Then you come back here and fall for a pretty little blue-blood with a pedigree as long as piccadilly."

"Attraction of complete opposites!"

"...and straight away you get the delusion that it's all a mistake, that you're a misfit living on your wife's money! And so you start hitting the bottle!"

Blackburn's mouth tightened. He said softly, "Okay! I'm a rat, a heel and a drunken bum!"

"Self-pity!"

"By Jesus no!" The hand fell away as Blackburn leapt to his feet "Anything but that!" He was gripping the back of the chair, his whole body rigid. "Chief, you know me better than any man living. Believe me when I say I've faced up to most things. But never that..." His voice went suddenly husky, choked in his throat.

Chief Inspector Read was placing his half-smoked cigar on the lip of the ash-tray. Below him the young man was passing a hand across his face.

The elder man was standing, gnawing a lip. Abruptly, he picked up a glass and strode to a cupboard in the corner. He returned, carrying the liquid carefully.

"Son..."

Jeffery's eyes swivelled to the glass. "No..." he muttered. "Not here! I'm trying to...to..." The cigarette dropped from his lips and as Read stooped to pick it up, their faces came level.

Jeffery said, "Why did you do this?"

Squat fingers were mashing the cigarette into the ash-tray. "Because," said William Read quietly, "I think you need it."

"By God I do!" Jeffery reached out hungrily but his hands were so slippery he had difficulty in bringing the glass to his lips. It rattled against his teeth. As he set it back empty, he gave a long sighing breath.

"Thanks, Chief."

The Chief Inspector took up the glass and moved back to the cupboard. From inside he took a tea-towel and began drying and polishing.

"Tell me," he said, "about this assignment you're working on."

Jeffery said slowly, "I'm not working on any assignment."

Read had found a smear on the glass and was back at his polishing. "Then why this interest in a stripped Greek on the Mena Road?"

"Idle curiosity."

"Didn't Otis Peterson's proposition interest you?"

Blackburn's head jerked sharply. "How did you know—?" He stood up, steadier now and more controlled. "Who's kidding who, Chief?"

Read came back and picked up his cigar.

"When I told you I hadn't seen Beth, it was the truth. But I've heard from the lass." He gestured to the telephone. "She rang me here about half an hour ago."

"What did she want?"

"You!" The older man rolled the cigar in his fingers. "I said I hadn't seen you for weeks and asked what you were doing. Beth told me about this appointment at the Dorchester."

Jeffery frowned. "But why did she ring here?"

Read said smoothly. "No doubt she'll explain when she arrives." His eyes went to the clock on the wall. "Any time now. I hope she isn't late because I've booked a table for lunch."

The muffled tapping of the typewriter next door filled the silence. When the older man continued, his voice had dropped a tone.

"Pity about the Peterson assignment. Beth hoped it might turn out to be something worthwhile. She mentioned you were going through a difficult time but she wasn't worrying. It was just that you had too much time on your hands. There was nothing wrong with you, she said, that some first-class action and excitement wouldn't cure..."

Blackburn's restless finger made a diameter inside the wet ring. Read waited, chewing his cigar. A brusque gentleness had crept into his tone when he continued.

"What was wrong, son? Why turn it down?"

Jeffery said, quietly and simply, "I was scared, Chief. I'm scared now! Just as I've been scared for the past three months. With this difference. At last I've got the guts to face it..."

"You know the old bromide about the crashed flier who has to get back into another kite before the nerves take him to pieces? That's how it is with me, I guess. Months ago in the States I took on a case and made a complete bloody shambles of it. Moratti wanted to get me back into harness at once. Instead, I got out from under and went on a three-day bat.

"I wouldn't have gone near the Dorchester if Beth hadn't insisted. She even arranged the appointment. And I was scared to the pit of my stomach even before I got into the lift.

"But deep down, underneath it all, I knew I was licked before I started. I could no more of handled that assignment than I could refuse a drink! That's why I'm giving the game away. I'm going back to the States..."

"You can't keep on running away, son. And it won't be any better over there. Might be a darned sight worse!" He paused and shot the younger man a quick glance. "Travelling alone?"

"Sure."

The Chief Inspector's fists were on his hips. He shook his head again. "Pity. Great pity! Mighty lot of temptations over there for an able-bodied youngster. And you're just in the right mood for 'em!"

The other said moodily, "Maybe you've got a better notion?"

"Maybe I have." Read eyed him for a moment and then crossed back to the desk. He began to sort the scattered papers and spoke without looking up.

"How would you like to team up with me?"

Blackburn had wheeled. "Team up— ?" Eagerness put a higher note into his voice. "Chief! You know there's nothing I'd rather do. But I don't latch on..." He leant across the desk. "How d'you mean— team up?"

Now the papers were a neat pile.

"When I said things were quiet, I'm not suggesting that this happy state's going to last much longer. Because we know it isn't! Any day now there's a

cyclone due. We know that it's coming because we've had the buzz from over the way."

Jeffery's dark brows came together. "Number Ten?"

"That being so, I can't say any more. But when the affair blows up, I'm going to need an assistant— someone completely outside this department."

Steady blue eyes were fixed on Jeffery's olive face.

"Well, son?"

Sunlight, filtering through the leaves of a tree beyond, freckled the young set face. Jeffery said, "You're prepared to make this offer after what I've told you?"

Read said casually, "I'm more interested in what you didn't tell me."

Blackburn swung around. "What's the pay-off?"

"I'm asking you." The elder man reached for the cigar-box, caught a glimpse of the watch on his wrist and withdrew his hand. The casual voice went on.

"It doesn't add up, son. You say you're turning down this Peterson assignment because you think you've lost your grip..."

"Right!"

"...yet you make a beeline here from the Dorchester, all steamed up about a naked Greek found dead in a house on the Mena Road!"

The Chief Inspector stood up. "Either you're interested or you're not! You can't have it both ways. But make up your mind!" Plain in the light of the window he saw a flicker of indecision cross the other's face. Blackburn opened his lips, then closed them. Read crossed and stood by his shoulder. "We're working together now, Jeff."

The other said stubbornly, "It's got nothing to do with the proposition you're offering..."

William Read said softly, "Care to make a little bet on that?"

The words brought a new expression to Jeffery's face, something more positive than incredulity, yet not as strong as surprise.

"Chief— if I thought—"

The knock on the door cut the words from his lips. Constable Manners said, "Mrs. Blackburn, sir."

"Hello, darling," said Elizabeth Blackburn. She placed bag and gloves on the desk and crossing, kissed her husband lightly on the chin.

"Beth..." he was proffering his case. "The Chief tells me you rang here for me."

"I've got a letter for you...or a message or something..." She crossed to the desk and delved into her hand-bag, turning with an envelope. It bore his name, hand-written. Nothing else. No address. No stamp.

Elizabeth blew a smoke ring. "It was left by a funny old man dressed up in a turban and robes and slippers. And he had a white beard, too."

Read, watching, saw Jeffery's eyes narrow.

"Tell me more, Beth."

She shrugged.

"I'd just turned on the radio. Dr. Birdseye— he's a parson I met with Ella Halversham last week— was giving a talk on his Underprivileged Youth Movement and he made me promise to listen in. I just got as far as the announcement when the door-bell went." Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. "I couldn't pretend I wasn't home because the radio was going full tilt."

She turned and crushed out her cigarette in the ash-tray.

"When I opened the door, this old man was standing there. I was so taken aback at his appearance I couldn't do anything but stare. He said, 'You will please give this to Mr. Blackburn at once. It is a matter of great importance.' Then he thrust that envelope into my hand and turned away. Before I could get my breath back, he'd vanished down the stairs.

"Open the letter, darling. I'm busting to know why it's so very important."

Jeffery grunted and ripped the side from the cheap envelope. Inside was a piece of paper, folded in half. He opened it as Elizabeth and Read crowded in to see. Two sentences were printed in shaky capitals:

"DEATH AWAITS THE INFIDEL WHO ANGERS THE HIGH GODS. LEAVE THE PETERSON AFFAIR ALONE JEFFERY BLACKBURN."

Jeffery was standing very still, fingering the paper. "Beth..."

She looked up with troubled eyes.

"...what time was this delivered?"

"Just after eleven-fifteen."

The Chief Inspector was standing by the door turning his hat in his hands. He said impatiently, "Forget about it, son. It's a typical crack-pot letter. With every new case, we get dozens of 'em. What we call examples of juvenile exhibitionism."

The young man was slipping the note into his wallet. A tight smile touched his lips.

"Figure it out for yourself. But round about the same time this bird was calling on Elizabeth in Knightsbridge, I saw him two miles away at the Dorchester Hotel...walking down a corridor in the Peterson suite!"

The slick-haired waiter said, "More coffee, madam?"

"Not for me," said Elizabeth Blackburn. She glanced at the Chief Inspector.

"Jeffery?"

"No, thanks, Beth."

He shook his head, a quick short movement.

"What's the set-up, Chief. Someone's playing a kid's party game with Uncle Otis, except..." He paused and frowned at the littered ash-tray.

"Except that no kid's game I ever played put me in two different places, miles apart, at the same time!"

Elizabeth said tentatively.

"Jeff...you couldn't have made a mistake...?"

William Read was fiddling with a coffee cup so small and fragile he could have crushed it between thumb and forefinger.

He said frowningly, "On the music halls, it's sometimes done with twins..." He was turning the cup in the saucer. "Son, just what did Peterson expect you to do about this chap Menena?"

Jeffery shrugged. "Keep him out of his hair, I suppose."

The waiter was hovering with the bill on a plate. Read wagged a finger at him and the plate came to rest at his side. The Chief Inspector was reaching for his wallet as he asked:

"How did Peterson get to know you, Jeff?"

"From Moratti— he must have used the agency sometime in the States."

Blackburn hesitated a moment, then went on. "Peterson had a full dossier on me— also, I think, by courtesy of Moratti."

Read placed notes over the bill and pushed the plate away. "And you told Peterson you'd think it over?"

Jeffery's eyes sought the other's for a brief instant.

"For obvious reasons, yes!"

Elizabeth's neat head was moving in time to the rhythm of the music. Qunite unconsciously, for she was smoothing her serviette abstractedly and her eyes were thoughtful. Presently she said:

"You know, chaps, I think we're all missing the essential core of this affair."

She put down the serviette and clasped her hands in her lap. "Let's reduce the thing to its barest essentials.

"Uncle Otis buys an antique in Cairo. Twenty-four hours later, a musical-comedy gent calling himself Menena comes to Otis, tells him that not only was the trinket stolen from his home but also that it contains the spirit of his ancestor. Menena wants the trinket back...or else..."

"Now— let's forget this double identity— now-you-see-me-now-you-don't act of Menena's and concentrate on the cause! Don't you realise we must accept one of two things. Either Menena honestly believes that his ancestor's shade is seething about inside the casket, waiting to escape and create all kinds of mayhem for the indignity suffered— or else— and this is the only possible conclusion— it's a lot of eyewash and first class hocus-pocus. Check?"

"Check," Jeffery grunted.

"All right, my boy! So it's a parcel of childish sensationalism." Mrs. Blackburn leaned her wrists on the table, bright eyes moving from face to face. "But don't you see that makes it even more puzzling? Why go to all this trouble? Why build up this adolescent masquerade? If the casket hasn't any sentimental value for Menana, why the deuce does he *want to get hold of it*?"

Her hands went to her head, adjusting her hat as she talked.

"So now we come to Uncle Otis. From what you've told us, Jeff, he's nobody's fool. He's no more scared of this comic strip pattern than we are. Then why invite you to a hush-hush conference? Because, my boy, Otis realises that there's a heck of a lot more to this innocent looking casket than meets the eye— and he wants the answer for his private information alone!"

She rose and picked up hand-bag and gloves.

"Chew over that, my hearties. I'm going to the powder room."

They watched her trim figure weave its way through the tables, then Read said, "Intelligence trained 'em pretty well, son."

"Sure," the other acknowledged. He pinched the ember from his cigarette and dropped it into the tray. "But there's something even Beth doesn't know."

"The Mena Road business?" A bushy eyebrow went up. "I wondered why that part was censored." The burning ash was scorching a match, smelling vilely. Read poked among the debris in the ashtray, extinguishing the ember.

"Wouldn't care to elaborate, son...now that we're alone?"

Jeffery said slowly, "Ever heard of a woman called Bianca Milland?"

Read shook his head.

"She was one of the loveliest creatures that ever walked the earth— and one of the wickedest. She lived in the States..."

"Lived?"

Blackburn's fingers were playing with the pepper-shaker, turning it around. His dark eyes were lowered.

"She's dead now. Overdose of sleeping pills. In a way, I...I was responsible..." The voice wavered, dropped a tone. "It's quite a story..."

The elder man said gently, "I'm interested."

"No," said Jeffery. "Not here. There isn't time..." Fingers upset the shaker, spilling the brown powder on the cloth. He frowned and pulled his hand away. "Tomorrow, perhaps..."

Read said promptly, "Two-thirty! In my office. Couldn't make it in the morning— got a conference." He glanced at the clouded face. "All right with you?"

"I'll be there," Jeffery told him. As thought dismissing a subject he regretted broaching, he added, "I wonder why Beth didn't mention Stewart-Riggs was an albino?"

"It's the kind of thing she wouldn't want to talk about." Having extracted a promise he knew would be kept, the Chief Inspector was prepared to abandon the other topic. "D'you think he's mixed up in this affair, son?"

Jeffery said evenly, "There's no proof— except that he was visiting Peterson this morning. The secretary mentioned that he was another collector."

Read gnawed a lip. "Like me to have him taped?"

But before Jeffery could reply, a shrill high voice spoke behind his shoulder.

"Mister Blackburn! You naughty, naughty young man! Oh, I'm going to give it to you!"

Both men wheeled.

A small plump woman in her late fifties was beaming at Jeffery. She was expensively but sloppily dressed; indeed Read's whole trained impression was one of a genial untidiness. The hat was slightly askew, strands of hair escaped from their moorings, one stocking was wrinkled and a hand-bag hung open. The face was a study in circles— round blue eyes, chubby cheeks and a carelessly painted O of a mouth, yet each feature was stamped with a glowing good-humor.

Both men were on their feet.

Jeffery said, "Hello, Lady Halversham." His eyes sought the powder room door frantically, but there was no sign of Elizabeth. He said, "This is Chief Inspector Read of Scotland Yard."

"Oh, I've seen *your* picture in the papers," Ella Halversham said archly. "Now, please, both of you, don't stand up any more." A wisp of hair danced across her eyes. She brushed it away, knocking the hat even more out of plumb. "Mister Blackburn, why didn't you come to my garden party yesterday? You missed the most wonderful time!"

"Busy," Jeffery muttered.

Lady Halversham waved the excuse aside.

"Oh, fiddle-de-dee— you always say that! I simply can't believe it. And yesterday I wanted you especially to auction my newest book— a man always does that kind of thing so much better, don't you think?"

Jeffery muttered, "Lady Halversham writes books."

"Not real books!" A plump hand went to her hat, anchoring it firmly. "I call them little thoughts for little people— the tiny tots, of course. Things like 'The Enchanted Garden'— that's my latest. Illustrated by Portia Divine. Quite a genius but a little...you know?" She cocked a roguish eye at the two men. "She honestly believes in fairies— sees them, the darling wee things, actually dancing around her studio!"

Jeffery shot his companion a look.

"Like Conan Doyle."

A wisp of hair came loose again and clung to Ella Halversham's faintly perspiring forehead.

"That's just what Portia says! But with her, I can't help feeling it's just the tiniest, weeniest pose...you know?" Again that quick, robin's-eye brightness. Abruptly she swung off at a tangent. "Mr. Blackburn, where is that dear, sweet little wife of yours?"

"Mrs. Blackburn will be back in a moment, m'lady. Won't you sit down?"

Ella Halversham shook her head, dislodging even more of her coiffure. "No, no, I mustn't! I'm supposed to be meeting someone in the foyer— a reverend gentleman."

A deep sonorous, voice interrupted.

"My dear Lady Halversham— a thousand apologies..."

The man approaching the table was a striking figure. He was grey-haired but his movements were still quick and resilient. From the top of the clerical collar which encircled the pink neck, tufts of greying hair were glimpsed.

"Why, Mr. Birdseye," shrilled Lady Halversham.

The newcomer fawned.

The plump little woman made a wide gesture. "Mr. Blackburn, Mr. Read of Scotland Yard. The Reverend Cyril Birdseye."

Mr. Birdseye thrust out a hand and Blackburn's fingers tingled under the grip. Then he turned his attention to the Chief Inspector. His black velvet and clotted cream voice purred like the deep notes of an organ.

"Mr. Read, sir, this is a genuine pleasure— a genuine pleasure, indeed! You will realise how genuine when I tell you that, for the past three weeks, I have been trying to frame a suitable letter of invitation to you. Indeed, at this moment, there is yet another half-finished draft on my desk..."

"Invitation, Mr. Birdseye?"

The clergyman nodded.

"I am organising a movement for underprivileged youths from our slum areas." He came forward and leaned a hand on the table. "My church believes that there are no such things as your criminals— only criminal environments. The child, born into the world in Christ's image, arrives pure and unsullied— it is the surroundings, Mr. Read, which stunt the mind and blight the immortal soul!" The rich tones rang with inner conviction. "So I have opened a series of club rooms to bring the youths off the streets and teach them the way of light through healthy recreation."

He paused and smiled.

"After Saturday, we hope to be able to extend this work."

Lady Halversham chirruped vaguely.

"Kind, kind Mr. Stewart-Riggs!"

Jeffery was watching Elizabeth come through the powder room entrance, but his head came around at the sound of the name. His eyes caught Read's for a split second before the Inspector spoke.

"This man gave a donation— ?"

"Such a *very* generous donation, Mr. Read!" The blue eyes opened wide. "His wonderful place in Kent— throwing it open to us on Saturday afternoon!" Ella Halversham placed a soft hand on the Chief Inspector's arm. "You simply must come along— and you too, Mr. Blackburn! Now remember the date...Saturday, August the twenty-fifth!"

The Reverend Cyril Birdseye nodded.

"We are seeking the co-operation of the press in this very worthy cause. In view of your official position, sir, your presence would be of inestimable value to our function."

The leonine head moved on the pink neck. Lady Halversham caught sight of Mrs. Blackburn. She threw out her arms, sending her gloves flying across the table.

"Elizabeth— my dear!"

The girl moved toward the group. "Hello, Ella."

"Just look at her— so fresh and so sweet! A real English rosebud, don't you think, Mr. Birdseye?"

The clergyman was murmuring something, his head bowed respectfully. Read was rescuing the gloves from among the cutlery. As he returned them to Lady Halversham, she was crowing to Elizabeth.

"My dear, we've made a real conquest!" She smiled at the Inspector. "Actually persuaded Mr. Read to attend our function on Saturday— as one of the guests of honor!" The triumphant note died from her voice as she went on. "And you must bring Mr. Blackburn, of course!"

Elizabeth moved to her husband's side.

She smiled. "We'll see."

The big clergyman was looking at his watch and the woman caught the gesture. "Now we mustn't stand gossiping," she said briskly. "We came in for a cup of tea and—" abruptly she stopped and threw up her hands. "Bless me, Elizabeth! I almost forgot the very thing I wanted to see you about! Could you be a darling angel and help me with the programme for the Kensington flower show next month!"

"All right, Ella."

The plump face was creased in smiles. "Eleven o'clock— tomorrow morning!" She released Elizabeth's fingers and put out her hand to the Chief

Inspector. "And we'll see you on Saturday, Mr. Read! I'll ring my secretary this afternoon and tell her to write to you— officially!"

"Now, come, come!" she commanded. "We've worried these lovely people quite enough..." and with handbag still gaping open, she shepherded her grey-haired companion between the tables.

"So that's Lady Halversham!"

Mrs. Blackburn said wryly, "Jeff— about tomorrow? You don't mind?"

He was staring across the half empty restaurant to the far corner where a crooked hat and a grey mane were bent together over a menu. "Bright idea," he muttered and then faced around. "Baby, tomorrow morning, do something for me."

She nodded, waiting.

"Put the squeeze on that old bag about this Stewart-Riggs guy. You said he was a friend of Fairy Sun-dew over there."

She said slowly, "Well— an acquaintance." Then she paused, looking from one man to the other. "Jeff, what's the idea?"

He said briefly, "Simple enough. I'm going to unpack that suitcase. They'll be flying one passenger light this afternoon."

Delight was in her face. "The Peterson assignment?"

"Sure— I'm hired! I'll drop you at Brook Street tomorrow morning and then mosey around to break the glad tidings to Uncle Otis."

"Jeff darling, I'm so very glad."

Promptly at eleven o'clock on the following morning, the Blackburns' cream Rover was bowling down Brook Street.

Elizabeth, smart as new paint and relaxed beside her husband, stole a side-glance at his profile. Jeffery had not spoken a word during the drive from Knightsbridge yet the girl's spirits were as bright as the shafts of sunlight dancing and glittering on the exclusive shop windows of Mayfair.

For this was a new kind of silence, the muteness of concentration and perplexity. What she had so come to dread was that other mood, seemingly ever present until yesterday, a state of black and shuttered taciturnity, when this man she had married would withdraw within himself and, snail-like, carry on a strange and secret existence of his own, shut away from herself, from his friends, almost from the entire world about him.

Happily now, she heard him speak first.

"Beth..."

"Yes, darling?"

"I've got a date with the Chief at two-thirty. Care to pick me up there?"

"It's an appointment."

"Better make it three o'clock." He nosed the car into the kerb and reaching across, pushed open the door.

Her lips brushed his cheek for a second. "Take care of yourself, Jeff."

For a few moments he sat looking at her, slim and straight and spunky. Elizabeth smiled and held up a hand on which thumb and forefinger made a circle. She gave it a little confident jerk. He gave her a brief half-grin and released the clutch. Making the turn around Grosvenor Square, he shot smoothly into Clarges Street and wheeled into Park Lane, drawing up before the Dorchester.

Here he drew a blank.

The desk-clerk informed him that the Peterson ménage were all absent. Mr. Peterson and his secretary had handed in their keys just after breakfast—the girl a little later. He could not say whether they would be in for lunch, but perhaps the gentleman would care to leave a message?

The gentleman would not.

When Jeffery walked through the doors, news-vendors were crying the early edition. He bought a paper, lingered a while watching the groups in the park and then returned to his car. With time to kill, he drove slowly along Piccadilly, angled into St. James Street and turned into Pall Mall.

Five minutes later he was entering the Royal Automobile Club. He took a chair in the lounge and, ordering a drink, unfolded the newspaper. Inch-high headlines flung a black banner across the front page.

"TERRORISM FLARES AGAIN IN SUEZ CANAL ZONE."

Then in smaller print:

"Three British Soldiers Killed: Nahas Pasha Warns British Government."

Below the main story were two photographs.

One was of Miss Jean Inglis, the British film star who had arrived in London to make a personal appearance with her film, "The Rabbit Habit" at the Leicester Square Empire; the other, much smaller picture, was of an unknown suicide whose body had been fished out of the river near Battersea Park.

He was turning to the sports section when his drink arrived.

Blackburn held the waiter while he ordered another. The second drink arrived and he placed it on the arm of the chair.

He smoked, conscious of a growing feeling of restlessness. Perhaps it was the prospect of his approaching interview with the Chief Inspector. Or perhaps it was those ominous headlines? He looked at the clock. Twenty-three minutes past eleven. He crushed out his cigarette, tossed the paper aside and made for the door.

Half-way down the steps, he remembered his drink.

Blackburn stopped short, teetering on the lowest step, seeing the untouched glass on the arm of the chair. Then he shrugged and crossed to his car. He had not locked it, a touch and the door opened and he slipped in behind the wheel and felt for the self-starter...

Something cold and circular was being pressed into the back of his neck!

Blackburn's whole body went stiff.

"Howdy, shamus?" said Susan Ann Peterson, lowering a gold lipstick container.

Jeffery let his breath go. "Blow!" he said curtly.

"And I always thought Englishmen had such nice manners!" she complained.

"I'm Irish!"

"Fine reward for faithfulness," she said. "I saw you go into that gin joint and waited for hours—"

"I was in there exactly ten minutes."

"Like me, shamus?"

"In the right place, sure!"

Sue Peterson leaned back. "Guess that makes it mutual! I've always had a yen for big men with dark eyes and crisp curly hair."

Jeffery said pleasantly, "So has my wife."

She climbed in beside him, sitting to one side. With small fingers linked on her lap, golden head bowed, she was like an obedient child dressed up to go visiting. Jeffery let in the clutch and the car slid out from the pavement.

"Ever been to Denham?" he asked.

Without looking up, she shook her head. "I'm only a dumb tourist."

Dark eyes, glinting with amusement, flicked in her direction.

"You're a tourist!" His big hands moved around the cellophane covered wheel. "When we get there, I'll stake you to a dish of tea."

A smile touched the corner of her mouth. "The spend-thrift Irish!"

"It'll be on the expense account," he told her. "Uncle Otis might even let you run to clotted cream!"

The smile had gone from her face. Now she looked up. "No!" she said firmly.

"No what?"

"No expense account!"

He said cheerfully, not meaning it. "Okay then! No job!"

The slim fingers unlatched and a small hand was placed over his. Sue Peterson turned.

"But that's it, Jeffery!"

He frowned. "That's what, chicken?"

"What I was waiting to tell you! Uncle Otis isn't going to want you. He's not going through with this probe. The casket's going back."

"Not to Menena?"

The golden head nodded.

"What's the set-up?"

She sensed the disappointment in his voice.

"It's all on my account— that flare-up yesterday. They're scared something's going to happen to me. So Henry's persuaded Uncle Otis to return the casket." She turned again and her tone was firmer. "Jeffery, I don't want to go to Denham or wherever it is. But I'd still like that dish of tea...and a chance to explain."

He said grimly, "Doing pretty well without it, aren't you?" He glanced around, noticed the curtained windows of Fortnum and Mason's, and drew into the kerb nearby. As Susan stepped, he leaned back and clicked up the rear door handle. Then he produced a bunch of keys.

"This time," he told her, "I'm making sure I won't find Jean Inglis parked in the back seat."

The old hopelessness was resting heavily on him and the silence continued as they sought the restaurant. Sue Peterson led the way to a table near the window and soon, from a traymobile, she was selecting cakes so creamed and frosted and candied that Jeffery's stomach twitched at the sight.

"Cream or lemon, Jeffery?"

He waved the invitation away. "I'll smoke a cigarette."

The young brow furrowed. "Aren't you having anything?"

He shook his head. "What are you trying to do, chicken? Spoil my lunch?"

"I'll bet you've got ulcers," Miss Peterson said. "Oh perhaps you're a diabetic, like Henry! He has to inject that awful stuff with a syringe— three times a day."

Presently she said, "I'm mad at Henry— real mad!" She licked her fingers daintily. "It's nothing whatever to do with him. He's not even a real secretary!"

Jeffery said, "Meaning?"

"That he's just a stand-in!" She brushed the crumbs together on her plate, moistened the top of her finger and conveyed the fragments to her mouth. "Uncle's permanent secretary is Dean Coleman. Mind you, Dean's not nearly as interesting as Henry. He's going bald and wears thick glasses. And he gets awfully sea-sick! That's why he told Uncle he'd resign before he'd take this trip! So we had to hire someone else."

Jeffery pushed over the ash-tray. "But Otis knew Lessing?"

"Not from Gregory Peck?"

He leant his elbows on the table, interest rekindling in his face.

"He must have had water-tight references," she explained. "Uncle's mighty strict about that kind of thing. And with one of the finest collections of antiques in New York, he needs to be!"

"How long was Lessing employed with you before he left on this trip?"

She considered. "A month— maybe six weeks."

"Chicken," he said, "I don't get it. Papa doesn't get it at all!" He waved his cigarette. "Your uncle buys a casket and a lot of monkey business along with it. He even talks about hiring me to do a probe! Then he lets his secretary— a strange bird he's known only for a few months— change his mind about the whole set-up!"

Sue Peterson deposited an inch of ash into the tray. "It's partly your fault, you know."

"How come?"

"Uncle says you wouldn't give him a definite answer about taking on the job. In fact, he had a hunch that you wouldn't! And he explained why he couldn't go to the police." She crushed out the cigarette. "And then last night when Henry got that frightful scare—"

Blackburn sat up. "This is news. What happened?"

The girl said slowly, "It was about two o'clock this morning. I guess I couldn't have been sleeping very well, because when Henry let out that scream, it rocked me right out of bed. I ran outside. Uncle was there in his pyjamas. And suddenly Henry's door burst open and he came tearing out, white as Kleenex! He said something had tried to throttle him..."

Blackburn grunted. "I suppose it's unlikely that Henry had bad dreams and got tangled in his own pyjama cord?" The spindly chair creaked as the young man moved his big frame uneasily.

"Something else won't stack. Why the attack on Lessing? I thought the finger was on you?"

The check bow danced as she nodded. "That's what we couldn't figure— not at first. Then Henry suggested that this morning might have been some kinda dress rehearsal for...for the real thing later on."

The voice trailed away. Jeffery said shortly, "Henry seems to be Number One boy at cheerful suggestions!"

Hands loose on her lap, she considered the remark. "I guess Uncle Otis was scared enough to listen to anybody. Mr. Pilgrim— that's uncle's attorney— said to come around and see him as soon as he got into the office. And that's where they've gone."

Jeffery said drily, "And what did you do? Apart from burgling the back seat of my car?"

She gave him a tiny smile so that for a moment her teeth were milk-white and gleaming against the geranium of her lips. "I took myself for a walk. That's how I came to see you going into your club. And I hid in your car because I was feeling mighty chipper and what happened early this morning all seemed crazy and impossible." She paused, looking down at her fingers. "But now," she said slowly, "sitting here and talking about it, I'm just not so sure any more."

"Then let's not sit any longer!" He rose and signalled to a waiter.

Together they moved into Piccadilly. The noon of high summer had thickened the crowds on the pavements. For a few minutes they walked in silence, savouring, each in their own way, the gay pageant of the streets.

"Jeffery!"

"Uh-huh?"

The face she turned toward him reflected all the brightness of her surroundings. She said: "Take me into the Ritz and buy me a drink!"

He said firmly, "I'm strictly temperance..."

Susan waved the excuse aside. "Gobbledegook!" she announced. "All private eyes get stewed."

"Only on celluloid, chicken."

"Like trying to shift Grant's Tomb," she said a little crossly. "Jeffery— come on!"

A bus moved past them already slowing for the Green Park stop. He watched it, not really seeing it, pretending the struggle was still going on in his mind. But Susan, looking up in exasperation, saw the direction of his eyes and swung a neat blonde head. Next moment, she drew a hard sharp little breath.

"My stars!" she cried. "It's Henry!"

A small knot of people had tangled on the platform waiting for the slowing of the wheels. One man broke free, thrusting forward and leaping for the pavement. Jeffery, his gaze suddenly transfixed, recognised the secretary more from his companion's exclamation than from appearance, for Mr. Henry Lessing was no longer the crisp and immaculate figure he had met on the previous morning. His tie was loose and flapped across an unbuttoned coat. He was hatless and his straw colored hair fell across a face pale and drawn and somehow shrunken. In blank amazement they watched him stagger across the pavement and cling to the bus shelter for support.

Several waiting people were casting uneasy glances at the figure.

Susan Ann Peterson released Blackburn's arm. "Henry! What is it? What's the matter?"

Lessing, still clinging to the post, raised his head and saw her approaching. With a visible effort, he stood upright and made a strange gesture with one hand, almost as though warding off the girl. Then he turned and ran in great

loping strides, along the pavement away from them and across the road to a waiting taxi. The door slammed and Jeffery watched it shoot off with a jerk.

"Sweet Christmas!" Blackburn muttered.

Sue Peterson had backed up short, like a young foal who suddenly finds the pleasant and familiar meadow opening unexpectedly under its tread.

"You— did you see that?"

Jeffery nodded. "A young man in a great hurry," he said grimly.

"Jeffery, what is it? What's it all mean?"

He shrugged. "About that drink...?"

But this time there was no response, no warm elbow clamping down and tucking his hand firmly against her slim waist.

"No, Jeffery. I— I don't want it now. And I think you'd better take me back...to the hotel."

Jeffery said haltingly, "It's not a pretty story, Chief. That's why I've kept it under wraps. Only a few people know about it. Moratti is one..."

The early edition of the newspaper, with its two photographs, one famous and the other completely unknown, was lying on the Chief Inspector's desk. It was so quiet in the panelled room that Blackburn could hear the muted clicking of the clock on the wall. The hands pointed to two-thirty.

William Jameson Read leaned back in his chair. "Let's have it in your own way, Jeff."

The young man hesitated. Read, watching him through the lengthening silence, prompted gently.

"How long ago did it happen?"

He pulled the newspaper toward him, folding it and slipping it under the glass paper-weight. Now Jeffery was talking again.

"It was about three months before I came over here. I told you I was working for the Moratti outfit in New York. One of the assignments tangled with a woman called Muriel Armarti— she was a Broadway actress and her husband was mixed up with a marijuana ring. He'd been found dead in a Bowery doorway, four slugs in his back. Anyhow, we cleared the woman, who's been living apart from this jerk for months, and she was mighty grateful.

"A few weeks after we'd wrapped up the case, Mrs. Armarti gave a party and Looey and I were asked along. It was a dull enough turn-out and we were just about to blow when a woman walked into the room. Now there were some fine looking specimens draped around the floor but when this one came forward, they just faded into the wall-paper."

Blackburn paused and spread his legs.

"She was built to take the breath and although she wore a floor-sweeping dress of some flame-colored material, you knew her legs would be long and

slender and strong. You didn't have to guess about the upper half— the dress being cut that way, it spoke for itself. It came down in front in a very low triangle and at the V she was wearing some kind of iridescent scarab brooch. Her skin was smooth and it had a faint warmish sheen— if you can imagine ivory velvet coming alive under your hand, that's the way it was..."

The young man shifted in his chair.

"She was squired by an oversized bohunkus whom someone said was an expatriated Russian director from Hollywood. This gorilla sat in a corner the first part of the night, not talking to anybody, just following her around the room with his little pig eyes. And after she'd circle the floor a couple of times, Looey and I decided we'd go out on to the terrace to cool down. We'd just got nice and relaxed with our minds on normal things like where our next Cadillac was coming from when out glided Muriel Armarti, saying that her friend would like to meet me. Nothing personal about it— not then— but Muriel had mentioned that I'd chivvied her out of a jam and the friend was curious. I was taken inside and introduced...and that's how I first came to hear the name of Bianca Milland.

"At close quarters," he went on, "she was even more lethal. Yet she wasn't beautiful, not as the other women were. Except for her eyes. They were a sort of deep luminous violet and very large and tilted upwards at the corners. One thing I remember— I looked down at her bosom and suddenly saw that brooch move. Because it wasn't a piece of jewellery. It was an honest-to-God beetle, alive and impaled with a jet pin and still kicking in a slow death."

Blackburn paused.

"Now if I'd had two brain cells to rub together, I'd have got out from under there and then! Chance handed me the opportunity on a plate. We were drinking together and then somebody turned on the radiogram. As we put down our glasses, she asked me to dance with her. I know as much about dancing as Fred Astaire knows about the Einstein theory and I had to say just that. Or else accept the invitation and give her chiropodist a break on the following morning. But I did neither. She put out her arms and I slid into them. And then, believe it or not, I was gliding around the floor like a professional fancy-pants! I couldn't understand it and when I commented, she tilted back her head and smiled slowly and said: 'You see, Jeffery, I've put a spell on you.'

"I didn't realise just how close she was shaving the truth. But I went in deeper and deeper, partly because I was enjoying it, partly because I was flattered at her attention, and partly because I got a kick out of seeing that Hollywood hercules burning up in the corner. He was trying to damp himself down with the Armarti vodka and it wasn't anywhere near doing its job. Round about midnight, the balloon went up. Bohunkus staggered on to the floor and

grabbed my partner so roughly he tore her bodice, showing a lot more than the designer intended. So I smacked him, just to teach him to mind his manners. And then it was on— with me using every dirty trick Moratti had taught me. And that's how I came out best...but only just."

Blackburn's big fist had clenched.

"Someone laid Ivan the Terrible away on ice and that kinda broke up the party. Going home in the car, I passed out myself and Looey took me up to my apartment and bathed my wounds and tucked me up in bed. In the morning, I was still bruised and sore, but feeling better, and deciding maybe I'd live a little longer. About nine o'clock that same night, my telephone rang. There she was— just wanting to thank me for what I'd done at the party and was I free to come around to her house and have a drink?"

Jeffery folded his arms, and his dark eyes were steady on the elder man's face.

"I showered and dressed and half an hour later, I was driving downtown in my car. I pulled up outside a number in East Seventy-Fifth Street. It was a shabby old place with an iron railing guarding five steps leading to the door.

"When I rang the bell, a colored maid answered. She took me inside, down a wide hall and opened a door. And there it was— the staircase, and the chandelier and some mighty expensive extras along with it. This transition from bleakness to luxury was so abrupt that I caught myself blinking, yet I remember hearing the maid shoot the bolts on the inside of the door. That click sounded another little warning note in my mind, but before I could do anything, a voice called my name. And there she was— on the stairs under the chandelier— smiling with her head tilted back and both arms stretched out.

"She was wearing a dress so moulded to her body and so closely matched to the color of her skin that straight away you got wrong ideas. Over her black hair was some quaint kind of head-dress and in the front, smack above her forehead, another beetle was pinned. Before I could move, she had her arms around me and she was smiling up and saying, 'I knew you'd come, Jeffery. Remember the spell I put on you?'

"And so we went upstairs. At the top she let go my hand, opened a door and led the way into a room. It was all black and gold. The only way you could tell where walls and ceiling joined was by a gold frieze around the top— a pattern of beetles like the kind she had a yen for using as jewellery. There were black pillars with gold circles and between them some life-size pieces of statuary, all men and athletic guys they seemed by their development. The floor was of some material like black glass and set smack in the middle of it a white rug about twenty feet square and more than a foot thick. I haven't been around without picking up a few hints, and I recognised that rug for what it

was— pure ermine and worth so much I couldn't even start figuring. Then there was another rug seemingly suspended in mid-air and it took me a few seconds to catch on that this was a reflection and what I'd taken for the black ceiling was actually a huge sheet of mirror stretching from wall to wall.

"Bianca didn't turn a hair at my reaction. She piloted me across the room and through a door at the end. This den was cosier and a sight more normal— there were bookshelves and padded seats and a nifty cocktail bar at one side. This was so much more my dish that straight away I began to relax and sat down while she crossed and mixed me a drink.

"So we sat there, drinking and talking, and she told me that she had tried to recreate something of the promised land right there in New York. Fortunately she had the chips to do it, she said, but didn't offer any further elaboration and I didn't press the point. For by this time the special brew she'd served up was starting to take effect and I had the urge to loosen my collar. It must have been a few minutes later that she stood up and smiled and excused herself and slipped through the door, leaving me alone.

"To take my mind off other things, I crossed and took down one of the books from the shelves. I opened it at random and I'll swear I felt my eyes pop in their sockets! Obviously this was something else she'd brought back from Egypt, for she'd never have got it through the U.S. mails! I slipped it back and grabbed another but that was even worse.

"I tossed the last book aside and was thinking of pouring myself a stiff one just to wash the taste out of my mouth. It was so quiet in that room you could have heard your flesh creep, and that's how it was starting to affect me. But this sound was a sort of rustling and then a soft plop. I stared around. The flat top of the bookcase was level with my chest and spaced along it were a number of small statuettes— exclusively male again— and all of them in their birthday suits except that some were wearing head-dresses similar to that get-up of Bianca's. And where the flat shelves joined at the angle of the wall a box about eighteen inches square had been thrust into the corner. I crossed and took a gander at it. A small metal plate had been fixed to the front engraved with some tongue-twisting Latin name ending in scarabus and next to this, in brackets, the words 'species male.' The sound came from inside the box and lifting the lid, I knew I'd discovered Bianca's jewel casket. Slithering about the bottom, rustling their way up the smooth sides and falling back with a flutter of wings, were about a dozen beetles of the kind she used as living ornaments. As I watched, one husky fella crawled up and over the edge, then spreading copper colored wings, took off and made a perfect three-point landing half-way up the wall. I wondered if I should try to get him back in case he starved or

something, then I decided that even so he might be better off. And then I heard Bianca calling me from the next room."

The deep voice paused and once again the ticking of the clock filled the silence. The Chief Inspector leaned forward and the squeak of his chair sounded monstrously loud in that hushed room. Then he made a gruff throat clearing sound that was part grunt and part cough.

"Nice company you keep!"

His companion said quietly, "I warned you it wasn't a pretty story, Chief. And that's only the first part of it. But if you rather I didn't go on..."

"Now, just a minute, son!" Read leaned his elbows on the desk, facing the other man over linked fingers. "I'm not judging you! You're big enough and old enough to look after yourself. If you want to romp around with a female pathological case, that's entirely your own affair. I'm only interested insofar as all this touches on the death of the Greek Cassamatis!"

Jeffery looked up. "You've got something on that already?"

Read shook his head. "The Egyptian police aren't being very cooperative these days. But there are other sources."

"Such as?"

The Chief Inspector sat back and folded his arms. "One thing at a time, son. Go on with your story." For almost a minute he waited, watching the dark and troubled face opposite. Then he said, "What's the matter, Jeff?"

Blackburn slewed his chair around. "It isn't easy," he muttered. "I didn't go home that night, or the next or the next after that. For the simple reason that my lonely apartment no longer interested me. In fact, during those days and nights, very few things interested me outside of Bianca Milland.

"On our first day together, she showed me the rest of the set-up. It was the screwiest joint. There were three other rooms beside the den and the Egyptian chamber— a large bedroom, with bathroom attached, and a dining room with an elevator which hoisted the meals from the kitchen. This suite was air-conditioned and all the windows fixed in their frames. A small circular staircase led on to a roof garden. From the outside, the only entrance to this love nest was through the door at the head of the staircase leading into the Egyptian room. Bianca told me that by turning the key in that door, she was able to cut herself off from the world completely— quite a homely little idea at the time but one that was due to turn around and bite me!

"It happened around about the fourth day when I began to struggle to the surface and see things in their right perspective.

"We were both sitting up there on that roof garden watching the sun wrap up another day and the city begin to deck itself out in spangles. And it came to me that there was a big exciting world outside this air-conditioned cage, with

people like Looey Moratti going about their business and wondering where the hell I was hiding and why. And suddenly I had a yen for my own stuffy little apartment that would have fitted into one corner of the roof garden. So making an excuse about a cigarette, I moseyed down the staircase and through the suite to the door of the Egyptian room.

"And it was locked.

"Although I'd been half-expecting it, the discovery gave me a nasty jolt. I was still turning the problem over in my mind when I heard her low laugh behind me. When I turned, she was standing doing something to the front of her dress. I watched her hands fall away and there was another of those beetles, freshly impaled and kicking away for dear life. And for the second time in a few minutes, something shivered up and down my spine."

Jeffery paused, glancing at the clock on the wall.

"Theoretically," he went on, "there were several ways I might have got out of that room. I could have picked up a chair and shoved it through one of the windows, except that I didn't fancy leaping through a jagged pane to the sidewalk thirty feet below— and possibly landing on a cop and having him ask a lot of awkward questions.

"I began to realise I'd climbed into something about as easy to get out of as a strait jacket. Short of busting either her or the window, there seemed no reason why I shouldn't become a permanent boarder. And although that prospect might have seemed fine and dandy a few days ago, I was getting a little tired of Bianca's parlour tricks and I still couldn't get used to her cute little ways with those insects.

"So because the situation seemed to call for subtle tactics and because just then she came up and put her arms around me, I pretended to ignore the fact that I was in danger of becoming another piece of living ornament. I guessed the wisest thing was to play it her way.

"And on the following morning I found an exit staring me in the face.

"I'd finished shaving and had opened the bathroom cabinet looking for some talc powder. Right next to it was a small phial of sleeping pills.

"That night, while she was in the bathroom, I prepared a couple of drinks, powdered a couple of the tablets and stirred them into her glass to dissolve. And they certainly were knock-out drops! She'd scarcely reached out and put that glass down when her head hit the pillow.

"I got up, dressed myself and spent a completely wasted hour searching for the key. By the time I'd finished the place looked like a bargain basement, but I was no nearer getting what I wanted. So I climbed up on to the roof garden and took a gander at the possibilities there. The only thing that offered any promise was the neighbouring fire escape about twenty feet away. I realised

that this was my last chance, since Bianca wouldn't fall for the same gag a second time and this sort of stimulated the phagocytes. In the end I managed it with three sheets from the linen cupboard, ripped up and knotted together. All the same, I was sweating like a track-racer when I stumbled down the last of those iron steps and found myself on the sidewalk.

"Bianca had ordered my car back to the garage days ago, so I flagged a taxi and ten minutes later, I was inside my own apartment. And it never looked better! I mixed and swallowed a stiff drink and was about to repeat the dose when the phone rang. It was Moratti and he sounded as if he had straws in his hair. He was so fat with questions that I told him I'd be along in the morning and explain everything.

"I didn't sleep well that night. In fact, I didn't sleep at all. Because somehow I just couldn't get that woman out of my mind. Every time I closed my eyes I kept seeing that room with the mirrored ceiling and the ermine floor covering."

Blackburn's hands had been resting in his lap. Now they slid down his thighs and fingers tightened on his knee-caps.

"But somehow, the spell or influence or whatever you like to call it seemed to get stronger as time went on. When dawn came, I'd worked myself into such a lather that if it hadn't been for the promise I'd made Looey, I swear I'd have gone back to that address in East Seventy-Fifty Street. However, around about nine o'clock I shaved as best I could and dressed and half an hour later, presented myself at Looey's office. He was sitting behind his desk. He looked up and when he saw me, his jaw dropped so smartly I expected to hear his dentures rattle down on to the blotter. His eyes were popping and he gave a long thin gasp and said, 'For bleeding Chissakes!' I wanted to know what was wrong and he came around the desk and took me by the shoulders-and marched me to a mirror on the wall.

"For the first time I saw myself through someone else's eyes. I looked as though I'd been tangling with a cement-mixer. My eyes were bloodshot and under them were pouches like curtain drapes. I had a network of cuts on my face where I'd nicked myself while trying to shave: My cheeks were hollow and shadowed and when I raised my hand to them my fingers trembled so much I could hardly make contact. And suddenly I felt as though all my strength had drained away."

Jeffery paused.

"If ever a man proved himself a pal, it was Looey that day. He didn't ask any more questions. He got onto the phone and put through a call, then he hustled me into a taxi and down to the Athletic Club where I got the entire works. By four o'clock that afternoon, I was feeling a little more human. Then to a

restaurant where Looey fed me a steak dinner and then back to his apartment where we talked until late into the night. And then I confessed the thing that was scaring me so badly— that I couldn't shake myself free of this woman and all the time there was something I couldn't explain drawing me back to that house and the room with the glass floor. I didn't want to go and yet I did, more than anything else I could think about. I asked Looey if he believed in spells and he said a dirty word. He told me his chief concern was the fact that on the following afternoon he'd arranged to leave for Miami on a case. And I was in no state to be allowed off the leash!

"But I slept better that night and by the time I'd put away a plate of ham and eggs and three cups of coffee, I had a stronger pull on myself. Looey's plane was due to take off about five o'clock and I could see he was still twitchy about going away and leaving me. We spent the afternoon at the club and I was dozing in the Members' Room around four o'clock when Looey came in with the paper. His ugly pan was hard as granite and he shoved the sheet under my nose and pointed to a paragraph. It was headed 'SOCIETY WOMAN TAKES PILL OVERDOSE,' and went on to say that Miss Bianca Milland, of East Seventy-fifth Street, had been rushed to hospital suffering from severe barbiturate poisoning.

"The first indication of trouble came from the patrol man who noticed my way of escape fluttering down the wall. He'd informed the maid, who reported that not only had breakfast come down untouched, but also lunch— remember that elevator arrangement I mentioned? The patrol man had decided he'd better get inside the suite and investigate, but that door at the head of the staircase baffled him. It seems to have baffled the experts for a couple of hours, but they finally got it open. And while the report didn't actually say so, the suicide suggestion was obvious. Miss Milland, the report concluded, was in a highly critical condition.

"I remembered only too clearly every detail of last night— pouring the drinks, powdering the two pellets while Bianca was in the bathroom— and then I realised what must have happened. On that night, with the door locked and the key hidden God knows where, she'd decided it was safe to take a good night's sleep herself, and had mixed her own dose in the bathroom. Two and two make four— no wonder she'd blacked out so fast!

"Looey, knowing nothing about my lacing of that drink, completely misread the cause of my panic. He thought she'd tried to commit suicide because I'd walked out on her. He believed I had the jitters in case a police probe would involve me and the whole dirty business get itself washed in the newspapers. The best thing, Looey said, was for me to clear out of the city until the business blew over. He bowled us both back to his office, pushed a file of papers into a

brief-case, told me to go over them carefully and an hour later I was on the plane for Miami as his stand-in on the case.

"But I could no more have concentrated on that case than I could have done a strip-tease in Times Square," he went on. "If you've got a load on your mind, Miami can be a bad place— or a very good one, depending on how you look at it. Then came the final clip. The day after I arrived, I had a telegram from Looey saying that Bianca had died that morning.

"There's a swell sanitorium in Miami for guys who've drunk themselves to the end of their rope. I spent a month in it. After I came out, Looey showed me a plane ticket for England. I'd been over here a few weeks when I met Beth. And she was so fresh and clean and decent and wholesome— so much the exact opposite of the muck I'd been wading in—" Jeffery paused and raised his eyes. "So you might call it a rebound marriage."

Blackburn's mouth closed like a trap and there were little white triangles at the corners of his lips. Read, still watching, saw the beads of perspiration on his forehead, the new, deep lines etched into the olive face and the glitter deep in those dark eyes. He realised only too well the strain that this shabby recital had meant and rising, he crossed to the cupboard and returned with two drinks. He thrust one across the desk.

"Take it, son," he said gently.

The other hesitated, his tongue flicking his lips. He said, "I've only had one today...only one..."

Read nodded. "Make it two!" He raised his own glass. "Here's to confession, son. And may it make you feel better!"

With a quick guilty look, the young man seized and drained his glass. Read had moved to a position under the clock.

"Just a few things to get the record straight. For instance, how do you feel about this woman now?"

Blackburn said steadily, "It's gradually sinking into the past. It's only when I start thinking about it or talking of it that I get anything of the old temptation. Being married to Beth has helped to fight it down..."

"But she knows nothing of this?"

The other's lips tightened. "Nothing!"

The Chief Inspector stood swilling the liquor around in his glass. He said slowly, "Then the root of your obsession is that you feel responsible for this woman's death?"

Jeffery stared at his smoking cigarette. "I killed her," he said. "She was rotten to the core, but that doesn't alter the fact that I killed her by the dirtiest possible way— by poisoning her drink!" He raised his eyes. "How would you feel with something like that on your mind?"

Read ignored the question by firing one of his own.

"Two months after you were married, you took Beth to New York, Why did you do that?"

The smoke from Jeffery's cigarette was rising in grey coils.

"Because the grip was still on me. I felt I had to know more about her death. I rang Moratti's office but he was down in Mexico on a case. Then I tried to contact Muriel Armarti" His tight lips relaxed. "Beth thought I was hell-bent for an old love affair and I couldn't say anything to set matters right. But even there I drew a blank. Armarti was touring with a stock company deep in the heart of Texas. There was nobody else." He paused and shrugged.

Read nodded and sipped his drink. "You didn't see her grave or anything like that?"

The other made an impatient gesture. "I've just told you..."

The elder man nodded again. "This Moratti chap seems fond of you?"

Jeffrey said curtly, "He's all right."

Read went on, "And being a good friend, I suppose he thought that if he told you this woman was dead, it would help to break this hold she had on you..."

Blackburn was rising slowly to his feet.

"...particularly as he believed it to be just an ordinary suicide attempt."

"Chief...what are you trying to tell me?"

The Chief Inspector said heavily, "She didn't die in New York, son. Two months ago, she was being squired around Cairo by a Greek named Dimitri Cassamatis. Your description of her tallies perfectly. It must be the same woman!"

Jeffery blinked. "Then...you knew?"

Read shook his head. "I've got a few stray threads in my hand— nothing more. I picked those up at the conference this morning. But if it's the same woman— and I'm certain it is— she's mixing herself in something a darn sight more dangerous than Eastern erotica! Because—"

A tap on the door interrupted him. Before he could call out, it opened and Elizabeth Blackburn came in.

"Sorry I'm so late." She came forward, pulling off her gloves. "But I've had a perfectly awful time! Ella Halversham insisted I stay for lunch, just as I had hoped she would. But half-way through it her illustrator came in— that Portia Divine woman— you know, the one that sees fairies—"

Read grunted, "What's she like?"

"The last thing you'd expect," Elizabeth said. "A head above me and built like a lady wrestler." She cocked a bright eye at the glasses on the desk and wheeled on the Chief Inspector.

"Please, please may I have a drink?" Then her eyes turned to Jeffery.
 "Haven't won the Irish Sweep or anything like that, have you, darling?"

"Something almost as good," he said, and gave her a half-grin. "But why?"

"You look different! Sort of all lit up inside." She laid her gloves carefully over her bag. "Don't tell me that Uncle Otis staked you to a new Chrysler?"

"Uncle Otis doesn't want any male help. He doesn't want anything except a very quick means of getting that casket back to Menena."

Read, in the act of handing Elizabeth her drink, stiffened. He turned his head, grey brows drawn together. "What's that you say?"

Jeffery said, "You heard me, Chief." He sat down by the desk, pulling the newspaper toward him and picking up the stylo, was making little doodlings in the margin. He spoke as though his thoughts were elsewhere. "Somebody or something crept out of the woodshed last night and tried to arrange a necktie about Henry Lessing's throat. Only he was asleep at the time. The whole thing seems to have put the unholy breeze up the Peterson ménage." The pen traced a circle and was adding petals to the edges. "Under Henry's persuasion, Uncle Otis has decided to play ball with Menena— before that necktie gets pulled any tighter!"

Mrs. Blackburn looked at her husband. "Peterson told you this?"

"Not Peterson." A stem was added to the flower. Jeffery dropped the pen and faced them. "Uncle Otis wasn't in residence when I called before lunch. Neither was his secretary. But outside my club, I met the niece."

He gave them a crisp summary of the events of the morning. Read listened, scratching an ear reflectively, and Elizabeth's eyes were bright over the top of the glass. Only when Jeffery came to describe Lessing's extraordinary behaviour in Piccadilly did she frown and then shake her head.

"Jeff?"

He had picked up the pen and was back at his doodling but he nodded and said, "Yes?"

She finished her drink and handed the empty glass to Read. "What impression did you get from Lessing's flight?"

Jeffery had filled the margin with sun flowers. Now he turned his attention to Miss Inglis and was ornamenting her upper lip with a fine curling moustache. He said thoughtfully, "I'd say he was beating it from something definite!"

Elizabeth was slipping out of her jacket. It was a very smart jacket, white with thin black criss-cross lines. The Chief Inspector, who took the jacket and hung it over a chair, thought she looked good enough to eat. He was saying, "Interesting point about him being in Peterson's employment only a few months..."

Blackburn was adding a flowing beard to Miss Inglis's dimpled chin.

"It's as simple as pie to fake a mark around your own neck, Chief. I suggested to the little Peterson filly this morning that he might have done it with his own pyjama cord. She told me I wasn't so smart, but now I'm beginning to wonder."

Elizabeth stood up, smoothing one bare arm. She took two steps toward the desk and then two steps back to her chair. Then she began pinching her lip.

"And Henry was the bright boy who began persuading his boss to return the casket," she said slowly. Between thumb and forefinger, her lip was white. "Jeff, during the excitement in the Peterson suite yesterday, was there any time when you saw Lessing and Menena together?"

He shook his dark head. Having suitably adorned Miss Inglis, he had turned his attention to the second picture, inking in the beard first.

"It won't jell, Beth," he said. "I've thought of the possibility of Lessing and Menena being the one person. But don't forget the appearance at Knightsbridge. Assuming we're right, how the heck could Lessing be in two places at the one time!"

Read was shaking his head. "And there were other occasions..." He was watching his companion's pen-work with a kind of broody worried abstraction. "I seem to remember you told me that Lessing and Peterson were together when they saw Menena on Charing Cross station."

"I'm recalling other things," Jeffery said. "Something you said, Chief— that on the music-halls it was sometimes done with twins!"

Elizabeth was standing by the chair and smoothing the material of her jacket. Abruptly, her small hands came together in a sharp little smack of enlightenment. She wheeled on the two men.

"That's it!" Her face was shining. "That's it exactly! Don't you see that it explains everything! Even to that infantile warning note left for me to give to Jeffery."

She moved to the desk, facing them, hands moving excitedly as she talked.

"Let's see if it works out this way! For some reason we haven't yet discovered, Lessing and Menena team up in Cairo to relieve Uncle Otis of the casket. Now if they worked together, there's your explanation of the vanishing prophet. Few disguises are as simple— and as effective as a false beard, a turban and a white robe. Not only is it distinctive but it hides a whole of a lot and it's easy to don and to discard. And on the ship where, of course, Lessing used it, no one saw the fake Menena at close quarters— Henry made a point of being sighted only at a distance. Meanwhile, the real Menena had come to London probably by plane, since he had to be here and waiting on Charing

Cross station when the Peterson ménage arrived!" She paused, cocked a bright eye at her husband and said, "Roger?"

He nodded.

"Now," continued Mrs. Blackburn triumphantly, "everything is jake with the couple. Henry goes around scrawling his warning dates about the place, dates incidentally which mean nothing more than a deadline to Peterson to make up his mind! The real Menena allows himself to be seen from Lessing's window. Actually, it's double-jake since Uncle Otis has indulged in some shady financial dealings over the casket and is very shy of the police. So Henry and Menena are sitting pretty, just waiting for Otis to crack." Her voice slowed. "But Otis doesn't crack that easily. Instead, he goes and throws a monkey wrench by trying to hire a private dick!"

Jeffery nodded again. He had his cigarette case in hand, proffering it. Elizabeth waved it aside with an impatient gesture.

"Now Henry really starts to worry! Because this particular private eye has a reputation for being tough. And it's more than just possible he might tumble to Lessing's impersonations. So Henry has to produce prima facie evidence that someone called Menena really exists— and what's more, exists outside the Peterson ménage. And to clinch the business, he has to produce this evidence while the private eye is actually inside the Peterson suite!"

She wrinkled her nose and went on.

"So, before Jeff arrives at the Dorchester yesterday morning, Lessing has got in touch with Menena and arranged a tight schedule which culminates in his visit to our apartment.

"Now, the trouble was that Menena doesn't appear to be very bright. Lessing had told him to find an excuse— any excuse— to be at our apartment round about the time Henry was doing his little act in the corridors of the Peterson suite at the Dorchester. And because Menena doesn't appear to be very intelligent— and because he seems to have taken this whole idea from an out-of-date horror film, his imagination didn't take him any further than a fantastic warning about vengeful gods. Menena apparently thought it a whale of an idea, which seems to prove that Henry's picked himself a pretty dumb kind of partner!"

Jeffery was still toying with his cigarette case.

"Sure," he said. "Sure! It holds water like a dam. I've been thinking about that scare yesterday morning. It would have been simple as pie for Lessing to have turned into one of those rooms, shucked off his Omay Khayyam outfit, whisked through another door and met me head on. For one thing, he'd know the lay-out of that suite as a cop knows his beat. For another, he could steer

me away from that tell-tale bundle of disguise when we searched the joint together."

He slipped the case back into his pocket as he added, "And naturally he'd be flushed and panting and worried, making a quick change like that in a little more than a minute." He looked up at his wife, but Elizabeth was leaning over the desk, making peculiar little movements with one hand. The Chief Inspector took his attention by saying: "So Lessing and Menena worked together on this thing? That's fine! But where does it lead?" Blackburn's eyes were following him as, still talking, the elder man began to pace the room. "Certainly it gives us the answer to this fake spirit disappearance stuff, but that's only half the problem." He swung around and holding up a hand, began ticking the questions off on his fingers. "First— what's so valuable about that casket as to set these two weasels concocting a scheme for getting their paws on it? Two— just how much does Otis Peterson suspect? Three— why call you in to investigate, Jeff? Four— where does the niece fit in— ?"

"Point five— Lessing himself and his appearance in Piccadilly this morning. What was the reason behind his panic? And where was he going? Was it to keep an urgent date with Menena?"

"No!" cried Elizabeth Blackburn.

Yet it was not a cry so much as a tight sharp throaty sound that jerked two heads around. She was standing by the desk, chin up and eyes staring into space. There were faint pink patches on her cheeks. She said in that same taut voice, "No, Chief! Wherever Lessing was going, it wasn't to meet Mr. Menena."

Read had dropped his hands to his sides and was frowning at her, puzzled by her attitude. He said carefully, "Menena might have wanted Lessing in a hurry."

"No," repeated Elizabeth. The V of her frock rose and fell as, she drew a deep breath. "Menena didn't want Henry Lessing this morning. Menena doesn't want anything now— unless it's six feet of earth for a decent burial..." The pink in her cheeks had deepened to scarlet and she wheeled, thrusting a finger at the newspaper on the desk, bringing it down on one of the disfigured portraits. She said quite simply, "...because Menena's dead!"

Three heads, iron-grey, curly black and golden blonde, crowded together over the desk. Three sets of eyes followed the finger to the cropped head and the underslung jaw so recently and unbeautifully adorned by the inked-in beard.

Elizabeth's voice trembled slightly.

"All along I thought that there was something very familiar about that photograph! And those awful squiggles on the chin only made the impression stronger. Only it seemed to me that the beard should be another color— and

then it clicked! I covered the top of the picture with my hand, imagined a white turban in its place and Menena just jumped clear out of the paper!"

The Chief Inspector gave her a quick side glance. He said gruffly, "You're quite sure...?"

"Of course I'm sure!" A small indignant note had crept into her voice. "Remember I saw him face to face and almost as close as we are. And look!" A polished pink finger nail slid across to the low forehead. "See that mark? It's a wart or a mole. I remember it distinctly!"

Doubt was ebbing from Read's expression, from his voice. He turned his grey head the other way.

"What d'you say, son?"

"No help, Chief."

"But you saw Menena—"

"Only his back— and that was more than twenty feet away." The young man straightened. "I'll buy Beth's version— she's got a hawk's eye for faces." He took up the newspaper, running a glance over the letter-press. "Pulled out of the drink just before dawn...believed drowned...police have no reason to suspect foul play."

Suddenly, the Chief Inspector threw back his head and let out a yell that almost splintered the picture of the former Assistant Commissioner on the wall.

"MANNERS!"

The secretary's head appeared. Read snapped at him, "Where've you been?"

Manners said tartly, "Surely a chap can get time off to—" Then he sighted Elizabeth, stopped short and blushed, looking appealingly at his superior. Read's face relaxed and he said brusquely, "Never mind— never mind!" He whisked the newspaper from Blackburn's fingers, folded it so that the marked picture appeared on the outside and thrust it at the secretary.

"I want a full report on that and I want it at once! Drop everything and jump to it. That's all!"

"Yes, sir! Of course, sir! And there's somebody waiting—"

The Chief Inspector thrust out a jaw and tapped his chest. "That's right," he snarled. "I'm waiting! Waiting for that report!"

William Read made a sound deep in his throat. He was walking back to his desk, stiffly, like a man holding himself in check. He flung himself down in his chair with such force that the springs whined in protest. Then he put his elbows on the glass top, linked his fingers and gave a tight savage smile.

"And just where do we go from here?"

Mrs. Blackburn was making little soothing noises. "Now now, Chief," she said. "Don't get rattled."

Read shot her a glance best described as basilisk. His lip lifted, showing a yellowing fang. "Don't get rattled she says!" He was glaring from one to the other. "Now listen! I've got worries— worries that you two know nothing about. Big worries...big as..." he half-rose out of his chair, darting glances around the office as if seeking something by which to measure the magnitude. The fact that he found nothing seemed only to add to his spleen. "Big as...as Marble Arch!" he snapped.

Jeffery mimicked. "Ain't we all?"

Read breathed deeply. "No we ain't...er...haven't! All you two have on your hands is some tin-pot piece of crookery cooked up between amateurs—"

"One of whom is dead," Elizabeth reminded him.

"And possibly murdered!" Blackburn stood up, hands in pockets, his head on one side. "What's eating you, Chief?"

The Chief Inspector let his breath go in a long gasp and sat back.

"What d'you mean— murdered?"

Jeffery shrugged. "Put it down to my cynical slant on human nature."

Read barked, "Quit the clowning, son. This is serious!"

The humour died from Jeffery's face as he snapped, "Serious? You bet your false fringe it's serious!" He took a step toward the desk. "Here's a pair of smart guys playing some under-cover game— and they're not doing it for a television rehearsal! They're both out for what you cops call felonious gain and that usually means a fat wad of that useful stuff known as folding money—"

The Chief Inspector started to interrupt, but the younger man talked him down. "Okay— okay! We're fumbling in the dark after the reason for it all! We're minus motive, but by Christopher Columbus, look what we have got! One side of the partnership racing down Piccadilly looking like something Charles Addams drew for the New Yorker— and the other pulled out of the river, a stiff!"

Elizabeth said slowly, "The river police seem convinced that it's suicide, Jeff."

He swung around to her. "Ever heard of being led by the nose?" he demanded. "It happens to bulls in uniform, too!"

And a suddenly quiet Chief Inspector said, "Son— you could be so right that it scares me!"

He hesitated a moment as though coming to a decision. Then abruptly he reached into his pocket, pulled out a bunch of keys, unlocked a drawer low down in his desk and slapped a folder on the glass top. The cover was royal

blue, there was a tiny gold crest in the centre and across the upper corner was a sticker bearing the words in scarlet:

"Department C Scotland Yard. Strictly Private and Highly Confidential."

The Chief Inspector gave a quick almost furtive glance at the door then gestured the couple closer with a jerk of his chin. As they crowded the edge of the desk, Blackburn saw the crest and his lips pursed in a soundless little whistle. Read measured his friends for a moment with hard blue eyes.

"If either of you as much as breathe a word of this until the proper time...!" He let the threat dangle and slipped two fingers like sausages under the royal blue cover. They emerged pinching the edge of a nine by six photograph. It was flipped across the glass, to come to rest under Jeffery's eyes.

"Who's this?" he grunted.

"Turn it over, son."

The pasteboard revolved. A name was scrawled on the back.

"Dimitri Cassamatis," Jeffery breathed.

Elizabeth was peering around his arm.

"That name?" she paused, frowning. Then: "I remember! It's the Greek who sold Uncle Otis the casket!"

"Murdered!" The Chief Inspector was locking the folder back in the drawer so that it was easy to avoid the other man's eyes. "He was found strangled in a house in Cairo."

Her eyes widened a little. Then she said; "But surely that's the business of the Egyptian Police Department? Why worry you about it?"

Jeffery said, "And why the place of honour inside that folder?"

"Is it," Elizabeth persisted, "because you think his death has something to do with this affair of the casket?"

Read was slipping his keys into his pocket.

"I'm not going to tell you what I think," he said. "It will be much less confusing to tell you what I know. When I explain that this information is hot from Intelligence across the way, you'll realise it's highly confidential. Get what I mean?"

There were simultaneous nods from both Blackburn and his wife.

"As you're both old enough to read the headlines," the big man continued, "I don't have to tell you there's a considerable amount of trouble going on in Egypt— particularly in the Suez area. Quite a lot of it is being cooked up deliberately by paid agitators— yellow-bellied weasels who'd put their own mother on the auction block provided there was a big enough price on her head. Now, I'm not talking about those packs of skulking jackals waging guerilla warfare on our lads doing a mighty unpleasant job over there, nor do I mean those hot-headed young fanatics parading the streets with placards

demanding liberation battalions." Read paused and jammed the cigar between his teeth.

"I'm getting to the root of the trouble! The paid rabble-rousers taking dirty money to keep the pot of trouble bubbling and simmering! Naturally, any kind of peace in the Canal zone is the last thing they want, because it means an end to their income. But now, if Intelligence hasn't slipped up, there seems to be one less of the brood to carry on the filthy trade!"

And Jeffery said again, "Cassamatis..."

Read's teeth clamped on his cigar. "Now there's no definite proof, but a mighty lot of circumstantial evidence pointing to the fact that the Greek was a key man in one of the most dangerous of the terrorist organisations making hay in Cairo at the moment. Intelligence had Cassamatis taped for weeks. But they gave him plenty of rope, hoping to get a line on the rest of the group. But the Greek was too clever for them. At last, in sheer desperation, they arrested and searched him to the skin. They didn't find as much a tram ticket!"

Elizabeth had moved back to her chair. She said, "Chief— all this still doesn't explain what the photograph was doing in that folder?"

"And," Blackburn added, "where Scotland Yard comes into the racket!"

Chief Inspector Read leaned forward, jaw thrust out, eyes hard.

"It's filthy enough when these rats scavenge on their home ground, but when they start trying the same thing here in England—"

Jeffery stiffened. "Sweet Christmas!" he breathed.

Grey brows came up. "It's happened before, son! When you've got a population of over forty million, it wouldn't be natural if it didn't include a few back-stabbers and renegades."

Mrs. Blackburn was on her feet. She was staring at the man across the desk and her voice was not quite steady when she asked, "But— what could they do here in England?"

"Two weeks ago, the Estrella was lying at Liverpool Docks. She'd just finished loading ammunition, high explosives and supplies for the Canal Zone. She was due to sail at dawn the following morning. About three A.M. two ratings sneaked back, having overstayed their shore leave by three hours. They managed to get past the guard on the wharf and were pussy-footing it across the deck when one of them noticed smoke coming from a hatchway. The lads gave the alarm and the crew got the fire under control just in time." The voice slowed. "But just say those ratings had been good obedient boys and had got back to the ship at the right time?" Read pulled the ashtray toward him and dusted the end of his cigar.

"One of the dear old V-twos couldn't have done more damage to the docks! And as for the good ship Estrella...!"

Jeffery drew a deep breath. "Not a line in the papers, Chief?"

The other regarded him with a kind of genial savagery. "No, son; not a line in the newspapers! Sometimes it doesn't pay to print all the truth. Maybe it's because what with food rationing and taxation and fuel cuts and possible petrol rationing, the man in the street just couldn't take any more bad news. Or maybe it's the Government that's got enough on its mind. But you won't read about the Estrella sabotage attempts in the paper, just as you won't read about the three letter bombs which arrived across the road last week!"

Elizabeth's head jerked up. "Letter bombs?"

Across the desk the metallic blue eyes shot sparks. "Remember the trouble in Palestine some years ago? A base-born louse posted a pile of lethal correspondence to some of the biggest names in England. Nine letters were intercepted but eight got through the post. Wholesale murder was prevented only by a miracle!" The Chief Inspector looked up into Blackburn's set face. "Sweet little *billets-doux*! A child could make one. A pencil sized battery, one hundred and ninety grams of pure gelignite, a detonator, two pieces of cardboard and some wire. Open it carelessly— and Bob's your uncle! Provided there's enough left of your face to make such identification possible!"

Jeffery stared at the elder man for a moment. "Chief? I could use a drink right now!"

Read snapped at him. "Try using your head, son!"

Jeffery shrugged. "I'm no master-mind, Chief! You're supposed to be top man in this brains trust." He set big shoulders against the cabinet, lounging there, hands in his pockets. "All I can do is to take what we know and stack it alongside of what you've told us. So what?"

He paused for a moment.

"Here's the ingredients. We've got an Egyptian casket sold by a key man in a terrorist clique in Cairo. We've got the buyer— a shrewd-eyed collector who tries to hire me to do a probe and then changes his mind. We've got a couple of two-bit chisellers whom we suspect of working together on a neat thimble and pea trick to get their paws on the trinket. We've got what we believe is a crowd of treasonous tintypes here in London doing a neat line in sabotage and terrorism in their own shy way. We've got a murdered Greek in a house on the Mena road and a stiff pulled out of the river near Battersea Park."

Inspector Read put down his cigar. As his friend paused, he snapped: "All that! Plus a woman calling herself Bianca Milland!"

Blackburn's jaw set tight.

"Okay!" he said. "We've got Bianca Milland! There's your ingredients. Get 'em together, throw in a low-geared private eye for good measure, shake well and pour! Okay! And what comes out?"

The answer was a growl. "Just about the dirtiest mess this side of Christmas!"

Pause. Then a small voice spoke from the centre of the room.

"Please," said Elizabeth Blackburn, "would somebody bring me up to date on Bianca Milland?"

The intercom set on the desk buzzed sharply. Read wheeled and threw the key. The harassed voice of secretary Manners filtered into the room.

"There's two gentlemen waiting to see you, sir— Mr. Otis Peterson and Mr. Wilfred Pilgrim. I wouldn't interrupt you, sir, but they've both been waiting half an hour and they're getting a little impatient."

Read barked, "Send 'em in."

The click of the intercom key and the opening of the door came almost simultaneously. Otis Peterson, face flushed as a newly-risen full moon, thrust his bantam body into the room. He was followed by a man in his late fifties who clutched a rolled umbrella and a briefcase against his narrow chest. The squat collector strode forward, looking neither left nor right and breasted the desk.

"Chief Inspector Read?" he demanded.

The official nodded.

"I'm Otis Peterson." The rimless glasses caught the light from the window, flashed for a second. "I've been sitting out there twiddling my thumbs since a quarter after three!"

Read said vaguely, "These important conferences, you know..."

Peterson waved the implication aside. "Don't imagine I can't appreciate the fact that you're a busy man, sir. But so am I. So is Mr. Pilgrim, my attorney."

"Solicitor," corrected Wilfred Pilgrim. The tone was dry, brittle, like sapless twigs snapping underfoot.

"How do you do?" William Read rose and gave an introductory wave of his hand. He added almost blandly, "Mr. and Mrs. Blackburn."

Jeffery's expression was sardonic. "Remember me, Peterson?" he asked.

The other replied with a curt nod which might have been either greeting or assent. Elizabeth, already familiar with the collector's appearance through her husband's description, turned her attention to an assent and a greeting.

Elizabeth was staring at his companion. Wilfred Pilgrim was as fleshless as a scarecrow. Years of desk-toiling had given a stoop to his tall frame so that the girl was reminded of an old walking stick garbed in shabby serge. The face, with its expression of habitual anxiety, was so seamed and wrinkled that it gave the impression of being moulded from crepe paper.

Mr. Pilgrim said, "Is this the young man you mentioned, Mr. Peterson?"

The collector nodded.

Pilgrim was still watching Blackburn with that curious sidelong appraisal as he addressed him. "May I ask, sir, if your presence here has anything to do with your interview with my client yesterday morning?"

The reply was terse: "Any reason against it?"

Peterson, clutching his hat in one hand, was rubbing the other over blue-knuckled fingers. "Just what have you told the Chief Inspector?"

"He's got a full script. Right up to the time your niece and I watched Henry Lessing cutting a swathe down Piccadilly this morning."

At the reference to his secretary, Otis Peterson's flush deepened.

"Lessing!" he snapped. "That's the reason we're here! We want that scoundrel and his partner traced and arrested!"

Mrs. Blackburn's face was alight. "Partner?"

"This man we know as Menena the Egyptian! His real name is Harry Morris and he's a criminal of the lowest type. Blackmailer—doper—it came out at their trial three years ago when both Lessing and Morris were sentenced to twelve months imprisonment at the Tombs Penitentiary in New York for demanding money with menaces. They're a pair of bare-faced swindlers, working the crooked racket of selling an antique and then persecuting the buyer with false threats and terrorism until he was glad to be rid of the object—whereupon the whole dastardly business began again, with a fresh victim!"

Chief Inspector Read had picked up his cigar and was examining the smoking ash as though it was some strange new novelty. Then he looked up.

"You have evidence of all this, of course, Mr. Peterson?" The plump cheeks quivered as the collector swivelled his head and barked a word over his shoulder. As the solicitor came forward, Peterson sought a chair. Pilgrim slipped the catch of his briefcase, thrust a hand inside and brought out several typewritten sheets secured with a paper fastener. As he laid these on the desk, he said:

"This is a full and comprehensive account of the trial gathered from contemporary newspapers, Mr. Read. It was received by air this morning from our New York branch. Very valuable and highly informative channels, newspaper files..." The soft dry voice reminded Elizabeth of a breeze rustling among dead leaves. "The charges against Morris and Lessing who at this time was using the name of Dexter Potter, were fraud, forgery and the demanding of money with menaces and were laid against the defendants by a wealthy widow, Mrs. Ethel Amanda Boyden the second, of East Hampton, Long Island. Both men were found guilty of conspiring to defraud Mrs. Boyden of ten thousand dollars, paid by the plaintiff for an antique Egyptian casket believed to be of considerable value because of its historical associations. Morris was

also indicted on a charge of being a peddler and a user of cocaine and marijuana—"

Read was staring at the lined and withered face above the desk. Now he interrupted.

"One thing at a time!" He turned to Peterson. "This was the casket now in your possession?"

"Obviously!"

Jeffery spoke from his position by the cabinet. "But if these clip artists were caught, why didn't this Long Island dame keep the trinket?"

The reply was curt. "She'd been forced to give it up before the police investigation began."

"Even so," Read argued, "her property must have been returned after being used as evidence at the trial?"

Mr. Pilgrim answered. He was standing rubbing his bony fingers together. "At the trial, the defendants denied ever having received the trinket from Mrs. Boyden." He gave that curious oblique glance toward Peterson. "My client's most unfortunate experience, of course, proves that they had merely hidden it away, waiting for a further opportunity for their dishonest practices."

The Chief Inspector had picked up a paper knife and was turning it in his fingers.

"There isn't time to read this now," he told the solicitor. "Can you give it to me boiled down small?"

Pilgrim nodded.

"The case of Mrs. Boyden," he began, "parallels the experience of my client in almost every detail. Having considerable financial means, Mrs. Boyden travelled extensively and enjoyed bringing back from various parts of the world objects of interest and beauty to grace her three homes. In addition to her Long Island house, the lady had an apartment in New York and a farm at Connecticut.

"The man we know as Henry Lessing used forged references to obtain a position as travelling secretary with Mrs. Boyden. During their stay in Cairo, he pretended to hear of this valuable antique and again used the Greek Cassamatis as an intermediary. There is not the slightest doubt that Lessing, Cassamatis and Morris worked as a permanent team just as we can be certain that other victims preceded both Mrs. Boyden and Mr. Peterson.

"No sooner had Mrs. Boyden paid the money and received the casket than Morris, on this occasion using the name of Ibrahim Saleen, appeared in his disguise. There was the same request to be met with the same indignant refusal. Then the now-familiar persecution began, was continued during the journey home on the ship and even carried into Mrs. Boyden's New York

apartment. Then in an effort to escape this bedevilment, the harassed lady moved to her farm in Connecticut. A most unfortunate choice of location, for it was lonely and isolated and as such, served the rascals' ends admirably. Here they made the final impudent bid for the casket. Morris, hiding in the undergrowth of the garden, launched an attack on a servant girl returning home late at night.

"At the trial, Morris, who was addicted to the cocaine habit, pleaded that he merely meant to frighten the girl by winding a cord around her throat. Whether he was under the influence of the drug at this time cannot be proved but the fact remains that the unfortunate girl was very nearly strangled. She managed to break away, however, and fled to the house in such a state of terrified hysteria that on the following morning, her mistress yielded to the secretary's persuasions and handed the casket into his possession, ostensibly to be returned to the haunting Ibrahim Saleem. And immediately, to Mrs. Boyden's intense relief, the reign of terror ceased."

The Chief Inspector digested the recital for a moment.

"Mrs. Boyden made no contact whatever with the police?"

"None!"

"Then what brought them into the affair?"

Pilgrim smiled.

"It would appear that the servant girl had a very pugnacious young admirer. He reported his lady-love's assault. It took the police some time to trace both Lessing and Morris because of Mrs. Boyden's reluctance to give information."

Jeffery lounged forward and wedged a hip on the edge of the desk.

"But why keep this racket under cover? Here's a wealthy old dame allowing the false fringe to be seared off her! What's more, she hands over ten thousand dollars worth of property without as much as a peep to the cops!"

Peterson's well-barbered face was flushed. "I'll tell you why!" he snapped and drummed his fists angrily on the arm of the chair, "Lessing fooled his victims with a pack of lies about bribing high Government officials in Cairo! He produced a list of important and influential names which he said must be paid. I don't know what that woman gave him but he collected a cool thousand dollars from me! All of which went into his own pocket, of course! But every time I suggested a police investigation, he pretended to become alarmed and pointed out the harm such a scandal would cause to British prestige in the East!" The speaker paused and his voice quietened.

"As you know, that prestige doesn't stand so very high at the moment. With eastern relations as they are, an investigation might have caused much more than just a local scandal!"

The Chief Inspector tossed the paper knife on the desk. Blackburn said slowly, "We're dealing with a very smart cookie in Lessing. He seems to have figured out just about every angle."

"Excepting one!" barked Peterson. Knotted fingers gripped the edge of the chair as the little man sat forward. "Lessing didn't figure that someone else might be just as smart! He believed himself so clever as to be beyond suspicion." He stood up and made that quick bantam strut toward the desk.

Read enquired: "Then why were you suspicious?"

"I think it was the references. Excellent and thorough reputable signatures but when I tried to get confirmation by telephone, all of Lessing's former employers were mysteriously out of town!" Peterson paused and frowned. "Time was running so short that it had to be Lessing or nobody! At first, the fellow couldn't have been more efficient and I was beginning to think I'd misjudged him when the hocus-pocus in Cairo began. Then all my suspicions returned. After all, I have travelled the world as collector for the Fosdyke museum— and nothing of this nature had happened before I took this secretary into my employment. That it should begin with his hiring seemed much more than mere coincidence. Again, the very idea of this Egyptian curse was much too infantile and ridiculous to be genuine!"

Blackburn had lit a cigarette. "Maybe," he suggested, "you recalled the Boyden case three years ago."

"Three years ago," Peterson said curtly, "I was in the American Zone in Berlin."

Read asked, "What brought the Lessing business to a head?"

"After this rascal Morris began to make his appearances in Cairo, I contacted Pilgrim's partners requesting a thorough check-up on my new secretary. While waiting for the report to come through, something else happened which convinced me I was dealing with a very dangerous customer."

The plump collector paused.

"Last Tuesday, I happened to be walking down the carpeted corridor of the Dorchester suite when I heard Lessing's voice coming from the small room he used as an office. It was on such a note of hushed and repressed anger— so completely unlike his ordinary respectful tone that I crossed and listened. The door was partly open and I could see the fellow talking on the telephone. Some of the terms he was using were so extraordinary that I guessed they were criminal slang. His side of the conversation consisted of accusing the person on the other end of the wire of not staying off what he called 'the needle habit' and then he snarled this sentence.

"He said, 'Listen to me, you low-down gutter-hypo, if you can't stay free of the dust I'm working this one solo!'" Peterson paused and made a deprecatory

little gesture. "Those queer terms remained in my mind because of their intense vulgarity. Another thing he said was, 'Why, you're not worth a crooked nickel to me. I could do the rest of this in my sleep. But if you want to make something of it, meet me down at your flea-house in Pimlico.'"

Read said sharply, "What happened then?"

"I think Lessing must have become aware of my presence because he hung up very quickly. I coughed to announce myself and when I entered the office, Lessing was slipping a piece of paper into his typewriter."

In the silence that followed, Jeffery drawled, "So that's the reason you decided to try and hire some protection?"

The pink scalp with its fringe of greying hair turned in Blackburn's direction. "You were recommended by Moratti's agency," Peterson said. "They appeared to consider you as a very capable agent. I'm sorry that I can't share that opinion." All the latent antipathy between these two men was expressed in the sneer that coated the next words. "However, your Hollywood performance in my office appeared to impress Lessing considerably. After you had gone, he came to me saying that in his opinion it would be completely hopeless to rely on you in any emergency. And for the future safety of my niece, I should return the casket to Menena without delay!"

Jeffery slid off the desk and took a half-step forward.

"Why, you half-pint cue-ball..." he snarled and doubled one fist.

"Jeff!" rapped the Chief Inspector. "Sit down and behave yourself!" As the other relaxed, he turned frosty blue eyes on the small man by the desk. "I think we can dispense with any further remarks of that kind, Mr. Peterson."

Read pulled a blank sheet of paper toward him.

"I want to check up on a few final details. I believe you told Lessing you would consider returning the casket."

The collector nodded. "I gave him that impression."

"Why— if you suspected he was a crook?"

"For that very reason! When he spoke about the future safety of my niece, I detected a veiled threat. By pretending to fall in with the rascal's wishes, I hoped to avert any planned danger to Susan Ann."

Read made a notation on the paper. "And carrying out this masquerade, you visited Mr. Pilgrim's chambers with Lessing this morning?"

"That is so."

"For what reason?"

"The casket is kept in a safe deposit in the Bank of England. I was to instruct Mr. Pilgrim to bring it to my hotel."

"Why couldn't you have collected the casket yourself?"

"Because I've given Pilgrim power of attorney. Every time the casket is taken from or returned to the Bank, it must be signed for on a special slip." Jeffery turned in time to see Peterson hold up twisted fingers. "Your climate plays the very devil with my arthritis— somedays it's impossible for me even to hold a pen!"

The Chief Inspector nodded.

A little clucking sound took Jeffery's eyes to the solicitor's chair. Pilgrim had remained so silent Blackburn had almost forgotten he was still in the room. Now the tall man of law began to unfold his gaunt frame, clutching his belongings in his eagerness to rise. Then he stood beside his client, towering a head above him as he addressed the man behind the desk.

"This delegation of authority has been used only twice since it was signed, Mr. Read. And each time an official from the Bank has been with me. I made it quite clear to Mr. Peterson that I was not prepared to involve my firm in any responsibility for—"

"All right— all right!" Read ground the end of his cigar in the ash-tray. "Never mind the casket. I'm waiting to hear what took place in your office this morning."

"Quite early this morning, Mr. Peterson rang me at my home. He asked me to get the casket and bring it around to my chambers where he would meet me. Shortly after ten o'clock, I sent two of my clerks for the casket and Mr. Peterson and Lessing arrived before they had returned.

"We were sitting in my office, all three of us, when another clerk brought in the first edition of the newspaper. As the clerk placed this on my desk, he mentioned that one of my partners, Mr. Humphries, wished to see me for a few minutes. I excused myself and slipped out of the room." Wilfred Pilgrim's pale eyes blinked. "As I was returning along the corridor, I was amazed to see Lessing, white-faced and staring-eyed, burst out of my room and rush past me. I called to him, but he ran on without a word and disappeared down the stairs."

"What happened, Mr. Peterson?"

The collector's fingers touched his spectacles.

"It was a most extraordinary thing, Mr. Read. After Mr. Pilgrim had left the room, we sat for a few moments. Then Lessing pulled the newspaper toward him and glanced idly at the front page. Next moment, he jumped to his feet, his eyes dilated and the paper shaking in his hands. Then he cried out, 'They won't get me!' and then, 'They'll never lay their dirty paws on me!' And with that, he flung down the paper and rushed from the room."

Peterson shrugged. "At the time the outburst made no sense at all. But this afternoon, when the report of Lessing's trial arrived..." he paused and spread

his hands. "Something in that newspaper told Lessing that his game was up. In which case, who else could he have been referring to but the police?"

A polite tap sounded on the door. Manners slid through with a murmured apology and laid a long envelope in front of his superior. As the door closed behind the secretary, Read slit the flap and drew out a typewritten sheet. He gave it a fierce swift perusal and then stood up.

"Very well, gentlemen. I think that's all we can do at the moment." He glanced at his wrist-watch. "Would you give us permission to search Lessing's rooms at the hotel?"

"Certainly!" Peterson tapped his fingers on the desk. "Call on us for any help you need. We want those two rascals traced and arrested even if it takes six months!"

THE ELECTRIC SIGN in Piccadilly spelt out the legend "Guinness is Good for You," and the illuminated clock above pointed to five minutes to nine.

Jeffery said, "Should it take all this time to do an autopsy?"

Elizabeth patted his hand. "Patience, darling. The Chief told us to kill time until nine-thirty."

They were seated on the steps at the base of the Eros statue, two incongruous figures in the calm golden glow of an English twilight.

Almost four hours had passed since the Chief Inspector ushered Otis Peterson and his solicitor from the office at Scotland Yard. When the door closed behind them, the big man had beckoned the Blackburn couple to his desk and pushed over the report of the body found in the river. Two pairs of eyes scanned the details and then Jeffery looked up.

"Seems to clinch it, Chief!"

Read had nodded. "Still, we have to be sure, son. I'll get a set of prints taken. Then I'll buzz Donlin and Armstrong to get across to Lessing's rooms for a complete once-over. They can pick up his dabs at the same time. I'll flash both sets across to New York for a positive identification." He glanced down at the report.

"Might be a good idea to have Conroy do a stomach autopsy on this chap."

Elizabeth had asked, "How long will that take?"

She recalled how Read had grunted, "Depends on Conroy's mood. Drop back here about half-past nine. Might have some news for you."

An elderly woman with a sottish face and grey hair crimped like a wash-board pushed a posy of wallflowers under Jeffery's nose. "Luvly posy, dearie—the last— five bob," she whined. Mrs. Blackburn waved them away impatiently. "Inflation!" she snapped. The loose mouth writhed as the hag spat

an insult and moved on. The traffic roared again and a bus changed gear with a sound like rending metal.

And in the next lull:

"If only this case hadn't turned out to be such a wretched frost," Elizabeth lamented, "everything would have been different. You could have gone to work with the Chief and taken your mind off this other business."

"So you think it's finished?"

She said promptly, "Unless you want to take on the purely routine job of tracing Henry Lessing. But Central Office could probably do it in half the time."

Jeffery shook a dissatisfied head.

"I wish," he said slowly, "I could get this affair clear in my mind."

"Clear?" She sounded surprised. "Darling, it's pellucid! Two crooks team up on a swindle racket. Then they quarrel and Number One boy decides that he can do without Number Two. Later, Number Two boy is fished from the river. A medical report tells of small bruises on the back of the neck and both arms pitted with marks of a hypodermic needle. Seeing that Number Two is a chronic cocaine doper this isn't surprising."

Jeffery said, "You've got it all figured out, haven't you?"

"Practically— yes!"

"Then maybe you can tell me why Lessing and his buddy quarrelled over the phone?"

Elizabeth tucked a stray curl under her beret. "Apparently Lessing didn't approve of his partner's bad habits."

"As far back as three years ago, Morris was flogging the juice. Why start to beef about it now?"

"Could it be," asked Elizabeth, "that Morris had perpetrated another of his dumb-bunny acts like the warning he handed to me in Knightsbridge yesterday? He might have been making a habit of gaffs like that. Particularly as the dope seems to have blunted what few feeble wits Morris had in the beginning!"

Elizabeth edged closer to her husband and her voice was compelling.

"Darling, don't you see this gives Lessing three first-class motives for murder? He no longer needed Morris because, as he believed Peterson was on the point of cracking, he knew he could carry on the masquerade alone. Again, a dead partner meant an undivided loot for Lessing."

The golden light was a rich amber over the tops of the buildings. The hag with the raw meat complexion had apparently given up hope of disposing of her high-priced posy. Now she had tucked it into her soiled blouse and squatting on the steps, produced a newspaper wrapped parcel. The smell of fish and chips mingled with the odor of carbon monoxide as she stuffed the

fat-soaked crescents into her mouth, pausing only to wipe her flabby lips with the back of her hand.

Then Jeffery said, "Beth!"

"Yes?"

Fingers linked, he was squeezing his palms together. "I'd buy it, baby," he told her, "except for one thing. Something that tosses your summing up right out in the alley. A few minutes ago you said that this hurdy-gurdy revolved around a pair of small time grafters— but haven't you forgotten someone else in this set-up?" He dropped his hands and turned to face her.

"A gopher named Dimitri Cassamatis."

The girl said sharply, "But he's dead!"

He nodded. "Like Harry Morris."

She was looking at his grim expression. "But I mean, Jeffery..." And then Elizabeth Blackburn paused, obviously unsure in her own mind just what she did mean. After a few moment's silence she shot off at a tangent. "I know what you're thinking— that because this casket racket originated in Cairo, it might have some kind of connection with what the Chief mentioned in confidence this afternoon."

"And you figure that's just a pipe-dream?"

She said uneasily, "But Jeff, how could the two be connected? Where's the link?" She went on quickly: "Oh, I know you're going to say it's the Greek, but isn't it possible he could have been mixed in both rackets— and both entirely separate from one another?"

Her husband said doggedly, "Can't see it, baby! These gyp artists had teamed up before and everything was dandy. Okay! Then why should the set-up suddenly come to pieces now? One guy dead, another dead presumed murdered and the third missing! And you still think that everything's jake!"

He was watching the coloured bulbs make a twinkling ascent of the huge Bovril sign. "Beth, remember how the Chief impressed on us that this other affair was to be kept strictly under cover?"

She nodded.

"So why confide in us unless he had a mighty strong hunch that the two cases were connected?"

There was a tiny wrinkle between Elizabeth's brows but her voice was disarmingly casual. "I'd answer that one," she told him, "if I knew something more about this woman you call Bianca Milland."

Jeffery was still, staring across the stream of traffic. "No secret," he told her. "This Milland woman was mixed up in a case in New York. I tangled with her when I was on Moratti's pay-roll. I thought she had died in the States. But

the Chief had the buzz from Intelligence that she'd coupled up with Cassamatis in Cairo."

She stilled the inner qualms, forcing her mind to the main issue.

"But, darling, what's the significance? How does that connect the two cases?" She paused, waiting for him to answer. After almost a minute, she added, "Unless there was a similarity in the New York affair?"

He shook his head slowly. "No." The answer seemed reluctant. "But she was always nuts on this Egyptian stuff. She had a crazy room in her apartment done out like a museum..." The words slurred into silence. For the hundredth time since Read had made the announcement, Jeffery was trying to adjust his mind to the fact that this woman was alive.

He felt the sweat forming on his lips and in an effort to divert his mind, turned and watched the blowsy flower-seller screw her grease-stained newspaper into a ball and wedge it against the angle of the steps. Grunting and mewling in an animal undertone she rose and staggered off in the direction of Coventry Street.

"Darling," Elizabeth was saying gently. "What is it? What's the matter?"

Her fingers slid down to his own and she found them icy-cold. "I know what's wrong with you, big boy," she said firmly. "Come on— up on your pins! I'm going to buy you a drink!"

His face was clearly lit by the dancing signs. She saw it tighten, grow almost wolfish in its hungry leanness, then the torment died as quickly as it was born.

"No, baby. It's not the booze. I'm beginning to think I've cut that down to size. It's just that I've got a single track mind on this casket affair."

"Jeff— ?"

He turned to face her.

"Are you certain it's not just wishful thinking?"

"So you think I'm like the guy who tried to slam a revolving door?"

She smiled at him. Then she said, "Jeff, do you still want to go to New York?"

His voice went high. "Why?"

She said steadily, "If you do, I'm ready. Whenever you say the word. Because, above all, I want you to be contented, darling. With me, that's all that matters."

Now the grin had spread to his eyes, lighting up his face. "New York's a hell of a spot in August," he told her. "We'd have to spend our time sitting in cinemas to keep cool!" He moved closer and took her hands. "I figure we can do better than that."

PICCADILLY Circus at nine-thirty on a Friday night.

They were edging their way through a pedestrian jam caused by four young men in custom-tailored suits who were training movie cameras on the advertising signs and drawing comparisons with Times Square in flat nasal accents.

Jeffery nodded. "Peterson might have us all out on a limb. He's pitched us a mighty fantastic story and we've all sat around and swallowed it." He steered her past a group waiting at a bus stop. "But how do we know that Peterson's on the level?"

Elizabeth said doubtfully, "Any reason to suspect otherwise, Jeff?"

"On the surface, no." He paused and she could see that he was worrying and teasing at the idea. "Except," he added, "for one thing. His alibi for not knowing about the Boyden trial seemed pretty flat to me. This bird says he was in Austria three years ago. Okay, but who else says so?"

"Archie Stewart-Riggs."

Jeffery broke his stride and came to a halt. He gripped his wife's arm and swung her around to face him. "Are you kidding?" he demanded.

"Cross my heart!" retorted Elizabeth. "Remember how you wanted the gen on Stewart-Riggs from Ella Halversham this morning? It was pick and shovel work— you know Ella's mind— but I came away with a few facts in my callused hands. One of them was that Peterson and Stewart-Riggs met for the first time in the American Zone in Germany three years ago."

"Doing what?"

"Collecting antiques. Around about that time the barter system was in full swing over there. Old homes were being ransacked for family heirlooms and these were being exchanged for the necessities of living. And there were all kinds of petty larceny going on— houses being burgled for antiques and these swapped for cigarettes and petrol and candy.

"This being so, Jeff, it isn't surprising that Uncle Otis knew nothing of the Boyden case. The country must have been in a sorry mess and there were more important things to worry about than an ordinary swindling charge in New York."

Jeffery nodded. They were moving on, crossing Panton Street and walking in the direction of Pall Mall. Presently he said, "What else did you find out?"

"Ella Halversham met him about six months ago at an Embassy dinner. Then he began to bob up at parties. Apparently, he's that very useful adjunct— a wealthy bachelor, unattached and smooth as silk."

"And what's the source? Collecting antiques on the barter system may be okay in one part of the world, but our Candy Kid seems to get around to other locations. That takes dough these days. So does buying a property in Kent and turning it into a show-place. Okay, but where does he dig it from?"

She said, "He might have inherited it—"

Jeffery sneered, "Or he might have made it by being top banana in a freak show!" He paused. "Talking of inheritance, did Ella Halversham mention anything about his pedigree?"

"Ella spoke of a step-sister."

"What is she like?"

"Ella doesn't know because she's never met her," Elizabeth admitted. "She heard about this woman from Portia Divine, the illustrator. Then it was only a chance reference. But apparently this half-sister stays down on the property in Kent." Her voice slowed. "But does it matter, Jeff? Why the sudden interest in Stewart-Riggs?"

He said quietly, "I'd give you an answer to that one if I knew the reason for Stewart-Riggs' visit to the Dorchester yesterday morning. Was it because of the casket?"

"Darling, they're both collectors."

"And you think Petersen would want to share his trinket with a rival?"

"Of course! All collectors do that kind of thing to each other. They revel in seeing their competitors drooling at the mouth!"

They were almost to Pall Mall now and Elizabeth paused to primp in a shop window.

"Anyhow, darling, if you're so curious why don't you ask Stewart-Riggs? You'll be seeing him in person tomorrow afternoon at the benefit thing for Mr. Birdseye's boys."

Hands thrust into his pockets, Jeffery began to move across the intersection.

"Jeffery— look out!"

Her scream and the cloaking darkness came almost simultaneously— a darkness that rushed forward and dropped over him like a giant wing. Then he was lying in a tall black forest and the tree-tops were hung with pale masks...and then they were not trees but people and there was no feeling at all in one side of his body and someone was saying, "Stand back there, if you please!" Elizabeth was cradling his head on her lap and he could see dark stains on the front of her frock and she was crying and moaning a little.

"Oh, Jeffery...Jeffery..."

He tried to speak but there was something wrong with his jaw and only a choking gurgle came through. The numbness was coming alive, not with feeling but with fire, every nerve a burning searing fuse. He gritted his teeth and clamped eyelids tight as the agony clogged his brain and the street spun in a mist of vertigo. He put a hand to his face to brush away the sweat; to his surprise it came away smeared with blood.

"What happened to me?"

Elizabeth was mopping his lace gently with a stained handkerchief. "It was a car," she whispered. "It tore out of Pall Mall and spun you into the gutter."

A deep contralto voice interrupted from the outskirts of the crowd. "Mrs. Blackburn!" Alarm raised it half a tone. "Let me through, please! This lady is a friend of mine. Let me through!"

Elizabeth raised her head, recognised the newcomer. "Miss Divine!" she cried.

Jeffery, watching with glazed eyes, saw a woman thrusting her way forward, topping most of the men in the group. They parted to let this unusual figure through— a huge woman, broad shouldered and flat-chested.

"Mrs. Blackburn—" Her dark eyes flew to Jeffery. "Great Scott! What's happened here?"

Elizabeth whimpered, "My husband— a hit and run driver." She swallowed and made an obvious effort at control. Her voice was steadier when he asked, "Have you a car?"

The woman nodded. "Of course. Across the way."

"If I could get my husband home, we could get a doctor..."

"Very sensible!" She turned to the constable. "Would you help him across the street?"

But the law was not to be dragooned like this. "Now, just a minute, miss! There's an ambulance coming for this chap—"

A wallet was being produced from a breast pocket. Next moment a card fluttered in strong fingers. "I am Portia Divine, constable. These people are friends of mine. They are, incidentally, also friends of Chief Inspector Read of Scotland Yard!"

Elizabeth said wearily, "I've given the constable the details. He's taken everything down."

Portia Divine's face, devoid of make-up as a cowboy's, set in a heavy frown. "Come along, Mrs. Blackburn. We must get your husband home."

She was wearing an over-the-shoulder bag; now she set a big hand upon it and used her elbow to wedge her way through the small crowd. The constable, after a glance at her formidable back, muttered something and half-led, half-supported Jeffery to the waiting car. Miss Divine swung open the rear door. Elizabeth climbed in first. Jeffery, shaking off the constable's arm, gritted his teeth and eased himself in beside her.

They were passing Hyde Park corner when he said huskily:

"Okay, baby— they've started it! This is the beginning, baby— now it's really on!"

"You're a case for the *B.M.A. Journal*," he grunted. "You must have bones like concrete! How you could have been bounced around like that without cracking even a rib beats me completely." He pulled a sheet across Blackburn's body. "How do you feel now?"

Jeffery managed a lop-sided grin. "I'm dying," he said. "But doing it the hard way. Like falling into a cement mixer!" He moved under the sheet and winced.

"We'll soon fix that," Merrill told him and reaching in his bag, took out a hypodermic syringe and a glass ampule. He was breaking the top as he went on, "This is going to stop your horsing around for a few weeks, my boy! You're going to be sore as a nest of boils." He was manipulating the syringe and then he tossed the empty ampule back into his bag. "Now let's have your arm..."

Five minutes later he entered the living room. Portia Divine was seated on the couch, smoking a small cigar. Elizabeth was standing by the window. Both women moved as he entered. Mrs. Blackburn came forward. "Paul," she cried.

"It's all right, Elizabeth." He was resting his bag on the table, snapping the catches. "He's a living miracle! By every known law. he should have been smashed to bits. Instead, he's got off with the nastiest set of bruises I've seen since the blitz!"

Relief flooding her face, she dropped into a chair. This was no bedside manner— she had known Paul Merrill too long. They had grown up together since the Merrills had owned a Cotswold property adjoining Chippingmarle. Now she looked at his gangling figure with new affection. He pushed a lock of blond hair out of his eyes as he straightened and smiled at her. "I've taped him up like a Christmas parcel."

She said, "Is there anything I can do, Paul?"

"Yours is the toughest task," he told her. "Keep him in bed and make him rest if you have to slug him. I'll drop around in the morning."

When the door closed behind him, Portia Divine reached up and pulled at the lapels of her coat. "I'll get along myself," she said gruffly.

The woman rose and took up her bag from the couch. "Bad luck about tomorrow afternoon," she said. "I suppose this rules you out?"

Elizabeth put a hand to her head. "Tomorrow?"

"The benefit at Holmedale," the woman reminded her. "Great pity! Mr. Birdseye has gone to a great deal of trouble to make the affair a stunning success. We're hoping to get that film actress Jean Inglis to open the fete and sign autographs for one guinea each. The Metropolitan Water Board have lent us some educational films and a lecturer— Mr. Birdseye's very keen on the cultural side, you know. And for the lighter minded, there's a strong man and a tattooed lady and a fire walker."

Elizabeth shook her head, a little distraught movement.

"I'm sorry, Miss Divine. I'm afraid that's quite out of the question. You heard what Doctor Merrill said. I must stay here with my husband." She watched the big dark woman nod heavily and with a kind of brusque sympathy.

"Do you think it was done deliberately?"

The sharp question took Elizabeth completely by surprise. She stared at the rough face for a moment. "Oh, no," she said. "Why should you think it was?"

"Something your husband said on the way here. Possibly shock." She thrust out her hand, a masculine gesture. "Goodbye, Mrs. Blackburn. I hope we meet again soon— under better circumstances."

As Elizabeth turned, the clock on the mantel chimed the hour of ten. She took a cigarette and lit up, then crossing to the bedroom, opened the door and looked inside. Jeffery lay on his back, breathing deeply in a drugged sleep. Elizabeth closed the door and returned to the couch.

Alone for the first time since the accident, she went over the whole terrible affair in her mind. The sudden predatory roar of the car. Jeffery half-way across the road and then his crumpled body lying in the gutter. Ridiculous to imagine that it could have been intentional!

She put down a hand to ease herself into another position and the fingers, slipping between the cushions, encountered something smooth and cool and hard. She pulled it out for inspection— a flat circular disc of some metal like gold. A compact, but certainly not one from her collection. It was heavy and in the groove making the opening, a smear of powder had gathered. Elizabeth put down her cigarette and crossed to the reading lamp on the table. Turning the object in her fingers, she saw a line of engraving across the lid. Slanting it toward the light, she read:

"To Portia, my clever collaborator, with thanks and affection, Ella."

Of course— Portia Divine! Elizabeth recalled the hand-bag flung down on the couch. She remembered her visitor clicking it shut before she left the room. Obviously the compact had fallen free...but compact? The girl frowned, visualising that broad heavy face, completely bereft of make-up in any form—

"Thank you, Mrs. Blackburn!"

Elizabeth gave a sharp throaty gasp and wheeled. Portia Divine was coming through the doorway, shoulders hunched slightly and a big hand outstretched. "My property, I think," the deep voice continued, and the object was almost snatched from Elizabeth's fingers.

"Always leaving that thing around. One day I'll really lose it and Ella will never forgive me. Might even break up a beautiful friendship!"

There was an awkward little pause. To cover it, Elizabeth said, "Is it a compact?"

"Naturally! What else do you imagine it would be?"

Elizabeth made no answer. She was staring at those rough-hewn features, at the weather-beaten skin she could have sworn had never known the touch of a powder-puff. Portia Divine seemed suddenly conscious of this scrutiny. She turned on her heel and the words were flung back over her shoulder.

"Sorry to barge in like that. Didn't discover my loss until I was out in the car, going through my bag for the keys. Thought I might have lost the thing for good this time. Well...goodnight again."

Scarcely had the door closed behind her when the telephone rang. When Elizabeth lifted the receiver, Read's voice sounded at the other end. Constable 901 had been meticulous in his reporting and his checking upon these "friends of the Chief Inspector" and the official's tone was full of anxious inquiry. Only the fact that he was still waiting for the Medical Officer's report had kept him at the office, but if he could accomplish anything by coming around...?

Knowing that her friend had enough problems of his own, Elizabeth forced calmness into her voice. "Thanks, Chief," she replied. "But it isn't necessary. Dr. Merrill's given Jeff a sedative— he'll sleep through the night. And there's nothing wrong with him that rest can't cure." She paused, listening. Then: "All right— come around in the morning. And meanwhile, don't worry about me. The situation's well in hand. And I'm quite all right..."

Dr. Paul Merrill's pleasant face was flushed. He stared at Jeffery with narrowed eyes, then turned.

"Elizabeth! Can't you reason with this madman? Make him understand that he must rest!"

Dr. Merrill pushed back a lock of fair hair from his eyes. His words were measured.

"Blackburn. Twelve hours ago you went through an experience which might well have put you into hospital for a month. Heaven alone knows why it didn't. Perhaps it was some minor miracle or it could be merely that you're constitutionally tough. But don't try that endurance too far! As a medical man, I'm warning you. If you leave this room today, I'd in no way to be held responsible for the consequences!"

Jeffery said shortly, "Okay— okay!"

Merrill spoke again.

"That's my verdict, Elizabeth." The tone was curt, harassed. "Now it's up to you. I'm sorry to have to take this attitude, but no doctor in the world can cure without a patient's co-operation. Goodbye for the present and I'll ring you later on."

Blackburn heard the voice move away and there came the click of a closing door. Then Elizabeth was by his side.

"Jeffery," she pleaded. "Won't you take notice of Paul? For my sake..."

"No, Beth."

She persisted. "Jeffery, early this morning before you were awake, Ella Halversham rang. She'd heard the news from Portia Divine. Ella said that under the circumstances, naturally they wouldn't be expecting us."

"You bet they won't!" The young man's tone was savage. "So they reckon they've got the green light on their monkey business."

"They?"

"The weasels who ran me down last night." Now Jeffery turned. "Surely you get the whole set-up, baby. Something's cooking down there at Holmedale this afternoon. So let's put this private dick out of action before he gets too nose!"

From the doorway, a new voice spoke.

"Thought you were supposed to be at death's door, son!"

They both wheeled. Chief Inspector Read stood in the entrance.

Elizabeth said helplessly, "He's crazy, Chief. He shouldn't have moved out of bed."

Jeffery swept the rest of the sentence aside with an impatient gesture.

"Any news, Chief?"

Read grunted. "Plenty!" He sat down and adjusted the crease in his navy blue pin-stripe trousers. "But what about your little party last night?"

"That can wait," Jeffery said briefly. "I'm more interested in that medical report. Anything turn up in the autopsy?"

The Chief Inspector leaned back and crossed his legs. "Fifteen grains of thiopentone sodium in the late Harry Morris' liver," he announced. "Reduced to essentials, it means that Morris was given a strong shot of dope and then tossed in the river. He was unconscious but still breathing."

Jeffery said slowly, "You ran the rule over Lessing's room at the hotel?"

Read nodded. "Unearthed quite an interesting little swag. In the box-room next to Lessing's room the boys flushed out a complete Menena outfit—burnoose, sandals, false beard and turban. Lessing's bedroom produced a hypodermic syringe and several rubber capped bottles of insulin. There was a calendar on his office desk and under Thursday's date was the notation, 'Pimlico— nine-thirty.' Obviously this referred to the meeting Peterson overheard being arranged between Lessing and Morris." The big man paused and flashed a keen glance at his listeners.

"Thursday, you'll recall, was the evening on which our friend Morris was hauled out of the river!"

It was Elizabeth who asked, "Lessing kept that appointment?"

"We think so."

"Then why leave all that evidence around for the police to find?"

Read said grimly, "Matters seem to have got a little out of hand for Lessing. As soon as we got that line on Pimlico, I had the district combed. The men were given copies of the paper with Morris' picture and every lodging house proprietor was asked whether he or she could identify the photograph. About ten o'clock last night, two of the patrols struck it lucky. A Mrs. Bertha Beamis, letting rooms in a rabbit warren off Inkerman Street, recognised her boarder. About half-past nine of Thursday evening, Mrs. Beamis was on her way back from the local. She passed Morris and another man in the street. She says she can't describe the second man because it was too dark!" The last word exploded in Read's mouth. "Dark, mind you, at nine-thirty on a fine summer's evening! Truth was, of course, she was muzzy! But she does remember that both men entered a big car standing at the corner— although whether that's evidence or imagination we'll never know. But the fact remains that someone called on Morris that evening and after that, he was never seen alive."

Read chewed his cigar for a moment. Then he added,

"Just to get the record clear— when I got into the office this morning, Manners handed me a reply from New York. The Tombs authorities identified the prints of both Lessing and Morris as being those of the men serving sentence there three years ago!" The big man gave a little triumphant nod. "So right now, there's a drag-net out for Henry Lessing that would trap a greasy pig!"

A thin dark smile touched Blackburn's lips. "You're wasting your time, Chief."

"Why?"

"I'm convinced that Lessing and Morris engineered this monkey business about the casket between them, because there's evidence to prove it. You'll get the bird for fraudery, but you'll never pin a murder on him." He shook his head. "No, Chief, Henry Lessing didn't put the finger on his partner."

Read was watching him. "You're not suggesting Morris committed suicide!"

"Oh, no! He was murdered."

The other man's voice was impatient. "But apart from Lessing, who else would want Morris out of the way?"

Jeffery had untied his dressing-gown. Now he unbuttoned his pyjama coat, slipping it off one shoulder, revealing the white tapes hugging the bruised purple flesh. He said tightly, "The same bunch of soulless bastards who did this to me— last night!"

THE CLOCK on the mantelpiece chimed ten times and the sound died away. Jeffery lowered himself back on the divan, easing his shoulders gingerly against the padded back. Then he said, "Merrill's dope wore off about three o'clock this morning. There wasn't any sleep for me after that. So I had plenty of time to sort things out. By the time I'd fitted everything into place, the pattern looked about as healthy as a pus pocket!" Now he addressed the older man directly.

"Someone's fixed a fine gilt frame for Lessing and we've been on the point of buying it."

Read was silent for a moment, chewing his cigar. "All right, son," he grunted. "But if Lessing's clear of this killing, why should he rush out of Pilgrim's office crying that the police would never get him?"

Jeffery drawled, "Careful, Chief! You're putting words in Henry's mouth. According to Peterson, he said that they'd never get him! We figured he meant the cops, but that's where we slipped up." He paused, watching the indecision on the other man's face. Then he went on.

"Let's assume that you're on the beam, Chief. So Lessing rubbed out his partner. Okay! So we want a habeas corpus. From Peterson, from Beth and from myself, we've got a complete description of the body. It's an elderly guy, bearded and wearing a rig-out from the chorus of Chu Chin Chow." His voice slowed. "So when an unknown guy is pulled out of the water— a bird completely different in every way from our habeas corpus, there's not one single reason why we should connect this unknown tramp with Menena!"

Jeffery leaned back and folded his arms.

"Henry Lessing wasn't scared of a murder rap. Nor was he afraid of the cops." The young man's dark eyes were steady on the official's face. "Lessing dropped his bundle because he realised his partner had been *murdered by someone who knew Morris not as Menena but as Morris!* And what sent him hot-foot from that office was the conviction that he was next on the list!"

When he spoke, the big man's voice was subdued. "You've answered another question, son."

"What's that?"

Read said shortly, "I was keeping it up my sleeve to floor you. I was going to ask why, if Lessing's innocent, he hasn't come forward to identify his partner's body. Jeff, if this third party knew about Morris' real identity, does that mean he knew about the casket swindle?"

"Possibly."

"Then he was likewise in on this pretty little game?"

Blackburn shook his head. "Lessing and Morris didn't need any outside help. Another partner would have been a loose cog in the machine."

Read frowned. "Then where does this third party fit in?"

"I figure he was after the casket for reasons of his own."

Elizabeth asked, "Another collector?"

Jeffery was fingering the cords of his dressing gown. He said slowly, "Collectors are crazy guys, Beth. But not crazy enough to plan a perfect crime like the killing of Morris, a murder which on the surface showed no traces of the act. Not crazy enough to send Lessing into smoke scared stiff in case he finished up like his buddy— and not crazy enough to try the dodge of smearing a nosy private dick across the pavement in Haymarket! No, baby! That kind of thing calls for planning and organisation, and the same brand of ruthlessness that marked the attempted sabotage of the Estrella in Liverpool docks two weeks ago."

The Chief Inspector had leapt to his feet with the abruptness that set his chair rocking. He waved his cigar in a gesture somehow futile and defenseless.

"Jeff!" he barked. "This third party..."

"...isn't just one person, Chief. It's a group of back-stabbing creeps that have set up shop here in England. You know why! And these treasonous tykes want the casket themselves."

"Why?"

Blackburn stood up. "There was another terrorist group in Cairo, and Dimitri Cassamatis was a member. He delivered the casket to Peterson. You told us that Intelligence had the Greek taped and that when they arrested him, they searched him to the skin. Okay! What were they looking for any why didn't they find it?"

He took a step forward and his voice rose a tone.

"I'll tell you why! Because whatever they suspected the Greek to be carrying was then inside the casket, placed there by Cassamatis when he was desperate for a hiding-place. And it's still there. That's why our little group of playmates need that trinket very urgently— and why they aren't stopping at murder to get it!"

Read spoke in a voice that was little more than a mutter. "So you worked all this out in bed."

Jeffery said grimly, "Sure!"

Read's clear blue eyes raked the young man's face for an instant. Then he turned. "Beth," he began.

She was anticipating the question so that her own words were an interruption.

"Last night," she said slowly, "I was laughing at the idea. But now I'm not nearly so sure." She came across the room, hesitantly, her mind on the

problem and seated herself on the broad arm of the divan. "I'm sure they exist but that's all. They've been too clever in covering their tracks."

William Read waved an irritable hand to clear the smoke from his eyes. He gave no indication of having heard Elizabeth's words as he repeated, "Something hidden in the casket?"

"Nothing else fits, Chief!"

Read said sourly, "But the casket was never out of Peterson's possession. How could this pair of beauties know what it contained— provided it contains anything at all!"

"You're the copper, Mr. Read."

Again the heavy, frustrated silence. It was broken as Mrs. Blackburn clicked her fingers. Rising, she crossed to the telephone and dialed a number. Then she spoke over her shoulder.

"If there's anything inside the casket, one person can tell us right away—" She broke off and addressed the instrument. "Would you put me through to Mr. Peterson's suite?"

The two men exchanged a glance and crowded forward, standing over her. They watched her frown, then she held out the receiver. The intermittent burring at the other end was plain in the hushed room. Presently it was broken; Elizabeth clasped the receiver to her ear and then she gave a little sigh.

"Thank you. Would you ask Mr. Peterson to call me back. It's very urgent." She gave their number and was replacing the receiver as Read muttered angrily under his breath. But Jeffery was already at the directory and flicking through the pages. Then he thrust the book at his wife, finger on a number.

"Pilgrim!"

But it was not their lucky morning. A clerk informed Elizabeth that Mr. Pilgrim had not yet arrived at the office. Again she left the number, emphasising the urgency of the matter. As she straightened, the Chief Inspector muttered angrily, "I could cable Intelligence in Cairo—"

"There's no time," snapped Jeffery. He was moving toward the bedroom. "I'm going to dress. When Peterson rings, tell him to wait at the Dorchester until we arrive."

She said helplessly to Read: "He shouldn't do this, you know. Doctor Merrill warned him..." She broke off, staring at the smoking butt. "You know why he's so stubborn, don't you?"

The big man said quietly, "Working his way back up the ladder again."

"That's one reason. He hasn't touched liquor for more than twenty-four hours. But there's something else, Chief. He's got this obsession that whoever ran him down did it to prevent him showing up at the benefit this afternoon."

"You think he's right?"

"I don't know." There was a curious note in Elizabeth's voice, something of doubt and of fear and of groping bewilderment. "If he's hit a bull's-eye about the contents of the casket..." She let the end of the sentence dangle almost as though afraid to continue. Then abruptly she shot off at a tangent. "But it's absurd, Chief— Jeffery's suspicions about the benefit this afternoon, I mean. People like Ella Halversham and Mr. Birdseye and Portia Divine— they're respectable well-known personalities. We've come to accept them!"

Read said slowly, "Like Alan Nunn May and Emil Fuchs. They were accepted, too."

"That's the wicked part of it," she was saying. "Whom can we trust? It's like— like an infection carried in the blood. No sign on the surface, outwardly everything seeming healthy and normal so that no one ever knows." She turned and Read, watching her, read desperate appeal in her face and in her tone as she asked, "Chief, surely Intelligence gave you some small clue to these saboteurs here? Something that might lead to their identity?"

"Nothing," he told her flatly. "From their work we know that they exist but that's all. They've been too clever in covering their tracks every time." He tossed the inquiry back to her. "How about yourself Beth? You've known this Halversham woman for some time. Can you remember anything she's said? Any anti-British criticism or comment?"

Jeffery limped out of the bedroom. "Managed everything but the shoe-laces," he announced cheerfully. He sank on to the couch and lifted a foot. "Here's today's boy-scout act for you, Chief."

So that when the telephone rang, Read was stooping and drawing the dangling laces together. Elizabeth sprang to the instrument; a few moments later she held out the receiver. "For you, Chief. It's Manners." Presently she heard the Chief Inspector say, "All right. I'll come back at once," in a tone so dead and so robbed of all spirit that she looked up quickly.

"What's the matter?"

He came around the edge of the couch, moving slowly. "They've got Pilgrim," he announced.

Elizabeth was on her feet. "That old solicitor?"

"What happened?" cried Jeffery.

"A letter bomb..." Read was standing with hunched shoulders. "I only know what's been reported to Manners. Early this morning the postman delivered four letters to Pilgrim's service flat in Holborn. He lives alone there. About two hours later, the cleaner arrived. She found the door wide open. Suspicious, she came inside and called Pilgrim's name. He didn't answer and she found the old chap lying across a desk in his study with half his head blown off..." The voice went suddenly dry and the official licked his lips again.

"The police found three letters on the desk. On the floor was a paper knife, the blade showing signs of scorching. They found other indications— part of a charred envelope and some ends of blackened wire. And while they were there, Peterson rang."

"What for?"

Read said slowly, "He was inquiring for Pilgrim. It seems that the solicitor had an appointment at the Dorchester at ten o'clock this-morning. He was to have brought the casket which he had claimed from the safe deposit late last night."

The slow significance of the words were not lost on Jeffery. Now his face held an expression of bitter triumph. "And there was no trace of the casket?"

The Chief Inspector was moving toward the door. "In a drawer of the desk, the police found the wash-leather wrapping. Just that!" He picked up his hat. "My apologies to your friend Lady Halversham. I've got to go to work!"

Book Two: The Conspiracy

THE SANDY-MOUSTACHED MAN in the shabby tweed suit looked out across the rows of canvas chairs, cleared his throat and took a firmer grip on his pointer.

"In a few minutes," he announced, "we're going to 'ave a fillum— a talking picture 'specially made by the Metropolitan Water Board to show you just how much trouble is taken by the authorities to keep your water supply pure and 'ealthy to drink. But first, if I may 'ave your undivided attention, I would like to call your attention to a few 'ighly important facts..."

It was very hot inside the marquee. From where Elizabeth Blackburn sat, almost in the back row and looking over the heads of a dozen apathetic but politely interested people, she could see the beads of perspiration gathering on the lecturer's ruddy face. She stole a side-glance at her husband, hunched forward in his seat.

On the raised platform, the sandy-haired man fiddled with a button of his waistcoat.

"I'd like to introduce myself to you good ladies and gents. My name is Bradley— Fred Bradley, and I 'old the position of maintenance engineer at Betson's Hill service reservoir not so very far from where you're sitting at this precise moment. I was 'appy to oblige Mr. Stewart-Riggs when he asked me if I would give my services at this worthy benefit this afternoon and to instruct you as to 'ow the Metropolitan Water Board copes with London's thirsty millions. Now, if you would be so kind as to look at this here diagram."

From some distance away came a sudden burst of neighing laughter. That, Elizabeth decided, would come from the yokels gathered pop-eyed around the U-Duck Sweetie exhibit. She sat back, trying to ignore Mr. Bradley's droning irritating voice and picturing the scene outside. It was almost an hour since she had arrived with Jeffery at the gates of Holmesdale— wrought iron barriers now widely and hospitably opened and bearing the large calico placard "Another Birdseye Benefit! Your Coin keeps a Boy from Crime!"

The Reverend Cyril Birdseye and his band of organisers had really spread themselves this time, she decided.

Under a cardboard sign nailed to the trunk of an elm tree "Games of Chance to the Left— Sideshows to the Right," they had found Ella Halversham looking even clammier and more untidy than usual.

"So you did manage to come after all!" Her voice was shrill with delight. "My darling, I'm so very, very glad!" She was looking at Jeffery, that absurd hat cocked on one side. "Elizabeth, my dear, how very brave of him!"

Elizabeth said quickly, "We have apologies from the Chief Inspector, Ella. He's been kept in town on urgent business. You may have heard about the murder."

The china-blue eyes went wide. "Dear me, no. I've been down here since early morning. What happened?"

Jeffery said curtly, "Old guy in Holborn had his head blown off with a letter-bomb."

"Goodness gracious me!" For just an instant, the round face lost its sparkle, became almost dough-like in its lack of expression. "Those awful things— I've read about them in the newspapers. Now, darlings, run along and spend a ton of money! I have to wait here to welcome Miss Inglis." She broke off to glance plaintively around the crowd. "Where is Mr. Stewart-Riggs? He should be here with me. After all, she is a guest of honour!"

They were moving along a track marked out by white cords when Jeffery had suddenly announced that he wanted to rest for a few minutes. They were opposite a marquee carrying a banner, "Free Films and Lectures— Courtesy Metropolitan Water Board," and together, they had slipped inside and sat down. And now on the stand, the perspiring engineer was struggling with his task of enlightenment.

Two rows ahead, the Reverend Cyril Birdseye sat touching shoulders with a stranger. Shortly after they had entered, Elizabeth had seen the clergyman's grey mane bend toward his companion— the man had turned and shot them a hurried glance over his shoulder. So hurried that all she gained was a fleeting glance of a thin, studious face ornamented by a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. Now Jeffery was staring fixedly at the stranger's back. He leaned toward her.

"Who's that bird?"

"No one I know." As she shook her head, something moist plopped on to her hand. "Darling, do you feel well enough to move on? I'm stewing in here."

It was cooler outside; a little breeze had sprang up, shivering the overhanging foliage and dappling the lawns with spangles of sunlight. They had almost reached the sideshow exhibits when a high young voice called.

"Hey there, Shamus!"

Jeffery turned. She was coming toward them.

"Hello, chicken," he greeted. "Beth, this is Susan Ann Peterson."

"Hello, Elizabeth," Miss Peterson said. "I know all about you. I looked you up in a book." She smiled at Elizabeth and turned to Jeffery. But at the sight of the plaster on his face, she sobered and thrust out an accusing finger.

"You've been fighting!"

He shook his head, grinning at her concern. "I'll never get used to those new-fangled safety razors," he told her. Then he added, "Did Uncle Otis bring you down?"

The shadow on her face spread to her eyes. "Haven't you heard about the awful thing that happened to poor Mr. Pilgrim?"

Jeffery nodded. "Sure."

"Uncle Otis had to stay behind because the police wanted to talk to him. Uncle told me that whoever did it took that old casket." The firm young chin set obstinately. "Well, that's okay with me, Jeffery! I hope we never see it again as long as we live. There's been nothing but a pack of mischief ever since Uncle Otis bought it. What are you doing down here, anyway?"

"A coin," Jeffery reminded her, "keeps a youth from crime!"

She said impatiently, "But shouldn't you be back there helping the police?"

He reached over and took the bulking paper bag from her fingers. "Be a good chicken and do as uncle says. Just forget all about it!" He hefted the bag waist-high. "Where did you collect all this junk?"

"Dr. Newcombe won them for me."

Elizabeth asked, "Who's he?"

"You must know him, surely? Tall thin party with cheaters— looks like a college professor. Lady Halversham introduced us." Susan Ann wrinkled her nose "She's a zany, isn't she?"

"Number one," agreed Jeffery.

"And what does Dr. Newcombe do?" asked Elizabeth.

"Things about nerves," returned Susan Ann. "He's top man at a big hospital around this neck of the woods. Your Government runs it for all those poor boys who got their reflexes snarled up during the war. Some of them have been there for years. Francis asked me if I'd like to have a look-see sometime, but I said no thank you— that kind of thing gives me the shakes even in the movies." She was silent for a moment before she added. "Crazy people are like normal folk when they're pie-eyed— you never know just where they're going to bust out."

Jeffery said, "Your nut doctor seems to have tossed a neat ring around you, too, chicken."

"Sure— we were getting on fine," announced Miss Peterson. "But then that old clergymen with hair growing up inside his collar came and took Francis away." She added quickly as Jeffery opened his mouth, "Don't ask me why. I figured maybe some party had taken sick some place."

"You figured wrong!" They were moving on again, walking in the direction of the tents. "And if you really want your loony specialist, you're on the wrong

beam. You'll find him back in a tent with Birdseye listening to a spiel about our water supply."

Miss Peterson said airily, "Oh, I don't want him— not now!"

Abruptly she broke her stride. "Why are you limping?" she demanded.

"Remember my ulcers?"

She turned to Elizabeth, "Is he ribbing me?"

She took the younger girl's arm and they fell into step again. "Tied to a hypochondriac— that's me!" Then she peered forward as the first of the canvas signs came into view. "What's the attraction down here?" She gestured to the group of young men gathered in front of a booth. "Oh," she said. "Of course! It's U-Duck-Sweetie."

"And if we're lucky," supplemented Susan Ann, "we might see someone lick the daylight out of the Terrible Turk!"

Opposite was a row of tents advertising the contents with gaudy posters. Queen Hatmoto— She Walks on Fire. Mountain Maid, the World's Fattest Woman. Mona Lissa, the Tattooed Charmer. One of the tents had a wooden platform erected outside and as the visitors approached, a rat-like man with a dark gypsy face above a fancy waistcoat stepped out. Encouraged by the apparently interested trio, he cupped his hands and megaphoned through them.

"Gentlemen— gentlemen— your attention please!" Cropped heads at the rival booth turned in his direction and inspired by this potential audience, the speaker's voice rose higher. "'Ere's your chance to prove your man-'ood and earn money at the noble art of self defence! Any gent as stays five rounds with Serb Zakris the Terrible Turk— five three minute rounds, gents— is entitled to come up to me an' take out of my willing 'and this five poun' note!"

A hand like a ham was thrusting aside the soiled canvas flap behind the speaker....

"Gee Willikins!" breathed Susan Ann Peterson.

The man who emerged on to the platform was so huge that Elizabeth almost expected the flimsy structure to collapse under his weight. He was stripped to a pair of bright yellow shorts and black hair mantled his broad shoulders and flowed down across the barrel chest to his stomach. He stood balancing himself on thighs like tree-trunks, long arms dangling and the bullet head on the squat neck thrust forward. The vacant face was frankly mongoloid, small slit eyes above high cheekbones and set athwart a thick-bridged nose.

Then the barker stretched up and laying a hand upon the massive hirsute shoulder, said ingratiatingly, "Say somethink to the gents, Serb."

As though a button had been pressed, the slit mouth writhed and a stream of syllables poured forth. There was no meaning to the sound, but the spruiker

obligingly translated. "The Turk says 'e'll give all of youse a fair deal." He paused and ran a speculative eye over the group of yokels and, collectively, they retreated like a touched snail. "Now, come on, gents. Serb's bark's worse 'n his bite!" Then he jabbed a finger at Blackburn. "Now, you, sir! You look as if you could give a good account of yourself! 'Ow about you settin' an example to these other gents?"

"Jeffery," Elizabeth whispered urgently. "Come away!"

But the rat-faced marker had caught the movement. "Now, now, lady," he admonished. "Let the gent make up his own mind." He beckoned amiably to Blackburn. "You look like a tough customer, sir! Step inside an' take off your coat!"

Elizabeth was watching with rising dismay the slow tide of colour flooding across her husband's face. She felt his body tighten and his muscles tense. Miss Peterson was staring at the vulpine barker and she was blinking as though almost on the point of tears. Then her head went back and she almost spat the words.

"Let him alone, you...*you lousy stinker!*"

"Chicken!" said Jeffery tightly. He thrust the paper bag into his wife's hand. "Take her away."

She went cold at the expression on his face.

"Jeffery— you're not...?"

"Take her away," he grated. "I'll fix this son of a bitch!"

Blackburn jerked his arm away from his wife's hand and took a step forward. Elizabeth gave a moaning little cry. Then a voice, soft but incisive, spoke from behind them.

"Booker! I'm surprised at you! Mr. Blackburn is a guest at this benefit!"

The swarthy spruiker, his hand still on the canvas flap, froze motionless for a moment. Then his mouth worked. Abruptly, he almost pushed his huge companion inside the tent and slipped in behind. As the curtain fell, Blackburn turned slowly.

A few paces away, the man he had encountered so fleetingly in the corridor of the Dorchester Hotel was standing watching him. The pale lineaments— light eyes and colourless hair and eyebrows— contrasted strangely with the brick-red complexions of the farm hands, now grouped into a self-conscious knot. Jeffery was suddenly reminded of one of those expensive confections brought out from cold storage just before guests arrive for a dinner party.

Now he came forward and held out his hand.

"I'm Stewart-Riggs, Mr. Blackburn. I've met your wife but I haven't had the pleasure of knowing you." Jeffery grasped the hand, discovering the same refrigeration extending to flesh and bone.

Elizabeth nodded. "How do you do, Mr. Stewart-Riggs. Do you know Miss Peterson?"

"I know her uncle. We're fellow fanatics in the collecting business." Again that strange too-long smirk. "I must apologise for not greeting you all before this. Unfortunately, Miss Inglis was almost an hour late. Being a film star as well as a woman, I suppose we must grant her double privilege."

Susan Ann said a little breathlessly. "But she *has* come?"

"Yes, indeed!" On the fourth finger of his left hand, Archdale Stewart-Riggs wore a platinum circlet with a ruby inset. He twisted the ring as he spoke. "I'd like you all to meet the lady. A number of us are having afternoon tea in the terrace room. I should be delighted if you would join us there."

"And then," continued Stewart-Riggs with well-bred indignation, "this morning I found a note to say that the man had left because he had been offered a more lucrative position in town. No other warning than that— and after everything I had done for him! That's the kind of gratitude one has come to expect from the lower orders these days."

There were nine people gathered in the high cool room overlooking the terrace. Jeffery's eyes moved from face to face.

Lady Halversham was there, sitting next to Elizabeth and Susan Ann. The Reverend Cyril Birdseye had been placed next to the slim serious-faced man now identified as Dr. Francis Newcombe. Portia Divine was seated alone on the deep divan and Blackburn's eyes narrowed as he took in the unusual pallor of that broad face and the trembling fingers already responsible for the tea slopped into the saucer. Then came their host and lastly, placed apart from the group in a high-backed chair, shedding her personality like radiance about the panelled room was the actress Jean Inglis.

The same studied perfection which marked Stewart-Riggs reached its apotheosis here. She was a woman of indeterminate height and indeterminate age, dressed in a frock of sea-green chiffon with a wide accordion pleated skirt which swirled like restless sea-foam each time she changed her position. Her blonde hair shone with secret and exciting lights against the frame of the wide black straw hat.

Stewart-Riggs was talking again. "Had the fellow come to me and said that he was dissatisfied with conditions, I might have reasoned with him."

Stewart-Riggs had risen as he talked and was moving the laden traymobile around the circle of guests. He paused opposite Miss Inglis who smiled and spearing a creamy confection, transferred it to her plate. Then she nodded. "I

know just what you mean." She spoke with that throaty contralto which science had imprinted on countless miles of sound track.

The changing breeze caught the water from the fountain, flinging it against the windows with a sound like moth's wings drumming on the panes. Jean Inglis had finished her cake and was wiping her fingers delicately on a wisp of chiffon. Mrs. Blackburn, catching the movement, was conscious of a curious sense of repetition— it was almost as though she had seen the actress perform that identical gesture in her presence very recently. Obviously on a film, Elizabeth told herself. She was still pondering when Ella Halversham gave a little outraged squeak.

"It's really dreadful!" she announced and her bovine eyes were wide and solemn. "There's so much true happiness in the world— so much sunshine and beauty! But no one seems to care about such things any longer. Instead, it's all destruction and death!" In her vehemence, she rocked the cup, spotting the faded floral gown. "America makes an atom bomb. So Russia makes a bigger one. Then America turns around and invents something even more terrible, like bombs carrying all kinds of horrible diseases...ugh!" She contracted her plump shoulders in a polite shudder.

Miss Peterson opened her lips, but before she could speak, a cool, ironic voice came from the other side of the room. "I wouldn't lose any sleep over germ warfare, Lady Halversham." Doctor Newcombe reached out a thin, blue-veined hand and transferred his cup and saucer to the small table by his side. "Outside of the newspaper adventure strips, has there ever been any suggestion that such a weapon would be used?"

Blackburn blew smoke into the air. "You think it's a wacky notion, doctor?"

Newcombe's head turned on his thin neck. "Not wacky, as you call it, Mr. Blackburn. Merely impractical. Remember how we were spared Hitler's reservoirs of poison gas during the last war? For the same reason, I very much doubt if any potential enemy would ever dare to use disease-bearing organisms as weapons of attack."

Jeffery shrugged. "The U.S. Army Chemical Corps don't agree with you, doc. Ever heard of a set-up called Camp Detrick?"

Jean Inglis arranged the folds of her skirt. "I'm abysmally ignorant of all this," she confessed. "But I was under the very hopeful impression that modern science had found...antidotes...is that the right word?" she tilted her head at Newcombe, "for practically every disease. Or am I just whistling in the dark?"

The thin-faced specialist said quietly. "I'm afraid so, Miss Inglis. Despite the improvement with the discovery of antibiotics and protective vaccines, there

are still a number of disease organisms which carry immunity from modern therapy."

Stewart-Riggs' long white fingers were entwined in his lap. "You know of such diseases, doctor?"

"I could," the other nodded, "name you one immediately."

The couch creaked as Portia Divine's big body came upright. For the first time since entering the room, she spoke.

"Melioidosis."

It was as though she had suddenly spat a filthy word.

Portia Divine spoke again and it seemed to Elizabeth that the sound came from along way off. "I'm right, aren't I, doctor? There's no immunity against melioidosis?"

In the thin throat the Adam's apple worked, but on Francis Newcombe's face there was only a sort of lean and wolfish surprise. "Yes, Miss Divine," he said mildly. "You're quite right."

Lady Halversham gave a shrill little laugh.

"Really, Portia dear, how very, very clever you are! Such an extraordinary word! But just what does it mean?"

It was Dr. Newcombe who answered and his word had a studied pedancy as if he was addressing a classroom.

"Melioidosis is an Eastern— or perhaps one should say— a tropical disease. It is characterised by cheesy nodules in the lungs and other parts of the body. These degenerate to form deep ulcers. The body temperature rises abnormally, lymph nodes swell and harden, mucous membranes become severely inflamed..." the voice hesitated for a fraction of a second. "The patient dies within a few weeks."

Newcombe pushed his glasses back on his thin nose. "As Miss Divine has told you, no preventative vaccines and no useful method of treating this disease is known to exist in the present state of medical science."

Every eye in the room was focused upon Portia Divine— the woman sat with shoulders hunched, clutching her arms across her breast. She was making odd little movements backwards and forwards, left and right, like a hunted creature trapped in a circle of lances. Her eyes flickered past the faces and came to rest on Jeffery's sprawled figure, travelling up to the tapes on his forehead. Then she gave a low throaty chuckle.

"All this talk about germ warfare!" The simulated amusement was a mockery to the strained sick face and the staring eyes. "Anyone would think the world had discovered something new. As far back as the Middle Ages, invaders dropped plague-ridden corpses into the enemy's water wells to spread infection—"

"Portia!" Ella Halversham was on her feet. "What a horrible mind you have! How can you even talk of such things!" The floppy hat fell over her eyes and she pushed it back impatiently.

Portia Divine's eyes moved to her collaborator, abruptly she gave a little shiver and passed a hand across her face.

"Sorry," she grunted. "Made a complete damned fool of myself. Apologise! Not at all well." She rose unsteadily to her feet and moved toward the long windows. "Get some air— do me good!" They watched her fumble at the panes and disappear across the paved terrace beyond.

Ella Halversham placed her cup on the traymobile. "It's the sun!" she announced. "I've warned her about racing around without a hat."

Newcombe was on his feet. "If I can help—" he began but the untidy little woman was gathering up gloves and programme. "No, no," she protested. "You must stay here and sign Archdale's visitor's book. I'll go to her. Don't anyone else move, please!"

An awkward pause followed her exit. Blackburn noticed that something of the crisp tailored quality had evaporated from their host's appearance. Stewart-Riggs was lighting a cigarette with fingers that trembled badly and his pale eyes were furtive over the lighter flame. Then Miss Inglis moved. She rose, poised, perfectly at ease, smiled and fluffed out her skirt.

"A visitors' book," she exclaimed. "Now what a very sensible idea! I've been meaning to start one of my own...oh...for months now."

She had covered the tension in the room admirably.

"Where is this book, Mr. Stewart-Riggs?"

He was staring past her, across the wide room to the terrace, so that her question hung for a few seconds before he replied.

"Where...?" it was a vague echo, then he nodded. "The visitors' book? Oh, it's in the museum."

His eyes wandered out across the terrace for an instant and realising her bad timing, she was making good the slip.

"And if I may I'd like to see the museum, too, please."

Stewart-Riggs addressed the room, "If anyone else is interested...?"

Susan Ann Peterson replied. "Please may I sign your book next to Miss Inglis?"

The actress regarded her gravely. "Would you like to sign above my name?"

"Gee!" said Miss Peterson and nodded. "Star billing!"

There was a little chuckle of amusement. A situation had been successfully by-passed. Stewart-Riggs turned the ruby ring on his finger and addressed Mr. Birdseye.

"I'm sure you'll be interested in one item," he said urbanely, "I have an ancient silver crown, decorated with a plumed head dress, which was found near Cusco. It is believed to have been worn by the priests during the fertility festivals. If you would like to see it— ?" Again the unspoken desire to get them out of the room, away from a scene the cause of which at least two of the guests failed to understand. Elizabeth dared not try to catch Jeffery's eye; she had a sensation of being watched closely as Portia Divine had been watched. But why...?

"And for you, doctor," Stewart-Riggs is saying, "there is an Egyptian mummy-mask, worn by the priests in the house of Akh-En, which I'm told was the house of healing." His white head came around toward Susan Ann. "And what have we to interest this young lady...?"

Jeffery Blackburn said.

"You wouldn't have a cute little Egyptian casket with a couple of mitts carved on the lid?"

Elizabeth felt her hands clench and she waited...But nothing happened, except that Archdale Stewart-Riggs shook his head with an air of amused regret. "You mean," he said, "a replica of the gem Mr. Peterson found in Cairo? I only wish I could say that I had. But it isn't for the want of trying." He was facing Blackburn, eyes frank and guileless. "Last week I tried to persuade Mr. Peterson to sell. But he refused all my offers. That was why I looked rather disgruntled when we passed in the corridor of his suite."

And now Jean Inglis was consulting a tiny diamond and platinum watch. "I'm sorry to be tiresome," she said. "But I have a dinner engagement in town." She looked up. "I'm sure we'd all like to see the museum." As if it were an edict, there was a general movement in the room. As she took her host's arm, Dr. Newcombe walked across to Miss Peterson and Elizabeth found herself partnered with Mr. Birdseye. Now there was a moment in which to glance at her husband.

They were turning a corner when Elizabeth looked back. But Jeffery was nowhere to be seen.

He came out on to the paved terrace, pushing the tall window shut behind him.

The terrace stretched bare and empty until it disappeared around the angle of the house. Either the benefit was over or the last stragglers were being very quiet in their departure for there was no sound save the whisper of the wind among the elms.

Jeffery tossed his cigarette over the balustrade and walked forward.

He had, he admitted to himself, no very clear plan in mind. If Henry Lessing was still alive, it was barely possible that he was hidden somewhere in this rambling old house.

Jeffery hurried his footsteps.

Now the lawn had begun to slope away so that the terrace rose some eight to ten feet above ground level. Around the bend, it widened into a patio, decked with wrought iron furniture and two padded lounges. Several brightly colored umbrellas sprouted like mushrooms from the centre of small circular tables so that this part of the terrace had the air of art exclusive country club.

Then he heard the footsteps.

Clear on the tassellated paving, they were coming from the direction of the terrace room— footsteps slow but alert, the movements of someone determined but uncertain. Jeffery hesitated then slid across to the french windows groping for the catch. It opened easily under his fingers and next moment he was in the room pressed against the wall, eyes swivelled to the patio. A long shadow crossed it then came the substance, eighteen stone of substance moving with that hunched and half-crouching gait, long arms swinging simian-like, the mongoloid head turning on the thick neck with that curious reptilian blindness.

Serb Zakris was on the prowl.

Zakris was dressed in a pair of stained grey trousers and wore a tee shirt bulging over the barrel chest. He raised an elbow and scratched at an armpit then turning lumbered back the way he had come. Jeffery watched him until the angle of the window cut off further view. Then he relaxed, grimaced and blew a long breath of relief. He looked down at the window catches...

And then he saw the thick white ermine rug.

It stretched across the entire width of the floor passing under the circular bed with its ivory covering and under the screen with its panels of mirror glass— a screen which masked off one corner of the room. As he stood there, frozen, his fingers still tight on the window catch, he caught a wave of perfume that set his skin tingling. Very slowly, he bent down and ran his hand over the rug.

Then he straightened, too quickly, forgetful, and almost cried out as the tapes tore at his bruised side. The sharp spasm of pain acted like a cold douche so that his eyes hardened and in a gesture of nauseous self-reproach he scuffed the rug aside and walked to the centre of the room.

Traces of her personality lay everywhere like a stain. Yet nowhere obvious for in this room the furnishings were tasteful without being luxurious. The ivory and blue color scheme was carried to the kidney-shaped dressing table with its array of cut-glass and silver, to the fireplace with its fluted side

columns, the wedgewood plaques inset above the mantel and their cool clean design worked into the quilted satin coverlet of the circular bed. A movement caught Jeffery's eye and he wheeled— to see his reflection frowning in the mirror panels of the screen. He crossed and looked behind it.

A whip lay hidden there.

He picked it up by the handle, an ebony handle circled at intervals with narrow silver bands.

Jeffery's jaw tightened; he ran the supple lash through his fingers and they came away marked with a faint brownish color. He tossed the whip aside and walked back to the bed.

Across the ivory and blue cover, a dressing gown had been thrown, a garment of silk in colours of canary yellow and green. Blackburn measured the gown across his chest but big as he was it would have hung upon him like a sack. He turned the soft material in his fingers nodding grimly at the initials worked into the breast pocket. His mouth contracted with disgust as he saw the perspiration stains on the back of the garment.

Then a quiet voice spoke from the other side of the room.

"Hello, Jeffery," said Bianca Milland.

She was standing by the french windows, just inside. If she had come from the terrace, her entrance must have been cat-like in its silence. She wore a pair of flesh colored satin lounging pyjamas, open shirt-like at the throat, moulded tightly to breasts, hip and thighs and flaring out at the knees. Her black hair was worn close to her head.

She stood there, eyes tilted, dark and smouldering.

"Hello Jeffery," she said again.

She came forward across the rug, flared out material swishing gently above the straw-plaited, high heeled sandals she wore.

"My property, I think."

He looked down at the silken garment and then tossed it on the bed.

"Scrabbling in the gutter, aren't you?"

"Serb?" She dropped her hands and clasped them behind her. Then she shrugged. "He's amusing." She put her head slightly to one side, surveying him. "But not nearly so amusing as you, Jeffery. He's so slow to learn. But then you were rather a disappointment You ran out halfway through the game."

She moved closer to him and her lips were suddenly wet. She said very softly:

"You've hurt your face..."

He sneered at her. "Surprise— surprise!"

"What happened, Jeffery?"

"Where were you last night?" he demanded.

The hand at her breast moved to take in the surroundings.

"Here."

"You miss all the fun. You should have been in Whitehall. Some of your buddies in a high power job tried to paint me across the pavement."

Something flared deep in her eyes— panic— anger— relief.

She whispered. "Why should they want to do a thing like that?"

"Maybe I got to beating around in the tall grass and flushed something best kept under cover!"

"Such as?"

He said harshly. "A rat-pick of treasonous vermin gnawing at their country's vitals!"

She glanced over her shoulder. He was watching her, his face bleak and cold. She took up a faceted flask; tipped it and removed the stopper.

"This country means nothing to you," she told him. "You're a denationalised person. Like myself. At home everywhere— or nowhere. We're completely rootless, you and I. Hotel-dwellers. If one hotel burns down, we pack up and move to another."

"As an alibi for murder," he said, "it stinks!"

"No one mentioned murder."

"I'm mentioning it now— on two counts. A worthless hop-head named Morris who got the needle and a chestful of Thames water. Stewart-Riggs and his band might plead they were saving the taxpayer's dough when they pressed the finger here. Maybe they're right." His voice hardened. "But it's a different roll of bills with that old guy Pilgrim."

She wheeled on him now, dark eyes blazing. "Who are you to judge?" she cried. "You tried to kill me!"

He said austere. "That's a lie and you know it."

She was standing very still, holding the stopper. A drift of perfume floated through the room. "There are so many times when I wish you'd done it properly..." the fire had died from her eyes. Now they were shadowed and the same shadow was in her voice. "Pilgrim was such an old man." She paused and frowned.

"A quick death...Perhaps he was lucky! Perhaps it's a lesson for us, Jeffery. To live while we can— while we have fire and strength and passion— while we're still young." She was moving the stopper before her face. "There is so little time..."

He said grimly. "Maybe a lot less than you think!"

She was replacing the stopper in the flask. "Is that a warning?"

"Sure!"

She turned. "I'll give you one in its place. Get away from here."

"I'm too busy!"

"Or too obstinate!" She made a little helpless, pleading gesture. "You don't realise what you're up against here! Jeffery, I don't want to see you hurt!"

He said mockingly. "Go light your lamp, Miss Nightingale!"

Her eyes travelled up from the floor, to the arms folded across his chest, to rest on that lean olive face with its sardonic mouth. She said softly. "You have a splendid body, Jeffery. Hard and lithe and powerful. It would be wrong to see it maimed and broken..."

"Thanks," he said. "But that bunch of boy-scouts in your camp tried once and flunked it. You can tell them from me there'll be no rain check!"

Her hands fell to her sides and her shoulders dropped. "You're only one," she said. "One against so many...and they're completely without mercy. They brought another man here—" she stopped, biting her lip. Then: "Jeffery— I'm asking you again! Please go!"

He was moving toward the mirror-panelled screen. "Not without Henry Lessing!"

As though her frozen immobility enraged him, he snarled at her. "I figure that Lessing knows the inside story about this little set-up. So your pack of two-bit heisters brought him down here and they're persuading him to keep his trap shut..."

He bent swiftly, picked up the ebony handled whip and flung it at her feet. "...with this!"

Now his heavy breathing was the only sound in the room. Bianca Milland lowered her eyes to the whip. Then she reached out a sandalled foot and touched the silver-banded hasp. It was a movement of disgust— disgust and repulsion.

"No, Jeffery," she said. "You're wrong. Henry Lessing isn't the man who feels the pain of this whip..."

Beyond the windows, the terrace was darkening. Only the furniture showed patches of muted colour in the shadows. For the first time, he called her by name.

"Bianca."

Her head came up almost in surprise.

"You can put a stop to all this," he told her. "You can write finish to it— now!"

She shook her head.

"You don't understand. It isn't so simple."

He made an angry, impatient gesture. "Who else is in this set-up? Who else beside Stewart-Riggs? Ella Halversham? That phoney Bible-bouncer?" The old

blank shuttered look had come back into her face. He strode across the rug and grasped her arms.

"What was it that lousy Greek unloaded in Cairo?"

She shrugged herself free of his grip. "Already I've told you too much. Jeffery, you must go away."

Jeffery reached forward, grasping her arms again, freezing the movement. She arched her shoulders with the pain of his grip, but around her mouth was that old, wise smile. Her hands came down to her breast in a movement of protest. His grasp tightened until the silken material of her sleeves bunched between his fingers.

"What's inside that casket?" he snapped.

He was dragging her up on tip-toe so that her slim body was rigid in his grip. She tilted her head so that her breath fanned his cheek.

"Why should I tell you?" she whispered. "We're fighting on opposite sides now." Now her eyes were hot smoking pools of darkness. "But in every fight there's a pause. Even the bitterest of enemies declare a temporary armistice when each party decides to yield...a little..." Her voice slurred, became thicker as she went on. "You want something from me, Jeffery. But what are you prepared to give?"

He had seen her like this so many times, so many months ago. The frank animal desire in the parted lips, the eagerness of the straining body. He thrust her aside against the bed and strode to the long windows.

He spat the words. "You and your goddam bunch of swine! They're going to hang higher than Hanjan!"

And then he was out on the shadowed terrace, breathing deeply like a man who has passed through a severe trial of strength and Elizabeth was coming around the edge of the house and calling to him.

"Did you know," Jeffery asked, "that they sent the Terrible Turk gunning for me?"

Elizabeth nodded. It was ten minutes later and they were walking toward the field where the Rover was parked. Presently Mrs. Blackburn said, "Stewart-Riggs missed you almost as soon as we turned into the museum. He murmured something about you being lost and spoke to a footman. I was frantic for you."

"You worry too much, baby," he said gently.

Not until the apple orchard adjoining the parking field hid the house from view did she speak.

"Find anything, Jeff?"

He said grimly, "Quite enough!"

She looked up quickly. "Henry Lessing?"

He shook a curly head. "No. But the guy's somewhere around here. She told me as much."

"She?"

"Bianca Milland..." It was amazing how easily the name slipped from his lips, without hesitation, without a trace of feeling or emotion. He might have been talking of the Chief Inspector. "She's staying in the house, probably covering up as Stewart-Riggs' half-sister." Then as the memory of the interview in the ivory and blue room surged back, he spoke with slow vehemence.

"They're a dirty bunch of creeps!"

Elizabeth said quickly. "Then you know something?"

"This much!" His tone was as hard, and as sharp as a steel blade. "I figure that Stewart-Riggs and this Milland dame head the outfit. It began as a pack of pleasure-seeking decadents. By now they've exhausted just about every kind of perverted pleasure of the flesh, so they're playing for a fresh thrill— a new stimulation. The stimulation of the power of life and death through danger..." He paused and ran his tongue over his lips. "Now they're making fine sport out of selling their country, with the excitement of murder thrown in to spice up the business."

She had never heard him speak like this before nor had she ever seen his expression so grim and gaunt. She lowered her eyes and pressed close to him, shivering a little.

"Jeffery— who are they?"

He said shortly. "Stewart-Riggs for one."

Now a little note of incredulity crept into her voice. "But if it's as you say, surely not Ella and Birdseye...?" She shook her head. "I can't believe it— not of *them*! Portia Divine, perhaps— there's always been something not...not quite right about that woman. And yet..." the voice trailed away.

Jeffery was opening the gate of the field, ushering her through. "And yet?" he prompted.

The tone was firmer now. "Back there in the terrace room, didn't you get the feeling she was trying to tell us something? But at the last minute, she farked it. They were watching her too closely." A new memory stirred. "Dr. Newcombe in particular. Behind those glasses, his eyes were like gimlets."

He said slowly. "Ever since we found that dope in Morris' inside, I've suspected a pill-juggler in the set-up."

A little breeze stole out of the orchard, ventured across the paddock and breathed coldly on them. Once more Elizabeth gave that quick and furtive glance over her shoulder.

"Let's get into the car!"

Jeffery swung his keys, unlocked the door and held it open, to halt abruptly. He said softly, "Now what cooks?" and jerked his head to the interior.

In the centre of the front seat was a folded piece of paper transfixed to the upholstery by a large black-headed pin.

Elizabeth said quickly, "A message!"

He grasped her hand as she reached for the paper. "Or a trap!" He pushed her hand to her side. "Someone sent Pilgrim a message, remember? We're not falling for the same gag!" His narrowed eyes were searching the ground as he spoke. He moved away, to return with a dried stick about four feet long.

"Stand back, baby," he warned her.

Jeffery wound the window down and slammed the door. Pressed against the rear of the car, he inserted the stick through the window and probed the folded paper gently. Nothing happened. Then he slipped the stick under the fold, gave it a sharp twist and paper and pin came free, fluttering to the floor. Even then he was not satisfied. Manipulating the stick, he opened the paper and glimpsed the broad backhand scrawl upon it.

"Okay," he said and tossed the stick away. "Okay now!"

He swung the door open and reached for the message. The paper was thick expensive linen. One sentence was written across it.

"You will find Henry Lessing in the gardener's cottage near the lake."

And Elizabeth gave a tight gasp. "Portia Divine!"

"How do you know?"

"The handwriting! She had signed just above me in the visitors' book!" She took the note and slanted it toward the light. "Yes," she said nodding firmly. "It's unmistakable!"

Jeffery took the note from her fingers, folded it carefully and thrust it in his pocket. "Into the car, Beth!"

Something in his voice made her obey without a word. The car purred into life, rocked gently over the ruts as he guided it through the gate and out on to the high road. The green hedges on either side slipped by for almost half a mile before Jeffery spoke again.

"I'm going back."

Elizabeth's hands, lying in her lap, tightened on her gloves. She said quietly. "They might want to trap you, Jeffery."

He swung the wheel as the road curved. "You had a hunch this Divine dame was cracking."

With the memory of that shadowed orchard and those watching-turrets in her mind, she cried out. "But it was only a hunch. I could be wrong!"

"Open the glove-box, Beth."

She bent forward, pulling at the ebonite knob. The cover came open. Inside was a pencil thin electric torch and a squat automatic. He took one hand from the wheel and gathered both objects up, slipping them into his pocket. His foot moved from accelerator to brake and the car came to a halt.

"Okay, baby," he said, and slipped from under the wheel. "It's all yours."

"No, darling..."

He said almost tenderly, "It's my job." Then he smiled. "Remember me? Rough-house Rodney, squarest shooter on the range?"

Now she clung to him, trembling. "You're my husband! I won't have anything happen to you! I love you!"

He took her in his arms, pressing her close, his lips in her hair. "Me, too. It must be catching. I've got it the worst possible way..."

There was a slam of a door and he was walking away. On that lonely road, only his shadow walked beside him. Elizabeth watched until the curve hid him from view and then raised two trembling hands to the wheel.

JEFFERY BLACKBURN vaulted the low stone wall and leaned back against it, surveying the orchard.

"Up and at 'em, Rover boy!" he grunted.

He moved forward, disturbing several sheep that were bedding down for the night. They moved away and stood staring at him with reproachful eyes that reminded him of Ella Halversham. The tree he had selected was thick-boled and low-hanging branches gave easy access to the main trunk. He reached up, wincing as his bruised muscles protested then gritting his teeth, pulled himself upward into the foliage.

The house and grounds of Holmedale lay calm and still under the summer twilight. It seemed incredible that a monstrous evil should lie coiled and festering beneath the surface of the dignified setting— weathered stone standing stolid amid smooth lawns buttressed by elm and larch and oak.

He turned his head right and left but not until he looked down did he catch a glint of water. He straddled further out on the bough and there, almost beneath him, lay the lake and the cottage, the latter a small stone dwelling with moss-covered walls and a steep thatched roof.

A few minutes later, he dropped to the ground and paused, getting his bearings. Then he struck off through the avenues of trunks. He stopped for a moment when he heard the crack of a twig behind him, then smiled when he saw a small animal scurrying off into the underbrush.

He moved on again.

Another few minutes and he could see the twilight ahead through the breaks in the foliage and then there was the reflection of the water. He made

for this and was almost out of the orchard when another crack in his wake caused him to freeze. He glanced over his shoulder; this time there was no explanation and there grew upon him a conviction that he was being watched. He turned, staring back the way he had come but in the gathering gloom there seemed only the long columns of the trunks stretching away. Yet the feeling that he was being dogged increased with every second. He reached into his pocket and took out the automatic; weapon in hand he traversed the rest of the way and came out into the open where a post and rail fence separated orchard from lake land. With a stout mossy post at his back, Jeffery raised the automatic and slipped out the magazine. Next moment he gave a little grunt of dismay.

It was empty.

Too late he remembered the reason, recalling his action in allaying Elizabeth's fears about carrying a loaded weapon in the car. Only a week ago he had tipped the shells out on to the living room table and watched as she locked them away in a drawer. Now as a weapon of defence the automatic was as useless as the torch in his pocket. Except, of course, as a bluff but Blackburn had the uneasy suspicion that Henry Lessing's captors were the last people to be fooled by an empty gun.

A few moments later he was outside the cottage.

The air of desolation and decay produced by the rotting thatch and the moss-stained walls was belied by the modern lock on the door. The new metal glinted like a warning eye. Jeffery thrust a tentative shoulder against the barrier but he might as well have attempted to dislodge one of the trees in the orchard. He moved cautiously along, his back hugging the slimy surface of the wall. Here was a window, but the wooden shutter was fastened on the outside by a six-inch nail driven into the frame. Jeffery felt in his pocket and took out a clasp knife. Slipping the blade under the nail head he strained it away from the wood, then bent it clear with his fingers.

The shutter opened with a creak that set his heart jumping. He shot a ray from his torch into the dark interior— the slim finger of light moved over the worn rug and the meagre furnishings to come to rest on the stretcher with its white-faced occupant. Then he was in the room and bending over the figure. So limp and lifeless did Henry Lessing seem that Jeffery was reminded of a marionette whose strings have been cut.

"Lessing," he whispered and rolled the lolling head backward and forward. "Lessing! Come on!"

There was a long soft shuddering breath and in the circle of light from his torch he saw the man's eyelids flicker open.

"Blackburn...?"

"Okay! Just answer me!" The staccato phrases came in a fierce urgent whisper. "How do you feel?"

The answer was a sigh. "So very tired..."

"You're not injured?"

The tow-head rolled in negation. Jeffery bent lower. "Okay! Now listen! We've got to get the hell out of here— and fast! Are you fit enough to walk?"

Lessing was fully conscious now. "Get away from me," he said weakly. "I've got no truck with cops."

Blackburn gripped his shoulder. "What d'you want to do? Stay here and let those lousy jerks tear you apart?"

The white-faced man licked his lips. "I...I couldn't go. I'm too weak. Three days without insulin...I'm a diabetic..."

Jeffery's face hardened. "This insulin stuff. If you don't get it what happens?"

"A coma..."

"And so you croak!" His grip tightened on the man's shoulder. "Why, you dumb gunzel, don't you see they're figuring on that? It's another example of their bloodless killing! They did the same thing to your buddy Morris— shot him full of dope and tossed him in the river!"

Lessing swallowed. "They...they won't hurt me. I know too much."

Jeffery snapped. "Famous last words! Did knowing too much save Morris?" He paused, watching the sick indecision on the weak face. "Listen, Joe! You know what this bunch of creeps are planning. String along with them and it's just so much crepe around your door! But play it our way and you might come out with a clean skin. With a record like yours, you can use the friendship of the cops. Savvy what I mean?"

Hope flared into Lessing's eyes. "They'd wipe the record?"

"You never know with cops." Blackburn straightened and slipped the torch into his pocket. "On your feet, bud! We're leaving by the window. Get yourself outside and leave the rest to me."

"Here's the set-up," Jeffery said curtly when they were outside. "We've got to mosey through the orchard to the high road. With luck, we'll pick up a bus running into Sevenoaks, or we might flag a passing car. From the town, I'll arrange for transport to the city. So the toughest part is just ahead. Think you can make it?"

Lessing nodded. "I'll try."

"Okay! Let's go."

Together they moved away from the cottage, avoiding the swampy patch and making for the break in the fence. Already Lessing was breathing deeply and Jeffery was watching his white drawn face when abruptly he saw it twist

into a mask of frozen fear. The young man gave a strangled cry, jerked away and covering his face with his hands, fell to his knees.

Jeffery's head came around.

Directly in their path, great hands bunched into fists, bullet head thrust forward, Serb Zakris was standing.

The two men eyed each other, rigid and watchful like rival mastiffs getting each other's scent. The giant was first to move. He gave a short animal grunt and lumbered forward. Blackburn's automatic shot into his hand.

"Stay where you are, pin-head!"

Zakris stiffened, halted. Blackburn's own frame was as tense as a coiled spring and throbbing under the binding tapes. He watched the other man's small red eyes as they focused on the weapon. Then the big man moved forward.

He said softly, "You give that to me."

He was no more than four feet away and the rank smell of his body poisoned the air. With a sickening of despair, Jeffery realised that his bluff had failed. There was only one thing to do. He dropped the gun at the other's feet.

"Okay, Fatso! Pick it up!"

As Zakris bent, he sprang and gored his fist into the thick neck. It was a blow that would have felled a lesser man but the giant merely gave a surprised grunt and jerked up his arm. The heel of his hand caught Jeffery under the chin and rolled him back into the mud. He was on his feet an instant later, to see his opponent toss the gun out into the lake.

"Now," he grunted, "we fight fair."

He came through the air like a flesh and blood projectile. Jeffery dodged and felt the air breathe as a cannon-ball fist ploughed past his ear. He gored a punch to the belly, a vicious short-arm jab that caught the other's breath and then Zakris' right arm encircled Jeffery's neck, tearing the tapes from the wound above his eye and lifting him off his feet. Then the Turk's feet skidded in the slush and for just an instant he relaxed his grip to get his balance. It was enough for Jeffery; with a heave of his shoulder he broke the grip and his head came up and smashed on the iron jaw.

Through a red haze lit with dancing lights, he could see Zakris rubbing his jaw and there was a puzzled, hurt expression on the mongoloid face. Then abruptly Zakris linked his sausage fingers, raised both arms in a bear-trap movement and leapt.

Jeffery knew that this was his one, his lone chance. Like a snake striking, he took his shoulder back and punched. Every ounce of quivering muscle, every sinew and tendon in the lean body was behind that blow. It smashed into the Turk's face like a battering ram and Jeffery felt the flesh splay out under the

impact. The bullet head shot back with a clicking sound and blood spurted wildly. Zakris gave a harsh and rusty moan; reaching up with both hands, he clawed at his smashed nose, halting in blank amazement at his smeared hands. And in that same moment a stinging pain galvanised Blackburn from wrist to shoulder and his right arm went dead, hanging at his side useless as the automatic in the lake. In sweating panic, he tried to lift it, failed and thought this is the end, now I'm helpless, now I can't fight any more...

And he heard Zakris give a loud and wide-mouthed bellow like an angry bull but he was too dazed with pain and shock and fear even to move. Blindly he saw his opponent coming, felt the Turk's right arm wrap him against the stained chest and the left hand catch his chin, forcing his head back until the neck muscles strained and screamed in agony.

But something happened. There seemed to be a sudden flurry behind Zakris and the Turk gave suddenly at the knees and then collapsed like a bag of washing. Jeffery gritted his teeth, strained on his workable arm, then staggered upright shaking his head to clear the woolliness from his brain. And then Susan Ann Peterson was coming toward him. In the twilight, her eyes were like saucers in the paleness of her face. She was carrying something in one hand.

"Chicken..." he croaked.

Now she was opposite him, looking up, her face puckered. "I...I...I hit him..." she could scarcely speak for the quivering of her lips. "With this..." and she dropped an iron tyre lever at Jeffery's feet. She blinked rapidly. "I feel awful sick..."

He could only stare at her as she stood trembling and gulping and wiping the tears away with the back of her hand. "How the heck...?"

"I followed you. I only pretended to leave with the others. Then I saw you walking back here. I waited and came after you— through the orchard."

The feeling was coming back into his arm now. He could raise his hand to wipe the blood from his face. "So it was you who trailed me! But why?"

Susan Ann Peterson said woefully, "I thought it would be like Dick Tracy and Tess Trueheart."

In spite of himself he managed a smile, a ruined battered smile. "For Pete's sake, chicken—"

She said soberly, "It's one thing to see it in the comic strips and another to do it. I guessed I'd never have the nerve. And then, when you couldn't get up, I— I just ran out and did it." She raised a tear-stained face. "Have I killed him, Jeffery?"

He looked at that sprawled figure. "You couldn't lay that buzzard with a bazooka," he told her. "Where's your car?"

"Parked on the road behind the orchard."

"Okay! You've got yourself a job. Hacky to a couple of crocks." He turned to where Lessing was raising himself, staring around with blank, frightened eyes. "Reckon you could drive us into London?"

Susan Ann stuffed the damp handkerchief into her belt. "Just try me!"

He grinned and flicked her nose with his finger. Then he strode across and hoisted Lessing to his feet. "Come on, Joe," he grunted. "Get a grip of yourself. The party's over!"

THROUGH the doorway of the spare bedroom in Blackburn's apartment, three pairs of eyes watched as Paul Merrill took up the insulin bottle, pressed the hypodermic needle through the rubber cap and then withdrew it. He bent over Lessing and pinching up the skin of his arm, made a deft injection. Then he buttoned the pyjama coat and came through into the living room.

"He should be all right now," he announced. "It's the injection he wanted. And some proper food. But remember— he's a diabetic. No sweets or starches!" He lifted his bag on to the table and eyed Blackburn. "Now what about you?"

"I'll make the distance."

Chief Inspector Read rumbled from his chair. "Don't be a fool, son."

Too tired to argue further, Jeffery leaned back and allowed Merrill to fit the tape neatly into place over his eye. The strain of the ordeal in the grounds of Holmedale had begun to set in during the silent ride back, with Susan Ann Peterson at the wheel and Lessing drooping helplessly in the rear seat. Only once was their journey broken. At Croydon, Jeffery limped into a phone box and put through a call to Elizabeth, telling her that he was safe and returning with Lessing and would she have the Chief Inspector and Dr. Merrill standing by.

Now Paul Merrill straightened and glanced around the room. "I suppose," he ventured, "it's useless to ask what all this is about?"

Mrs. Blackburn glanced at the Chief Inspector. Read gave a little barking cough and cleared his throat. "Sorry, doctor," he muttered.

Merrill gave a wry smile. "I just thought I'd ask," he said good-humoredly. Then he turned to Elizabeth. "I can't help contrasting all this with the old days," he added. He was slipping the roll of tape into his bag, making a final check-up of the contents. "Remember Bloody Friday?" he asked the girl.

Elizabeth nodded, smiling a little.

"That," explained Merrill, "was a day at the end of every month when the pigs were slaughtered. Elizabeth used to run away and hide in the copse with her fingers jammed tight in her ears. I sneaked into the slaughter house once to have a look and used to tease Lisbeth by telling her every ghastly detail." His

wide mouth broke into a grin. "It wasn't until we were much older that I confessed I'd made up all the grisly facts, because at the first spurt of blood, I'd rushed outside to be sick in the yard!"

Read grunted.

"The name Newcombe mean anything to you?"

Merrill took out his case and lit a cigarette. "I met him at a B.M.A. dinner about three months ago. He's specialised in psychiatry but he's very interested in biology— protective vaccines, antibiotics and that kind of thing."

"Know anything about his background?"

Paul Merrill looked surprised.

"Very little," he admitted. "I don't think I'd ever heard of the chap before that evening. I remember the chairman introduced him as having just returned from abroad— Africa, I think it was. Or Egypt. Anyhow, he'd been away doing research work on botulism among the native races."

Elizabeth spoke. "Paul," she said, "Have you ever heard of a disease called—" she hesitated over the name, "— melioitosis?"

The young doctor smiled. "You probably mean melioidosis." His face sobered. "Yes, Lisbeth, I've heard of it. But only just. I think it's one of the fungus diseases and pretty fatal. Fortunately it's very rare. That's just about all I can tell you."

Jeffery said, "But you're a doctor..."

A slight stiffness crept across Merrill's pleasant visage, a slight coldness came into his voice. "A doctor— but not an encyclopaedia of biology! I've told you that this particular disease is extremely rare." Then he looked curiously at the girl.

"Where did you hear about melioidosis?"

Before his wife could reply, Jeffery spoke. "That well-known little bird..."

Merrill's mouth tightened and a faint flush spread across his cleanshaven features. His tone was cooler than ever when he replied. "Please don't imagine I'm being inquisitive. But it is rather surprising to hear a layman use a term unknown to even the majority of general practitioners." He crushed out his cigarette and picked up his bag.

"I'll drop in tomorrow morning with a supply of insulin for the patient." His tone was curt and professional. "By that time, the chap should be steady enough to administer his own injections." He nodded to the table. "I've left a syringe he can borrow for the time being." He walked to the door, turned and faced Blackburn. "I know I'm wasting my time giving you advice, but the sooner you're in bed, the sooner you'll be fit again." A moment later the door clicked shut behind him.

Then Read sat upright in his chair.

"All right, son! Now let's have all the details."

Jeffery smothered a yawn. "How much do you know?"

"While we were waiting for you, before that chap put in appearance," Read jerked his head to the door, "Beth gave me all she knew about this Portia Divine woman. I've got six of my best men watching her house back and front. She'll be grabbed as soon as she arrives there."

Elizabeth said quickly, "And I've told the Chief about Stewart-Riggs."

Read thrust out a wrist and looked at his watch. "In approximately ten minutes," he said with satisfaction, "a squad of men should be swarming all over that pretty little country estate, taking it apart and generally raising blistering blue blazes." He shot back his cuff. "They were on the move within a few minutes of the time Beth phoned me."

"Maybe I'm just a worry-wart," the other replied, "but after what happened down at that country seat this afternoon, Stewart-Riggs would know a visit from the cops was as certain as death and taxes. My money says that already they've gone to ground somewhere as far from Holmedale as they can get."

Something of the assurance drained out of Read's expression.

"Never mind pouring cold water! How about telling us what really happened down there this afternoon!"

"Okay!" Blackburn reached for a cushion and adjusted it under his aching neck and detailed in full the events of the afternoon.

A hush had descended on the room. The Chief Inspector sat hunched in his chair, arms folded across his chest.

"So many loose ends..." he sounded disgruntled.

Jeffery nodded. "Right now I agree. But I figure Lessing can do a first-rate splicing job."

He paused again and Read and Elizabeth waited.

"Back there in the cottage, he told me this gang wouldn't put the finger on him because he knew too much. And he wasn't bluffing! The fact he was still alive proves that. Okay, so this bunch kill Morris because he's in the know, yet for the same reason they keep Lessing on ice. It doesn't stack up at all."

Elizabeth opened her mouth and then closed it. Now she stirred under his gaze and rose.

"Coffee," she announced. "How about it?"

"Swell! Just what I need to keep me awake."

She turned to Read who nodded briefly. As Mrs. Blackburn moved toward the kitchen, the official spoke, his mind still on the question of Lessing.

"Three murders might have been enough even for this crowd to stomach."

"Don't kid yourself, Chief!" Jeffery drew on his cigarette. "It wasn't sentiment that kept Lessing alive. Nor was it fear of discovery. They could have weighted his body and sunk it in the lake."

Read shifted irritably. "You keep talking about 'they'! But who are we trailing? Who's in this rotten bunch?"

"I figure that Stewart-Riggs works somewhere near the top," Blackburn replied. "Or he may even be number one boy. As for the others— my money says it's Ella Halversham and her fiery-eyed devil-dodger and from what Merrill told us, Newcombe could also be among those present." He paused. "Bianca Milland knows the drill but I'm beginning to wonder if she's part of the actual set-up."

Read thrust a square head forward. "Now what about this Divine woman?"

Jeffery tapped his cigarette into the ash-tray. "Another loose end," he announced. "Is she part of the inner circle? If so, what made her decide to split about Lessing? And why hasn't she arrived back at her quaint little cobbled nest in West Kensington?" He gave a last draw on his cigarette and crushed it out. "If she isn't part of the gang, why leave the message in the car? Why not come right out into the open? After all, she was playing it our way."

The clock on the mantel chimed the hour of ten. Read glanced at his wrist-watch, muttered something and was silent. The aroma of brewing coffee hung on the air. Jeffery started to say something then realised with a drowsy surprise he had forgotten what it was. Got to concentrate, he thought, and leaned his head back on the cushion and closed his eyes. Then someone was shaking his shoulder and he blinked with the fragrance of the coffee stronger now and filling his nostrils. He looked up at Elizabeth who was saying gently.

"Past your bed-time, big boy."

He sat up and looked around. Read's chair was empty. "How long have I slept?" he demanded.

"Half an hour."

"Where's the Chief?"

She nodded to the spare room. "Lessing woke up a few minutes ago and started calling."

At that moment Read emerged. "It's all right," he said. "He's gone under again." The big man frowned at Jeffery. "You get to bed, son."

"Nuts," the other said amiably. "Where's the coffee?" And as she moved toward the kitchen he turned to the elder man. "Anything come through yet?"

Read nodded without speaking.

"From West Kensington?"

"No, son. From Kent."

Jeffery said impatiently. "Well?"

Read was standing by the empty fireplace, one elbow on the mantel. He said bleakly. "You've already told me what they'd find there. Nothing!"

When Read spoke again, his tone was as grey as the frowning brows. "Now there's only this Divine woman." He consulted his watch for the third time. "I'll give her another twenty minutes, then I'm going home to bed."

Blackburn said gently, "Don't let this bunch of slobs ride you. Chief."

The other man snapped at him. "They're well ahead in the field so far, aren't they? Three deaths— Cassamatis, Morris and Pilgrim— and we haven't as much proof as you could push through the eye of a needle! We know that they're responsible, but British justice demands a tricky little thing called evidence."

Jeffery drained his cup and placed it on the mantel. "That's just what we've got!"

"I'd like to lay my hands on it!"

Blackburn said mildly. "You've done that. Tucked it up a few minutes ago when it got restless." He nodded toward the bedroom. "If we're prepared to play ball by soft-peddalling the swindle rap, Lessing will babble like a disc jockey."

Read snarled. "I'll see him freeze first!"

Jeffery shrugged. "Okay. You're the boss. You run the outfit."

Read muttered something and Blackburn snapped at him, "To hell with Peterson! That cue-ball doesn't amount to a row of wooden nickles. If he won't co-operate then he can jump down his own fat throat." The young man levelled a finger at his companion. "I'm telling you, Chief. If we wipe the fraud rap for Lessing, we can wrap this whole affair by tomorrow morning."

Read said uncertainly. "And Portia Divine?"

"She can wait."

From across the room a voice interjected. "No, Jeffery. She can't wait!"

Both men turned. Elizabeth was standing by the couch, resting one hand on the padded back. She was breathing fast and spoke with a little rush of words. "More than anything else we must find Portia Divine."

"What's the hurry, Beth?"

The hand on the couch curled fingers into the material. "She must answer two questions. How she came to know about melioidosis, a disease so rare that it's right outside the field even of general medical practice." Her eyes were steady on Jeffery's face. "And we must ask her just what she was trying to tell us in the terrace room this afternoon."

He frowned. "We know that. The low-down on Lessing."

She went on as though he had not spoken. "Portia Divine was alone on the couch. Her glance moved across every face almost as though she was warning

those people— almost as though she was saying, 'You can't stop me now. Here it comes!' Then her eyes came to rest on you, Jeffery. As though whatever she had to say was for you personally."

His eyes, puzzled, moved to the bedroom. "Something about Lessing?"

The girl said impatiently. "Forget about Lessing. Try to think."

Jeffery frowned, picturing the scene. Then he looked up. "She gave us some spiel about ancient history..."

Elizabeth's hand moved from the couch. It was trembling and she tucked her fingers into her belt to steady them. She said quietly. "Portia Divine's exact words were, 'As far back as the Middle Ages, invaders dropped germ-ridden corpses into the enemy's water wells to spread infection.'"

Read was staring at Elizabeth with an expression of sick incredulity but before Jeffery could comment, the girl spoke again.

"Jeffery, how big was the casket?"

"Casket?"

"Peterson's casket. You're one of the few people who have actually seen it. How big was it?"

"About three inches by two— maybe not even that."

She nodded as though his words were a confirmation. "So whatever Cassamatis slipped inside would have to be very small..."

"What's all this, Beth?"

"Loose ends, Chief. I know just what you mean." She brushed a hand across her face, a puzzled, harassed movement. "Ever since Jeff told us about what happened back there at Holmedale, I've been trying to fasten together a lot of disconnected threads— phrases and glimpses and gestures..." She paused and sat down on the arm of the couch. "That funny little man from Betson's Hill service reservoir— stuttering and sweating through a dull lecture— who would ever suspect him?" Her glance rested on her husband. "Bianca Milland tried to tell you, Jeffery. She said that you were only one against so many merciless people— that they liked playing God by holding the lives of thousands of others in their hands..."

She paused again, watching the slow shocked realisation dawning in the bruised face.

"So many loose ends...A group of dangerous saboteurs in London and seeking a casket in which an enemy agent has concealed something very small. A rare disease from the East called melioidosis for which biologists say there is no known antidote. An amusing little clown who has control of the machinery which pumps our water supply after it has left the purification plant of the main reservoir. A back-sliding member of this sabotage band who reminds us that, hundreds of years before we were born, invaders won battles by

poisoning the drinking water of a city..." Again she paused, to continue with an almost childish insistence.

"So many loose ends...But if we accept one horrible premise, the ends unite and the pattern's complete, isn't it?"

"Germ warfare!" Read was staring at the girl as though she had suddenly sprouted horns. "They— they wouldn't dare..."

Blackburn snapped harshly. "Why not?"

"Why...?" The Chief Inspector turned slowly as though in the last few minutes he had aged twenty years. In that same grey and haggard voice, he said. "No...no, I can't believe it. It's too fantastic."

"Get your head out of the sand, Chief! What's so fantastic about slipping a germ capsule into a water pipe?"

Read said weakly. "But it— it's never been done before..." He stopped, realising the fatuity of his words. Then he rallied. "In a thing like this, surely they'd want to experiment..." his voice trailed away as Elizabeth made a gesture from the arm of the couch.

"But don't you see, Chief," she said. "It was to be done in Cairo! That was to be the try-out— the rehearsal!"

Jeffery said. "How do you figure that?"

She linked her fingers and pressed them to her head.

"That's why Cassamatis was carrying the capsule, because he'd been chosen as the agent. But Intelligence got wind of the experiment and searched him. When they found nothing, they didn't dare allow even a whisper of their suspicions to leak out. It might have meant wholesale panic. Intelligence could only wait and pray that they'd been misinformed about the plot. That's why, when the Greek was murdered, they were only too willing to hush up the business. Don't you see it was like handling dynamite!"

Her voice splintered and she fumbled for her handkerchief, dabbing at her eyes. "I'm sorry to be so stupid. But it's so horrible. And I'm so very, very tired..."

She started across the room, but stopped as the Chief Inspector said her name. "Elizabeth..." she turned as he went on. "You don't think they've..." It was as though he could not get out the rest of the question.

She said wanly, "No. I don't think they've done anything— not yet. They only got hold of the casket this morning. Portia Divine wouldn't have troubled to warn us if it was too late." She shook her head almost as though convincing herself. "They might not even do it all now. It could be far too much of a risk."

Read said, "Why?"

"Because they realise we'll get the full story from Lessing or Portia Divine. They know that they'll be suspect."

The Chief Inspector watched her go into the bedroom. Then he squared his shoulders and when he spoke, some of the old official bark had returned to his voice.

"Think she's right, son?"

The younger man said grimly. "I know she's right. What's more, you know it, too. Every detail fits together like a dime-store puzzle. There's a few spare parts, but we can leave them for Lessing in the morning."

"Never mind Lessing. I'm thinking of this illustrator woman." Read crossed the room and picked up his hat. "I'll get a contact message into the eleven o'clock news on the air. Seems mighty fishy to me that she hasn't turned up at her home address."

Then he paused and shot a quick glance at his companion.

"That engineer bird at the reservoir— what is his name?"

"Bradley."

"I'll pin a tail on him at the same time. I'd like to have a little heart-to-heart talk with Mr. Bradley of Betsom's Hill." He was moving out into the small entrance hall. "Now get yourself off to bed, son. It's been quite a day."

And he swung open the door.

Portia Divine fell almost into his arms.

Her heavy body, which had been propped up against the door, collapsed with a thud and rolled sideways into the hall. She still wore that mannish check sports coat but across the broad back, a bloodstain was spreading from a neat bullet hole in the centre.

Lady Halversham put her fat, ringed fingers over her ears and cried wildly, "I won't listen to you— I won't! To say such things about the dear departed, it— it's inhuman! It's downright wicked!"

Elizabeth Blackburn said quietly, "It happens to be true, Ella."

The other woman shook her head like a willful child. "To accuse poor darling Portia of a thing like that when she's not— not even cold in her grave! I'll never believe it— never!" Abruptly the chunky, vacuous face crumpled and big tears welled in her eyes. She reached for a handkerchief and dabbed at them. "Don't talk to me for a moment," she implored. "I just want to sit very quiet."

It was about four o'clock on the following afternoon.

In the gathering gloom of the Blackburn's apartment, Elizabeth could see the faces of her husband and the Chief Inspector as formless white blurs in the shadows. Only Ella Halversham's features, clearly outlined in the glow of the newly-lit table lamp, were plain with their marks of unlovely sorrow.

Elizabeth's mind flashed back to the events of the previous evening. She remembered the corridor as a blurred tangle of official figures, intermittently

lit by the flash of a photographer's bulb. Jeffery had seen even less than this. Already rocking with weariness and strain, he had waited only until the body was carried away to collapse on to the couch and it said much for William Read's friendship, that, despite the situation, he waited to assist Elizabeth get her husband into bed. He then delegated constables Thompson and Vines to remain in the apartment until the morning.

It was almost noon when Blackburn awoke. There was a sound of voices in the living room. Slipping on a dressing gown, he emerged to find Paul Merrill talking with Elizabeth. The young doctor had brought a supply of insulin for Lessing. Blackburn took the opportunity to demand the removal of the tapes from his bruises.

When the doctor set to work Blackburn was secretly intrigued to discover that, although Portia Divine's death was probably banner headlines in the Sunday editions, Merrill made no reference to the affair. But Elizabeth, with her knowledge of her friend's sensitivity, guessed that he was still smarting under the rebuff his curiosity had received on the previous evening.

As Elizabeth took the chloroform-soaked tapes and thrust them into the incinerator chute, Merrill had taken a look at the still-sleeping patient. The unbroken rest had already laid a mark of improvement on Henry Lessing— the unshaven cheeks had lost their gaunt lines and a faint colour was creeping under the fair, three-day growth of stubble.

Merrill took his departure with the two constables. As her husband bathed and shaved, Elizabeth had ordered a meal from the service restaurant below. They had almost finished this repast when a ring at the door announced the Chief Inspector. The couple had expected to greet a man hag-ridden to the last degree, but to their surprise Read had recovered his official confidence and bite. They discovered the reason for this change of attitude in his story of certain revelations following a search of Portia Divine's house in West Kensington.

Half-way through this recital, the telephone rang. It was Lady Halversham who, rising late, had just seen the morning papers. In response to silent promptings on the part of the Chief Inspector, Elizabeth had suggested her friend call over as soon as possible.

Now Lady Ella Halversham rolled her handkerchief into a tight bundle and blinked woebegone eyes at her hosts.

"I can't even pretend to understand all this," she whimpered. "I came around here to ask for comfort and sympathy. And I find myself faced with an— an inquisition!"

William Read said quietly, "We can show you letters and other documents taken from Miss Divine's room, proving beyond all doubt that for years she had been taking drugs. She began with cocaine but later turned to hasheesh."

"No..."

Elizabeth Blackburn reached out and put a hand on the elder woman's arm. She said very gently, "This thing's gone too far for false loyalty, Ella. You've got to be truthful with us. You knew that Miss Divine was a drug-addict. You said yourself that this poor woman had visions— saw fanciful creatures which never existed. You knew because that kind of hallucination is one of the symptoms of the hasheesh smoker."

Ella Halversham stared at the girl for a moment then in the light they saw her features crumple and run together like a wax mask placed too near the fire.

"Yes..." the words were a moan. "Yes, I did know. I tried to warn her about it. But she wouldn't listen. She said she had to have it for what she called inspiration— to do those illustrations..."

Elizabeth said gently, "She told you this?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"About six months ago. One night she took me to her studio. We were to talk about illustrations for my book— the one before 'The Enchanted Garden.' Then she showed me some other drawings."

The pudgy face contracted. "Ghastly things— nightmares! I knew that no person in their right mind could have thought of such things. So I— I asked her. And she broke down and told me." Ella Halversham's voice trembled at the memory. "I think it was even worse than the drawings, somehow."

"Ella dear, what made you suspect in the first place?"

A red-rimmed eye peered at Elizabeth around the handkerchief. "After the publication of our fifth book, I gave Portia a compact as a present. I was always begging her to use make-up because I never let her see I thought she was at all— unusual— you know what I mean? But one day she asked me to get the car keys from her handbag. I saw the compact and when I picked it up there was a powder smear on the outside. I thought it was grand that she should have taken my advice, but when I opened it, the powder wasn't like any kind I'd ever seen. Then Portia came in and almost snatched the compact out of my hand. She was so very red and angry that I knew that something was very, very wrong."

"Yes," said Mrs. Blackburn. "I know all about the compact. Miss Divine left it here on Friday evening."

Outside the window the massed clouds hung lower and the leaves of the larch trees were motionless as though drawn against the leaden background.

It was the Chief Inspector who broke the silence.

"Lady Halversham, we all realise how very deeply you must feel over this tragedy. But you must believe us when we tell you that far greater issues than personal grief hang upon the— the death of Miss Divine. There seems to be no doubt that the unfortunate woman came to this apartment last night with certain vital information. And it was to prevent the passing on of that information that she was murdered."

Ella Halversham gave a little rocking movement to her head. "But that's what I can't understand, Mr. Read. Who would want to do such a terrible thing?"

Jeffery opened his mouth, but the elder man waved him to silence. Then he went on.

"We believe she was shot down by the person from whom she had been getting her drug supply."

"But who could that be?"

Read said evenly, "Archdale Stewart-Riggs."

If Ella Halversham's face had been vacuous before, now it assumed an expression akin to witlessness.

"You— you're joking with me, surely?"

"No, m'lady." Read's face went suddenly bleak. "Until two weeks ago, this man was Miss Divine's only source of supply. Then he refused to deal further with her." He leaned forward, fixing the woman's face with his eyes. "Last night, a thorough search was made of Miss Divine's house in West Kensington. In a waste paper basket we found a number of half-written letters, notes begun and discarded. They were addressed to Stewart-Riggs, requests for supplies of narcotic."

As the untidy little woman continued to stare at him, he reached into his pocket and produced a folded letter.

"Here, m'lady, is a specimen of the replies we found. I must ask you to listen to it." He lowered his eyes and read:

"It is useless for you to pester me with hysterical requests. I've already explained that in view of the importance of the task we're undertaking, I have been ordered to stop what has proved to be a very lucrative sideline. Our leader feels that far too much risk is involved by the drug disposal and, as you know, just at this moment it is essential that we keep ourselves completely free from suspicion until the assignment is completed."

"It is— it's impossible!" she whispered. "Mr. Stewart-Riggs— so very kind. And such a gentleman..." the whisper trailed into silence. Then she drew a

sharp soft breath. "But if you know this, why not arrest him? He must be punished for what he's done!"

The Chief Inspector was returning the note to his pocket.

"It isn't quite as simple as that, Lady Halversham. Last night, a squad of my men raided Holemdale. Except for a skeleton staff of servants, the place was as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard."

The woman clasped her hands "But where had he gone?"

Read sat back. "That's where we think you can help us. Your social duties brought you into contact with this man several times. Did he ever mention another address?"

"I— I can't remember," she said at length.

Elizabeth leaned forward. "Ella," she said quietly, "you must try! As Mr. Read has told you, so much more than the death of your friend depends on this. Did this man ever speak of a town apartment or a place other than the property in Kent? Concentrate, Ella. Think hard!"

The thunder, closer now, grumbled again and a sudden scythe of lightning split the leaden sky. Then Ella Halversham gave another of her short cut-off gasps and she sat upright, hands linked before her.

"Yes!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "He wanted to buy a windmill!"

Blackburn spoke for the first time in minutes. "Where was this?" he snapped.

At his brusqueness, she seemed to shrink a little within herself and the light died from her eyes. "It was just after he bought the property in Kent," she said feebly. "He motored me down to see it remember we were coming along a road near Penshurt and there was the loveliest old mill standing in a field. And that man said it all looked so pretty that he'd like to buy it— field and all..."

Read insisted. "But did he buy it?"

"I— I don't know..." She paused and added lamely, "Perhaps it might only have been a figure of speech."

There was a short baffled silence. Elizabeth gave a quick glance at the two men before she said gently, "That's not the kind of thing we mean, Ella dear. We believe this man is somewhere in London. He wouldn't dare stay at a hotel because his description is being circulated as wanted by the police. So he must have some private address where he's hiding away. We hoped you might be able to help us find him."

The woman on the couch was tugging her frock into place. "I can't think," she said pettishly. "My poor brain just won't function. It isn't fair to badger me like this— not after all the shocks I've had today. My mind's just whirling!"

Mrs. Blackburn, looking at that ruined face, said gently, "Wouldn't you like to come into the bedroom and freshen up a little, Ella?"

The plump chin set obstinately. "No, no, I'm quite all right." Lady Halversham jerked her dress into position. "I just want to go home."

"All right, Ella dear, I'll see you out."

She followed her guest across the living room. Ella Halversham moved with a curious jerkiness, like a person whose co-ordination has been thrown out of gear by a mind half-stunned by impact. Nor did she pause to bid the two men farewell. They heard Elizabeth making little sympathetic noises in the hallway, then as the door clicked shut Blackburn turned, "Think we were wise, Chief?"

"In what way, son?"

"Were we taking a risk in giving so much away?"

Read said shortly, "We gave nothing away that she won't read for herself in the morning papers. And when you consider that a gang of saboteurs are holding a disease capsule over the heads of a few million citizens of London, don't you think we're justified in taking a few risks?"

Elizabeth had returned to the living room. She crossed to the couch and began to shake up the cushions. "I know you wanted to keep her here, Chief," she said. "But it wouldn't have done the slightest good. As it was, she was only getting rattled. Any further pressing and she'd have gone to pieces completely. I know Ella Halversham too well!"

She took a cigarette from the silver box, proffering it to Jeffery before putting it down. He shook his head and clicked his lighter for her.

"That's the point, Beth," he said grimly. "Do you know her? Well enough, I mean, to figure whether or not she was just putting on a fancy act here?"

His wife took up her favourite position on the arm of the couch. "It's so hard to say, Jeffery. If she was acting, it was a brilliant performance. If we didn't know that this gang were so diabolically clever, I'd be prepared to swear that her shock and grief were genuine."

Blackburn thrust his hands into his pockets and leaned by the mantel. "You'll notice," he said, "that she gave nothing away. Only when you forced her into a corner did she spill about Portia Divine and the coke."

That old worried look had crept back into Read's face. "You think she's one of the gang, son?"

Jeffery nodded. "Sure I do!"

From the doorway of the spare bedroom a tired voice drawled, "You're right off the beam, copper!"

Three heads wheeled.

Henry Lessing stood in the entrance.

"That old trout's never been part of the set-up. They wouldn't touch a dim-wit like that with a forty-foot pole! I can tell you the names of every single person in that outfit— and some of those names are going to pop your eyes clean across this room!"

Jeffery snapped at him. "Okay, smart guy! Start talking!"

His feet loose in Blackburn's slippers, Henry Lessing shuffled across the room and sat down on the couch. Then he folded his arms and sat back.

"It doesn't come that easy," he told them. "I'm a very valuable guy. I've got information that's going to raise the short hairs on your neck." He paused and surveyed the trio calmly. "But first we've got to do a little collective bargaining."

THERE WAS the sound of thunder, closer this time and more menacing. Then Lessing spoke again.

"In one way," he said calmly, "you're smarter than I thought. Figuring about the germ capsule and the sabotage crew— you're square on the bull's-eye there. But in another way, you're dumb as a Bellevue nut! They've led you by the nose until you're walking in completely the wrong direction. And without my seeing eye, you'll never get back on the right track."

Lessing scratched a stubbly chin. "I guessed our casket racket would be blown wide open when you fished that dim-wit out of the river. I reckoned you'd get around to checking up on his background— and mine, too." He cocked an eye at the Chief Inspector. "How does my late boss feel about it?"

It was Blackburn who answered. "Peterson wasn't quite the fall guy you imagined. He had you taped from the word go! He was getting a fishy smell from those forged references. When your hop-headed pal showed up in Cairo the first time, Peterson recognised a racket that stuck out like an old-fashioned case of hives. So he shot your dossier across to New York. And if Stewart-Riggs hadn't put the finger on your cokey friend, you'd both be on the inside looking out— right now!"

"That dumb gopher," said Lessing and showed his teeth. "I might have known that he'd ball everything up!" Then he added with a soft slow bitterness. "I sure picked myself a swell team!"

Jeffery sneered. "A dope-head. Plus an oversexed Greek with one foot in a terrorist camp!"

The unshaven jaw gaped. "You know about Cassamatis?"

"Sure! We bought a brand new crystal!"

Lessing stared at Jeffery's lean face for a few seconds.

He said sullenly, "Let's quit needling each other and come out into the clear." His eyes came up to where the Chief Inspector stood, feet apart, arms

folded across his chest. "Just how much does your side know about this set-up?"

Read eyed him coldly. "We know that a couple of cheap chisellers were working a racket of selling an Egyptian casket and frightening the buyer into returning it so that they could repeat the swindle all over again. We know that in Cairo they picked up a third partner as go-between, a Greek named Cassamatis. But what they didn't realise was that the Greek was also an agent for a terrorist gang, who'd picked him for the pleasant little task of slipping a disease capsule into the water supply of the British forces stationed in the Canal Zone. But our Intelligence got wind of the idea. When they cornered the Greek in Peterson's hotel, Cassamatis had the brainwave of slipping the capsule inside the casket so that when our boys arrested and searched him, they were just wasting their time."

The Chief Inspector paused. Then Lessing said almost irrelevently, "Cute idea— that trick lid: Works on a hidden spring. You could tinker about all day without making it perform. Or you might hit on the drill right away."

"Keep talking."

"We know that this Greek was living with a woman called Bianca Milland. We know that after Cassamatis was murdered, she came to England and contacted Stewart-Riggs who runs his own terrorist outfit in this tight little island. We know that Stewart-Riggs made his money in the dope racket but was ordered to give it up because it was too dangerous to this new venture. We know that when he stopped his supply to Portia Divine, one of the gang members, she turned nasty and tried to blow the gaff. She tried to warn us that this gang meant to drop the capsule in one of London's reservoirs and when we didn't take the hint, she came here last night to make her meaning plainer. But either Stewart-Riggs or one of his hatchet-men interrupted her visit with a bullet."

Lessing sat hunched at one end of the couch, enfolded in Jeffery's oversize pyjamas and dressing gown like a chrysalid prematurely shrunken in its cocoon.

"Brother!" he said and there was a reluctant admiration in his tone. "You sure made good use of that crystal!" He paused as Elizabeth rose from the other arm of the couch and crushed out her cigarette. "Now tell me what it is you don't know."

"Okay," said Jeffery. "We don't know why Cassamatis was murdered. We don't know how soon it was before you got wise to the fact that the capsule was inside the casket. We figure that Morris was rubbed out because he got into Stewart-Riggs' hair. But how did he and why? Was it because he found out too much and passed the bad news on to you? If so, why was it they didn't put

the finger on you down there in the cottage? And how did you get into the cottage? You were last seen hot-footing it along Picadilly!

"We know that Portia Divine was a member of the sabotage clique. You tell us that Ella Halversham is in the clear, but what about a guy named Newcombe, a beefy Bible-thumper called Birdseye and a sleezy little tyke by the name of Bradley?" Jeffery rapped out the last question. "Are these people in or out?"

Lessing stared at Blackburn for a second then transferred his attention to the Chief-Inspector. "Did I hear you tell that old dame you raided Stewart-Riggs' house?"

Read said shortly. "Last night."

"And Stewart-Riggs had taken a powder?"

The other nodded. "So the place was empty except for the servants?"

From the mantelpiece Blackburn snapped, "What's all this?"

Lessing flapped a hand at him. "Patience, brother! I'm trying to get something clear in my own mind." He addressed Read again. "Among those servants, did you run across a guy named Grimstowe— a gardener?"

The Chief Inspector eyed him cautiously. "We got a report on Grimstowe," he said. "He walked out of his job yesterday morning— said he'd been offered better money working for someone else."

Lessing narrowed his eyes. "Did you know that Grimstowe had a record? Three years in Levensworth for robbery with violence?"

Read shrugged. "Can't say I'm surprised," he grunted. "That would be just the type Stewart-Riggs would choose to work for him. Birds of a feather!" Then his tone sharpened. "Now look here, mister! We've supplied you with enough information. How about returning the compliment."

"After we've come to terms."

Read's moustache bristled at the tone. Leaning forward, he tapped Lessing on the shoulder. "Get this into your thick skull, my beauty! We don't start any bargaining until we've heard what you have to say. If the information you give us is worthwhile, then we might talk about seeing what can be done to save your greasy hide! So come on! Let's hear what you have to say."

Lessing's unshaven face flushed behind the stubble and he sat teasing his lip for a few moments. Then he shrugged. "Okay," he said, "you know so much already that you might as well have the full picture."

"When we decided to fleece Peterson," he began, "Morris went on ahead to Cairo to hunt up a go-between. Someone put him on to Cassamatis. At this stage we hadn't a clue about his connection with any political clique— all we knew was that he wasn't over particular about the way he earned his money and also that he was living with some dame in a house on the Mena road. I

never laid eyes on this canary, but Morris had seen her riding around with the Greek in a car that would have dwarfed a battleship and he told me that she was a tasty dish in any man's language. Anyhow, Morris contacted this guy who agreed to play ball with us. It seems that the pair got mighty pally and when Morris confessed that he was worried about getting his supply of snow in England, the Greek gave him the name and address of a top-rate peddler named Stewart-Riggs.

"Okay. So that's the set-up when I arrive with Peterson and his niece. And everything goes according to plan— at least in the beginning. The Greek unloads the casket onto Otis and we arrange to meet that same night and split the divvy. But Cassamatis doesn't turn up. We start to worry and talk about the old double-cross. But that's nothing to how we feel in the morning when the gyppo police arrive at the hotel with the news that Cassamatis has been found strangled and stripped at the Mena road address. Because I'd filled Peterson with a lot of baloney about bribing important officials, he played cagey with the cops and had me make arrangements to get the hell out of Cairo but fast! But seeing that we were leaving behind ten grand which the Greek had taken out of that hotel, I was feeling mighty sore about the whole set-up."

An inch of ash fell from Lessing's cigarette and powdered the borrowed dressing gown.

"The fact that we'd lost that ten grand gave me what you might call greater incentive to get my paws on the casket. But Peterson was nobody's fool! On the ship, he kept the trinket locked in the captain's safe and when Peterson wanted to gloat over his treasure, the niece was sent to get it out of custody. Meanwhile, Morris had flown to London and was waiting for us when we arrived. You've figured how we managed the bogey-man scares, so there's no need to waste time talking about that.

"Then Morris suddenly disappeared for two days. I was just beginning to think he'd turned yellow and crawled out of the whole business when he rang me at the Dorchester. He wanted me down at his room in Pimlico. I shot down there that evening and my partner told me a story that just about put pretzels in my spine.

"It seems that Morris had run short of his dope supply and was starting to give at the seams. So he decided to contact this peddler named Stewart-Riggs. But when he got there, Stewart-Riggs looked at him as if he'd asked for the Statue of Liberty wrapped in cellophane. He said he wasn't a dope merchant, never had been and would Morris get the hell out of it before he put the dogs onto him. Morris was wandering through the grounds in a kind of daze when suddenly he got a hail from behind a hedge. And there, wielding a pair of

shears, was an old buddy of his named Grimstowe with whom Morris had shared a cell back in the good old Levensworth days."

He paused and looked at the Chief Inspector.

"Now you know why I was so interested in that guy. Because Morris poured out his sad tale and Grimstowe said to meet him in the local gin parlour that evening. And over a few pints of what passes for beer in this neck of the woods, Grimstowe told Morris that Stewart-Riggs had been a peddler but had suddenly put a stopper on the practice. But Grimstowe knew that Stewart-Riggs kept his supply under the floor boards of an old deserted windmill he had bought near Penshurst."

He paused again as the three listeners exchanged quick corroborative glances.

"To Morris, who was cranky for a shot of what made his life worth living, this information was like dangling a carrot before a burro. He hung around until dusk and then lit out for the location of the mill. When he found it, the place looked deserted enough on the outside, but Morris prized open a window and found the main floor set up like a board room at Rockefeller Centre. There was a thick carpet on the floor and sprung chairs around the walls and a six-foot desk, but before Morris had time to take in anything more, he heard the sound of a car pulling up in the road. Through the window, he saw three people get out of the car and start across the field toward the mill. He recognised two of them as being Stewart-Riggs and this streamlined brunette last seen playing with Cassamatis in Cairo. But the third was an oversized gorilla who looked like a cross between King Kong and Man Mountain Dean. They were already at the door of the mill when Morris decided he'd better get going, so he moseyed up a ladder to the floor above. He put his peeper to a crack in the boards and had a grandstand view, with full sound effects, of everything that went on in the room below.

"More people kept arriving until there were ten fannies wedged into those chairs. Then this dame got up and made her testimony. She told that gathering how Cassamatis, cornered by the gendarmes, had slipped the capsule inside the casket. After being frisked, it seems he went back to this dame and told her what had happened. And as this gang works in sympathy with those coloured slobs in Cairo, she was here to tell them that they must get their paws on the contents of the casket right smart!"

Jeffery interjected, "But what about the Greek?"

Lessing held up his hand. "I'm coming to that," he explained. "Just after the dame left the house to catch a plane, the members of the Cairo clique called on Cassamatis. They'd just heard he'd been combed by Intelligence and wanted to know if the capsule was safe. When the Greek told them what he'd

done, they figured he was stalling. So they stripped him of his clothes— and in one of the pockets they found the ten grand. No capsule, but a parcel of money— and the Greek's just left British Intelligence headquarters. To the poor heathen, it stuck out like a schnozzola. Cassamatis had sold out to British Intelligence for ten grand. So just to teach him his manners, they wound a rope around his fat throat and pulled tight.

"Then the head man of that gathering in the mill suggested that when they got the capsule in their mitts, they might do a little experimenting of their own here in England. According to Morris, this idea met with a mixed reception, with that Portia Divine dame squawking the loudest in protest. Anyhow, there's a lot more spiel for and against the scheme and eventually the meeting breaks up. Morris waited until the last car had disappeared, then he beat it like a track runner."

Lessing's voice splintered into a sudden fit of coughing that wracked his thin body from head to foot. When he took up his story again his voice was husky and strained.

"Now Morris has what he figures is a brilliant idea. He wants his dope and I want the ten grand we mislaid in Cairo. So Morris suggests that we go to Stewart-Riggs, let him know we're wise to his party game but ten grand plus some happy-juice for Morris will button our lips for good. I tell my partner to slide the idea right down the can— that the whole thing's dynamite and we're in enough trouble already. But Morris has got that dumb look on his face.

"On the following afternoon, my clever partner rings me at the Dorchester. He'd been down to Stewart-Riggs and spilt the whole mess fair into his custom-tailored lap! Stewart-Riggs had asked for time to think over the proposition. I was so steamed up that if I'd have been within reaching distance of Morris I'd have broken him like a dry twig. I just blew my top over the phone and shouted a few home truths down the wire. Then I heard Peterson pussyfooting outside the door, so I snapped at Morris to meet me at his Pimlico flea-house that night and jammed the receiver down.

"I got down there shortly after half-past nine— to see Morris come out of the residential with one of the men who'd been at the gathering in the mill. This chap hustled Morris into a waiting car. The next news I have about my smart alec partner is his photograph in the newspaper, together with a paragraph saying he's been pulled out of the river. And since Morris has told this sleazy albino that Henry Lessing is also in the know, I figure I'm in a spot about as healthy as that germ capsule in the casket!"

Lessing paused to wipe a dribble of water from his chin.

"Maybe," he confessed, "I panicked in Pilgrim's office on Friday morning. Maybe if I'd kept my head, everything would have been okay. But just then I

was like a guy who suddenly has a rug pulled out from under his feet. So I figured that the smartest thing to do would be to get out into the open— right away somewhere where I could think out the next move." His eyes swivelled to Blackburn. "And it didn't help any to run smack into you and that Peterson filly in Piccadilly."

Jeffery said, "Where were you going when you jumped the taxi?"

"Harrow."

Read barked, "Why Harrow?"

Lessing shrugged. "Because it was the first place that came into my mind." He rubbed the back of his hand across his chin again. "I let the hacky put me down in High Street and when I went to pay him, I made another pleasant little discovery. All I had on me was about nine shillings and the taxi fare swallowed the best part of that! So there I was, alone and dead broke, because I daren't go back to the Dorchester in case the cops had a reception committee waiting for me."

It was Elizabeth who asked the question: "What did you do?"

"I walked, lady!" The speaker gave a twisted grimace. "I walked until about four o'clock in the afternoon when I found myself out in the open. That was where I wanted to be but then I had to ask myself, so what? I was dog-tired and sick with worry and that wasn't helping my complaint any. I was just about ready to look for a hedge to sleep under when a truck driver pulled up and asked me if I wanted a lift. I guess he thought I was a down and out bum and I sure must have looked the part. Anyhow, he dropped me off near Covent Garden and with the idea of getting free lodging for the night, I made my way across the river and down into the East End where I figured I wouldn't be so conspicuous among the other dead-beats.

"By the time I got to Poplar, I was more than ready to cry quits. So I sat down in the doorway of a warehouse and started figuring whether I'd walk in and give myself up to the cops. Then I must have fallen asleep for the next thing I remember is a glim full in the pan. I looked up and two hefty bulls were standing over me. I thought, well, this is it and what the hell, but all those babies wanted was to give me some free advice. They told me that if I wanted a bed, a holy Joe named Birdseye ran a charity joint further down the street. If I passed the de-lousing test, I'd be given a free feed and a doss down for the night." Lessing paused and gave a hard chuckle. "Just as simple as that— and I walked into it wide-eyed as a kid at the circus. The reverend guy met me at the door, shook hands, poured a few psalms into my ear and then took me inside where I got my ration of tea and sandwiches. There must have been enough knockout drops in that tea to floor Joe Louis and when I woke up, I was lying on that trestle in the cottage by the lake."

"You wanted to know the reason they hadn't rubbed me out when they had the chance. I couldn't figure it out myself until around about midday, I had a visit from three people. Two of 'em were Stewart-Riggs and that doctor guy. The albino did the talking— told me they'd got their paws on the casket only half an hour before and if I wanted to keep what was left of my health I'd better tell them what I'd done with the germ capsule—"

"Done with it?" It was Blackburn, staring at the speaker.

Read jumped to his feet. "What are you talking about?" he snapped. "If they'd got the casket, the capsule was inside!"

Head on one side, Henry Lessing regarded the Chief Inspector with a kind of weak sick maliciousness. "That bunch of slobbs had the same idea. But there's been monkey business. Something's come unstuck somewhere. Because when Stewart-Riggs opened the casket, it was empty."

Jeffery snapped, "Is this on the level?"

Lessing shrugged. "Why not? You've asked me why they kept me alive and I've told you. Those babies thought I'd taken the capsule."

"Then Stewart-Riggs nodded to this doctor guy and he came forward with a hypo and gave me a shot in the arm. Naturally I figured they were dosing me with insulin. It wasn't until I started to black out that I realised they'd pumped me full of sleep dope to keep me quiet until they needed me again."

Read wheeled. "So Cassamatis was lying about the hiding of the capsule?"

Jeffery said slowly, working it out. "He couldn't have been lying, Chief. We know the Greek had the capsule when he went into the hotel. Intelligence grabbed him as soon as he came out— they frisked him and found nothing. Those Cairo bloodhounds did the job thoroughly, stripped their boy friend naked in the search! Add to this the fact that the Greek had no reason to double cross Bianca Milland— if he'd hidden the capsule where he could lay his paws oh it again, he'd have done so." Jeffery thrust his hands in his pockets, jingling the loose change. "So it stacks up to this. Between the time Peterson took possession of the casket and the time Stewart-Riggs got his fingers on it, someone else found a way of opening it and removing the capsule."

The Chief Inspector regarded him with a savage impotence. "That's fine!" he barked. "That's just dandy! A capsule of lethal germs floating around among eight million people."

Jeffery said grimly, "If Peterson and his solicitor were the only two handling the casket, it seems a mighty simple job of elimination." He began buttoning his coat. "I think I'll take a run around to the Dorchester and exchange a few ideas with Uncle Otis."

"When?"

"Just as soon as we get through with this family quiz!" He bent over the couch on which Lessing sat with his hands pressed to his temples. "Okay, Joe. Finish the job!"

The touselled head did not move. Blackburn reached forward and jerked up the drooping chin. He barked the words into the unshaven face. "Birdseye, Newcombe, Stewart-Riggs and Portia Divine. Okay! Now who were the other people in that room at the mill?"

With a movement swift and vindictive as a snake striking, Henry Lessing swiped aside the hand. "You've had all the gravy you're getting from this chicken. Before I say another word, someone's going to grease that rap of mine. When I see how I can slide clear, that's when I unbutton the lip. Until then—" he pulled away a hand and tapped his chest. "Meet the Sphinx!"

He moved unsteadily to the mantelpiece and picked up a rubber-capped bottle and the syringe.

"I'm giving myself an insulin shot. Then I'm taking the weight off my feet. Meanwhile, you master-minds can decide how to wangle this fix for me," Lessing's lip curled. "When you've got the blueprint ready, call me and I'll run my peepers over it."

"You two-cent tin-horn—" but a slam of a door cut off Blackburn's snarl. The young man was still glowering at the panels when Read spoke.

"Take it easy, son!"

Jeffery turned. "I know the cheap chiseller's got us all over a barrel," he grunted. "But it's more than time someone cut him down to size. If he wasn't a sick man, I'd go in there right now and pin his ears back— just to teach him manners before a lady!" He eased himself back onto the couch and shot another malevolent look at the door.

Read nodded. His tone held a note of satisfaction as he spoke. "It's fitting together nicely, son. Tomorrow we can start rounding up at least half a dozen members of this sabotage group."

Mrs. Blackburn was pulling the curtains across the open windows and she spoke over a rattle of rings. "Stewart-Riggs, Birdseye, Zakris, Newcombe, Bradley and the woman Milland." Now she turned. "With Portia Divine, that makes seven. Surely there can't be many more of them!"

"It could," Read considered, "be ten or possibly a dozen of them." He selected a cigar and slipped the case into his pocket. "But whatever way we look at it, the case now rests on two questions."

"Three," announced Blackburn.

Read's grey brows came up. "Two," he explained. "The whereabouts of the capsule and the names of the remaining members of the clique."

"Plus," said Jeffery, "the identity of the guiding hand behind it all."

"Stewart-Riggs— ?"

A dark head was shaken. "No, chief. Recall that Lessing said in one direction we were completely out of focus? And that some of the names would kick up our blood pressure? Not being a crazy guy, he wasn't meaning the names we already know. Nor was he referring to that bleached dream-peddler down in Kent." Jeffery leaned forward. "Item number two! Lessing mentioned three people visiting him at the cottage— Stewart-Riggs, Newcombe and a third party. You'll notice he didn't trouble to identify this last guy, so I figure it's someone right outside our range of suspicion. And that's the ace Lessing's keeping up his sleeve."

"Someone we don't even know?"

"Or someone we know very well!" Elizabeth had moved back into the living room and was straightening a squashed cushion. "Lessing's entire bargaining power lies in this question of identity. Therefore, the name he's keeping back must be terribly important."

A sudden breeze, springing from the darkening world outside, bellied the curtains and fanned the room with a warm breath.

Jeffery said:

"I'm worried about that guy in there." He jerked his head to the bedroom. "Those babies outside have spent time and money arranging what they believed was a foolproof set-up. And now one lone guy has the know-how to blast the whole game wide open. The big leaguers must know this. Okay, then what are they doing about it?"

The Chief Inspector looked at him for a moment. Then he crossed to the telephone and dialed a number. He issued a few curt instructions into the mouthpiece and then hung up.

"In five minutes," he announced, "there'll be four men watching this place back and front. I'm staying up here with Beth. You can't ask for any more protection than that, surely!" He picked up Jeffery's hat and tossed it onto the couch. "Now, for Pete's sake, go around and talk to Peterson. Or go for a walk! Or do something. You're giving us the willies mooching around like this."

Blackburn hesitated a moment then walked across to the spare bedroom. He opened the door. In the half light he could see Lessing lying on the bed with his face to the wall. "Are you all right, Joe?" he called.

The fair head turned. "Got some news for me?"

"Not yet."

"Then get out, shamus. I'm trying to rest."

Jeffery drew a deep breath, then he retreated, pulling the door shut after him. "Guess I've got the horrors," he grunted and made for the telephone.

Read said, "Like a whisky, son?"

In the act of dialing a number, Jeffery looked up. "Haven't you heard? I've switched to blackstrap molasses." Then he was talking into the instrument. He replaced the receiver and turned. "Peterson won't talk over the phone. But he'll see me if I go around."

"Well?" grunted Read. "What are you waiting for?"

Jeffery darted a final look at the bedroom door then began reaching for the telephone again. But Elizabeth's voice halted the movement. "If you're ringing for the Rover, Jeff, it's Sunday. They won't deliver."

"I'll walk around and pick it up." He retrieved his hat from the couch. "You'll wait here with Beth, Chief?"

Mrs. Blackburn turned and gave a quick glance at the unnatural gloom beyond the windows. But when she looked in the direction of the hall her husband had gone. She gave a half smile. "I was going to tell him to take a raincoat," she said. "He'll probably get soaked."

The Chief Inspector said amiably, "That way won't hurt him."

Elizabeth gave him a quick understanding look. Then she slipped into an easy chair resting her small hands in her lap. She said slowly, "It's a dreadful thing to say, but I'm happier than I've ever been in my life."

Read had propped himself against the mantelpiece. "And what's so very dreadful about that?"

"Four deaths," she said. "It's set Jeff back on to the rails again, but that's the cost of the treatment."

"Cassamatis and Morris weren't any great loss!"

She raised her brows. "Perhaps not, Chief. But that poor Divine woman..."

"She played about with fire," the big man reminded her. "No one's fault but her own if she got burnt."

"And there's Pilgrim." Elizabeth shook her head. "God knows that murder's bad enough, but this is worse! It's so— so treacherous. It doesn't give the victim a chance." After a pause, she asked. "Anything new on that angle, Chief?"

Read spread his hands. "What can you do in a case like this? Arrest the postman? We couldn't even get a lead from the envelope— the explosion destroyed almost every trace of it."

He made a gesture with his cigar. "Don't you worry, Lisbeth. There's going to be a wholesale settling up tomorrow morning. I shouldn't be surprised if another twenty-four hours writes finish to the whole affair." He grinned at her. "And then you'll be pestering me for a new job for that trouble-shooting husband of yours."

Now Elizabeth smiled in turn. "I'm terribly grateful, Chief," she murmured.

"What for?"

"Helping him find his way back."

The crash of a door flung open splintered the words on her lips. She wheeled simultaneously with her companion. The big man's face tightened. "Lessing!" he grated.

The pyjama-clad figure was slumped in the doorway, staring around with glazing eyes.

"Lessing," Read cried again and almost flung his cigar into the ash-tray. "What's the matter with you, man!"

Now the breathing was sterterous and the mouth worked, stiffly, as though the throat muscles were becoming rigid and constricted. Henry Lessing took two faltering steps forward, one clenched fist sought the edge of a chair, sought it blindly, missed— and the man fell headlong across the floor, still mouthing like a stranded fish. And as Elizabeth and her companion sprang to his side, one word bubbled from the stiffening lips.

"Poison!"

Read flashed a quick incredulous glance at the girl who was staring in fascinated, horrified helplessness. The glazing eyes held such an expression of dumb and agonised appeal that Read cried an involuntary question.

"Lessing! Who did this?"

For just an instant, comprehension flickered into the filming eyes. The jaw worked again. They had to bend their heads to catch the words.

"Grimstowe— he— he—"

A second convulsion twisted the body. Lessing's bare feet drummed the carpet and then were still. The eyes became opaque as pebbles and the fair head rolled sideways.

THE FIRST drops of rain, large as florins, were beginning to spot the pavement as Jeffery Blackburn emerged into the street. He was deliberating whether to return to the apartment for a raincoat when a taxi came into view. Jeffery raised his hand and a few minutes later he was moving down Kensington High street in the direction of Hyde Park corner.

He lit a cigarette and sat back, mentally reviewing the progress of the case. They had, he reflected, every reason to be hopeful. With Lessing's aid, tomorrow would see the complete membership of the sabotage group broadcast throughout the length and breadth of England. Not only would this concentrated man-hunt curtail the group's activities, but the unexpected disappearance of the capsule must surely immobilise the diabolical experiment in wholesale destruction.

When he emerged at the Dorchester, the sprinkle of rain had stopped but the clouds hung dark and threatening and the hotel foyer was a blaze of light.

Jeffery found Peterson waiting at the door of his suite. It was obvious that the collector was prepared to forget past differences since, after a moment's hesitation, he thrust out his hand to greet the visitor. Shrewd eyes flicked to Jeffery's face, taking in the dark bruise on the jaw and the tapes still in place over the brow.

"Looks as though we've all been having trouble!" he muttered and led the way to the room along the passage. As he threw open the door and Blackburn entered, the young man found it difficult to believe that only four days had passed since his first introduction to this bland apartment.

Blackburn said slowly, "You sure bought a peck of trouble for that ten grand!"

"A dreadful business— dreadful!" In the light of the desk lamp, the collector's face seemed to have aged ten years. "A most extraordinary example of how an innocent person can become embroiled in a fantastic situation— a situation, I might say, more reminiscent of the cinema than the ordinary round of life."

With the palm of one hand, Peterson was massaging the swollen knuckles of the other. "My friend, Pilgrim, was murdered because a gang of killers wanted the casket, believing something of importance was hidden inside it, according to Chief Inspector Read."

Jeffery nodded. "Did the Chief name the object?"

"No."

"Then I'll tell you. It's a small capsule, made of some material or substance that will dissolve in water, and measuring possibly about an inch long."

The collector was looking down at his twisted hands. "What kind of capsule?"

Blackburn said slowly, "Containing enough disease germs to wipe out half the city of London."

As though jerked on a string, Peterson's head came up.

"Don't be a fool!"

"When I clown about a thing like that, you can call me a much dirtier name!" Blackburn was watching his companion's face, frowning over the expression about the mouth. It was more than surprise, deeper than incredulity— an expression of such complete disbelief that Jeffery's tone hardened. "Get this into your head, Peterson. Cassamatis the Greek was deputed to slip the capsule into the water supply of the British troops in the Canal Zone. Our Intelligence guys caught him on the hop. To save his skin, the Greek pushed the capsule into the casket, only a few minutes before you gave him the ten grand in payment! I'm not giving you any comic-strip baloney! I'm

telling you plain facts!" He leant forward and rapped the words, "Okay, Peterson. Where's the capsule?"

The other man stared at him. "How should I know?"

The bewilderment in the reply was so simple and unaffected that it was Jeffery's turn to stare. Then Peterson went on. "Good heavens, Blackburn. You're not suggesting that I've taken this capsule?"

The expression of blank surprise on the face, the faint and rising indignation in the tone— were these sincere? In spite of his doubts, Jeffery would have been prepared to swear that they were.

Jeffery said grimly, "When the gang got hold of the casket, the capsule was missing. Between the time the Greek stowed it inside and yesterday afternoon when Pilgrim was rubbed out, someone had removed it."

"Impossible!"

"You're going to tell me that no one beside yourself laid hands on the trinket— ?"

Something of the old impatient rasp had returned to Peterson's tone when he answered. "I'm going to tell you more than that, Blackburn. I'm going to tell you that somebody's lying."

"Why?"

The collector leaned his elbows on the desk. "Who told you the capsule was hidden in the casket?"

"Henry Lessing."

Otis Peterson spread his arms. "That explains everything. A cheap crook. A congenital liar!" The tone was suddenly harsh. "He's lying because of one very simple fact. In this very room last Thursday morning, just after that fellow Stewart-Riggs left here, I was handling the casket and the lid shot open. Gave me no little surprise, I can tell you! I hadn't realised the trinket had a trick lid. But the point I'm getting to is that the box was empty."

If the plump man behind the desk was telling the truth— and again Jeffery had little doubt that he was— what the devil did it all mean? More to cover the lengthening pause than to elicit actual information, he asked, "About this guy Stewart-Riggs. What brought him here to see you?"

Peterson blinked at the sudden switch of subject. He replied evenly, "He said he was interested in collecting antiques."

"Did you show him the casket?"

Peterson nodded. "But only from a distance. I can assure you that he never touched it."

"Then Stewart-Riggs suggested you bring it down with you yesterday afternoon?"

"That's right. He said there'd be several people who would like to see it."

Jeffery said grimly, "The year's understatement!" He rubbed his jaw again. "You'd met this guy before, hadn't you?"

"Briefly!"

The word was so curt that the younger man looked up. "Did he recall it?"

"No." Peterson's mouth went tight. "He might have found his change of name rather awkward."

Blackburn sat upright. "What's all this?"

"Three years ago," the collector said, "I met this man in the American Zone in Berlin. He was calling himself Henry Duval and was posing as an art collector. One evening, some friends took me to a cabaret called the Bergkeller, on the Kurfurstendamm. It was the favourite meeting place of West Berlin intellectuals.

"Duval— or Stewart-Riggs as he now calls himself— was present with a Russian woman. When we were introduced, he presented this woman as Marina Mayakovsky. She was, I remember, very beautiful and wore her long black hair wound round her head rather like a turban. We also met a third person in their party— a Russian officer, a huge bear of a man, named Nikolai Greegoryev. Our meeting was extremely brief and we exchanged no more than a few words."

Peterson's hands went to his spectacles. He removed them and turned them in his fingers as he continued:

"Some few weeks later, I happened to be talking to Herr Fritz Gerbhardt, who brought the famous Kaiser Frederich collection from America to West Berlin after the war. The name of Henry Duval came up and Gerbhardt told me that the man had been asked to leave the American centre. Although nothing could be proved, U.S. Intelligence had discovered that Duval was making a fortune by trafficking in human misery. He and his companions would circulate information that they were prepared to smuggle wealthy refugees from the Russian to the American zone. Having collected their price, they would guide their charges to the border and there turn them over to waiting Russian agents. The same agents paid a substantial reward for each victim."

As he paused, Blackburn said quietly, "There's no doubt about him being the same guy?"

Peterson slipped his glasses back onto his nose. "The true albino is a fairly rare type," he said almost primly. "I recognised the fellow as soon as he entered this room."

"I guess they don't come any grubbier," said Jeffery and rose to his feet. "Thanks for the background data about this heel. But I wish you could let some more light into this set-up about the capsule."

The collector came around the desk. "I've told you," he said curtly. "Lessing's a liar. I'm prepared to swear on oath that there was never anything inside the casket." He thrust out a crooked hand as he spoke. "Sorry I can't help you, Blackburn. But that's the truth!"

MR. BLACKBURN had more than enough to occupy his mind as he left the Peterson suite. The discovery of the true background of Archdale Stewart-Riggs and the woman calling herself Bianca Milland was counter-balanced by the conflicting stories concerning the capsule. Jeffery could not believe that Henry Lessing had been lying, since every piece of evidence in their hands supported his story. On the other hand, he was equally convinced that Otis Peterson was telling the truth. Thus he was so absorbed in trying to reconcile these two diametrically opposed points that it was not until five minutes later he realised two things— first that he had omitted completely to mention the subject of Lessing's terms regarding the fraud charge, and second that he was standing in Park Lane and being drenched by the long-promised downpour.

A wind had sprung up, tearing at the trees and scattering leaves across the lawns. It whipped the rain into his face. Jeffery cast a desperate look up and down the now deserted thoroughfare, but there was no taxi in sight.

So heavy was the premature dusk that the few cars speeding for shelter along Carriage Road had their headlights shining, the glare turning the rain into slanting silver needles. Still alert for a taxi, his eyes ranged the tempestuous scene. Then a car turned from Oxford Street into Park Lane and he took a half-step forward, to retreat with a grunt of disappointment. For this was a long, black Rolls Royce, moving with regal disdain and outlining his damp and disgruntled visage in its blinding headlights. Then to his surprise the big car began to slow down and edge into the kerb. As it halted opposite the shelter, a woman in the rear seat tapped on the glass and began sliding down the window.

Jean Inglis called, "Mr. Blackburn!"

Then a door swung open and gloved fingers beckoned to him. Jeffery needed no second invitation. He cleared the intervening space with a bound and as the actress moved to one side, he slid into the seat beside her. The uniformed chauffeur in the front leaned across and reaching out a huge hand, slammed the door shut.

What happened next was almost split second in its timing.

A second car was wheeling through Grosvenor Gate into Park Lane and the headlights lit the interior of the Rolls like a showcase. The chauffeur received the glare full in his face— a face criss-crossed with adhesive tape which

covered a pad of cottonwool over a smashed nose. Two slit eyes blinked in the brilliant light...

Jeffery gave a quick tight gasp.

"Zakris!"

He wheeled on Jean Inglis. The automatic she held was pointed directly at his stomach. Her hand was as steady as her voice. "I don't want to kill you, Mr. Blackburn. It might make such a mess of the upholstery."

Then the headlights of the second vehicle moved on and there was darkness in the Rolls Royce, darkness and tension and the steady drum of the rain on the roof. And Jean Inglis was saying in that husky, faintly amused voice that was known all over the world, "All right, Serb."

The big car slid forward and gathered speed. Jeffery grunted, "Okay, baby. Put the pop-gun away."

In the half darkness he could see the gleam of her teeth. "I like the feel of it," she told him. Then she gave a soft chuckle. "You know, I'm always being ordered to thrust things under your nose. Last time it was a posy."

He frowned. "Posy?"

"Of course. Last Friday evening on the steps of Eros." Irony edged that velvet voice. "Don't tell you've forgotten, Mr. Blackburn. I considered it one of my finest performances."

Jeffery said grimly, "Congratulations."

"Thank you," said Jean Inglis gravely. "A true artist always appreciates sincere admiration."

The car purred over the streaming road. Then Jeffery said, "I take it you don't mind blood on your paintwork?"

"Meaning?"

"Last Friday evening. I must have made quite a mess of your fenders."

He felt rather than saw her shrug. "I wouldn't know. Serb always cleans the car."

"Versatile guy, isn't he?"

"Mr. Blackburn," he thought he detected an edge of weary distaste in her voice, "I don't suppose you'd like to save everyone a considerable amount of trouble by handing it over to me?"

He said evenly, "Handing what over?"

She drew a little breath as though controlling her impatience with the situation. "The capsule given to you by Otis Peterson."

Jeffery leaned back and studied her. "How do you do it?" he inquired. "With a crystal or just plain listening at keyholes?"

The impatience rose to a well-bred exasperation. "For a very attractive man, you're an extraordinary fool! Haven't you been hurt enough?"

He said calmly, "You and your buddies should know. You've made two tries at the game."

"Haven't you ever heard of the saying— third time lucky?" He could feel her waiting for his reply so deliberately he kept silent. Then he saw the white blur of her face move and knew she was shaking her head. There was a genuine regret in the next words.

"I guessed you'd be obstinate. And I'm very sorry. I haven't any quarrel with you. In fact I could...could like you very much. If circumstances had been different, perhaps we..."

She stopped on a word, then suddenly her tone took on an edge hard and shrill as a pencil on a slate.

"Why the hell am I talking to you like this." The hand holding the automatic stiffened and she jerked the words over her shoulder.

"Round here and slow up at the corner, Serb!"

From Cromwell Road, the car slid easily into Queen's Gate Road and already Blackburn felt the speed decrease. The steady rain had given way to a slow drizzle which blurred the street lights and painted their reflections across the wet pavement. As the car drew up toward Queen's Gate Gardens, the headlights fell on a tall slim figure in a dripping macintosh. He was standing under a street light and as the car eased in toward the kerb, he came forward, shaking the rain from his hat.

The waiting man hesitated for an instant as a passing car shot away in the direction of Knightsbridge. Then, as Serb Zakris opened the door of the Rolls, he climbed inside, taking his seat beside Blackburn. As the door slammed and the car moved off, he favoured the young man with a brief hard stare and turned to the actress.

"I hardly expected this..."

She smiled. "My little surprise."

Jeffery said, "Mine, too, I guess." He surveyed the pleasant boyish face of Doctor Paul Merrill and grunted, "If I'd have known you were coming I'd have hired a band. In fact, two bands— one for each of your wrists!"

DOCTOR CONROY was a precise little man, bearded in the manner of the late King Edward the Seventh. With his high forehead, his dark down-turned eyes and a small rather spiteful mouth, he had something of the appearance of a dissolute and worldly apostle. Now he stood in the doorway, one hand smoothing his beard.

"You're quite right, Chief. The fellow was poisoned."

William Read stared at him for a moment. "You don't say, Mac! That's really brilliant!" His tone dripped irony.

Conroy placed the pipe in his mouth, dusted his hands and felt for matches. "How long ago since this chap took food?"

Read glanced at Elizabeth who ran a hand over her forehead, "Time?" she repeated. "About ten o'clock this morning."

"What did he eat?"

"I gave him a salad. Lettuce, some cheese, a slice of pineapple."

Conroy struck a match. "Prepare it yourself?"

"Yes. From the refrigerator." Elizabeth paused and added, "You know he was a diabetic?"

The Medical Officer nodded. "Bill, did you say that Blackburn spoke to him before he left?"

Read nodded in turn.

"And approximately ten minutes late, the fellow staggered out saying he'd been poisoned?"

Elizabeth gave a little shudder and her eyes went to the carpet. "It was horrible," she said. "I— I've never seen anyone die like that before."

The Chief Inspector said heavily, "There's your case, Mac. Other than the salad, prepared by Elizabeth, Lessing took no other food today. He was alone in that room— and alive and well ten minutes before he died." The big man spread his hands. "He babbles about poison. But I ask you— how could it be poison?"

Miles Conroy regarded him with a calm, almost bitter satisfaction.

"It's poison right enough," he announced.

"What was used?"

The bearded man tossed the match into the ash-tray. "I'll tell you after the autopsy."

Read glowered at him. "Can't you form any opinion now? What about the outward signs?"

The other puffed contentedly. "What the hell kind of Chief Inspector are you?" he retorted. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself asking a question like that. It's only in books that doctors smell the victim's breath and roll back the eyelids and announce that they can perceive the odour of bitter almonds."

A crash of thunder detonated over the rooftops and as though the sky had split with the reverberation, the rain cascaded down. Elizabeth crossed and flinging back the curtains, secured the long windows into place and in a few moments the panes were streaming. Conroy cocked an eye to the tumult outside.

"My boys are going to hate your guts, Chief," he remarked. "It's bad enough to be called out on a Sunday. But on a Sunday like this!" He jerked his

head towards the bedroom door. "But the sooner we get that carcass into the lab, the sooner you'll have the answer to your problems."

"That means more waiting," Read grumbled. He thrust his hands into his pockets and began to move restlessly around the room. Conroy watched him for a space. Then very deliberately, he placed his pipe in the ash-tray and leaned back in his chair.

"Since we've nothing better to do until my boys arrive," he said patronisingly, "I'd like to give you a few simple facts about poisons. I told you I could make a guess at what wasn't used, so let's start there." He pressed the tips of his fingers together. "I think we can rule out what we call the corrosives— sulphuric, nitric, hydrochloric and carbolic acids. Corrosives, passing the entrance to the larynx, damage the organ so badly that the voice becomes hoarse and husky— sometimes completely inaudible."

"There was nothing wrong with Lessing's voice," Read told him. "If he had difficulty in speaking, it was because his face and jaw muscles seemed paralysed."

Elizabeth said, "The Chief had to force open the fingers to get the insulin bottle."

Conroy paused with his pipe half way to his lips. "Insulin bottle?" he demanded. "What insulin bottle?"

"When that bird rushed out of the bedroom," Read explained, "he had one hand outstretched almost as though he was trying to show us something. Whatever it was he had gripped tight in his fingers. After I rang for you, I prised open the hand and an insulin bottle rolled out."

"A full bottle?" Conroy looked at Elizabeth.

She shook her head. "Empty. He'd given himself an injection about twenty minutes before."

One hand went to Conroy's beard as he stared at the girl, frowning. The other hand thrust the pipe back into the ash-tray. Then the medical officer rose.

"Where's this bottle now?"

Read nodded to the bedroom.

"The syringe, too?"

"I shoved 'em both on the table beside the bed," the big man told him. "But why the sudden interest in all that paraphernalia?"

Conroy said slowly. "I'm wondering if it could have been a plain insulin reaction..." He shook his head. "But that wouldn't induce death. Convulsions and the mouth-foaming, perhaps, but that would precede a coma..." He was talking it out with himself, almost oblivious to the presence of the others. "On

the other hand, it would explain the circumstances of the seizure..." Now he looked up and his face cleared. "You say he was alone in that room?"

"Yes..." Read's tone was cautious, inquiring.

Head on one side, eyes thoughtful, Conroy stood regarding his companions. "Say something went wrong with the insulin. That chap wouldn't know. You've seen the insulin bottle— they're protected by a rubber cap. The patient pushes the point of the needle through the cap then he makes an intravenous injection. And twenty minutes later..." He broke off and his tone became sharper.

"Bill— let's see those things."

The Chief Inspector took one look at his colleague's face and obeyed without a murmur. He returned and passed over the objects. Conroy put the rubber capped bottle on the table, turned the syringe in his fingers, placed the needle to the ball of his thumb and pushed the plunger. A tiny drop of liquid was ejected.

Elizabeth and Read watched as the doctor spread the moisture across his thumb. He sniffed at it, frowned, wiped the tip of his little finger over it and transferred the digit to his lips. His eyes narrowed.

"This isn't insulin!"

Elizabeth's voice went high. "But it must be—"

"Wait a minute!" The air of slightly bored condescension had vanished. Again Mrs. Blackburn was reminded of a terrier— a bristling eager terrier on the scent— as Conroy produced a pocket knife and picking up the insulin bottle, began to cut through the rubber covering. Then he held the phial to the light, inserted a finger and once again transferred it to his tongue. Then he turned, thrusting the bottle forward. "Where did this come from?"

Read said, "Paul Merrill brought it this morning."

"Who's he?"

"A G.P. who attends these people," and Read waved a hand around the room.

Conroy said grimly, "Well, he's going to attend a medical inquiry just as soon as I can get him on the phone!" He crossed to the instrument. "What's his number?"

"Cheston 5647," Elizabeth replied. From Conroy, she looked at Read then back to the doctor. "What are you going to do?"

The sound of the rotating dial formed a background for the words. "Discover where this G.P. got the stuff." He turned, receiver to ear. "Because our diabetic friend shot himself full of the contents and died twenty minutes later! He knew there'd been a mistake. That's why he rushed out clutching the bottle."

Elizabeth moved to his side. "When you've finished, doctor, may I talk to Paul?"

"Paul?"

"He's a friend of mine— our families have known each other for ages." She made a little distraught gesture. "He's going to be most terribly upset about this. That's why I must talk to him."

Conroy grunted, "Doesn't look as though anyone's going to talk to him. There's no answer at the other end." He was about to add something else when a ring came at the door. "That'll be my lads," he announced. "Somebody had better let them in."

Read moved but the girl stopped him. "I'll go," she said. "You may want to talk to Paul." She patted a strand of hair into place almost unconsciously, her mind wrestling with this new and extraordinary development. Paul Merrill— steady, reliable, his profession almost a sacred dedication— would never make a mistake like this! It could only be— must only be the fault of somebody else.

She opened the door.

"Elizabeth!" cried Susan Ann Peterson. "Elizabeth— they've got Jeffery!"

Such was Mrs. Blackburn's state of mind that, in the first seconds, the words made no impression. She could only stand staring at the flushed and trembling girl and at the face which appeared over her shoulder— the bespectacled, hawklike visage of Dr. Francis Newcombe. Now Susan Ann blinked like someone very near tears and reaching out she grasped Elizabeth's arm, shaking it in her perturbation.

"It's the truth! Frank and I were coming out of the park. Our headlights picked up a car right opposite— a big Rolls. And that awful monster who fought with Jeffery was driving. That film actress was in the rear seat and when Jeffery got in, she pointed a gun at him while the car drove away!"

Mrs. Blackburn said huskily. "No...oh, no..." The shrill words spun at her like pebbles, seemed to rattle around in her brain. Jeffery...Jean Inglis...Zakris...a gun..."No," she whispered again and as the faces blurred before her, she reached out and held fast to the door. Then she was aware of a strong firm hand on her arm and the solid figure of the Chief Inspector was behind her.

"What's all this?" he grated.

So fierce was his tone, so savage the expression on the square face that Susan Ann gulped and stood literally frozen into silence. Dr. Newcombe patted her shoulder gently as he stepped forward.

"We followed the Rolls as far as Queen's Gate, Inspector. It stopped there to pick up another man." Newcombe paused and faced a pair of blue eyes hard and penetrating as bullets.

"We are both prepared to identify this man as Doctor Paul Merrill."

Mr. Blackburn said amiably, "Seems we've been figuring the wrong plague pusher in this cess-pool. We'd taped Newcombe."

Paul Merrill grinned. "Of course you did. That's why we invited Newcombe to the Holmedale party yesterday afternoon." A lock of fair hair snaked across his forehead and he pushed it back. "You see, Blackburn, we're really very clever people."

"You never figure that cleverness might turn around and bite you?"

Merrill said pleasantly, "Not while we have morons like the Chief Inspector and yourself in the opposition camp."

Jeffery considered the remark. Then he said warmly, "I don't reckon we're so all-fired dumb. We've got Lessing, you know."

"But—" began Merrill. Then he paused and holding up a wrist, squinted at his wrist watch. "Of course," he went on, "I'd forgotten that you've been with Peterson for the past half hour. So you wouldn't know anything about it."

Something in his attitude and his tone stripped the badinage from Blackburn's voice. "Understand what?" he snapped.

Paul Merrill leaned back and felt for his cigarette case. "I'm afraid," he said easily, "that Henry Lessing won't be doing any talking, Blackburn."

The Rolls Royce had made no further stops since Queen's Gate. From there it had doubled back on its track, and from Cromwell Road it had cut across Sloane Street. Weaving its way through the maze of thoroughfares at the rear of Belgravia, Serb Zakris had brought them out along Victoria Street and they were approaching Westminster Bridge as Big Ben tolled the hour of seven.

The Rolls Royce was half way across the bridge before Blackburn spoke again. "You're lying, Merrill!"

Jean Inglis spoke from the shadows. "It's true, Mr. Blackburn."

He said harshly. "Who d'you think you're fooling? I left that guy full of pepper! We've got him guarded. None of your greasy clique could get near him!"

Merrill said gently, "Aren't you forgetting a doctor?" He paused and blew a thin stream of smoke. "You know, all along the line we've had luck on our side. For instance, Lessing being a diabetic. This morning, you may recall that I delivered a phial of insulin. Only it wasn't insulin."

Hunched in the corner of the seat, Blackburn went suddenly cold. "You'll never get away with it," he muttered.

Merrill said almost impatiently, "Oh, don't be ridiculous!" He might have been answering the arguments of a flat-earth fanatic. "You still don't realise what you're up against, Blackburn." The car was passing through Lambeth, rounding a bend so that he swayed slightly as he went on. "After we've cleaned up this evening's business, my first call on my return to town will be to your

apartment. I'll be carrying an empty insulin bottle. There's bound to be a certain amount of confusion over the extraordinary demise so it will be perfectly easy to make a switch. Even if anyone suspects poisoning, they'll find no clue from the bottle."

"Being a doctor," Blackburn said slowly, "you'll have heard of a neat trick known as an autopsy."

Paul Merrill was holding his cigarette. Now he threw back his head and laughed. "Being a doctor," he said lightly, "means something else. Having, for one thing, a knowledge of toxicology and knowing that of all poisons, aconite is the most difficult to locate."

Merrill finished his cigarette, pulled out the ash-tray let into the upholstery and crushed the butt free of sparks. He said quietly, "I'm telling you these things, Blackburn, to impress you with the futility of your fight. I'm trying to show you that we've all kinds of tricks up our sleeves— -the business of the aconite is merely trivial by comparison with the others. Unfortunately, I can't make any further disclosures since our orders are only to pick you up. Perhaps, if a certain person is present tonight, you may learn more."

The actress' voice sounded again, in a warning note. "Be careful, Paul."

His reply was sullen. "I know what I'm doing."

They were passing through Lewisham Junction where the Neon sign of a cafe blazed a rainbow of colour across the wet streets. In the reflected light Blackburn could see the frown that had settled on Merrill's face. He thought sardonically— the clean young captain has momentarily let down his side. He drawled the next words.

"So that's the pay-off for this buggy ride? A little tête-à-tête with the head man of the outfit?"

The muffled purr of the engine and the sibilance of rubber on wet tar was the only answer. Then Jeffery spoke again. "I've been trying to figure out how you managed to trail me. Could it be that Uncle Otis tipped you off?"

Then the actress made a move. "Pull up at the next telephone box, Serb," she ordered. "I want you to make a call."

"I BELIEVE," said Archdale Stewart-Riggs, "that you know most of the people here, Mr. Blackburn."

Jeffery's cold eyes moved around the faces of the other eight people in the circular apartment of the old mill near Penshurst. It was a room more spacious than the outside dimensions of the structure suggested. As the Rolls had driven up and Jeffery had alighted, he was surprised to glimpse the collection of cars in the neighbouring field. He had expected to meet only one person and

now found himself confronted with what seemed almost the entire complement of the league.

Stewart-Riggs was seated at a folding card table and seven chairs were arranged in a semi-circle on the carpeted floor. These were occupied by the Reverend Birdseye, the shabby engineer Bradley, the dark gypsy-faced man he remembered as Booker and two Egyptians, lithe young men in their mid-twenties. Jean Inglis and Paul Merrill had slipped into their seats while Zakris took up his position by a large, solid-looking desk which had been pushed across to the doorway. Jeffery looked in vain for the woman now calling herself Bianca Milland. His first thought was that she was late and then he noticed that no chair had been set for her.

Stewart-Riggs was saying, "But I don't think you've met our Moslem friends." He gestured with a manicured hand. "Mr. Salah Hafiz and Mr. Abdel Azzi, of the Moslem Divinity School at Al-Azhar."

Like automatons, the two men jumped to their feet and flashed white teeth. Blackburn did not even glance in their direction. Deliberately he turned his back and addressed Stewart-Riggs.

"Planning to sell these guys down the river, like you did those reffos in East Berlin?"

A ripple passed through the watching group. The swarthy-faced Booker moved in his chair and his hand flashed to his hip. Jeffery rounded on him. "So you're the hood who drilled the Divine dame?" he snapped. "Give me a moment to turn my back!"

Booker, frozen into an attitude of malignant menace, said slowly, "For two pins I'd spray your bloody guts all over the wall!"

Then Jean Inglis was on her feet, disgust wrinkling her face and her mouth tight with anger. She cried to Stewart-Riggs, "Must we have this kind of thing? Can't we wait like civilised people?"

The man at the table regarded her for a second. "We're not waiting," he said. "I informed the others before you arrived. I have been ordered to deputise."

The actress flashed the scowling Booker a look of extreme distaste. "Then for heaven's sake get on with it. And ask that creature to behave himself!"

Stewart-Riggs passed a hand over his snow-white hair and in the light from the overhead bulb, the asymmetry of his face seemed even more marked. He said thinly, "You don't seem to be over popular, Mr. Blackburn. Therefore the proposition I am about to put to you may not meet with unanimous approval. However, the gentleman who has elected himself as our leader appears to have a justifiable aversion to further violence." He paused and glanced at the silent assembly.

"I mention this merely to make it clear that I am acting only in the capacity of a servant under orders."

Stewart-Riggs was speaking again. "You have in your possession, Blackburn, a small plastic capsule which was at some time or other removed from the Egyptian casket now in our hands." On the felt table-top he had placed a silver cigarette case and now he turned this slowly in his fingers. "I am therefore authorised to offer you one thousand pounds for the return of this capsule."

Jeffery grinned. He said quickly, "Free of tax?"

Very gravely the other man replied, "Completely."

Jeffery shook his head and his manner became genially confiding. "Can't do it. I've got a special arrangement with the Department of Inland Revenue. I dodge no taxes and they poison no reservoirs."

Stewart-Riggs picked up his cigarette case, turned it over in his long fingers and put it down again. He said patiently, "Nobody intends to poison reservoirs, Blackburn. I admit that the suggestion of such an experiment was put forward. Indeed, at one time we even went so far as to elicit certain advice in that direction."

In the momentary pause, the pale eyes rested on the stocky engineer. "But we were assured that the obstacles in the path of such a scheme were too great. At the moment, all we ask is that the capsule be given over to certain agents who will return it to a laboratory in a certain University in Cairo. Our friends from Al-Hazar will act as the couriers in this transaction."

Blackburn said grimly, "Just as simple as all that, eh? The capsule goes back for a second attempt on the water supply of the British troops, while this sympathetic set-up does some more back-stabbing on the lines of the Estrella sabotage venture here in England!"

This time there was no reaction, only a hushed, almost shocked silence in the circular room.

"May I say a word?"

It was the Reverend Cyril Birdseye. He was on his feet and his face seemed to have taken on something of the greyness of hair and clerical collar. Those curious red flecks burnt in the dark eyes as he addressed the immaculate figure behind the table.

"This is not a question of whether or not Blackburn accepts the money. The wealthy forces which back our organisation could afford to pay twenty times the amount for the return of the capsule..." (...and here the two Egyptians put smooth oiled heads together and exchanged a rapid conversation of liquid syllables, nodding and making little gestures with slim supple fingers...)

"...The issue at stake is, I believe, that this man is a positive and acknowledged danger to certain plans which have been maturing over many months. Therefore, I say that there is one course alone which is open to us."

Jean Inglis cried out, "I won't stand for any more killing!" She rose and gripped the back of a chair. Emotion brought her tone almost to the point of shrillness. "Five deaths are more than enough— at least for my conscience! When I came into this affair, nobody warned me that it would get so completely out of hand!"

It would, Jeffery reflected wryly, have astonished Miss Inglis' legion of fans to have seen their idol now, standing rigid, her face drawn and showing every line, every wrinkle of her true age. In the harsh light, the crepiness of her throat beneath the quivering chin belonged to a woman of fifty. Now there was the rising note of hysteria in her voice as she cried, "No more bloodshed! It's got so that I can't sleep at night! I won't have any more killing!"

Archdale Stewart-Riggs had sat very still during this interchange. Only his hands moved, one about the other, fingers playing with the ruby in its platinum setting. Slowly, he moved his chair and rose as Paul Merrill spoke.

"And since when did you give the orders?" Of all the people in that tension-filled room, only he seemed to have preserved a sort of detached composure. His pink and white schoolboy complexion was unchanged as he turned to face the actress. "Like the rest of us, you're being paid a small fortune to do just what you're told."

Now Jean Inglis choked and her eyes seemed to recede so far back into her head that the sockets cast deep shadows on them.

"Dirty Wafdist money! It buys and sells pimps all over the world! That's all we are— pimps in the pay of a wealthy political machine! Lackeys to greasy Egyptian politicians trading on our insecurity— bribing us to do the gutter sabotage they haven't the courage to—"

On that word, Stewart-Riggs slapped her and the sound was like a pistol-shot through the room. Jean Inglis, glamorous goddess of millions, made a sobbing little sound like "Ah-h-h-h..." and collapsed back into her chair, one hand to her cheek, and old, shrunken, terrified woman. The ruby ring had scratched her cheek and now a thread of blood oozed to the surface. The actress' hand came down and she stared at her smeared fingers with an expression of vacant, almost idiot bewilderment.

Herbert Booker chuckled softly.

Archdale Stewart-Riggs took out a fine lawn handkerchief and wiped his hands.

"I'm afraid we can waste no more time in bargaining. You've heard our proposition, Blackburn. Are you prepared to accept the money?"

Jeffery took a step toward the table. "No," he said clearly. "And 'if there wasn't a lady present, I'd tell you just where you could put it!"

The white-haired man gave a little sigh and raised one hand. Blackburn was completely unprepared as Zakris cleared the distance from the door in almost a single bound. He jerked back Jeffery's head and pinioned his arms as Booker stepped forward. He leered as he came and made little washing movements of his hands.

"Want me to get it?" he asked.

Stewart-Riggs nodded.

Zakris tore Jeffery's coat from his shoulders and Booker pounced on it like a ferret on a rabbit. A minute later he discarded it and turned on the man himself. He ran spider-like fingers over the rest of Jeffery's clothing then as Zakris ripped the shirt from his back, the pinioned man snapped:

"To save that dame's sense of modesty, I'll tell you're wasting your time! You don't figure I'd be punk enough to carry the capsule on me!"

Stewart-Riggs said very softly, "Where have you hidden it?"

"Find out!"

For the first time during the interview the pale-eyed man smiled. "We mean to," he said. "Take him out."

Blackburn's last impression as the door closed behind him was the paper-white triangle of Jean Inglis's face, with its sick expression and eyes that had gone stony with terror.

It was a tiny compartment in which the three men— captors and prisoner— now stood. A thick centre beam supported the ceiling of a cubby-hole less than eight feet square. The former residents of the mill had made some attempt to transform this corner into a miniature kitchen— a narrow cupboard supported a steel sink and at the side of this was a small electric griller, dusty from months of neglect. It stood directly beneath a power point let into the wooden wall.

As Booker retrieved a coil of rope from the cupboard, Zakris sent Jeffery staggering against the beam with a thrust of his arm and before the young man could recover his balance, he was neatly trussed into place.

Then Zakris faced him and placing rough hands on his shoulders, dragged the torn shirt away leaving his torso bare. For a brief space the Turk looked at the bruises showing dark in the yellow light of the overhead bulb. Then he stepped back with a little grunt of satisfaction.

"Just as if 'e ain't goin' to be warm enough in a minute!" he chuckled.

Blackburn took one look at that dark, leering face and cried desperately, "You'll get nothing this way, Booker!"

The other said softly, "We've 'ad tough 'uns say that before, mister. You'd be surprised 'ow quick they change their tune. Where's the capsule?" he snarled.

"I don't know."

Booker hit him.

"That's just a taste."

...AND THEN he was swimming upward again and he opened his eyes and there was the face. He cried out again and crouched back and it came to him that there was no post at his back and as he fell into the darkness again it seemed that the face he had glimpsed was not sneering and swarthy and vulpine, but rather like the face of his own wife...

...and then he opened his eyes and he was staring at the sunlit ceiling of his own bedroom and Elizabeth and Dr. Francis Newcombe were gazing down at him. He closed his eyes again but when he opened them they were still there and Elizabeth was saying tremulously:

"It's all right, darling. You're quite safe. We've got you home, Jeffery. You're all right."

Chief Inspector William Read said, "I think we can say that it's practically finished, son. I know there's a few loose threads, but now that they're behind bars, one of those skunks will talk— sure as shooting!"

It was late on the following afternoon and the official sat facing Elizabeth and Jeffery in the Blackburn's apartment at Knightsbridge.

After his recognition of the friendly faces about his bedside on the previous evening, Blackburn had dropped into a sound sleep which had lasted for more than twelve hours. He had woken only long enough to swallow lunch and had fallen asleep almost immediately. Dr. Newcombe approved heartily of this; the patient, he explained, was suffering more from shock than from actual physical injury, particularly as his lapse into unconsciousness and the arrival of the police had prevented any further "persuasion" being practised on him at the mill. Thus it was well into the afternoon before Jeffery awoke and learnt from the newspapers of the arrest of the sabotage group. Then Elizabeth was on hand to fill in the details.

"Susan Ann and Dr. Newcombe had taken the number of the Rolls. The mill seemed the most obvious place that they'd take you, Jeff. The Chief put through a call to the Sevenoaks police and asked them to scout around."

She went on to describe how they had found him unconscious in the tiny corner at the rear of the meeting room. And here Mrs. Blackburn became so vehemently incoherent that Jeffery hastily kissed her and gave her his solemn assurance that he felt none the worse for his experience. But Elizabeth could

not get that scene from her mind and she was still voicing her candid opinion of Mr. Herbert Booker when a ring at the door announced the arrival of Chief Inspector Read.

Now the official was speaking again, "If it's any satisfaction to you, son, Zakris and Booker are discovering right now that it doesn't pay to torture people in this country. At this moment I'd say that they were just about two of the sorriest men in the length and breadth of England."

Jeffery made a gesture of impatience. "I just want to forget that," he grunted. "I've got other things on my mind."

"The whereabouts of the capsule?"

Blackburn nodded. "That's one of them." He raised his eyes to his companion's face, "Want to hear the other three?"

Read said, "If you're thinking of the leader of that group, there's a dragnet out for this Russian woman."

Jeffery frowned. "If those jerks in the mill were on the level, the top brass wears trousers."

Jeffery turned back into the living room. "Last night," he said slowly, "I had a hunch that Uncle Otis might be holding the reins."

Read looked surprised. "Why?"

"How else could they work that snatch in Park Lane?"

"A lucky coincidence," the other assured him. "We got that much from the actress woman this morning. After you grabbed Lessing, the top man arranged this gathering in the mill to decide on the next step. When Jean Inglis saw you in Park Lane, she realised it was an excellent opportunity to make you the guest of honour."

His mind still on that silent ride, he did not answer and his wife went on, "The fact that those people were prepared to use torture to find the capsule surely proves that Peterson was telling the truth about the casket being empty." She blew another ring. "Somehow I can't see Otis in the role of top man."

Read said almost complacently, "It's only a matter of time before one of those beauties spills the entire bag of beans."

Jeffery said quietly, "There's Grimstowe."

Automatically, Mrs. Blackburn's glance went to the door of the spare bedroom and Read knew that her imagination was re-creating the scene. Jeffery went on, "You told me that when you demanded the name of the person responsible for Lessing's seizure, he replied that it was Grimstowe. But we know that it was Merrill. So what the heck was he talking about?"

"Unless," suggested Elizabeth, "his mind was wandering..."

Her husband sounded unconvinced. "Didn't you say aconite made for clarity of mind?" He watched them nod and then continued, "Here's another point. Lessing seemed mighty interested in this bird Grimstowe. Recall how he questioned us about him after the raid on that Kent hideout?" He addressed the Chief Inspector directly. "It might be worthwhile checking up on that guy. Lessing told us he did a stretch at Levensworth."

Read said gruffly, "I'm expecting Grimstowe's dossier some time today."

Elizabeth Blackburn said thoughtfully, "Paul Merrill..."

"Bit of a surprise, eh, Lisbeth?"

She looked up at the square face of her friend. "Yes...and yet..." she tapped her cigarette on the ash-tray and shrugged a little.

"I know it's so very easy to be wise after the event. But now so many small things keep coming back." They were watching her and after a short pause she went on.

"His parents had that lovely old home in the Cotswolds. Paul was terribly proud of Graystones. It had been in his family for generations and when he invited you there, it was a very great privilege. Once he confessed to me that he considered strangers almost a desecration in the place— that was how he felt about it. But then came the war and the crippling taxation. The family couldn't afford to keep the house going. Paul joined the Medical Corps and once he came back on unexpected leave— to find his family living in four rooms and making ends meet by showing the American boys over the house at two shillings a head..." She was watching the burning tip of her cigarette.

"That was the first shock. Paul came back from the war and started practising, determined to put every penny he earned into the restoration of Graystones. Then, within twelve months of each other, his parents died." Elizabeth's voice faltered. "Paul had to sell the house to the National Trust to pay the death duties. One night shortly after that, I went to visit him in his flat in Sloane Square. He'd had a little too much to drink— a rare thing with Paul. But I've never heard such an outburst of concentrated bitterness! First he attacked the Government, saying that he meant to start a movement to undermine their authority. He declared that they had ruined England with their socialistic ideas and had delivered the country into the hands of wealthy spivs and black-marketeers— and that money was the only thing that mattered. Finally he said that he was only waiting a chance to climb on the band-wagon himself." Again Elizabeth made that little shrugging movement of her shoulders.

"Paul never mentioned that scene and I'd almost forgotten about it. But now..." she paused and spread her hands.

Jeffery broke the small silence that followed. "Money was the magnet to attract Jean Inglis. He career was on the point of folding— for too long she'd been playing on borrowed time. And I'd say that they dangled a stack of Wafdist money before Birdseye and Bradley, too." His tone hardened. "Thanks to his filthy dealings, Stewart-Riggs was a rich man in his own right. But he was buying a fresh thrill— a new sensation."

Read said grimly, "There's a certain prison governor who'll supply him with one pretty soon now!"

Jeffery flung himself down on the couch and ran his fingers through his curly hair. "Before you hang that rat," he said, "I want the answers to my four questions. Who's the real leader of this outfit? I figure it isn't this Russian woman but I want to know what's happened to her. Why did Lessing tell you that Grimstowe had poisoned him. And what the merry hell has happened to the capsule!"

The Chief Inspector raised his hands, palms outward, "Patience, son," he said. "It will all come out in the next few days."

"I'm not prepared to wait that long." Jeffery shifted restlessly on the cushions. "You figure that this affair's wrapped up. My money says different. There may be some stiff jolts waiting for us."

Read snapped, "They can't do very much behind bars!"

"One guy's still free! The most important guy of the lot. Mister Big himself!"

The Chief Inspector opened his mouth but the burr of the telephone cut across his unspoken words. Elizabeth crossed to the instrument and then handed the receiver to her husband. "Peterson," she said briefly.

She crushed out her cigarette, watching Jeffery's face and listening to the curt, one-sided conversation. As he hung up, she asked, "He wants to see you?"

Her husband nodded. "Says he has some important news for me."

Read said, "I heard you suggest that I go instead."

"Uncle Otis vetoed the idea!"

That old worried look was back in Elizabeth's face. "Darling, be careful! I don't like the sound of this."

Blackburn reached for his hat. "I'm playing a hunch that Peterson's on the level," he said. Then he winked. "Maybe that's my trouble. Just a simple soul with too much faith in human nature!"

Blackburn parked the Rover near the hotel and a few minutes later, he was facing Otis Peterson across the desk in his fourth floor apartment. "What's the pay-off?" he demanded.

The collector revealed his dentures in a smile. "My niece wants to see you," he explained.

"Susan Ann?"

She entered and stood just inside the door, hands clasped behind her back. Now she came forward and hesitated, looking up at him. "Jeffery," she said, "you're going to hate me like hell."

Peterson's twisted hands came up. "Susan Ann!" he cried in reproach.

"Gee, uncle— we're old friends." The swift smile died from her young face. "Though I guess we won't be much longer." She brought her hands around and laid a twist of tissue paper on the desk. "There you are, Jeffery."

He looked from her candid eyes to the desk and back again.

"What is it?"

"You open it up."

He reached forward. There was something small and hard inside the paper. Jeffery drew a soft sharp breath, flashed another glance at the girl and then his fingers were smoothing the folds of the tissue. He stared down at what lay revealed there.

He said harshly, "Where did this come from?"

She stood kneading her fingers, head lowered so that he could see only the smooth yellow hair shining gold where the afternoon sun caught it. Her voice was little more than a whisper. "It was on the ship, Jeffery. I was passing Uncle's suite and on a table I saw the casket. I thought the suite was empty. So I went in and picked up the casket— I'd heard so much about it and never had a chance to handle it. And when I picked it up the lid came open and...and that piece of paper fell out. Then the lid closed and no matter what I did, I couldn't get the old beat-up thing open. Then I heard Uncle coming out of the...the bedroom. So I just picked up that screw of paper and lit out for my life."

Jeffery expelled a long breath. "For God's sake..."

"I knew Uncle would crab my head off if I told him I'd touched the casket. So I guessed the best thing was to wait and try to put the contents back again. But I didn't get a chance. Then I thought...well...maybe I'd better keep it by me on account of it might be valuable or important. Because I'd unwrapped the paper and found that crazy-looking pill thing inside..."

"Then this morning at breakfast, uncle and I read all about those jerks who kidnapped you being arrested. I asked uncle why you'd come here yesterday and he told me you were asking about something hidden in the casket. I asked sorta casually was it important? And when Uncle told me, I very nearly honestly died, Jeffery!"

Now he grinned at her. "Chicken, you're terrific!"

The painted lips came open. "And you're not mad at me?"

"I wouldn't have the nerve to be."

Now Susan Ann literally danced around the desk to throw her arms about her uncle's neck. "Isn't he a dazzle-dynamo?" she cried.

She pirouetted back to Jeffery, twirled again and halted to face him. "So we cry quits?"

"Almost," he told her. "A lunch at Claridge's could just about shave it level."

She clasped her hands. "Jeffery! When?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Sure— sure!" Then her face fell. "No, I can't! I've promised Frank Newcombe."

"Give him the gate!"

"Oh, but I couldn't! Why— next to you—" she stopped and blushed.

"Okay, chicken. You get a rain-check."

"That's a promise, remember!" Then she flashed a smile and almost capered from the room.

"Sorry about this, Blackburn. If there is anything I can do to help....?"

"There is!" Jeffery assured him. "Get on the phone and ring my wife at home." He picked up his hat. "Tell her I'm on my way back— with a sizable slab of the bacon!"

WHISTLING SOFTLY, Jeffery climbed into the Rover, started the motor and edged the car out into Park Lane. He was almost to Hyde Park corner when he saw her.

She was walking slowly in the opposite direction, making her way toward Oxford Street. Only by her superb carriage did he recognise her— that easy, graceful swing of her body that not even the grotesque wardrobe could disguise. She wore a rusty black coat and skirt above wrinkled stockings and down-at-heel shoes. A felt hat with crushed artificial flowers was pulled down over the turban of black hair and a pair of colored sun-glasses obscured the top half of her face. Through these she peered right and left as she made her way along the pavement.

Jeffery lifted his foot from the accelerator.

There were two courses open to him.. The first was to call a policeman and have the woman detained, then return home with the valuable property he carried in his pocket The other was to follow her in the hope that she might lead him to the solution of the last three problems in this extraordinary case. At that moment he glanced at the rear view mirror to see the shabby figure hail a taxi. Blackburn hesitated no longer. He swung the wheel and a few minutes later the Rover was trailing the taxi as it sailed around Marble Arch and into Bayswater Road.

Fingers caressing the wheel, eyes on the vehicle ahead, Blackburn allowed his thoughts to drift back to the interview at the hotel. One thing seemed certain. Unless Peterson was playing a game deep beyond all comprehension, his behaviour over the business of the capsule surely meant a complete exoneration from suspicion— a suspicion, Jeffery reflected wryly, that had been fairly groundless even in the beginning and arising only from a desperate perplexity. Could the Chief Inspector be right after all— was the woman in the taxi ahead the mainspring of this now decimated organisation? And then he was aware that they had reached the Shepherd's Bush turn-off and the vehicle was swinging into Uxbridge High Street.

A few miles further along, the taxi veered off the main road and began to slip through scattered suburbs which in turn gave way to the open country near Denham.

The taxi veered around another curve and when Blackburn rounded it in turn, he found the vehicle drawn up before a high, glass-topped stone wall, broken only by a pair of wrought iron gates sadly in need of paint. Jeffery sped past the waiting car covering the distance to the next bend. He pulled the Rover into a grassy bank and, alighting, walked back to reconnoitre.

The taxi was disappearing in a cloud of dust and then the road was empty. Jeffery surveyed the wall. It was so high that only the tops of trees appeared above the cruel spikes of broken glass. He made his way along the weed-grown pavement until he reached the gates, to find them closed and secured into place with a chain and padlock. Hugging the wall, he peered around the edge and through the rusty grille-work.

Now the entire western sky was cloaked in semi-darkness, broken here and there with shining rents pierced through with long shafts of sunlight. One such stream of radiance bathed the house— an old Georgian mansion— glittering on decorated fanlight and outlining sculptured keystone. He was deliberating on a suitable point of entry when a sudden flash beyond the panes caused him to crouch back into the shelter of the wall.

Behind the windows, someone was scrutinizing road and grounds with a pair of field-glasses.

Blackburn retraced his steps to the car. Commonsense told him that it would be suicide to attempt an entry into the place during daylight. There seemed no other course but to wait until the approach to dusk covered his movements. He realised that he was taking a certain risk in leaving the residence unwatched, but it seemed unlikely that the woman would venture forth a second time during the few hours before evening.

Ten minutes later, he was driving down the rose-scented main street of Denham village. He pulled up under the sign of the Black Swan and smoked

cigarettes until the bar opened. Inside he surveyed the array of bottles behind the bar, decided to risk a pint of beer and ordered cheese and watercress sandwiches. The next two hours he spent playing darts with the locals and trying to glean information regarding the house among the trees.

At nine o'clock Blackburn looked at his watch, ordered a final round, left his own untouched on the bar counter and climbed into the waiting Rover.

He drove slowly but even so the purr of the engine seemed dangerously loud to his ears. About half a mile from the house, he parked the car. As he began walking the intervening distance a few drops of rain, falling from the overcast sky, stirred the dust at his feet. It was almost dark by the time he reached the wall.

Blackburn paused.

The top of the barrier was some three feet above his head. He eyed the serrated edge, then began transferring articles from coat to trousers pockets. First the twist of tissue paper, then cigarettes and matches. Next he removed coat, vest and tie, using the latter to bind the garments to form an improvised pad. After three attempts, he succeeded in placing this rough cushion on the wall, wedging it across the glass spikes.

He loosened his shirt, tensed and made a high leap, wriggling his body to the top of the wall and across the protecting pad to the other side. Soundlessly he dropped into the long grass and slipped into the shadow of the trees.

At the edge of the coppice, he stopped to survey the house. About it was a silence like a hand placed over the lips.

Jeffery frowned, staring at the windows that were like dark blinds drawn down against the weathered stone-work. Was he too late— had she left the house during his absence? Then abruptly, one set of panes came to life— a flood of quivering amber poured out into the garden and sent him dodging back into the shadows. Then a curtain rattled dimly and the radiance died as suddenly as it had appeared.

For almost a minute, Blackburn waited.

But there was no further sign of life and he made his way forward again. He felt lawn under his feet and then broken paving; and then he was crouched against the wall, peering through the panes, through a break in the curtain to the lighted room beyond.

Although the fold of the hanging cut off all but a segment of the apartment, it seemed spacious and somehow gone-to-seed. In the harsh light the furnishings looked worn and shabby. He could make out a couch upholstered in some velvet material now rubbed and darkened and several chairs with their cushions sagging with years of wear. A carpet covered the floor but the portion he could see bore little of the original pattern.

But there was no sign of the woman.

Cautiously, Blackburn put fingers on the tarnished catch of the windows. It moved under his hand. Next moment, he was in the room and sliding his body behind the tall curtains. Closer at hand the sense of genteel dilapidation was even more pronounced and the air was heavy with the dank mustiness of a room long unused.

Then, from some distance away, he heard the sound of footsteps on a bare floor. They came closer and then the room of the room opened and she stood framed in the entrance, head back, nostrils dilating slightly almost as though she could scent his presence. Then she shook her head with a little puzzled, dissatisfied motion and turned to leave.

Blackburn stepped from behind the curtain.

"Don't go, Marina!"

He watched her stiffen and her head jerk back on the column of her neck. She turned very slowly.

"Jeffery Blackburn," she said, softly.

He nodded. "Marina Mayakovsky, I believe?"

There were signs of strain in her face, tiny lines about the darkness of her eyes and the redness of her lips. She said in that voice that was like velvet stroking bare flesh. "How did you know?"

He was watching her, arms folded. "Surprising what turns up in U.S. Army Intelligence reports."

She made no answer to this. Her slim hands came up, cupping her breasts and then moving slowly down and across the thighs. She was wearing a white sheath-like garment, fitting close to her body from the high page-boy collar to where it fell within six inches of the carpet.

"Have you come to arrest me, Jeffery?"

"I'm out of uniform," he told her and crossed to the couch, sitting on the broad arm. Then he put his head on one side, almost as though listening. "Who else is here?"

"Who else?" She seemed surprised at the question. "Nobody. I'm quite alone."

"I figured you might have set up house with Mister Big."

She frowned "Mister Big?"

"The guy responsible for all this schemozzle. The top man."

Now her face cleared and she smiled. "Oh, no, Jeffery. He wouldn't be interested in me!"

"Then it is a man?"

She shrugged. "A man is generally responsible for most of the trouble in the world."

Now for the first time she seemed to notice his attire. "Where's your coat?"

He gave a jerk to his head. "Top of your wall."

She considered this for a few moments. Then: "How did you know I was here?"

"I trailed you from Park Lane." He lit a cigarette and leaned against the rubbed velvet back of the couch.

Again she made that gentle, caressing motion of hands across her breasts. Her tone was faintly provocative.

"You must have been very anxious to see me, Jeffery."

"Sure!"

Now she took a step forward. Some of the lines had vanished from her eyes and they were larger and softer and more luminous. "Once before I said you were full of surprises."

"Meaning?"

"On that occasion you seemed very indifferent toward me."

He blew a long feather of smoke, watching it gather and hang wraithlike in the damp mustiness of the room.

"There's a whale of a lot happened since then," he told her. "See the paper this morning? That bunch of slobs you hunted with are all on the inside looking out. Some of them are going to hang. Our side has collected a tidy pack of evidence— including this."

His free hand brought out the twist of paper, unwrapping it, showing the contents. Then he tucked it back into his packet. He was watching her as he said:

"We've swapped spots, too?"

She said with a trace of weariness, "Have we?"

He nodded.

"Recall how you told me I was one lone guy fighting a tough bunch who'd stop at nothing to get my scalp? And that I hadn't a coon's chance of coming out on top." He paused, seeing her mouth tighten and the luminosity die from her eyes. "Figure what I mean when I say we've changed spots?"

She came closer to him, so close that he could see the faint pearl lustre of her skin and smell the perfume of it. She tilted her chin back and her eyes were large and steady on his face.

"What will they do to me, Jeffery?"

"Plenty!" He blew another finger of smoke. "With your record, they might even hang a lei around your neck!"

He waited for her to speak. But she kept silent.

"Maybe," he said, "it might not work out that way." His voice hardened. "The beak might be influenced by your youth and your innocence. He mightn't figure how phoney you are, so maybe you'll get off with about twenty years in stir."

Her face gave a sudden twitch. "What is it you want, Jeffery?"

He rose, looked about for an ash tray, found none and flicked his cigarette butt into the old-fashioned fireplace. "I want information. The name of the big guy who used to give the orders."

She made a harsh ugly sound in her throat. "Why should I tell you?"

He said slowly, "At your age, twenty years out of circulation can be one hell of a stretch. This might be the way to clip it in half."

He had moved and was standing directly beneath the light. She was staring at him, not at his gaunt bruised face but beneath it, at the shirt open at his throat. She walked across until she was almost touching him.

"Those burns..."

"You miss all the fun! You should have been at the mill last night!"

Her fingers came up, resting light as a moth's wing on the red raw scars. He saw her swallow as though her throat was constricted. "Two days ago, I tried to warn you..."

"Okay! Right now I'm trying to warn you!" He seized her hands. "Do I get that name?"

Marina Mayakovsky said very gently.

"That depends on you, Jeffery." She paused. "It depends on what you're prepared to give me in return." He said harshly, "I've told you."

She gave an impatient twist to her mouth. "I'm not interested in your offer. I'll never go to prison." It was a statement so rooted in steady conviction that his eyes narrowed. The curve of her lips relaxed, softened in the ghost of a smile. "Don't imagine I'm afraid, because it's all been worthwhile for just one thing. Those days we had together. If we could have them over again— just for a little time— I'd be more than satisfied. Just once more and I'd do anything for you. I'd tell anything you wanted to know." She released her hands and slipped them up under his shirt to his bare shoulders, holding them, looking up into his face.

"That's my price, Jeffery."

His own hands were on her wrists, tightening there. Then his grip relaxed:

"Okay!"

She gave a sobbing little cry and her hands were linked behind his head, pulling it down as she kissed him full on the lips. Her fingers tangled in his hair as he tried to pull his face away.

"Who's the guy?" he said thickly.

Because his head was averted, her lips were on his cheek and his throat and he felt the sharp nip of her teeth. Because his head was averted, he saw the curtains at the window move slightly and there was a short soft pop like a cork ejected from a bottle. The woman's head jerked forward and then fell back and he was looking down at a face that all at once had gone loose and slack. He felt her fingers move from his head; with a soft caressing gentleness they slipped slowly down his face and across his chest as her body dropped away from him and sank to the floor.

It half-rolled and lay still.

Then there was only the acrid smell of cordite and the soft rustle of the curtain settling and the faintest suggestion of blue smoke and the rich colour of blood staining the worn carpet.

Blackburn was at the window, pressed hard against the papered wall, head back and eyes slanted toward the garden.

There was no further sound— no movement. Under the waning light, the overgrown lawn and the dark belt of trees seemed as remote and as deserted as a patch of Amazonian jungle. Yet in this very stillness and silence he read menace, knowing full well that the creature who had taken another life had become part of the watching shadows.

His eyes ranged the room, found the light-switch. Still hugging the wall, he flicked it up and the darkness crowded in, cloaking everything but the pale blur, on the carpet. He waited until his eye had become accustomed to the gloom and then moved toward the door. Then he was treading a linoleum covered passage. A light at the end shone upon two rosewood doors. Reaching them, he tried the nearest and felt it move under his hand.

He entered a room that was filled with a greenish undersea half-light from the long windows in one wall. He waited for almost a minute before unclasping the window. Then he slipped through and dived like a rabbit for the undergrowth beyond.

The tangled foliage shut out the twilight so that he had almost to grope his way through the dim-seen avenue of trunks. His exit from the second room had so confused his sense of locality that he was very hazy about the direction of the garden wall. All he could hope to do was to maintain a straight line from the house but this was far from easy. Scarcely had he entered the trees when he found himself ankle deep in slush from blundering into a shallow bog which appeared to stretch for some yards across his path.

He was skirting this obstacle when he heard a faint rustle behind him. He wheeled— just in time to hear that muffled cough and something whistled past his head. Desperately he stared around. He was cursing under his breath and conscious of the excellent target his white shirt made against the dark

background. He flung himself to the ground, hugging it and crawling to the shelter of a broad trunk. There he waited. After almost half a minute he began to raise his head. The cough and the whistle sounded again and something thudded into the wood by his ear.

Okay, wise guy, he thought, if you want to play it dirty...and he raised himself for the second time.

The muffled report followed automatically and Blackburn gave a sharp bitten off cry of pain.

"You goddamned swine," he sobbed and clasped his hands to his stomach and dropped heavily into the squelching mud.

He waited.

A minute passed.

There was a brittle cracking and a rustle. The gloom coalesced into a figure moving slowly, cautiously toward him. If he puts a slug in my guts before he gets too near, I'm finished, Jeffery thought, and felt the sweat forming on his chest. He let his whole body go limp and held his breath. Through half-closed eyes, he saw the figure halt and a shadow that was an arm came out, pointing down at him.

Like a spring released, Blackburn kicked at the legs.

The arm shot up wildly and the bullet sped into the foliage as the figure sought to regain balance. Those few seconds were all that Jeffery needed—just long enough for a quick mental measurement of the distance between his shoulder and the featureless smudge hanging against the blackness.

He punched.

Every ounce of his near fourteen stone was behind the fist and the blow generated an impact that lifted the figure completely off its feet, projected it more than a yard away where it crashed against the trunk of a tree, sagged and lay still. But Blackburn was not to be hoodwinked by his own trick. In a moment, he was on to the body, his fingers gripping the shoulders, jerking them upward. But the other lay limp as a rag doll in his grasp. He opened his fingers and the body slipped down, lying half-propped by the tree.

Blackburn reached for matches with hands that trembled. In his eagerness, he broke the heads from two. The third ignited and he held it close as he jerked up the lolling head.

"Now, you goddam son-of-a-bitch! Let's have a look at your pan!"

JEFFERY EASED the Rover into the kerb, climbed out and walked to the telephone box. He inserted the coins into the instrument and dialed a number, waiting, listening to the intermittent buzz at the other end.

Then it was broken and he said, "Baby?"

Five miles away, Elizabeth Blackburn cried out, "Jeffery! Jeffery— darling..."

"I've located Mister Big. I can name the jerk!"

"Jeffery— who?"

"Wilfred Pilgrim."

There was a shocked damp silence at the other end. So he said again, "That old solicitor guy— the one with a pan like a used handkerchief. Wilfred Pilgrim."

In his ear there was an incredulous little sound that presently became words.

"But, darling— Pilgrim's dead!"

He said slowly, "That was Grimstowe. Same age— same build. And he had too much on Stewart-Riggs to be let go on breathing. So they dressed him in Pilgrim's clothes and blew his head off. Clever stunt about the letter-bomb, particularly as they'd laid the trail by scattering a few around before-hand...." A sudden yawn choked his words.

A voice said quickly, anxiously. "Jeffery...!"

"Okay. I'm still here."

"So that was what Lessing tried to tell us."

"Sure!"

There was a muffled interchange at the other end and he said, "Is the Chief there?"

"Here— and pop-eyed!"

He grinned. "Tell the old buzzard to go to work. Pilgrim's sweating it out in a cell at the Denham police station. The punk'll need some attention to his jaw. I figure it's broken."

Again the muttered interchange and he heard a distant sound like a door slamming. Then Elizabeth's voice came over the wire again.

"He's gone like a jack rabbit." A pause. "Jeffery, does this mean it's all over?"

"That's just what it means, baby."

"Where are you?"

"Ealing."

"Jeffery, I'm on my own here. Come back soon."

"I'm on my way, baby— right now!" And he hung up and pushed the door wider.

End