

The LSD DOSSIER

by

Roger Harris

CHAPTER ONE

DESPITE the heat, the man wasn't sweating, but he was being irritated by the coffee flies. Thousands of the tiny insects flitted around his head, their target the moisture on the edge of his lips and at the corners of his eyes.

The man's eyes protruded above an aquiline nose. His flat, mongol cheekbones and low, sloping forehead were the features of a man whose ancestry went back to the time when the Mayan people were the most civilized in the whole American continent. This people had invented one of the most complex yet most accurate calendars ever known. Even before the Roman Empire had begun they had determined the revolutions of Mars and Venus, predicted the eclipses and the equinox – had done these things and many more before the Spaniards came in 1524. But now Maya was but a legend, living on only through its magnificent ruins in the vast jungles – and the Indian, and Indians like him, who abounded in Central America.

The Indian lay in the scrub just off the dusty road that led to Yutaxa's capital – Itlo.

As the shadow of a hawk passed over him, the man looked up. His expressionless eyes took in the bared underbelly then gazed at the road again. Unconsciously he recognized the Azuouan rain-bird and knew that now the hawk was migrating the rains would soon follow. But his attention remained on the road and the rifle in his hands.

Compared with Indian weapons, the gun was modern. It had first seen the light of day in the Lee-Enfield factory in 1913. It had been an experimental model, having a bore of .276 inches. Logistic problems during the Great War had caused it and hundreds like it to be converted to the standard .303. This was the No. 3 model with the front locking-lug giving greater accuracy. Because of this, the rifle was fitted with telescopic sights and had been issued to a sniper in the 20th Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers. During the first Battle of the Marne it had killed fourteen Germans before a Minnenwerfer exploded in the sniper's bell-tower. The rifle lay clutched in his hand until it was retrieved during a counter-attack by a corporal in the same regiment.

The corporal had later carried the rifle ashore at Gallipoli, where he was shot through the lung as he breasted a shale cliff. Weeks later the rifle was found by a Turk who saw its potential value. After the war he sold it for the equivalent of £15-10-0 to a Levantine who, in turn, sold it to an Arab slave trader for £47.

Later the rifle turned up in the hands of a Rhodesian hunter, who made a good living guiding tourist safaris. He sold it to an American who took a fancy to it. The American only kept it a year – on his next holiday, in Lima, it was stolen from his baggage.

Now in 1966, this still highly-accurate weapon was being gripped in the lean, brown hands of a Mayan Indian lying

beside a road in the Central American Republic of Yutaxa. On the butt, keeping company with nicks recording the deaths of Germans, Britons, Arabs, Mayans, as well as lions, wildebeest, panthers and a host of other wild animals, was a painting of an owl.

The owl was Ah Puch, the Mayan God of Death.

Gliding though the cloudless, cobalt sky, the hawk looked down. His wing-beat was slow and steady. He was well ahead of the main flight of migrants and was in no hurry.

Beneath him were the banana plantations covering the lowlands and the foothills of the Sierras. He moved his steel-blue feathered head and glimpsed blue ocean far to his right. Dipping one wing, he started on a long, shallow dive. By the edge of the sea were marshes, islets, swamps and winding, sluggish streams where he would find wide-mouthed bull-bat birds and kingfishers, parrots and macaws. He was hungry.

Then he halted his long glide down by a swift down-thrust of his left wing. He rocketed upwards again as he caught a glimpse of sun shining on metal by the side of the long, dusty road below. By nature a curious bird, he turned. The movement brought his head facing due west, where the plantations rose into the mountains and joined the thick forests of the higher slopes. Had he continued in that direction the hawk would have seen, far, far, along the rutted road running through the mahogany forest, through the chicle plantations and the mountains beyond, a small wooden gate, more symbolic than useful, and two wooden huts facing each other.

Over the furthest hut flew the vertically striped flag of Guatemala – two outer stripes denoting Liberty and the centre one Faith. In the centre of the white stripe was a

coat of arms showing two rifles and two swords entwined by a laurel wreath tied at the bottom with blue and silver ribbon. Above the arms was a quetzal, the sacred bird of the Mayas that dies in captivity, perched on an open scroll bearing the legend, *Liberty, September 15, 1821*.

That was the date Guatemala gained her independence from Spain.

Over the wooden hut nearest the hawk was another flag, almost identical to the first, but instead of the coat of arms it said, simply, *Libertidad, Julio, 1860*.

The date Yutaxa gained her independence from Guatemala.

Beyond the frontier rolled ten thousand square miles of the Guatemalan department of Peten, growing 800 million feet of mahogany for the country. Inside the Yutaxan frontier mahogany also grew, but in no great quantity, for the entire country was smaller than the Guatemalan department of Peten.

The hawk didn't fly that far. He saw only the intriguing glitter in the brush beside the road. He swooped lower.

Then he opened his hooked, yellow beak and screamed. With a flicker of strong, scimitar wings he hurtled towards the steamy forest leading to the sea. He was a wild bird and feared man.

Especially a man with a gun.

The General was tired. Once a month he visited the outposts of his small army. Today had been the turn of the Guatemala frontier guard. There was still paper work to be done, and as the General sat in the black leather seat of the Mercedes convertible he read through the typewritten notes in his briefcase. He had to finish them before he arrived at Itlo. He was seeing the President

that night. More important, he was to see Pia, his current mistress, afterwards.

The escorting jeep kept well behind the Mercedes to avoid its dust cloud.

The heavy car lurched over a deep rut. In the jeep the four armed men clung to its sides as, a moment later, it lurched, too.

"Steady, Jose. I'm trying to read."

The driver grinned, showing his tobacco-stained teeth.

"Pardon, General. Here the road is very bad and I must go slowly. But you will finish your work in time to see Pia tonight."

The General smiled in reply, happy in the knowledge that he was popular with his men. In a small army, and a poorly equipped army, it was even more important to have the men solidly behind him.

Discreetly-leaked news of his love affairs had helped maintain his popularity with the romantic, sex-starved illiterates forming the rank and file.

The six cylinders purred as petrol was injected into them and the white 230 SL idled along for another mile and a half before it reached the dip in the road where the old ford had been. The water was gone, but the criss-crossed tracks of many cars were still visible.

The Mercedes dipped into the hollow.

The jeep followed.

The Indian rested his cheek against the rifle's stock and looked through the telescope. He saw the top of the rise, saw dust swirl as the car ground its way out of the bottom, saw the small blue lizard dart swiftly across the road in alarm as the car reached the top. Then the Indian thumbed forward the serrated safety catch by the cocked

bolt. A careful man, he wouldn't risk warning his target with an accidental shot. The car breasted the rise and dipped on to the road again, and for an instant the jeep was lost to his sight.

The black upholstery contrasted beautifully with the white body. Through the telescope the Indian saw the driver and the General sitting beside him. Adjusting his aim slightly, he centred the fine cross-hairs on the second medal in the row of five on the General's chest.

He held his breath, then squeezed gently, releasing the bolt firing a Mk. 7 cartridge and 174 grains of lead spinning at 2930 revolutions per second towards the General's heart.

The General saw nothing. He felt only the tremendous buffet in the small of the back as men do when shot with a high-velocity bullet from the front.

The driver saw only the starring window before a second crumb of lead whipped across his throat. He flung up his hands as the car swerved and crashed on its side among the hard, thorny trees.

As the jeep reached the top of the rise, a third bullet found the petrol tank of the Mercedes, the car bursting into orange flames.

The four in the jeep stared in bewilderment at the blazing wreck. They stared along the road to Itlo. There was nothing to be seen but dust and craters. On either side was grey, thorny scrub. Nothing moved. Nothing made any sound.

The blazing wreck crackled as the men gazed at each other in stupefied fear.

The air was full of the smell of burning flesh.

CHAPTER TWO

THE low, whitewashed house lay a short distance from Avila in the Spanish province of Castile. It was morning and it was still cool on the wide verandah where an old man sat in a wickerwork chair, his well-cut suit loose on his old body, his mind concentrated on himself as it almost habitually was. He liked the morning best. It gave him hope. He didn't like the middle of the day at all. It was too hot and dry and the view was barren compared with his memories of Yutaxa.

The evenings disturbed him. In the evenings he almost always sat with a bottle of wine, staring into the night, listening to the cicadas chirping and dreaming that he heard them chirp in Yutaxa.

He loved Yutaxa – but Yutaxa no longer loved him.

He sighed. The Spaniards had given him sanctuary, but he felt he was approaching death and he longed to go home.

The two men seated opposite him were waiting in apparently respectful silence. Hopefully, but with some disbelief – for he still retained some of his old shrewdness – he spoke to them.

“You are sure Gutierrez bears me no malice?”

“Not now, señor,” said the larger man, making a soft gesture with his right hand.

“And Señor Zubillaga will . . . keep his bargain?”

“Señor Zubillaga will pay you the money you ask.” The smaller man spoke, barely concealing his contempt for the old man.

The larger of the pair, Lomas, leant forward hastily. Blasco, his companion, was becoming too impatient. Toriello had to be coaxed, comforted, assured of friendship and safety.

“Señor Toriello,” he said, smiling, “even now Señor Zubillaga remembers the help you gave him before that traitor Gutierrez deposed the late President, yourself and the other members of the government. He is still grateful. Still. There was no need for your talk of telling the Americans or the British of his agricultural venture. You had only to ask him for help.”

Toriello smiled sardonically. “Instead, I blackmailed him. Zubillaga must be feeling the pinch since we were deposed. He must have difficulty in retaining the secrecy of his venture. I am not so sure he would have helped had I not made my threat.”

The old fool feels he is in a position of power again, reflected Lomas as he smiled and shrugged. That was fine. He could foster the illusion.

“What does it matter? Now you can return to Yutaxa – a free, rich man with no responsibilities. That is, of course, unless you wish for responsibility.”

“What do you mean?” asked Toriello.

“Well . . .” Lomas shrugged. “It is five years since you

were so shamefully deposed. From the time of the army’s uprising until today you have been forced to live in exile and your people have longed for your return.”

“My people? My return?”

“Señor Zubillaga has been your friend all this time. Lately he has been reminding the people that you – the only survivor of the murdered government – are still alive. Each day Gutierrez forces men from their lawful, gainful pursuits and each day their resentment grows. It only needs someone of the old school, like yourself, to return to set the spark to the kindling that Gutierrez himself has laid.”

“A counter-revolution,” breathed Toriello. Then he chuckled. “Their memories are short. We bled them dry. Gutierrez is a selfless man.”

“The peons have a few extra comforts, but they get used to them – and they want more. Gutierrez cannot supply them swiftly enough. Meanwhile, the rest of the population have less and hate Gutierrez for that. He satisfies no-one – like all these socialists. The Americans are suspicious of him. They are slow to lend him the money he needs. To them he is a potential Castro, eh?”

“They do not trust a selfless man, those Americans.” Toriello smiled.

“But they would trust you.” Blasco grinned, unable to resist the dig.

Toriello accepted it in good humour. He had no illusions about himself. He was resigned to playing the role that his greed and his circumstances had made for him.

“President Toriello,” he said. “A puppet president, no doubt. Zubillaga knows I am old and that I have little stamina. He would expect a great deal of co-operation.”

“He would expect some display of gratitude.” Blasco stood up, feeling less contempt for the old man now that Toriello had admitted his corruptibility.

Blasco had the figure of a bullfighter, a dancer. He was proud of it. Even standing and relaxed, he unconsciously adopted a pose. His sharp, little face was all Spanish, although he had at least half Indian blood.

“Then you will return with us to Yutaxa,” said Lomas, rising slowly. If Blasco was the bullfighter, then the bulky Lomas was the bull, even to the large, brown eyes and the heavy breathing.

Toriello remained seated. “When do you leave?”

“Today.”

“That is too early. I have things to settle. My daughter is in London. I must go to the village and telephone her to tell her the news. I must have some sort of written assurance from Gutierrez. If he has heard rumours, then this could be a trap. He could have me arrested as soon as I stepped off the plane. I . . .”

“Gutierrez can give you no such assurance, Señor Toriello,” Lomas said earnestly. “He is prepared to ignore your presence in Yutaxa so long as you return in comparative secrecy. He has spoken against the old government too often, to be seen making peace with you. I was going to tell you of these arrangements.”

“What arrangements? Gutierrez could be deceiving us all. And, even if he is not doing that now, he might change his mind later. I would never be safe.” Toriello’s voice was cracked and high. Once again he was a fearful old man.

Blasco sighed. “He is convinced of your infirmity. This

concession is an act of mercy on his part. He has been told how you long to return to Yutaxa to die. He regards you yourself as no threat at all. He has been informed that you have only a few months to live . . .”

“Who told him that? I could live for some years yet – particularly as President.”

“Certainly. But all in good time,” interrupted Lomas. “As it is, you may only return to Yutaxa if you return in secret. That is Gutierrez’s only request. Why not concede it? In less than a year it will be Gutierrez begging for his life from you.”

“I would not grant it,” Toriello said proudly. The infusion of ideas had muddled his mind slightly. “Very well. But I must phone my daughter.”

“That will not be necessary. Your daughter also is returning to Yutaxa. She will join you there.”

Toriello became wary. “Why is she returning?”

“Señor Zubillaga has had her informed of the good news,” said Blasco blandly.

“She should not return to Yutaxa until I am certain that she would be safe there.”

“Señor Zubillaga will ensure her safety,” Lomas assured him.

“I . . .” Toriello frowned. He felt tired. “I am unhappy about this. Zubillaga has no business . . .”

“He wishes only that affairs move as swiftly as possible. Certainly it was not only you he was thinking about, but of himself also. With you in power he would be able to expand his agricultural project as fast as he liked. At present, all this secrecy is slowing him down. You know what an impatient man he is.” Lomas helped Toriello to his feet.

“I have not seen her for some time,” Toriello murmured. His mood became momentarily romantic. “It would be good to meet her again on our own soil.”

“The soil will be all yours soon enough,” Blasco said cryptically.

“Mine and Zubillaga’s.” Toriello smiled slightly. His knowledge of his own character was good. His sense of his own importance was not quite so good.

He let Lomas lead him into the house.

“Everything is well planned,” Lomas told him. “We will enter Yutaxa through the mountains. Once there, suitable accommodation has been arranged on Señor Zubillaga’s estate. Accommodation fit for a future President.”

Blasco glanced at his wrist watch as they walked through the main living room and into the hall. “You have time to get one suitcase packed. We shall obtain a tourist card from the Mexican embassy in Madrid.”

“Mexican?”

“We fly to Mexico, then travel by car to the border. You cannot enter the country legally, as we have explained. You will be in no danger, however. A blind eye will be turned. Our friends will meet us there.”

Toriello nodded. He was beginning to feel excited. It was not solely because he was going home – it was, perhaps, more because he was going to be powerful again.

Some twelve minutes later the three men sat in a Zodiac that raised clouds of dust as they drove to Madrid. Blasco was at the wheel. There were few flowers by the roadside and what there were had no scent. The fields were yellow and parched and the glaring sun beat down on the metal roof of the car.

Lomas sweated profusely. The small automatic under his left arm began to chafe and he had some difficulty remaining relaxed. Toriello must not sense any tension – not until he was over the Yutaxan border, at least.

Several hours later the three men sat side by side in the economy class cabin of a Super DC8.

It took off at 13.10 precisely, beginning the long flight that would end in Mexico City.

It took an hour to reach Lisbon, and during that time Toriello talked to Lomas.

After Lisbon came the blue of the Atlantic, the glaring yellow of Santa Maria in the Azores. And Toriello, exhausted, slept.

They all slept and dozed, ate and drank and finally, at 18.20, they disembarked at Montreal.

A wait.

Another DC8, then, at five to midnight, they landed in Mexico City.

Mexico was so similar to Spain that Toriello hardly realized they had travelled thousands of miles. He dozed heavily as they drove from the Central Airport to the centre of the city.

Blasco stared thoughtfully at the reds and blues and greens of the winking neon and the twitching bottoms of the girls. When a girl happened to notice him he felt pleased and at ease. At midnight in Mexico City it was still all-alive and through the open window of the car Blasco could hear the mixed sounds of blaring juke boxes and harsh, barely musical, jazz clashing with the traditional *Cantares Mexicanos* that moaned from the dark cafés.

Blasco enjoyed looking and listening and being glanced

at from time to time. He was too tired even to think of joining in.

The hotel was adequate. They all slept well.

Next morning, Toriello had a violent headache and complained of pains in his chest. He grumbled as the men hustled him to the Buenavista Station and aboard the train for Campeche.

A much more tired and still complaining Toriello was handed over, hundreds of hot and weary miles later on the Mexico-Yutaxa border, deep in the mahogany jungle where no wire marked the boundary.

Toriello was disturbed when the two men left him to trudge back to their car, their job finished. He had thought they were going with him all the way to Zubillaga's estate.

Now he was stumbling through the forest with this pale-faced man in the white linen suit. It was hotter than he remembered.

"Where are we going? Why have Blasco and Lomas left us?"

Pale-Face didn't answer.

They crossed some open country and came to a narrow road. Here the man in the white linen suit climbed into the driver's seat of a waiting jeep.

From the other side of the road another man rose and climbed into the back as Toriello got into the seat beside the driver.

"Where is Zubillaga?" Toriello asked, breathing heavily.

The driver bent his arm and released the hand-brake.

"Zubillaga . . ." repeated Toriello, feeling irritated. He had been travelling for nearly three days, his head ached and the pains in his chest had become worse. Everything except the pain seemed unreal.

"Answer me, please . . ."

He got his answer. And it was a ring of cold, blue steel pressing against his cheek. The ring's inner diameter was .303 inches and the Indian in the rear seat cuddled the butt of a rifle which had a small owl painted on it.

Toriello's lip trembled.

"You're Gutierrez's men, aren't you? It was a trap. I was a fool. I'm too old – too old . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

ALLARD took a taxi from London Airport. He felt the taxpayer owed him that.

He ran his fingers through his slightly greasy black hair and looked out at the rain. He sighed. It made a change.

He had been away from England for six weeks – six weeks of walking, parachuting, canoeing. Two weeks in Alaska, where he'd learned that it's possible to exist on reindeer moss and seal meat; two further weeks in which he'd found that water could be obtained in the middle of the desert – you rolled a handkerchief into a ball, put it under a stone at night, and in the morning you could drink the condensed dew. He had just managed to survive in Arizona.

He had really hated those last two weeks. By that time he wasn't allowed to carry even an emergency pack or the .22 survival rifle. With an Air Force sergeant from Milwaukee, he'd scrambled, stumbled and slithered

thorough the Panamanian jungle. He'd eaten raw birds' eggs and roasted snake. In his turn, he'd been eaten by midges and flies no bigger than specks of dust; by mosquitoes and by gaily-coloured monsters that carried a sting like a horse doper's syringe.

Allard rubbed his slightly greasy fingers across his slightly grubby face.

He looked like an aging young man about town in the gear of yesteryear – the brown and white striped Jaeger shirt, the dark pin-stripe, single-breasted, double-vented suit, the suede chukka boots, the yellow woollen tie, the sheep-skin jacket. He might once have danced to the music of Ken Colyer or Humphrey Littleton, drunk coffee in Bunjies, liquor at the Champion behind Oxford Street, taken his birds back to a large bed-sitter in Chepstow Villas, festooned with trailing wires plugged with matchsticks into a single socket, smoked marijuana just once in Dalston Junction or Brixton, eaten at Sam Widge's in Berwick Street, smoked Gauloises, drank Algerian rosé and listened to Edith Piaf at parties in Chelsea or Fulham. He would have been romantic, but pretending to be cynical and ruthless, ready to drop a dud cheque if pushed and with a good chance of getting away with it, interested in faintly shady deals – although hardly ever taking part in them. Because of the late nights, the poor diet, the general environment, his skin would appear to carry a thin film of grease, never looking properly clean. Not altogether his fault, with his dark complexion and black hair. His shirt would always look new on, but faintly grubby, his clothes not noticeably slept in but giving the impression that they had been.

Nick Allard had been known as "Pooch" Allard when

his clothes had been fashionable and his tastes in touch. He had always sported a rolled umbrella and a tie that looked like a Guards' tie.

He sported neither now. His boss didn't approve of the military hint. He preferred Allard to look completely the junior executive in a small advertising agency, the freelance journalist or somebody who was something or other in the BBC. He preferred, in fact, for Allard to appear what he might be rather than what he was.

Allard worked for the government.

As he drove towards London, Allard decided that the taxpayer owed him a meal as well as a ride. Quantity rather than quality was what Allard normally required of food, although he ate at good restaurants as often as he ate at bad ones. He might go, in that case, to the Guinea and the Piggy. Or there was always his old favourite, Romano Santi's in Greek Street. That was more or less medium price. So was Mahrer's, further towards Soho Square.

But why should he save the taxpayer money? Where could he go that was dear and gave you lashings of grub?

He smiled to himself as the taxi now fumbled its way from traffic jam to traffic jam. He didn't look at the wet streets and raincoated crowds that thronged them. They were in the City now, but in his mind he was sitting in front of a mound of food, nosing . . .

The driver turned. "Wake up, squire. We're arrived – and this will cost you. London Airport, in this traffic! Don't say I didn't warn you."

Allard got out of the taxi, huddling himself against the rain as he paid the fare. He pressed an extra coin into the driver's hand.

"Here's a tanner for being so cheerful," he said. Then he grabbed his briefcase and dashed into Bank Underground station.

Bank station was often used by Allard because of the number of exits it had. It was an ideal place for losing a tail. The rush-hour was just starting and Allard mingled with the crowd, not too conspicuous in spite of the sheepskin coat and the tan.

He moved well, athletically. The survival course had improved his fitness and he had always been naturally healthy in spite of his abhorrence for all sports.

He didn't think anyone was following him. In fact, he didn't really want to jostle with the blokes in bowlers and the dolls in their PVC macs and stiletto heels. But it was part of the routine and if he ignored it he might easily find that someone had been checking – even someone who was only checking would have difficulty following him. From the corner by Mappin's he could have regained the street at the corner of Walbrook, in Mansion House Place, Lombard Street, Cornhill, Lloyd's Royal Exchange, Stock Exchange, Threadneedle Street, the Bank of England, Princes Street, Cheapside or Guildhall. He could have joined the District Line or the Central Line, the Circle, Northern, City, or – via The Drain – the Waterloo Line. If he really wanted to be difficult he could have walked half a mile underground to the Monument at Billingsgate fish market.

Since he wasn't being followed, Allard made only a token trip in and out, walked up the dirty flight of steps into Mansion House Place and into George Street.

Ratones Lane at the bottom had been named after the rats infecting it before the Great Fire. Now it was almost

clear of rats. A tiny street between two great warehouses, it led to Redye Court.

Redye Court had got its name from the stream that had once been there. But the stream was now a sewer, below a good foot of concrete. Where once heron might have stood and looked for frogs there were old, soot-blackened office blocks. Only on Allard's right was there a touch of life. It was a converted stables, with yellow doors and black iron hinges. A blue flower-box stood on the sill of a window which had venetian blinds drawn on its other side. There were some geraniums in the box.

A brass plate on the yellow door was engraved in script, reading:

NATIONAL INSURANCE (U.K.) LTD.,
(Registered Offices)

Allard walked in.

The girl in the reception cubicle looked up politely.

"Oh . . ." She smiled vaguely. "Mr Aldiss, isn't it? One of our agents?"

"I'm one of your agents," he agreed, "but the name's Allard. Is Commander Moody available?"

"Have you an appointment?" She began to look through a book.

"He's expecting me in today. We didn't fix a time. I've been out of the country."

"I'll give him a buzz for you," she said.

National Insurance was a bona fide insurance firm and its managing director was Commander Robert Moody. It advertised on a small scale in low-circulation magazines. Its name, carefully chosen, put most people off. Its profits

were not large, but reasonable enough to pay the staff and any premiums necessary. Some of its agents, however, only occasionally tried to sell someone insurance. They specialized in endowment policies – security.

Unlike most insurance firms, however, they were particularly concerned with forestalling disaster before it struck.

"Mr Allard to see you, sir," said the girl. She listened briefly and then replaced the phone. "He'll see *you*." And she smiled at Allard.

A door opened on Allard's left.

"Come in, Allard," said Commander Moody.

Moody was a midget of a man, almost bald, with three grey strands of hair brushed across his head. His finger-nails were bitten short. He worried constantly. He made mistakes and took them seriously. He had made a bad one in the Reese affair, but that had been his only major set-back in twenty-three years of intelligence work and his superiors thought very highly of him. They never told him so, because they got better results from letting him worry.

"Come in," he repeated as Allard walked past him and into the office. Moody closed the door carefully.

The office was tidy and modern. The firm hadn't been in the building for very long – only since the big shake-up of two years earlier when British Intelligence had been reorganized along the Russian lines of independent cells, each self-contained, each having one man who, alone, knew how to contact the next cell. The advantages were that a betrayal revealed only one small segment and no undue strain was placed on the operatives who, being virtually autonomous, could operate with greater efficiency. Each cell specialized in nothing in particular, each being ex-

pected to be able to carry out a variety of assignments.

The firm of National Insurance was a cover for Cell 6. The head of Cell 6 – Moody, the ex-naval commander – connected the group with Section B above, but even he didn't know who were cells five or seven.

"Feeling fit?" asked Moody, sitting down and offering Allard a cigarette. "Learn a bit? Something useful?"

"Yes, thanks, sir." Said Allard, lighting his cigarette. He didn't like Moody very much. By the string of empty questions, Allard knew Moody was worried. But that was normal.

"Nothing go wrong? Nothing suspicious?"

"No, sir."

"You've got some leave coming to you now, haven't you?" Moody said, leaning back with a smile. "I don't suppose you expect to get it right away."

"I was hoping to, sir."

"We've had a busy time while you've been away. We're a bit short staffed at the moment."

"Somebody copped it?" Allard asked casually.

"Four of our best bods."

"Who were they?"

"Platt, Cummings, Finlay and Jents. Any of them pals of yours?"

"No, I don't get on with most of the types round the office, as you know. What happened?"

"That's not for you to know. Anyway, we're recruiting at present and expect to be up to strength pretty soon. In the meantime, I'm afraid all leave's cancelled. The old story. Sorry, Nick."

Allard didn't like Moody using his first name. He did his job but he avoided emotion in anything connected

with it. He felt he had been blackmailed and press-ganged into it in the first place. Still, it was better than prison – in some ways. If he hadn't deserted his Basic Training camp and hadn't then got mixed up with some East End business men who were importing morphine and penicillin into the country illegally from France, the government wouldn't have him by the short hairs now. His penchant for languages was one of the main things that had saved him from suffering the lot of the ordinary deserter and drug-smuggler. Also, lazy as he had been, he was intelligent in a perceptive way, an instinctive way, that made him a good judge of people, a good manipulator of people and situations. It was a talent he had only previously used for getting himself out of trouble and women into bed.

British Intelligence was making a man out of him.

Nick Allard would have been content to remain a care-free boy, coasting along until he got into serious trouble, then talking or manoeuvring his way out of it when it came. It was easy enough when dealing with individuals – but the government was a buff form and a set of by-laws. That was how it stayed in business and dealt with people like Nick Allard.

"You've got something you want me to do?" Allard asked.

"Not just yet. If you come in again in the morning I'll probably have things sorted out by then. You look a bit seedy, Nick. You've had a tiring time. Better go home and get some sleep."

"I always look a bit seedy, sir," Nick said. "No, I think I'll treat myself to a slap-up meal tonight."

Moody almost winced.

"Steak and kidney pudding at a little place I know in

the Portobello Road,” Allard went on. “Great thick chips and lashings of H.P. sauce. Ah, I can taste ‘em now, sir.”

Moody made a face. In earlier days he had had the reputation of a gourmet, but his stomach wouldn’t allow much of that now. He was perpetually hungry. The mention of food – particularly the mention of such food – made him envious and revolted at the same time.

He burped and opened the drawer where he kept his magnesia tablets. “Get out, Allard, for God’s sake.”

“Yes, sir.” Allard rose. “I’ll have college pudding to follow, I think, smothered in runny custard and golden syrup. That’s a speciality of the house, sir.”

“Come off it, Allard. I know it’s irrational of me, but I can’t stand another moment. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Right you are, sir,” Allard said with some satisfaction. Moody thought it was his little joke, but it was really his little bit of malice. It was the only way he knew of making Moody uncomfortable without actually offending his boss.

It was odd that Moody should be so sensitive about such a trivial thing.

“I’d like to pick up my pay, sir,” Allard said.

Moody pointed to a door that led off his office at the side. “Pop in and see Willoughby. You’ve got to sign yourself in, anyway. He’s got your pay.”

Allard went through into the little offices on the other side of the door.

“Good Gord! Mr. Allard, sir!”

Willoughby was dressed in a navy blue sergeant’s uniform. He looked after the post and special messages for the firm. He looked foolish, a rather stupid ex-regular with a waxed moustache and a red, cropped neck. But

behind the vacuous blue eyes was a cunning mind and at, fifty-six, Willoughby could break a man’s arm using only three fingers – and he could slit the knave of spade’s throat at ten paces with a throwing knife.

Just as it never occurred to Moody that Allard might feel resentful of the job that had been forced on him, it never seemed to cross Willoughby’s mind that Allard had never been an officer and rarely been a gentleman. All the agents received the treatment that Willoughby, with his romantic ideas, thought they deserved for the work they did in protecting their country from Evil.

“We thought you’d have starved to death by now, sir,” Willoughby joked. “We was going to buy you a pound of pork sausages instead of the usual flowers.”

Allard smiled as best he could.

“Got my pay, Willoughby?”

“In the safe, sir. And the books. You sign them, sir, while I get the money out.”

Willoughby took two heavy ledgers from the shelf behind his head. He thumped them on his desk and opened them at the appropriate pages.

The first ledger was opened at a sheet bearing Allard’s name. It showed details of his pay since he had joined Cell 6. The date, the amount, the deductions. These ran across the page. On the far right was a space where Allard had to sign his name. He picked up £37-4-5 per week – after deductions. He was always paid in cash. With various expense allowances, Allard could live fairly well, but not nearly as well as he would have liked. Not as well as he had from time to time.

Allard signed the book.

The other book was also opened at a sheet bearing his name.

Here were details of how his time had been spent since he joined the firm. At the top of the page it said: *Name:* Allard, Nicholas Giles. *Rank:* A-Class. *Number:* C6/5114 (MB/759/6).

The number in parentheses was a cross-reference for his general file in Internal Security.

Below this were various sub-headings. Most of the details were filled in for Allard and usually all he had to do was sign the appropriate space:

ASSIGNMENT:	LOCALE:	LEFT OFFICE:
<i>S. Course</i>	<i>US/Panama</i>	<i>5/1/65</i>
RETURNED OFFICE:	DOSSIER NO:	SIGNED:
<i>20/2/65</i>	<i>None</i>	

Allard signed.

Willoughby unbent from the heavy, old-fashioned safe, a fat envelope in his hand.

He gave it to Allard.

“Don’t spend it all at once, Mr. Allard.” He winked.

“I think I’ll try, all the same,” Allard said, popping the packet into his briefcase. He wasn’t a saver.

Moody had been a gourmet. Allard was a gourmand.

Allard ate until he could eat no more at Rules. Then he took a taxi home. It was still quite early and he didn’t feel like going to bed.

His flat was in Pembridge Villas, Notting Hill. It had two main rooms, a big kitchen, bathroom and lavatory and a little balcony overlooking the street. It was untidy and dusty. Sometimes one of his girls would clear it up for him, but he didn’t employ a cleaner. He wasn’t allowed to employ a cleaner not approved of by the firm – and he wouldn’t use one that was.

The only comparatively neat part of the living room was near the french windows that opened onto the balcony. Here was a big trestle table covered in green baize, with a miniature battlefield on it. Little rocks and now-dead bits of foliage, a scrap of mirror painted to resemble a pond, were the background for a static battle of beautifully painted toy soldiers. These were cast lead. A few of them Allard had bought painted, but most of them he had bought unpainted for an average of twenty-five shillings each. No particular battle was in progress – rather a series of skirmishes were taking place. Here Roman horsemen battled Mongolian archers; there a detachment of Light Brigade charged Russian Infantry and artillery. Elsewhere a scene from the American War of Independence was being fought out, and nearby, richly armoured mediaeval knights rode into battle carrying bright banners. Most of the banners were British, but some were German – especially the 1914-18 British and German cavalry who rode against one another in the far corner near the window.

Near the trestle and against one wall were dozens of polished wooden chests and boxes. Many of them were travelling writing desks, ships’ desks, from the 18th and 19th century. In these boxes, mostly of oak with brass fittings, Allard kept his collection of toy soldiers. Many had yet to have their armour or uniforms painted on.

He went into the kitchen and made himself some coffee. The flat was at once familiar and strange to him. It was a bit of a shock to leave the jungles of Panama and roast snake for this private place with its strong aura of his personality seen, as it were, naked. All his obsessions, his hobbies, were reflections of his psychological state, Allard knew. But the survival course had cleaned out, temporarily, a few of his neuroses, so that his flat was not quite so comfortable to see as when he had left it six weeks before.

He shrugged as he poured water on to the Nescafé with one hand and reached for a tin of milk with the other.

He took the coffee into the living room. It was warm, at least – the flat was centrally heated. He put the cup on the edge of the trestle table and leaned back in the old-fashioned leather armchair staring at the models. Sometimes they made him feel randy and he'd never quite been able to work out why.

Feeling randy, he picked up the phone on the other side of the chair and dialled a number.

"Alice?" he said as the phone at the other end was lifted.

"Yes. Oh, Nick! You're back!" The voice sounded a trifle over-enthusiastic.

"Have you been faithful to your only true love?"

"Of course, Nick. I . . ."

The phone went dead as if she'd put her hand over the receiver. Nick Allard thought he heard a bit of a scuffle in the background.

"What's the matter?"

She sounded as if she was breathing more heavily.

"Nothing. What do you want, Nick?"

"Thought you'd like to come over tonight."

"I'd love to, but . . ."

". . . she's busy," said a young man's voice suddenly. "Bad luck, chum."

Nick replaced the receiver. He hadn't been very serious, anyway.

He went to one of his boxes and opened it. In it were all kinds of little pots of paint for decorating his soldiers.

He lit a cigarette as he began to clear a space on the trestle, setting the box down on it. From another box he took out a small hussar on horseback. He was painting it in the colours of the Waterloo period. The sabretache was to his liking but the gold frogging on the jacket would have to be done again. He began work. Absorbed in his painting, he could relax and let his mind drift – forget about the damned service and think pleasant thoughts, mainly about the past.

A strange panorama was laid out in front of him. It covered two thousand years. Two thousand years of unending fighting. Only the weapons became more and more sophisticated. The society never. Only in superficial details.

Allard knew that he was really the typical modern soldier, not the bloke in uniform who marched up and down or flew back and forth. He was fighting today's real wars. It was all under the surface and it was a very subtle business. Maybe it was better this way. He and his kind warred with one another, lost and won battles while governments continued to get less overtly belligerent towards one another. Maybe it was a good thing that the uniformed Services fought less and the Secret Services more. At least cities didn't get blown up. Fewer people were killed. The gains and losses were still made and felt by

the governments involved – they got their satisfaction, but without the mass bloodshed.

Those bastards ought to be grateful to us, thought Allard as he painted his soldier.

He felt no pride in the job he was doing, though he was A-Class and that meant he was very good at it indeed. He felt only the futility of the struggle itself. Governments reflected the most childish and primitive impulses in mankind, not the noblest, he reflected. Not often, at least.

The phone rang.

Allard set down his soldier and his paint-brush, picked up his cigarette and answered the phone.

“Allard.”

“Moody here, Allard. Sorry to disturb you, but I’d like you to start a bit earlier on that job I mentioned. Hope you don’t mind. We have a potential client. She might well be interested in taking out some insurance with us. Would you mind popping over there tonight and seeing if she is?”

“She’s perfectly healthy at the moment, is she?” Allard said resignedly.

“Yes. But there’s always a chance that she might become ill. I want you to make sure that she seems completely healthy to you. It might be wise to have a long chat with her, stay there as long as you like.”

“What’s the address?”

“Number Eight, The Walk. That’s Hampstead – it fronts onto the Heath.”

“Nice area.”

“Very nice. The lady’s name is Toriello – Miss Toriello. As a foreign national, of course, she might not be inter-

ested in our brand of insurance, so I suggest you go as easily as possible.”

“Okay.”

“Soon as you can, old chap.”

“I’m on my way,” Allard said lazily as he put the phone down. A girl in Hampstead was in some kind of trouble and he had to make sure nothing happened to her. A fuzzy sort of assignment. Not the kind he liked at all. But Moody couldn’t give him any details over the phone.

He hadn’t even changed his clothes since he’d got off the plane. There wasn’t time to change them now.

He pulled on his sheepskin coat and went downstairs to the garage. He got his grey Jensen out of it, closed the door and got back into the car again.

It would take him nearly half-an-hour to reach Hampstead.

There was a slight drizzle in the air, the kind that made driving difficult.

He wondered a bit about the job in hand, but since all he knew was that he had to keep a Miss Toriello out of trouble without too much fuss, there wasn’t a lot to speculate about.

He got to Happy Hampstead in twenty minutes, finding The Walk easily – a row of big houses overlooking the heath on the west side.

Allard got out of his car and turned up the collar of his coat. He began to walk along, peering gloomily at the brightly coloured doors.

It was not just the rural atmosphere of the place that depressed him – Allard only felt totally at ease with fifteen miles of built-up area in every direction – it was the conscious quaintness of the gardens and the way the houses

were decorated. Someone nearby was growing nicotiana. Allard could smell the white flowers but couldn't see them.

He found number eight and pushed open a wooden gate, walking up the crazy paving between the shrubs and the trees.

He was about to knock on the front door when a car drew up behind him.

It was large, black and foreign. Two men got out hurriedly.

Allard didn't knock, after all. He walked into the shrubbery and waited as the men ran up the path.

He didn't like the look of them. One was large, like a bull; the other was small and slender, with the figure of a dancer.

Automatically, he felt in his pocket for his pen.

The length of a fountain pen is about four and three quarter inches, excluding the cap, and three inches of steel are quiet sufficient to kill a man when they are buried in his heart, particularly if impaled with some force by a small explosive charge.

Allard shouldn't have even had that weapon, according to regulations. It should have been handed in. An oversight which could be discovered any time soon, but not one Allard was likely to point out.

In the darkness of the shrubbery Allard fingered the knife. He had no licence to kill. That was a fiction, a romantic piece of imagination, and of no practical value. Had the killing been abroad, a piece of paper signed by a British civil servant could hardly give him the authority to commit murder, while at home the police still had some old-fashioned ideas about the sanctity of human life.

His only licence was his ability to remain undetected. Allard, with seven killings, had never been discovered.

The two men knocked on the door, murmured something in Spanish and were admitted.

Allard had been warned off any real action by Moody. Presumably he had to make sure that nothing happened to the girl without actually doing anything. An imprecise order. Moody must be in a flap.

He decided that he would do the minimum necessary to guard himself against down-grading and less money.

He went up to the front door and knocked on it, after first putting his pen away.

The door opened quickly and the shorter of the two men stood there, looking at him suspiciously.

"Yes," he said in English.

Allard put on his insurance salesman's smile.

"Good evening, sir. I believe a Miss – er – Toriello lives here."

"You know her?"

"No, sir . . ." Allard pushed in a little closer. He found one of the firm's policy cards in his coat pocket and pulled it out.

"National Insurance."

"She is going away. You go away, also."

Miss Toriello came into the hall.

"Are you Miss Toriello?" Allard smiled.

"Yes. What is this?"

She was a beautiful woman, dressed in a black and white Courreges suit with boots to match. Her strong face was heart-shaped and her black hair, normally worn up, Allard suspected, was hung down her back and over her shoulders. She looked a self-possessed young woman

but under some strain. Her figure was wonderful, Allard thought – long legs, slender hips, breasts just the right size.

He smiled at her with genuine warmth.

“I’m selling insurance, Miss Toriello. If you need any kind of help, my firm can supply it.”

If she got any hint, she didn’t take it.

“I cannot speak to you,” she said. “I must leave at once.”

The small man gave him a push. “So – go.”

Allard stepped very quickly past the small man.

“I am sorry to be so insistent, Miss Toriello, but . . .”

He shouldn’t have turned his back on the tricky little fellow. He looked round again, sensing a movement.

The little fellow had a gun in his hand. He pushed it into Allard’s face and pulled the trigger.

Allard tried to grasp him before he fell, but he never made it.

Allard hit the floor.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE smell of toast drifted from Willoughby’s office into Moody’s room. Moody wrinkled his nose as he sat down. Allard sat facing him, feeling rough.

“This place becomes more like a damned restaurant every day,” Moody complained. “Why can’t Willoughby have some breakfast before he comes here?”

He opened his desk drawer and began the early morning ritual of tablet-taking. “I should have insisted on another rest room when they installed the transmitter in the basement.” He swallowed two magnesia tablets. “It’s a wonder I don’t die of malnutrition. I live on these bloody things.”

“I made a bit of a balls-up last night, sir,” said Allard, trying to sound regretful.

“What happened? Where’s Miss Toriello?”

“Don’t know, sir.”

“You look the worse for wear. Get roughed up?”

“I got a faceful of gas from a gas-pistol.”

“People still using ‘em, are they? Dangerous things.”

Liable to leak and do you first. So you had some trouble.” Moody shuffled through some papers. He picked one up and read it. “I can tell you where Miss Toriello is, Allard. She’s on a plane bound for Mexico City. Who got to her first, last night?”

“They did, sir.”

“You went in and found them bundling the girl out, is that it?”

“They weren’t bundling her, sir. She seemed to be willing to go on her own. But she was leaving in a hurry.” Allard explained what had happened.

“You weren’t too sharp, were you?” Moody said. “Not like you, Allard, being caught off guard just like that.”

“I was tired, sir. The survival course . . .” Allard knew he had a good chance working on Moody’s exaggerated sense of justice so that he, Allard, would come out more as a martyr to Moody’s insensitivity rather than as a bungler. He hadn’t cared last night – that was the truth of it. He hadn’t taken any trouble.

“My fault, I suppose, really . . .” Moody muttered. Allard had produced the desired effect. “I should have filled you in yesterday afternoon. Then, when I phoned last night, you’d have known all we knew. I’d better wise you up now.” Allard knew Moody. When he slipped into forced, out-dated slang it meant he was trying to be jovial – that he felt guilty.

Moody had never realized how much he was manipulated by Allard. No other agent would have behaved like this. Moody didn’t suspect Allard of base motives because Allard was a good agent. For an Intelligence boss, Moody was surprisingly imperceptive in some ways. He made up for it in others.

Moody took a big atlas out of his central drawer and dumped it on the table. The heavy pages crackled as he turned them to find the place he wanted.

“Come and have a look at this, Allard.”

Allard got up and walked round to lean over his chief’s shoulder.

The atlas was open on Central America.

“Oh, no,” Allard sighed.

“What do you mean?”

“I haven’t got to go back there, have I?”

“Don’t you like it?”

“Damp heat, insects, terrible music and lousy food. Chaotic cities that are falling to bits, if you’re lucky – bloody pampas and jungle if you’re not.”

“You’ll probably get a bit of both,” Moody told him. “I know you prefer European assignments, but you’re the only bloke we’ve got for the job – and you’ve had some training recently.”

“And a dull job,” Allard said wearily. “Banana republics, revolutionaries, wicked presidents. I suppose a general’s been assassinated.”

“As a matter of fact, one has.”

“If Miss Toriello is the President’s beautiful daughter, sir, that’s too much. Why are these cases so much like comic operas? What comes first, sir? Do the comic operas imitate the countries, or do the countries feel they’ve got to live up to their comic opera image?”

“You’re taking a rather unsophisticated view of the Central American states, Allard,” Moody said. “You know how important they are these days.”

“To the Americans, the Russians, the Chinese – not really to us, though, sir.”

“Only here,” Moody said, pointing at the tiny red bit that was British Honduras. “That’s our interest – that’s our *specific* interest, anyway. Sometimes some of our interests clash with the Yanks as well as the Russians and Chinks. Our interests are clashing here, right now.” Moody indicated Yutaxa, lying between Honduras and Mexico, backing on to Guatemala.

“That’s a funny little country. You can hardly see it.” Allard smiled. “Doesn’t look worth anyone bothering about. Yuta-ch-a, eh – the place with the liberal President. Or is he a Communist?”

“He’s a socialist. Gutierrez. The Yanks reckon he’s a secret Commie, of course, while the Chinks in particular reckon he’s too right-wing.”

“Does he get any money from either?”

“A little from the States. Nothing from the Chinks that we know of. He gets quite a lot from us.”

“Does he?” Allard grinned. “What’s our real interest? Are we thinking of going back into the colonization business? Annex Yutaxa as part of Honduras?”

“Don’t be facetious, Allard. It’s in our interest to keep Gutierrez in if only because he’s pro-British, thanks to the help we’ve always given him and his movement. And he spends the money well – housing, education, land reform. He’s done wonders with what he’s had and could do more wonders once he got the economy going. With a big American agricultural grant he could produce a model state. He could produce an example of a workable alternative to Communism. The Yanks won’t see it, of course. They buggered up Guatemala in the same way.”

Allard remembered. Guatemala, a tiny country with a population of four million, mainly dirt-poor and de-

pendent on the banana crop. In 1951 a Colonel Arbenz had come to power and was judged a Communist by the U.S. for passing his Agrarian Reform law, redistributing land to the peasants. The American United Fruit Company of Boston was the hardest hit by these laws since they owned practically all the banana plantations. In 1954 there was a counter-revolution backed by planes with “a precision and skill which would have been a credit to the U.S. Air Force,” as the *Sunday Express* had put it. And Arbenz was ousted.

“So we back Gutierrez and the Yanks don’t. In the middle the Russians and the Chinese are working away, doing what they can.”

“They haven’t managed much since Gutierrez got in,” Moody replied. “Another thing that could cause trouble if he were deposed – Yutaxa has always had a claim on British Honduras. It’s a traditional one, but Gutierrez isn’t interested in it. A Chinese-sponsored revolution, in particular, could put a government in power that would make an issue of that. It’s just the sort of thing they like – a good opportunity to stir things up. Since Cuba, the Russians have been much quieter in South and Central America, particularly as they’ve been spending too much elsewhere . . .”

“China couldn’t be spending much in Yutaxa, surely,” Allard put in.

“You know them as well as I do – they work on the cheap. They’ve a few front organizations in Yutaxa. The usual things – trade missions, student organizations, an agricultural workers’ union. But give them a chance and they’ll be in there fast enough.”

“And the Americans soon afterwards.”

“Probably. But you never know. Public opinion in the States isn’t what it was – the government will find action much harder to justify.”

“So what’s this got to do with the little señorita from Hampstead? She’s a Yutaxan, is she?”

“Yes. Her name’s Toriello – Doctor Toriello, actually. Psychobiology is her speciality. It’s all pretty new research and she’s one of the first people to specialize with any marked success. She’s done a lot of work on hallucinogenics – that sort of thing.”

“She’s been working over here – for us?”

“Not for the government. For Freeman-Trulove’s, the big drug people.”

“Mescaphine.” Allard mentioned one of British Intelligence’s new truth drugs, perhaps the most effective they had had.

“F-T developed that.” Moody nodded.

“What was Doctor Toriello working on?”

“Ergot derivatives mainly, I think. LSD 25. Stuff like that. She was primarily interested in things like antromorphine. She was looking for antidotes, if you like, against the big, habit-forming drugs. She was quite idealistic one way and another.”

“Has she been kidnapped for her knowledge?”

“That’s what’s so puzzling, Allard. Her research wasn’t secret. She published virtually everything. Nobody needed her. I mean, the only people who would be interested in her would be dope addicts looking for a cure. And I can’t really conceive of . . .”

“An International Conspiracy of Dope Fiends? I agree, sir. Any other angle?”

“One. Her father, César Toriello, has disappeared from

Spain. He was last seen in Mexico City – that was easily checked – and has probably re-entered Yutaxa in secret.”

“Why in secret?”

“He was Minister of Agriculture during the old regime that Gutierrez deposed. Gutierrez is a humane and liberal man – but he had to bump off every high official in the old government, partly to satisfy the people that he was in earnest, partly to make sure that a counter-revolution never got off the ground. The only one to escape was Toriello. Toriello was quite a popular figure – in the cities, at any rate – and it’s just conceivable that somebody’s brought him back to head a revolution. There have been a few totally unfounded riots in Itlo – that’s the Yutaxan capital – just recently. Maybe whoever’s behind them is also behind Toriello?”

“The Chinese?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You don’t seem to have much information about the current set-up at all,” Allard pointed out grumpily.

“That’s because our information stopped coming in a while ago. We had two men out there – not Cell 6 agents – who were bumped off. One of them, doing routine work and not really expecting any kind of trouble, I’m told, got on to something in the jungle south of Itlo. He didn’t follow it up because his body was found a few days later with a lot of bullets in it. Maybe that’s where the revolutionaries are hiding out. I don’t know.”

“So Doctor Toriello has been induced – or gone willingly – to join her father in Yutaxa.”

“Yes. The only reason we suspect she didn’t go willingly is because of her lack of interest in politics and the fact that she had better research facilities with F-T than

she'd get anywhere else, bar the States and West Germany."

"And a general was killed, you say?"

"Another survivor of the old regime. It seemed to be an arbitrary killing, but that was perhaps a shade too well planned for that."

"Was the general popular?"

"Very popular. He'd been a bit unusual for out there – absolutely no interest in politics. He shifted sides when it looked like Gutierrez was going to win, speeded up the revolution and served the new president loyally, as far as we can tell."

"No chance that Gutierrez himself got rid of him?"

"That's unlikely. Could be the Chinese trying to get some tension worked up. Don't know."

"I seem to be going on a fact-finding mission," Allard said ironically. The job's nature was still vague. "All you want me to do, then, is go out there and get the information you should have given me in the first place. What then?"

"Then we'll see. Play this quietly, Allard. Try to be an observer rather than a combatant."

A quiet job. Suits me."

"It might not stay quiet. But as soon as you've done your bit, we'll send a team in from Honduras."

"Why aren't they there now?"

"The whole group out there are well known to the Yanks. They've worked with the C.I.A. too often not to be recognized. We want a lad out there who won't be known to the Americans. They don't like the support we're giving to Gutierrez, so we want to keep everything to ourselves as much as possible."

"The U.S. couldn't be behind this revolution? They

supported the previous government Toriello was in, didn't they?"

"Yes. But I think we'd have found out if the C.I.A. boys were up to anything. We'd have heard from Honduras or from one of the other two agents who were out there. Bear the possibility in mind, and, if it's more than a possibility, I needn't tell you to tread very softly and use your loaf – *and* get a directive from me for every action you take. If the Yanks *aren't* mixed up in it, you've got pretty much a free hand."

"I'd better get some kit," Allard said, rising. "And I want all the stuff you've got on file that you can let me have."

"Willoughby's been briefed. See him. He's got your expense money ready, too. Dollars and Yutaxan currency. If you need any more, draw on the bank."

"What's it called out there?"

"National United Bank of Honduras. Don't go overstepping the limit, Allard, or I'll have to answer for it."

Allard nodded goodbye and thought he wouldn't mind that, as long as he didn't have to answer for it too.

CHAPTER FIVE

ALLARD called at Freeman-Trulove first. He wanted to talk to someone who'd known the Toriello girl, get some idea of her personality while she was in England so that if they met up in Yutaxa at some point he'd notice any disparity, know a little more. Allard wasn't the only spy who worked on the assumption that if you got to know all you could about the personalities involved in a job, the situations would stand a better chance of taking care of themselves.

According to the rather skimpy file Moody have given him, the man to see was Dr. James Campbell, boss of Doctor Toriello's department and her lover for a short while about six months before. Allard expected a somewhat subjective impression from Campbell, but it would at least come from someone who'd known her in many moods.

Campbell's offices were very clean indeed. The walls

were of the kind that come in metal sections, painted grey and giving Allard the feeling he was on board a battleship. The window behind Campbell's desk looked out over the river, encouraging this impression. A few tropical plants stood in pots on the window-ledge, a low bookcase ran the length of one wall. On this were a few potted plants, too. The desk was large – Swedish, in light pine. It had two filing trays on it, one marked IN and the other OUT. Both had very little in them. A blotter was positioned between them. On the blotter were Dr. James Campbell's folded hands – soft, red hands. He wore a grey suit that almost matched the walls, a shirt of a light grey and a tie of a darker grey. Allard hadn't been able to see if Campbell wore grey shoes. Campbell's face was gaunt, with great slabs of cheek-bones and thinning red hair. His eyes were grey, too, Allard noticed. They looked at Allard suspiciously.

"I knew Doctor Toriello quite well, Mr. Finlay," Campbell admitted. Observing that Campbell was a Scot, Allard had, cynically, chosen a pseudonym that might help him get that extra grain of information.

"What was she like?" Allard asked.

"A dedicated worker – most conscientious. She seemed to be one of those people we never get enough of in research. She had almost instinctive flashes of inspiration from time to time. She'd work slowly and efficiently but without getting much in the way of concrete results. Then, suddenly – a break-through. It happened several times while she was working here."

"Pretty good, eh?"

"*Very* good, Mr. Finlay. I hope this trip of hers won't take too long. We need her here."

“She didn’t tell you or anyone that she was going?”

“Not a soul. It’s her father, isn’t it? Ill? I got this message this morning.”

“Something like that,” Allard agreed. “Now, Dr. Campbell, would you mind telling me a few more personal details . . .”

Campbell stared at Allard angrily for a moment, then looked down at his folded hands. “You chaps want to know a lot. What’s it all about? What has Gregoria done to get herself involved with the police?”

“We’re not police, doctor,” Allard assured him. “We’re Foreign Office. A diplomatic matter.”

“To do with Gregoria Toriello’s father – the chap who’s out in Spain now?”

“That’s it. You were her lover, weren’t you – from April or June of last year?”

“I was – although I’d like to know how you found it out. Is this a police state and I never knew about it?”

“This checking has all been done recently, doctor – after we became interested in Gregoria Toriello. What did you think of her?”

Campbell smiled reminiscently. “I thought she was smashing, Mr. Finlay – if you must know. She would have had to have been, you know. I’m married, you see, and fond of my wife and home – but Gregoria was irresistible. And a very demanding young woman, too, Mr. Finlay – though equally generous. She was inclined to be pensive and introspective, but she never let anyone know if she could help it. She always smiled, no matter how unhappy she felt, and it was a good act she put on, too – not the I’m-smiling-though-my-tears sort of thing that a lot of women adopt. She would sound cheerful, look cheerful,

act cheerful – and you had to know her very well indeed for a long time to realize that she wasn’t by nature a particularly happy person.”

“You’d never have known if she was under a strain?”

“Only by one thing. She’d become more apparently vivacious, moving her hands about more than usual – that sort of thing. But that was the only indication, though to anyone who didn’t know her very well indeed it would appear that she was exceptionally happy. She was a tremendous person, Mr. Finlay. She helped me through a very bad patch. I don’t think she cared that much for me – as a man, as it were – but she gave me a lot of understanding. She cared for me as a person.”

Campbell coughed and put one hand over his mouth. “I – I’m probably sounding a bit sentimental, eh?”

“You’ve been a lot of help,” Allard said non-committally.

The door opened and Campbell’s dowdy secretary stood there.

“I’m sorry, sir. The young lady is waiting.”

“Ah, yes. A prior appointment. Can I tell you anything else, Mr. Finlay?”

“I think I’ve got a good enough impression now, thanks, doctor.” Allard got up and shook hands with Campbell. “One last question: She had no political affiliations, I suppose?”

“She was idealistic – a liberal, I suppose you’d call her – but I don’t think she was interested in politics as such.”

“Many thanks,” Allard said. “Goodbye, doctor.”

The visit hadn’t been wasted. Allard had found it very satisfying. Whether other people’s impressions of the girl fitted with Campbell’s was another matter. According to

the file, she didn't mix much, was well liked though few people really knew her.

As Allard reached the hall he noticed the doctor's prior appointment. The girl was about five feet ten, with long well-muscled legs that sprawled out in front of her. She wore an indigo skirt that rode almost up to her thighs. She had large breasts, large hands and blonde hair. She was reading a copy of *Country Life* and Allard couldn't see her face. She had rings on her fingers – but no bells on her toes that he could see.

He stepped over her feet and pushed the swing doors open, walking out into the bright, chilly air of the embankment.

Allard didn't like airports. For one thing, they were hard to get to and when you got to them they were ugly, with their concrete runways, concrete buildings and concrete refreshments.

Allard preferred sea travel, anyway. He found the transition from one climate to another too sudden, too traumatic. He liked things to change gradually. In his business, however, sea travel was out of the question.

It was five-thirty and the loudspeakers were beginning to marshal the passengers towards the 707 that would take them to New York by twenty-past seven. Allard sighed.

Outside he could see the sad pageantry of the airport.

The colours were there – the deep blue tails and white swallow of BOAC; the white, purple and yellow of Lufthansa, a red tail and white cross of the SwissAir Con-vair 990 Coronado. There was the heraldry – the two rows of eight and eleven stars of Pakistan International Airways, the elongated *S* of the Sabena, the horizontal red,

white and blue stripes of Loftedir, and the bow and arrow of Alitalia. Allard sighed again.

As if in a frenzy, the airport grouped together Boeing 707s, Comet 4s, A Tupolev TU 104a jet belonging to Air India, Super Constellations, Viscounts, D.C. 6bs, and a small de Havilland biplane.

They were so many big bits of metal to Allard, to whom the romance of flight meant little more than a quick dalliance with the stewardess in the galley before touch-down.

At 17.45 the 707 BOAC Monarch flight started for New York. Allard unfastened his safety belt. He glanced at the long legs sprawled in the gangway and noted the large breasts.

This time he looked at her face.

She was quite young, with a heart-shaped face and large, blue eyes, heavily made up. Her only other make-up was on her full lips. Her nose was small and straight and the blonde hair was worn long at the back and sides, cut in a fringe at the front.

She turned with a quizzical smile and said archly: "Do I satisfy you?"

He grinned. "When can we find out?"

She laughed. She picked up a magazine and started to glance through it rather rapidly, Allard thought. He waited casually for her to make the next move. She made it soon, throwing down the magazine and taking cigarettes from her handbag.

She turned to him. "I hate these flights." She offered him a Benson and Hedges special filter. He accepted, nodding agreement. He lit their cigarettes.

"I'm Nicholas Allard," he said.

“I’m Reana Pedersen.”

“Norwegian?” he asked. He’d noticed a very slight trace of accent.

“Swedish, originally,” she said. She smiled and put one of her big, beautiful hands on his arm, a light, caressing touch. “Mind you, that’s only where I was born. I’m a bit of everything, really. I work for the UN. What do you do?”

“Insurance,” Allard replied, wondering if she knew he knew he was lying too.

They chatted amiably about nothing in particular – a film they’d both seen in London, a restaurant they both knew, a book they’d both read. They sat side by side as they ate their *Sole Villeroi* and *Chicken Pilao* and flew over the grey Atlantic.

By the time they had reached New York, Reana was laughing gaily at every slightly funny remark Allard made. Allard laughed, too, because Reana was unaware that he’d seen her in the reception hall at F-T. He was also amused because he was being followed by a very beautiful woman – and that didn’t happen nearly enough in his job.

He hoped she had orders to stay as close as possible.

In his job there were no coincidences. A beautiful girl didn’t just happen to be at Freeman-Trulove in the morning and sitting next to him on the New York flight in the evening – didn’t just happen to be willing to be picked up so fast.

She was his tail. She could be employed by the Chinese, Russians, U.S., Yutaxan Government, another department of the Services – but was unlikely to be a genuine UN employee. Unless as a cover. The speed with which she’d got on to him indicated two main possibilities – that she

was employed by the people who’d taken Gregoria Toriello away last night, or she was on his own side from a different cell. It was just possible that she’d been interested in Gregoria Toriello before him and had seen him go to the girl’s house the previous night. That meant, again, that she could be working for anybody. He’d wait and see, enjoying himself as best he could in the meantime.

He watched over her as she slept while they waited in the airport lounge for the connecting 6.30 Astrojet to take them south to Mexico.

Chicago, Dallas, San Antonio. They dozed, laughed, slept, ate and flirted.

By the time they reach Mexico City they were holding hands and talking through lips that brushed gently together as they gazed, somewhat warily, into each other’s eyes.

In the airport taxi they clung together, ignoring the abstract patterns of colour made by the neon, the rhythmic noises from the bars. They were making their own rhythmic noises.

The shirt-sleeved driver stopped in a narrow, cobbled street. They had chosen a hotel just off the *Passo de la Reforma*. The window was wide and somewhere a young man sang, with the usual Mexican lack of regard for tune or pitch.

Allard closed the window and loosened his tie. Reana already had her skirt and blouse off. She turned and Allard unhooked her brassière, running his hands over her soft back and shoulders, over her arms and down to her waist.

The young man’s voice could still be heard faintly, but later was drowned by the sounds that Allard and Reana made as they stretched on the hard bed.

Then the young man’s song had finished and Allard

dozed for a while, waking up shivering. Reana was still asleep. He looked at his watch then pulled a couple of blankets over them both. She lay on her side, her back to him. Allard noticed something. He withdrew the blanket and saw that the skin was smooth and fresh except that across her back were two fine lines that might have been the mark of a thin whip. He frowned.

He looked at the rest of her. Her waist was not over-narrow and her hips were broad and firm, child-bearing hips that were the finest for love-making. The thighs were hard, muscled, and the legs long. Gently, Allard ran his hand around the far side of her body to the firm, heavy breasts. She stirred a little and he withdrew his hand reluctantly. He had work to do tomorrow. Self-discipline was called for.

Allard lay back on his pillow and smiled. He slipped his hand behind the bed-head. The revolver was still in the clip holster.

Then he began to stroke Reana into wakefulness again.

To hell with self-discipline.

CHAPTER SIX

THE walls of the hotel were white and thick so that inside it was still cooler than outside. The walls also muffled the sound of a gun being fired so well that the sound mingled with the backfire of many noisy cars that hooted and honked to greet the morning on the Avenida Juarez y Balderas nearby.

The heavy scarlet blooms in the gardens masked the scent of cordite.

Allard, looking a little grubbier than usual because of the heat, breakfasted on the wide balcony of the first floor, overlooking the broad street, which was divided down the centre by tall, vivid green trees. Through them Allard could see the modern flats and hotels opposite and the yellow Dodge taxis cruising noisily by. From his corner seat he could also see down into the narrow alley that

ran alongside the hotel. The view offered by the alley was more entertaining. There the fruit sellers held their pitches.

Big, fat, brown women in loose white dresses draped with black shawls sat curled before packing cases spread with sapodilla fruits; the zapotes Negroes with their green jackets and black pulp, red and green chillies and alligator pears, with black, wrinkled faces. Tomatoes, pecans and papayas were heaped in shallow trays that were inspected by leisurely buyers who were feeling, testing, gossiping and, sometimes, buying. The alley, Callejon del Beso – the Lane of the Kiss – was warm and human and at that time of the day smelt of good, natural farm produce.

Allard sipped his iced orange juice and honey, then started on the devilled kidneys on toast. He couldn't wait for Reana any longer. He ate her portions, too. As he stuffed himself he heard the pleasant background noises.

“Café negro! Quien toma café?”

“Rosas blancas! Losas y claveles?” Roses and carnations.

The cries of the coffee and flower sellers were interrupted by the voice of the waiter close to Allard's ear. *“Por favour, señor.* The lady – you wife. She does not eat this morning?”

“I expect she will. I'll re-order when she arrives.” Allard wiped his greasy lips.

“I ask, señor, because I see her going now to a taxi, and wonder if . . .”

So she'd left already. Allard scratched his head.

“Okay, forget about her,” he told the waiter.

He got up. It was odd. Why had she stayed with him this far and then buzzed off? There was something inconsistent about it. He made his way from the balcony and back into the hotel.

Taking the flight of stairs two at a time, Allard reached the long, cool corridor and his room, fumbled for the key, opened the door quietly and stood looking inside.

The broad bed was crumpled. The light-weight case that Reana owned had gone from the foot of the bed. He went into the tiny bathroom. It was empty.

He was annoyed for several reasons. Partly his pride was hurt. He didn't think he'd done so badly last night – would have thought she'd have stayed for more. He had the feeling, too, that he hadn't been careful enough. She might have stolen something or set him up for something.

He began checking his luggage.

Quickly he searched through the contents of his bag. Nothing had been disturbed that he could notice. He turned to the bed and groped behind it.

As soon as his hand touched the rough butt he knew the gun had been moved.

Carefully, Allard lifted the gun by its holster from behind the head-board.

The holster was a simple, quick-draw U-shaped affair in soft cowhide, with a nickel spring clip riveted to it. It could thus be fastened to the trouser band, under the armpit or to any convenient spot. Allard preferred the gun to be on his hip, high and with the butt tilted forward, giving the fastest draw of all.

But now the holster lay in the palm of his hand and in it was the Smith and Wesson .38 Special with a short, 2-inch barrel. He removed the gun and pressed the slide that swung out the cylinder. There were still six rounds there, but in the centre of one blue, brass-circled cap was a sharp dent as though a nail had been driven into it. The gun had been fired.

He sniffed at the barrel. Faintly, a smell of cordite came to him. Tossing the gun gently up and down in his palm, he looked around the room. It was too small to hold anything large that was not immediately apparent to the eye. Feeling slightly foolish, Allard bent and looked under the bed. Nothing.

“What the hell was she up to?” he murmured. “Some kind of frame – but no body here, so I shan’t be having the cops round to take me in for murder.” He began to wander round the room.

He had suggested the hotel, so the room wouldn’t have been bugged. Not that there had been anything worth listening to, anyway, Reana might have had a bug in her luggage somewhere, of course. But, there again, there was no reason why she should have rushed off.

He began to search systematically. He looked for nothing in particular – just from habit. He looked around the window frame and the skirting board and in the ball-cock in the lavatory. He took apart his shaving soap and felt at the toothpaste and in his cigarette case. He went through the suitcase again. It hadn’t been touched, he decided – not even by an expert. With a sigh, he turned his attention to the bed.

And there was the answer.

Of sorts.

The mattress had six bullet holes in it. The one nearest the foot was surrounded by a bad scorch mark. And one of the pillows was missing.

Six holes from one bullet! Allard scratched his head thoughtfully.

The door opened after a brief knock. He whirled, slipping the gun and holster into a side pocket.

“Le siento, señor.”

Allard relaxed as the dark face of the chambermaid peered round the door.

“Venga usted qui, por favour, Habla usted ingles?”

“A little,” she said.

“My wife. Gone?”

The thin little girl twisted her hands together in an effort to please. She was an Indian girl and her Spanish was scarcely better than her English.

“Wiyaf?”

“Woman. *Muchacha. Esposa. Marida. Si?*”

“Ah.” She smiled. “*Si. Taxi.*” The girl made a waving goodbye gesture and a brrrrmm-ing noise. The waiter, it seemed, had been telling the truth. The confirmation was worth fifty centavos and the girl was grateful. That night she would be able to buy a crimson headscarf she’d wanted for two weeks.

Allard packed and paid the bill and left his luggage at reception. He was due to meet Knightly some time that morning. Knightly was one of Mexico City’s residents. He had lived there for years and had built up an excellent cover. His work involved him in hardly any danger at all. It was a cushy number, thought Allard. If it wasn’t for the heat, he’d envy Knightly his job. On the other hand, he was hoping, himself, for a residency somewhere nearer home, in a climate he found more congenial. Dublin would do, he thought, as he got a taxi to his destination.

The gun now rested against his armpit under his starched linen jacket. He wore a horrible yellow paisley cravat, pearl-grey slacks and brown moccasins. He looked a dream.

He got the taxi to drive around a bit before going to

the bar where he was to meet Knightly. He was being a little more careful. He was sure he'd walked into a frame, but just couldn't work out what it was going to be. He wasn't even sure it was Reana, though it could hardly be anybody else – particularly since she'd left so fast.

The small bar was too cool. In the background the air-conditioning plant hummed away and made the only noise in the place. To his right a huge plate glass window looked out onto a broad thoroughfare and behind the bar were the usual collections of whiskies, gins and brandies, the usual smooth little man in a white jacket, polishing glasses and refilling the small dishes with nuts and olives. Allard wondered if the Mexican Barman's Union stipulated regulation size and smoothness for its members.

He ordered a tequila sour and when it came up it was good. He sipped at the tall, ice-frosted glass and waited for Knightly. It was eleven-thirty and mid-morning drink time had not quite arrived. Allard was the only customer.

Moody had told him to meet Knightly here. He'd shown him a photograph. Knightly would brief him on further developments, tell him anything he'd found out, filling him in on what he already knew.

He hoped to get some kind of lead from Knightly.

The man who walked in was short and fat and bounced and bobbed as he walked. He seemed to be itching to run and jump along, as if he found walking too lackadaisical, too dull for him.

Allard noticed the tattoo mark at the join of the finger and thumb of the man's left hand. It was a bad thing for an agent to have such an easily recognizable mark – but that was London's business, not his.

Knightly nodded to him. "How do?"

"You're English, aren't you?" Allard said. "Join me for a drink?"

"Don't mind if I do." Knightly smiled. He held out his hand as he advanced. "Knightly's the name." He pumped Allard's hand, gripping it tightly in his fat fist. Oh, Christ, thought Allard – a bloody Live Wire. "Call me Frank," Knightly said.

"Allard. Call me Nick if you like."

"Okay, Nick. I'll have the same as you." Knightly climbed on to the next stool. He glanced at Allard's drink.

"On second thoughts, I'll have a tomato juice," he said. "Got to watch my duodenal, you know."

Another one like Moody, Allard thought. I bet he picked him specially.

"I'm in insurance," he said. "We go in for long-term security policies mainly. Can I interest you?" and he laughed.

"Not really," Knightly said. "I'm in hardware and such-like. Safes, mostly."

The passwords completed, the two men relaxed.

"It gets more complicated every year," Knightly complained. "When I first came here after the war, we had a routine code-word and that was it. Now they're as long as your arm and change every time. Useless buggers." He spoke softly as the waiter went up to the end of the bar to find a tomato juice.

"It's not like the old days, is it?" Allard said.

Knightly didn't notice his sardonic tone. "The business has gone to seed. We're not doing anything useful. It's all out of our hands. It's the Yanks and Russians and bloody Chinks nowadays. We just get in the way or get jobs as messenger boys, if we're lucky. We've improved

counter-espionage but we've let everything else rot. We've lost our dynamism, chum." The tomato juice arrived.

They took their drinks over to a table.

"Know a girl called Reana Pedersen?" Allard asked.

"Whom does she work for?"

"No idea. Could be anyone. Even our people." Allard described her.

Knightly frowned. "She sounds lovely – but I don't know anyone anything like that. Wish I did."

"I think she's going to try to frame me for a killing," Allard said. "But how or where I don't know." He told Knightly what had happened.

"Sounds complicated," Knightly said. "Have you got yourself an alibi?"

"I'm going to keep lots of company while I'm here," Allard said. "Nobody's going to wonder where I am."

"Very wise."

"I wonder who the victim is going to be," Allard said.

"I shouldn't think that's necessarily important," Knightly replied as he sipped his tomato juice. "It's not your problem, anyway."

"It might be."

Knightly nodded. He didn't seem particularly interested. "I'll report what you've said," he told Allard. "We've had a tail on the Toriello girl, by the way. He phoned in just before I came here. We're meeting him in Yutaxa."

"We?"

"I've been told to take you there – by a special route."

"I see," said Allard. "After we've talked to the tail I take over – is that it?"

"After that, you're on your own," Knightly agreed. "I

can't say I envy you. You deal with Honduras after that. You've memorised the number?"

"Yes. What does the job look like to you, Knightly?"

"It's a fuzzy case, but a lot of people seem interested in it. The CIA's here in force and I recognized one of their SIC men yesterday. It could be Yutaxa – it could be something else altogether – but my instinct tells me it's Yutaxa."

Allard pursed his lips. He didn't like the idea of tangling with SIC. Security Intelligence Control were allied to the CIA, but very few of the CIA boys liked them. SIC was the clean-up arm of their Service. Defectors, double-agents, redundant agents – and agents of Allied powers who got in the CIA's way – were all dealt with by SIC. SIC were killers, and that's all they were. Most of them were pathological killers at that – men and women who enjoyed their work.

"The sooner we leave, the better," said Allard. "Do you think we'll be followed?"

"I think people will be trying," Knightly said. "But I've got a decent route worked out. I think it'll fox anyone. We get the three-thirty . . ."

"Don't tell me. I trust you," Allard said.

"Right you are, then. The sooner I get back to my wife and kids the better. Let's have some lunch, eh?"

"Let's," agreed Allard. "I can't stand the local grub, what I know of it. Can you recommend a restaurant and a meal?"

Knightly rose. "You're talking to a man who's actually eaten *Mole Poblano*," he smiled.

"Mole what?"

“*Mole Poblano*. It’s a traditional sort of dish. Years ago, according to the story, a Spanish viceroy was coming to a Mexican village. He was going to stay at a local convent and the Sister wanted to make him a special sauce for a turkey they’d been fattening for him. She was thinking away when this angel appeared. He told the Sister to take some raisins and chillies and chilpotles and toast them over the fire with sesame seeds, cloves, pepper and almonds and about twenty other different fruits and spices and then – then onions and two bars of chocolate. Then she was to pour it over the turkey.”

“Was it nice?” Allard asked as he got up, too.

“Bloody awful!”

Allard laughed.

“The airport restaurant’s okay,” Knightly said. “We’ll pick up your stuff and go there.”

They left the bar.

When they had gone, the barman reached into the pot of gladioli and took out the directional mike.

He was pleased. When he got the money from the man who had hired him to plant the microphone and tape-recorder he’d be able to buy his daughter’s birthday presents. No more accusing stares from his wife because of all those lottery tickets he had bought.

The man returned and picked up the mike and tape-recorder, paid the barman and left.

The man who listened to the tape-recorder wasn’t so pleased. There was hardly a scrap of information on it. He knew Knightly almost always liaised in that particular bar and he knew Knightly was meeting a new agent that morning.

Allard had guessed Knightly had old habits, too. That

was why he had expressed lack of interest in Knightly’s route.

The man who had listened was disappointed. He turned to his companion. “Knightly said ‘three-thirty’. That could be a plane. It’ll give use something, at least. Find out what plane leaves the airport at three-thirty.”

Allard and Knightly had *Quesadillas de Flores de Calabaza*. They sat in their chairs in the light and airy restaurant that overlooked the runways. Outside was the roar of engines being turned over and tested, and the sound came dully through the thick glass. Quesadillas were a sort of puffy pancake made with cheese flavouring and stuffed with meat or beans. *De Flores de Calabaza* were made with yellow pumpkin flowers and fried in deep fat. They had avocado pears to finish.

There was plenty of it, so Allard enjoyed it. He wondered how it affected Knightly’s duodenal.

They were catching a local flight to Campeche first. Campeche was out in the wilds of Mexico. Then they would hire themselves a car, back-tracking to Champoton and going to Escarcega. They had to back-track because Campeche was the nearest field to Escarcega. Then they would drive to the frontier of Yutaxa. It wouldn’t be along a proper road, but there was no proper boundary, either – the forest was too thick. Dr. Toriello’s tail would meet them at a prearranged spot in the forest. The tail would return with Knightly, having passed on all his information to Allard. Allard would then be on his own.

They took the Aerovias Mexico plane which left at three-thirty. Apart from Campeche, it was going to Villahermosa and Ciudad Del Carmen – nowhere else.

Allard and Knightly dozed as they flew high over the hot, flat coastline, taking no notice of the vivid sea which stretched to their left, blue as a sapphire. The sand turned into grey shrubs and the shrubs into lagoons and slow rivers and then back into sand again.

At last the plane touched down at Campeche. Outside the wire fence the car waited. Knightly identified himself to the man, paid the deposit, checked the fuel and gave the car a short test. He drew up alongside Allard, who waited, holding his bag. Allard climbed into the passenger seat of the Chrysler.

"All set, old boy," said Knightly. "Back we go to Champoton, then."

Knightly let out the clutch and the car started to roll away. They were eight kilometres outside Campeche when the Buick tried to flag them down. In it were two men – Americans by the look of them. They were waving passes or identity cards of some kind.

"Keep going," Allard said.

"Knightly was jittery now. He steered erratically as the Buick scraped the side of the Chrysler.

"We'd better stop, old boy."

"We'd better not," said Allard. As unobtrusively as possible, he pulled out the Smith and Wesson and cradled it in the palm of his hand. "Keep going."

"I'm not sure I can. I'm not that good a driver, Allard."

"Bloody well keep going, you fool!" Allard wished he'd decided to drive. He reached across and stamped on the foot that Knightly had on the accelerator.

This was the set-up, he was sure. This was why Reana had mucked about with his gun. He still didn't know

quite what they were up to, but he was going to play safe.

One of the men was mouthing something at them. Knightly looked at him.

"Eyes on the road, Knightly," Allard ordered.

The Buick bumped the Chrysler. Both cars were going at nearly seventy, careering along on both sides of the deserted road.

Then the Chrysler hit a bump.

It skidded.

It swerved and Knightly, swearing and moaning and sweating like a pig, tried to keep control.

"It's not good, Allard!"

He slammed his foot on the brake and the Chrysler bumped along the road and stopped.

The Buick stopped beside them and the man nearest Knightly signed for him to wind down the window.

Knightly began to obey.

Allard just sat there, cursing Knightly under his breath and waiting, tensely, to see what happened. He couldn't do anything else.

As Knightly wound down his window and the other man wound down his, a shot-gun suddenly appeared and was thrust close against Knightly's chest by the man who leaned over from the far seat.

Allard pulled Knightly away and snapped a shot at the man as the twelve-bore cartridge exploded and forced a single slug down the smooth barrel, through the linen jacket and into Frank Knightly's heart.

Allard missed, his bullet shattering the window on the far side of the Buick.

Then he moved instinctively as the door opened behind

him. He tried to turn in the cramped seat of the car, but Knightly's body impeded him.

As he tried to protect his head against the blow which fell on it, he realized suddenly what had been done – why the mattress had had six holes in it.

Then his head seemed to explode with as much force as the shot-gun cartridge.

CHAPTER SEVEN

REANA PEDERSEN could never look at him for long without her whole body starting to shake as revulsion swept through her. He sat slumped, almost shapeless, in the long, wicker lounging chair on the wide verandah. She could see why he had been called Gila – if he hadn't chosen his cover name himself.

Gila monster – one of the world's only two poisonous lizards. A big, sluggish creature with poison sacs at the roots of its needle teeth. A freak. A cylindrical body, unblinking eyes, neckless, covered in pink and black blotches. A horror.

Gila resembled the cold-blooded reptile not only in general appearance but in the aura that was almost always with him.

Reana was subordinate to him and he was the only man she had ever felt real fear for. The old *agent provocateur* probably knew that too.

Gila moved slightly in the chair and slowly lifted a glass to salute Reana and the pace-faced man in the white

suit that sat next to her. The girl shuddered. That she could hardly stand – the sight of Gila's left hand, which was blotchy pink and had no fingers but merely the five nails growing from the top of the palm. A curious vanity made him have the nails manicured and they glittered in the rays of the setting sun. When he spoke it was in a strange, flutelike voice.

"You have done very badly so far, Reana. And you too, Max." He sipped at the glass and set it down, smiling very, very slowly. "Now you perhaps begin to see the wisdom of being just a little cooler, Reana. But I do not blame you for leaving Allard so soon – even though in doing so you made him suspect you. You, Max, let me down very badly, however – losing half our consignment like that."

"Zubillaga's Indian turned up out of nowhere – in the middle of the forest. How could I have been prepared for him?"

Gila did not reply.

"How?" Max insisted, his pale face intense.

"That is for you to ask yourself, Max, not me." He moved his body in the chair and it creaked. "Zubillaga will be here soon. We must try to decide upon some plan that is in our mutual interest." Gila paused. "But I will become impatient if any more delays of this kind are introduced, Max. You understand, Reana?"

She nodded and glanced at Max, who looked away.

Max was unhappy. Toriello had been delivered to him at the frontier. He had been induced to come, thinking he was going to see Zubillaga. But, of course, Gila was the one responsible for bringing him back to Yutaxa. Somehow Zubillaga had found out that they intended to get

Toriello before he could. He had sent his Indian after them. The Indian had found the jeep, waited, and then forced him to drive to where Zubillaga's men were waiting to pick Toriello up.

Gila had anticipated Zubillaga's plans to get hold of Toriello and the girl. He had got his men to Spain ahead of Zubillaga's. He had got his men to England ahead of Zubillaga's. He would have held both the old man and the girl – held the whip hand if Max had not be unwary. Now Zubillaga had half the 'consignment'.

Still, Gila had the most important half.

Zubillaga, whose family had originally come from Brazil and who was a multi-millionaire, thought that Gila was helping him because of the promises of power he had made to Gila. Gila smiled. Gila was making use of Zubillaga's millions, that was all – or, rather, the people who employed Gila were making use of those millions though Gila.

Gila had worked for many countries in his years as *agent provocateur*, courier, double-agent and killer. He had worked for the British, for the Germans, for the French, for the Russians and for the Americans. Sooner or later he had double-crossed them all and they no longer employed him. Now he worked for the Chinese. It would be his last operation. It would make him rich. Max and Reana were two of his staff, and Blasco and Lomas were also employed by him. Gila had a hold of some kind over them all. That was how he had built up such an efficient little free-lance network.

"You had better get the car out, Max," Gila said, glancing at his watch. "We meet Zubillaga in one hour."

Max got up readily. He left the verandah of the house

Gila rented on the outskirts of Itlo, leaving Reana alone with their master. Gila held out his empty glass to her.

“Make me another drink, Reana.”

Obediently, she went into the semi-darkness of the room and made him another drink.

Zubillaga was a tall, emaciated man dressed in a grey silk suit and a panama hat. His eyes were pale blue and he wore a full beard that was black with a few streaks of white.

He leaned against the bonnet of his Cadillac and smoked a cheroot. Incongruous amid the luxury of the big car, the little, ancient Indian with the Lee-Enfield sat in the back seat, his impassive eyes watching as the Thunderbird drew up.

The jungle road was dark except for the Cadillac’s parking lights.

In the Thunderbird were Max and Gila. They had left Reana behind at the house.

Gila got out of the car laboriously. He nodded to Don José-Maria Zubillaga. They didn’t shake hands.

“How is Doctor Toriello?” Zubillaga asked sardonically.

“Very well,” Gila said. “And her father?”

“Also very well – at least, as well as can be expected. He yearns to be reunited with his daughter.”

“And his daughter shares his feelings,” Gila smiled. “You did not tell your American friends you were meeting me?”

“Of course not. They trust me anyway.”

The two men had been in contact by phone earlier.

“At least the British seem out of the picture now,” Gila

said, glancing into the Cadillac and noting the Indian. “We have only the Americans to worry about – and if you can continue to deceive them as to why you have Toriello at your house, we should manage to put our plans into operation with little difficulty.

“Once we have sorted out our personal differences,” Zubillaga reminded him. “Already you have betrayed me once, Gila. I had told you that I would deal with Toriello and his daughter. Now perhaps you will let me have the girl. You are trying to ransom her – is that it? I am prepared to pay – but that will terminate our original agreement.”

“I wouldn’t think of it,” Gila said. “It is simply that I felt you held too many cards, Señor Zubillaga. I wanted some of them. For my own security, you might say.”

“I see. I have the culture – you have the potential antidote.” Zubillaga seemed to accept the situation.

“Exactly. And if you give us back Señor Toriello . . .”

“Give him back? He was mine to begin with. You . . .”

“We have the girl. We need Toriello to make her work. You must be more philosophical about this, Señor Zubillaga. It will turn out to our advantage in the end. Nothing will have changed.”

“We will take a photograph of Toriello and let you have it. That will convince the girl. A tape-recording of his voice, even. But not Toriello himself. We must keep him – or the Americans will suspect.

Gila pursed his reptilian lips.

“For the moment, then,” he said, “you will let me have photographs and tape-recording by tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

“Have one of your servants deliver them to the offices of the Student Freedom League. You know where it is?”

“I do. To whom shall I address them?”

“Miss Reana Pedersen – she is on my staff.”

Zubillaga sighed. “You have complicated the issue unnecessarily, Gila.”

“It saves potential – and long-term – complications in the future,” Gila said, lumbering back towards his car. “Good-night, Señor Zubillaga.”

A moment later the cars drove off in different directions.

Gila smiled again. Zubillaga was convinced that he still had the real power. He did not know that Gila worked for the Chinese, though he suspected he was planning a local revolution. Zubillaga had no interest in politics as such. What Zubillaga craved was money – much more money than ever he possessed. Real power – the unobtrusive kind – was what Zubillaga planned to get for himself when he had the whole of Central America at his feet.

Gila was not so sure that that was what Zubillaga would get. But, in trying to get it, he would create so much general mayhem that Gila’s employers would have the opportunity to take unprecedented advantage of the chaos that would result from Zubillaga’s tremendous scheme.

The Chinese had the problem of providing limited funds for use outside Asia. They had to get results on the cheap. Gila knew this. When Zubillaga had come to him for his help and outlined his plan, Gila lost no time in contacting the Chinese, with whom he had been flirting for some time. They had told him to go ahead and help Zubillaga, but meanwhile they would be preparing their own plan, with his help.

If the plans came off, Gila could retire. He would like to return to Europe, buy himself a beautiful young wife . . . With the money he would possess, anything would be possible . . .

Reana Pedersen was about to go to bed when Blasco came up the stairs from the basement.

“Where’s that bastard, Lomas?” he said petulantly. “He’s due to relieve me. Still sleeping, is he?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“*Por favour*, Reana – go and give him a knock. Remind him that I need some sleep too.”

“Okay.” Reana went into the hall and began to climb the stairs. Behind her Blasco paused before returning to the cellar. He looked at her long legs as they took her gracefully up the stairs, admired her well-rounded bottom as it moved from side to side under the thin skirt.

Then he sighed and went down to the cellar again.

There was a little passage at the bottom and a heavy door at the end. Through the judas-window he looked at the girl inside and sighed again. It was too much for a man. This one he dare not touch and the other one, the Pedersen girl, was withdrawn. She locked her door every night, he knew. Anyway, he was not a rapist. He smiled. There was no need to be.

Lomas came yawning down the steps, shrugging on his jacket. He looked at the plate of stale sandwiches on the little table by the door, the half-full jug of milk covered by a saucer, the dirty glass.

“Is that all there is to eat?”

“You eat too much,” Blasco said. “I’ll bring you something fresh from the kitchen.” He went away and came

back ten minutes later with some fresh sandwiches and a mug of coffee. "I treat you better than you treat me."

Lomas munched a sandwich. "You sound like a man's wife. Thanks."

Blasco returned to the ground floor and began dousing the lights, checking the doors and windows. Gila was out somewhere – so was Max. He didn't know where. But Gila didn't like to return home to find the lights on and the house not properly locked up, in spite of the alarms.

One after the other, the lights in the house were doused. In the lush garden outside, surrounded by the high wall the flowers poured out erotic scents. In the tall mulatto tree with the red, peeling bark and the bare trunk that reflected the silver of the moon, a bull-bat rested for an instant before flying on soft, feathered wings with bristled mouth agape, searching for night-flying insects. Beneath, in the irises that grew in ranks up to the house, a tiny mouse crouched, terrified as the grey ghost of a barn owl flew past. Far away in the forest a monkey chattered.

In the cellar, Gregoria Toriello lay chained to her bed, moving uneasily in her shallow sleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ALLARD woke up with his head splitting. His trembling hands groped at the thick, muffling bandages around his head and he opened his eyes. At first he saw only a translucent veil of underwater green. As his eyes slowly focused he saw the walls opposite. Hospital walls, without a doubt. Slowly and carefully he turned his head – very carefully, for the first abrupt movement had sent a flash of pain across his eyes.

Against the wall was a low table with cape jasmines and tall lilies in an earthenware jug. Past that was a white-painted door and further along still a broad window that gave a magnificent view of the Caribbean. Tiny blue wavelets skipped by the side of a fishing boat sailing slowly towards port.

Painfully turning his head further, Allard saw the uniformed policeman in the corner and, beyond him, completing the half-circle, he saw the plainclothes man by the head of the bed.

"I've got the choice of three questions, haven't I?" he said. "Where am I? What happened? Who are you? Consider I've asked all three."

The plainclothes man motioned with his head and the

uniformed policeman left the room. "This is the Hospital of the Sacred Heart," he said. "You murdered your colleague. I am Captain Hernandez." The captain, a short, dapper man, relapsed into silence. A simple man, direct and to the point, Allard thought. "You are under arrest," added the captain as an unnecessary afterthought.

With an effort, Allard smiled. "This is a mistake," he said. Moody's instructions were straightforward and clear on the subject of foreign police. Get yourself into trouble with them and you could get yourself out again.

"Why should you think I killed Knightly?" he asked. "He was my friend. We were going on holiday together." He managed to make his voice sound puzzled, mild and innocent.

"I do not know why you do this," the captain said, offering no theories. In his opinion Allard had killed Knightly. Why, he did not know – but that was for Mexico City to worry about.

Allard widened his eyes. He knew he'd been framed, of course, and he couldn't blame a small-town policeman for believing whatever evidence had been faked. Twisting on to his side, Allard looked squarely at the man and saw the rectangular shape of the Colt .45 on his lap. The gun had power enough to blow a large, ragged hole right through his body.

He tried to get the captain's sympathy.

"Please, Captain Hernandez, would you tell me why you suspect me? What *did* happen? The only thing I remember was being hit over the head."

The captain looked owlshly at the blue-black gun on his lap. Almost onelessly, he said: "You were found beside the man Knightly in the car. Knightly had been shot. Your

gun had been recently fired." He spread his hands and raised his eyebrows.

Allard remembered the instinctive shot he'd loosed off at the man who'd killed Knightly. That had been chance. If he hadn't fired, Reana's boyfriends could have easily have done it after they'd knock him out.

The captain continued. "We have limited means here, but examination through our microscope shows that your gun fired the bullet into Knightly."

Allard nodded. "But I didn't do it, sir," he murmured. "I must have been – er – framed."

"That is for Mexico City to decide. The bullet has already been sent there. And you will follow.

"When?"

"When the doctor says you may."

Allard's head was clearing rapidly. He would have to get out of this hospital. In bed, with no clothes and an armed guard, he had a slim chance of escape. It would have to be on the way to the airport. He was convinced that the bullet had been contrived well enough to convict him. The set-up had been highly professional. Who was Reana working for? He had to find her and, if his guess was right he'd find her in Itlo. He bet she knew where Gregoria Toriello and her father were.

"Call the doctor, captain. I'm well enough to travel."

The captain shrugged. Who was he to discourage a man from hurrying to his own funeral? He called the uniformed man and then went in search of the doctor.

Allard lay back on the bed thinking hard. The trip to the airport was his best chance. This small town would hardly run to an armoured paddy-wagon. A jeep, or possibly a sedan. If they hadn't discovered the truth about

his fountain pen that was even more to his advantage. He could make no plans, though – only watch and wait for his chance. For the time being he could rest and work out his details of how Reana had framed him.

The laugh that came from the bed was harsh and it broke the stillness of the quiet room. The policeman jumped.

Allard had worked it all out.

Whoever Reana worked for – almost certainly the same people who'd got hold of the Toriello couple, and she had probably been in Hampstead that night – wanted to prevent him and Frank Knightly arriving in Yutaxa. It couldn't be a simple killing. They didn't want two dead agents and a murderer loose, with the chance of the police getting too interested in who had bumped them off. So they'd arranged one victim and one killer. Neat.

Reana had got close enough to him to get his gun. She had folded up the mattress and fired his gun into it. It ploughed its way through, making six holes before winding up in the pillow at the other end. She then had a bullet from his gun, unmarked by the mattress, but having the right groove marks. Then her friends had stuffed this properly marked bullet into the barrel of a smooth-bore shot gun, padded it with cotton wool or something similar, and loaded the shot-gun with a blank cartridge. Hey presto! Point it at Knightly. Pull the trigger. One corpse – killed by a bullet which could be proved to have come from his gun.

Allard bit his lip. He had to get away before they put him on that plane. Mexico City would be convinced he'd shot Knightly.

The white door opened and the doctor entered, followed by the captain and his large .45.

"You say you are well enough to travel?"

"I am, doctor."

The man shrugged. He preferred his beds occupied by honest people, but he had to make the gesture necessary to preserve the face of his profession.

"I think you have only the cracked skull from the spanner in the hand of your companion" – that's how they'd worked it out – "but you are well enough otherwise. If you wish, though, I will recommend you stay here for another day, perhaps two."

Shaking his head, Allard refused the offer and the doctor left to have his clothes brought to him.

When they arrived, Allard dressed. He was a bit shaky on his pins, his head thumped, but he wasn't in too bad shape. After he'd got his jacket on he felt in his pocket for his pen. It was still there.

Minutes later, a heavy police sedan howled to a stop in front of the hospital steps. A sharp clatter of Spanish from a white-robed nun and the driver's sincere promise not to make that dreadful noise in the grounds of the hospital again. The policeman appeared at the top of the steps and saluted as Hernandez and Allard made their way towards the car.

The nun dashed up. "You are well enough to travel?" she asked anxiously, her face animated only slightly. "Say if you are not and they shall not take you."

"I'm all right."

"May God go with you."

"God help me, indeed," breathed Allard in English.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when Allard

climbed into the blue car. Just twenty-four hours had passed since Reana had effectively framed him. Twenty-four hours lost. He wondered what had happened to the tail they were supposed to meet in Yutaxa. He'd probably gone back to Mexico City. If he got in touch with London – or even Honduras Allard might stand a chance of getting some help later.

The road from the Hospital of the Sacred Heart to the airport at Campeche was long, dusty and lonely.

Three in the afternoon was the end of the siesta time. The burros and their drivers stayed sensibly in the shade of the cactus and the adobe walls. The two villages they sped through were still; not even the chickens squawked from under the wheels. Grey dust spurted from beneath the churning rear wheels and hung for five or ten minutes over the pot-holed road before settling down again.

Campeche grew nearer.

In the rear of the car Allard turned to the captain. The man was nervous with a foreign killer to guard. He raised his gun. The driver in the front seat half turned but Allard didn't bother about him. The driver was too busy watching the awful road.

"One request, captain..."

"Cigarette?"

"Thanks. No. Can I be allowed to write a message to the British Consul in Mexico City before we reach the airport?"

"He has been informed as a matter of course."

"This is private and very urgent. My wife . . ."

There was a long pause. The car had reached the outer suburbs of the town now. They had only to drive through

the small centre and out towards the sea. The airport was at its edge.

The car sped on. The captain scratched his chin and Allard waited impatiently.

"This is not unreasonable."

Allard sighed and reached slowly for his pen.

With sharp, black eyes the captain watched the movement. The prisoner had been searched and the gun taken – but you never knew. Gently he moved the barrel of the .45 higher as Allard took out his fountain pen.

The knife blade was loose as the car turned around the edge of a cobbled square and into the row of mud and corrugated iron hovels that seemed to mark the outskirts of every Central American town.

Still there was no sign of life. Only the smell of poor, unwashed people showed there were human beings inside the broken walls. The ammonia smell of dirt-floored, gutter-lavatoried shacks entered the closed car. Through the curved windscreen Allard could see, well ahead, a wind-sock dangling limply from a tall pole.

It had to be now.

Allard dropped the empty holder to the car floor with an apparently clumsy gesture and allowed the scrap of paper he'd taken from his pocket to follow it.

Briefly Hernandez's eyes looked down at them. Time enough.

The razor-sharp edge swept out and bit deeply into the tendons at the base of Hernandez's wrist. Blood spurted from slashed arteries on to the black upholstery.

Allard grabbed the gun with his left hand.

"Don't try anything," he said quietly in Spanish. The sight of the heavy gun was enough for the driver.

“Drive past the last shack and then halt and keep your hands on the wheel,” Allard ordered.

The car stopped. The airfield could be seen ahead. On it stood a light aircraft.

The engine died inside the car and it was quiet and still. Only Captain Hernandez broke the silence with a suppressed groan as he gripped his ruined wrist with his left hand. The driver stared wide-eyed with hands gripping the wheel, still not able to understand exactly what had happened. He had a wife and two sons. He didn’t intend taking any risks.

Allard spoke. His head throbbed with the after-effects of the blow and the excitement. The heat inside the car had become intolerable since they had stopped and the wind has ceased to blow. The stench of the slums had been replaced by the arid smell of the desert – the dreary, hopeless stink of dust and moving air.

“Hand over your gun.”

The driver’s .38 Spanish revolver was handed across and Allard dumped it on the floor.

“And the knives,” said Allard.

He got two – a flick knife and a short Solinger throwing knife. He relaxed a little. Blood still dripped from between Hernandez’s fingers and into the spreading pool at his feet.

“You in the front. Bind up that wound,” Allard told the driver. He wasn’t moved by humanitarian motives but by expediency. He needed the captain to appear unhurt.

He transferred the captain’s gun and the knife from left hand to right. “Listen,” he said quickly. “We’re going to drive to the airport. You arranged for a special plane to take me to Mexico City – right?”

The captain stared sullenly at his slashed wrist and muttered.

Allard swung viciously at the sleek, black head and Hernandez fell back onto the stained padding. Blood spurted again as he involuntarily released the grip on his wrist.

“Just answer my question,” Allard said.

“There is a plane waiting for you and me.”

“What arrangements have you made for me taking me aboard?” Allard glanced out of the car. Soon siesta-time would be over. Curious people would start gathering round the car. “Is anyone seeing us off – like the Chief of Police? Anything like that? Will the pilot want you to produce an identity card? You know the sort of thing.”

Hernandez looked as if he was going to cry. “I am the chief. The pilot knows me. He has made such trips before.”

“Does he expect anyone else – other than you and me?”

“No.”

The driver bound up his captain’s hand and then started the car at Allard’s instructions.

“Have you got my gun, captain?” Allard asked.

“In my pocket.”

“Give it to me.”

The gun was tugged from the captain’s pocket. It was unloaded. Allard examined it, then handed it back and slipped the loaded .45 into his own pocket.

“Now I’m your prisoner again. Keep that wounded hand hidden and cover me with the empty gun. We’re going into the airport and up to the plane. Remember that I’m the one who’s armed, chum.”

Allard turned to the driver. “Any trouble from you –

anything out of the ordinary – and I shoot the captain, you, and anyone else if I have to.”

Allard looked at the dashboard. The car didn't have a radio-telephone.

“You'll remain in the car till the plane's taken off,” he told the driver. “Captain, you'll escort me aboard in the usual way.”

“And I suppose you will capture the plane and fly it all the way back to England, eh?”

“You've got the general idea,” Allard said.

The pole guarding the runway was lifted at the sound of the police siren and the dust stirred on the hard runway as the car pulled alongside the light plane.

The plane was built on the lines of an Auster. It had been made by an American company that had gone bankrupt and was as easy to fly as a fairly temperamental small car was to drive. The wings were high and clear of the cockpit, which had a minimum of equipment. Inside the perspex canopy, slid back to prevent the sun turning the place into a hothouse, were three seats, placed tandem fashion. Allard noticed the parachutes and was pleased.

The pilot stretched as he rose from his place in the shade under the wing. He was tall, thin and stringy. He spoke with an odd lisp.

“Hernandez! Another little trip, eh? What have we this time? Rape? Arson? Murder?”

“Murder.”

“Ah, good. And a gringo, too!” He smiled.

“For mercy's sake, Juan! Let's get going.” The captain spoke wearily. He'd lost a lot of blood and was about to lose his prisoner.

The two men climbed into their seats. The pilot glanced

curiously at Allard then climbed in also and shrugged himself petulantly into his seat. Hernandez must be in a bad mood. Usually, he liked to talk about how he captured his prisoners. Maybe there was trouble because this murderer was a foreigner. The pilot switched on the engine.

Allard glanced back at the man in the car. He hadn't moved.

The pilot taxied into the faint breeze and gunned the engine before making the take-off run. He was about to let the brakes go when Allard stuck the gun into his neck.

Juan glanced into the mirror and saw Allard holding a gun and the Captain of Police sitting behind him, white-faced and swaying gently. Juan throttled back the motor.

“You're going to take me up,” Allard told him. “But we drop Hernandez first. His hand is bad. Tell him, captain.”

“This man slashed my wrist open. He is a killer. Do as he says, Juan.”

“Well said,” Allard approved. “Now, Juan, listen to me. You're going to fly me to a certain place after we've dropped the captain. I'm going to parachute out late. Nobody need get harmed any more. We can take the captain with us – but he will bleed badly – perhaps to death, you see. What are you going to do?”

The pilot decided. He shrugged. He watched with a grey face as Hernandez stumbled out of the plane on to the ground.

Allard pulled the door shut. “Let's go.”

The pilot began to take off. Allard put the gun on the seat beside him and fumbled with the familiar webbing of the chute. He soon had it on.

When they were airborne, Allard gave the pilot his instructions. The pilot nodded. “I can navigate myself,”

Allard warned him, “so don’t try to take me to the centre of Mexico City, will you?”

Later, when they were high over Yutaxan forest, Allard helped himself to Juan’s map-case.

“This I’m going to need,” he said.

Then he jumped.

The white canopy opened over the solid green earth and blocked from view the silver flash of a river. The plane turned, flicked its wings and headed back to Campeche.

That night Mexican National Radio broadcast a warning that a murderer was loose and passed the message to Yutaxa. The message was relayed amidst a jumble of other items – football results and the winning numbers in the lottery. Murder was commonplace.

But someone else heard the message and knew just who the murderer was. Few would kill near Campeche and then head for Yutaxa. It had to be Allard. A careful plan had gone slightly wrong. But not to worry – Allard was on the run so he couldn’t give them much trouble. As a murderer, no-one would worry too much about his disappearance, either.

A phone call was made to Zubillaga. He was told what had happened.

“I think we’d better use your Indian,” they said.

CHAPTER NINE

THE long strip of the inner bark of the majagua tree floated down the stream, the end marked by a red-tinted blob – a wild tomato. The globe bobbed quietly along on the brownish surface, caught in a weak eddy, then swung violently inwards towards the big rock. Suddenly the water churned into a white foam and the tomato was gone. The fibre line tightened then jerked like a whip. The silver torpedo that was a moharra fish sailed gracefully up and over the rock, still biting voraciously at the tit-bit that was to cost the fish its life.

It was not sporting. Nor was it elegant. But it gave Allard his third fish to fill his belly.

The river was wide and the jungle came right down to the edge, save where the storms had cleared small patches and the creepers and thorn bushes had not had time to cover the bare spaces. It would soon be night and the birds and animals knew, though there was no visible sign. The whip-poor-will started singing his melancholy ditty and the large blue heron on the opposite bank

lumbered into the air on untidy wings. Deep in the forest a wild pig barked like a dog and, over the red embers of the cacao-wood fire, Allard cleaned and gutted three moharra.

Suddenly, a velvet darkness took hold of the forest and the insects chirped and squeaked more loudly and a bull-bat bird silent left its two blotched eggs nestling in dead leaves under a thorn bush and flew on soft wings in search of night-flying moths. In the darkness, the river spoke with a deeper and more comforting sound and the small river glowed redly. The sweet smell of wood-smoke mixed with the aroma of the cooking fish and mingled with the even sweeter scent of the white, jasmine-like flowers that grew by the edge of the river.

Soon, the white, crumbly flesh had been stripped from the delicate bones and the bones themselves tossed into the river. The river provided water for drinking and washing and the parachute made a comfortable bed.

Allard carefully placed more cacao-wood on the fire knowing that it was slow-burning and would last until the morning. He lay on the silk and drew another fold over his body – the air was rapidly turning cold. He lay with his hands beneath his head, staring into the branches of the tree and at the orioles' nests in the high branches.

Twenty-four hours had been lost in the hospital. But Knightly and he were travelling by car as far as the frontier. About even so far as time went, he guessed. Unless the 'chute had been spotted coming down – and he thought that was unlikely – he could move without undue risk. There were surveyors searching for oil, hunters after chicle

trees and scouts after the mahogany. Speaking good Spanish, he could pass for one of those.

The real danger would be in the city. The Toriello woman would probably be in Itlo, too. It was the only place of any appreciable size in the country.

Allard sighed and rolled on his side. Moody had given him a beauty this time, he thought. He'd as much chance of finding this girl as he had of finding a virgin in Soho – and, like the Soho virgin, she might not want him if and when he did find her.

A brittle moon touched the glade with silver and turned the hanging nests of the orioles into Christmas-tree baubles.

Allard slept.

He slept and the moon shone. It shone on rocks and rapids, on quiet brown waters and muddy banks and on mile after mile of the moving water of the river.

Allard slept, and far, far downstream, where the water lay quiet as the bed widened into a patch of soft soil, the surface was like a pool of mercury.

Suddenly, the mirror surface was shattered by the stubby bows of a native canoe.

The curved bars of blackness spread out, breaking the silver pool with a harlequin effect. The night had never been really quiet, but the sounds had all been those of nature. Now the sounds of man intruded.

Following behind the broken wavelets came the soft chuff-chuff of an outboard motor as it pushed the canoe against the current. In the stern, with an arm curving over the outboard and the other caressing the rifle, sat the Indian.

Suddenly, the engine coughed into silence and the craft glided towards the shore and, with an exact knowledge,

the Indian grounded it with only the gentlest of bumps. A tug at the bows and she lay snug for the night. Some ten minutes work with the machete, then a fire; a handful of beans and two re-heated Chalupa tortillas; water, blanket. The silent Indian squatted and quickly pulled through the rifle with a lightly oiled rag, looked suspiciously around, then slept peacefully.

The task Zubillaga had given him was not difficult.

Find Allard and kill him!

Find one man, seventy-four inches high and one-hundred-and-seventy pounds in weight, in a few thousand square kilometres of desert forest or swamp. Kill one man, a man who was trained in jungle survival and who had a detached, professional approach towards death.

The Indian considered the job to be easy.

The only means of swift travel through any jungle is by river. The Indian knew that Allard would travel by water and that he had parachuted roughly in mid-state. In that area there were only four rivers and two of them did not run into Itlo. Allard would make for the capital city. By which of the two rivers? The Indian camped four miles downstream from their junction.

A dangerous man? The rifle was clean and well oiled; the ammunition was new. The jungle was thick and an ambush simple. Above all the Indian had muttered his half-understood prayer to his god. A Puch – a prayer to the God of Death.

The moon rode across the sky and in due time was replaced by the sun.

Allard awoke coughing as the morning mist curled around him. After a swim, brief and warm, he started

to search the banks for fallen logs, something newly fallen so that it would not have had time to rot. Something broad enough to make a platform until he could fashion a canoe. He found a suitable log after half an hour's search and using a sapling as a lever he manoeuvred it to the edge of the river.

A second log was more difficult to find, but by the time the sun was halfway to its peak, Allard had made himself a serviceable raft. The two logs were lashed together with strips of majagua bark, and across them at right-angles were several small branches serving as a seat. By the time the raft was finished, Allard was sweating profusely and cursing freely.

As the wisps of steam disappeared and the sun glowered down in white-hot fury, Allard was paddling for mid-stream. The 1911 Colt .45 was tucked safely in the band of his trousers; his own gun, the .38 Smith and Wesson with the 2-inch barrel, was back at Campeche in the hands of Captain Hernandez. More serious, the Captain also had Allard's money. Sitting in his linen jacket, Allard took hold of the rough paddle and thrust sufficiently hard to give his craft steerage-way.

Hour followed sweaty hour. After a short journey close to the bank, Allard kept to midstream where the flies were fewer, paddling monotonously.

The rough line trailed aft but no fish had taken the bait – a tender young frog. Allard paused and tightened his belt. He didn't want to waste time on a trip ashore in search of food if he could feed himself from the river as he travelled. So he fished as he paddled.

The sun, now hidden by the high, sweeping trees, now glaring on his handkerchief-covered neck, reached its peak

and moved downwards again. More and more often, Allard paused to wipe the film of sweat from his bleary eyes.

He paused wearily with his head throbbing from the combination of the sun and the vicious crack he had received when Knightly had been shot. He stretched an aching back, presenting a perfect target.

Hidden behind a fallen log, the Indian squinted along the sight of the rifle. He knew the man had to come this way. The Englishman's thin body was caught in the cross-hairs of the 'scope. Without any change of expression, the brown thumb pushed forward the safety catch. No joy, no elation; no feeling of sorrow. If Zubillaga said that the man had to die, then die he must. No trembling of the forefinger – this work he had done before. And no fear.

The forefinger squeezed the trigger at the same time as a moharra fish at last took the frog that still trailed behind the log-raft. The line, wrapped loosely around his wrist, jerked Allard up in momentary surprise.

The tug, the jerk, the fanning of his cheek with a wind far hotter than any so far that day – and then, finally, the sharp crack of the rifle that set the parrots and macaws and the monkeys screeching and squawking. It shook Allard out of his semi-conscious state. Suddenly his brain was clear. His heart throbbed and pumped the adrenalin through his veins, and automatically his eyes searched the shore for signs of powder-smoke even as he slid swiftly into the brown water.

Behind the log, the Indian jerked the bolt up and back, ejecting the spent cartridge, then forward, pushing home the fresh round served by the leaf-spring in the magazine, and cocked the weapon. He squeezed, holding the breath, and watched the bullet strike the water with that cruel zip

some two inches from the black hair. Still no emotion. The god, Ah Puch, was displeased maybe.

But the man must land somewhere and by then he would have said more swift, jumbled prayers to his god. The Indian rolled away from the log and moved silently into the jungle.

Allard submerged. For two and a half minutes he swam downstream and to his right. That was the obvious move to make – too obvious, but the current was too strong to try swimming underwater upstream. Now his mind was working along well-worn channels. Someone was shooting at him – an unpleasantly familiar situation, but he was paid for taking just such risks.

First, check the position. He bobbed briefly to the surface, choosing by good luck, the moment when the Indian was changing his position. The smoke had come from the patch of ground fifty yards into the forest, now slightly upstream. Down into the brown depths, kicking in brief panic at tangling weeds that brought sharp visions of alligators and piranhas and an unpleasant death in a steaming, stinking corner of the world deep below the surface of a muddy brown river. The bed shelved upwards and Allard swam just beneath the surface until he encountered a log that lay almost at right-angles to the bank. Cautiously, he poked his head up by the side of the log for breath.

The bark exploded before his eyes as the Indian took a snap shot. Allard grabbed air into his lungs and submerged again.

On the bank, the Indian waited. The log had been the obvious place for a man to come up to breath, and there Allard would die – for the Indian could see what the man in the water could not.

The log lay along a spit jutting out into the water and at the end of the spit the river suddenly narrowed as the hitherto soft river bed changed suddenly into hard, unyielding rock. For three hundred yards the river crashed and caromed from boulder to boulder and churned itself into a white rage that threw spumes of fury into the air. A man could not swim through that brief patch without injury, and he certainly could not swim at all under the surface.

The log and the small bay that lay quietly protected by the spit were the only places where a man could land. And the Indian lay hidden upstream from them, cuddling the rifle to his cheek.

Allard moved backwards under the water, pushing himself along the log with his hands. He was unaware of the swift change in the river, he had been half asleep with the heat, and had swum some distance beneath the surface since the first shot. A swift gulp at the heavy air. No shot. The Indian was content to wait for a certain chance.

Push backwards to swim further downstream and away from his attacker. Panic again. The tearing current grabbed at his legs with a brutal grasp. Allard choked as he gauged the speed of the swirling river, and involuntarily exchanged some precious air for foul water. Arms thrashed and body convulsed, the grip on his legs temporarily forgotten in the mad desire to breathe.

By surfacing, Allard saved his life and, through changing his mind and loosing off a quick shot, the Indian lost his.

The spurting of the bark told Allard that he must move downstream away from the man with the rifle; the roaring

of the water told him that he dare not venture into that fearsome quarrel between the water and the rocks.

Flinging his whole body sideways and reaching out at full length, Allard grabbed for and grasped the trailing roots of the tree. As he grasped them, the river tore at his body so that he was dragged at right-angles to the tree and parallel with the river. The pull was still on his legs.

Heaving and gasping and praying that the log afforded him cover from the rifle, Allard pulled himself forward until he could grip the roots with his left hand also. With a taut, stretched body, he struggled with the power of the stream until his hands grasped the solidity of the trunk itself and his cold trembling hands sought to join each other around the heavy, solid trunk.

Allard breathed deeply and looked around. No shot – he was still hidden by the bulk of the tree. Recovering slightly, he sought to bring his legs up from the horizontal position in the water and grip the trunk with them. His trembling legs were soon locked in the comfort of the thick roots.

Moving slowly, inch by cautious inch lest the river seize its chance to sweep away his body, Allard pulled himself along the downstream side of the log until he reached shallower water. With feet firmly on the bottom, he poked a swift but cautious head above the top of the log. Still no shot.

Next step – consider the counter-attack. Allard struggled with the heavy gun that still remained in his belt. He looked at it doubtfully, holding it at eye level out of the water.

It was heavy – heavy enough to batter a man's skull into

fragments. His hand sought for the knife. A twist and the blade came out of the fountain-pen holder. This was a weapon that would not betray him.

He felt the fierce tug of the current and knew he dare not risk the journey through the rocks downstream. He looked at the quiet of the sheltered, log-protected bay, watched keenly by a man with a rifle.

Allard looked over his shoulder at the raging water.

He would take his chance with the rifle.

Knife between his teeth, gun threaded by the trigger guard through his finger, Allard breathed deeply and began to work his way under the log to gain the side nearest the quiet bay.

Fear came back as slimy growths slithered across his face. He knew he could never have survived the rapids. The fear stayed with him as he reached the sheltered side, and he knew that he had to come to the surface to drag air into his aching lungs.

Peeeeee!

The Indian fired as Allard shot up through the water's surface like an exploding mine. A white plume, a splash, a swift, merciful gulp of air and he was gone again.

The Indian stared in disbelief as the shot missed. He had expected a quiet, nervous surfacing by his quarry and the energetic leap out of the water had thrown him off balance.

He muttered a fresh prayer to Ah Puch and began to run towards the shore of the bay.

The Indian and Allard reached the edge of the clearing together, Allard knee deep in water, the Indian crashing his way through the low undergrowth on the far side.

Staring at the wild, glaring figure with water streaming off its clothes and a hateful glitter in its eyes, the Indian grunted and worked furiously at the bolt of the rifle. Allard heard the grunt, saw the Indian reach behind him as he realised the magazine was empty. Nine long yards of clinging sand stretched before him as the Indian rammed home a fresh clip.

Eight . . . Seven. The bolt slammed home, sending the loading clip to the ground, and still the wet sand clung – held – delayed.

Six . . . Five. God! God! God! Pull those stinking feet out of the ground. Faster, Allard. Faster.

Four yards. Three . . . Two. Leap! Body outstretched, right arm drawn back. See the green forest twist madly. Feel the wet, greasy butt, insecure in your hand. Watch in slow motion as the brown hand holds the rifle that points at your chest.

HIT NOW!!

Scream in your mind as your arm seems to be an age responding to the stricken call from your brains. Watch the brown finger tighten on the blue curve of the trigger as your feet hit the floor and your arm is still descending.

Then, suddenly, the cold, heavy weight of the gun crashes down. The dull black hair caves in under the barrel. The blood spouts up and the rifle roars in response to a dying finger with such savagery that you are deafened. In a confusion of movement, tug the gun loose from the hair and bone that grip at it.

Strike! Strike again!

At last all is still and even the blood flows quietly.

Allard rose and shook his head irritably, trying to dispel

the ringing in his ears caused by the shot from the rifle. He looked down at the man on the floor and felt no pity. Dispassionately, he saw the crushed scalp and oozing blood. Irritation was his only reaction. He needed information and this man would have supplied it. The knife blade that he slipped into its innocent case would have seen to that. And now the man was dying.

Kneeling once more, Allard took hold of the Indian by the shoulders and bent close. It was hopeless, but he must try.

“Who sent you?”

No answer.

“Where are you from?”

Silence.

The only sound was the drip-drip of dark blood as it plopped into a pool of its own substance. Then the mouth of the man opened and Allard saw why the Indian had never spoken. His tongue had, long ago, been torn out at the roots.

The rattle in his throat was the first sound that the Indian had made for many years. That was not made by a tongue. It was the last remnants of breath dragging its way past the bubbling blood in his throat.

In the lonely forest, deserted by his god, Ah Puch, the Indian died.

Allard checked the body. The pockets were empty. There were no marks on the rough clothes. Allard sat on a fallen log and lit the last of his cigarettes. It was still damp from the river where the water had entered the tight metal case, but it was still just smokeable. His gas lighter was unaffected.

His watch had stopped and he had no idea of time,

but he knew it could not be long before nightfall. Allard tucked the cigarette into the corner of his mouth and walked towards the river.

The Indian wouldn't have bothered to come above the rapids, he reasoned. He was going to ambush him there, so he would have left his canoe tucked away downstream. Allard turned.

The canoe with the outboard had been dragged into the bushes about a half-mile downstream. By walking along the edge of the river, Allard was able to find the spot with little trouble, tracing the drag marks that led from the mud into the bushes.

The craft slid easily back into the water.

The engine started with two jerks on the cord and, in comparative comfort now, Allard resumed his journey.

As he went along, Allard stripped the Colt. With the remnants of his handkerchief, he wiped the excess water and mud from the metal and, after it had dried a little more in the sun, wiped all the parts with the oily rag he found in the hollow butt of the Indian's rifle.

The .45 was reassembled, the magazine pushed home and the slide pushed forward to work a round into the chamber.

Once more armed, Allard paused to look around for a suitable camping place. It would be night soon and he must eat. Pushing the steering arm across so that the whole of the motor turned to the right, he grounded the canoe on a flat bank. That would have to do.

Under a crude shelf forward, he found a small bag filled with dried black beans and a screw of paper containing hardened peppers.

Wood fuel was plentiful, and soon he was sitting com-

fortably by a small fire boiling the beans in a tin he had also found in the canoe. The peppers he ground between two flat stones and sprinkled onto the thick soup. The meal both filled and warmed him and, after straining and boiling some water from the river, Allard was at last satisfied. He turned and wished that he had been able to save the parachute silk, for the night was turning cold.

Something crunched under him and he reached out and grasped the scrap of paper in which the peppers had been wrapped.

The fire flickered and he saw that there was writing on the paper. It was, in fact, an old envelope. With eager fingers he straightened it out. The top had been torn. The Indian had obviously sought for something in which to place his peppers so that they did not mingle with the beans and had found this envelope. It was too big, so he had torn it horizontally in two.

The writing on the remaining portion read:

*Casa del Cerero,
Itlo,
Yutaxa.*

The House of the Wax Chandler in Itlo.

Who lived there? Allard shrugged. He knew that the Indian might have picked up the envelope anywhere. In the street even. But it was a lead he could not afford to leave unfollowed. It might take him to Reana, Gregoria – or both.

A canoe with a motor, a full belly, a dried-out gun and his ambusher already starting to rot in the corrupting forest. And a possible lead.

Allard slept easily.

CHAPTER TEN

ALLARD needed money. In his rags and deep tan, squatting on the pavement outside the English club in Itlo, he passed for a taller than usual péon.

A bootblack squatted next to him, gesturing as a slim figure left the club and crossed the street.

“That’s the one, *amigo*. He tried four times with my sister and did nothing.” The bootblack laughed. “And off he goes to look for another girl.”

Allard got up and began to follow the young man – an official from the consulate.

The streets of Itlo were narrow and hilly, with little alleys and courts leading off them.

Allard followed the youngster into one of the alleys. It was dark and quiet. Allard stepped nearer, slipping his heavy Colt from his waistband and shoving the official into the nearest dark doorway.

He poked the barrel into the youngster’s belly.

“Your wallet,” he said.

Trembling, the young man took out his wallet. It was full, as Allard has guessed it would be.

“You’re going to have to feel randy today.” He grinned as he took out the money and handed the wallet back.

“Who are you?”

“I represent the National Insurance Company, chum. Go back to the consulate and tell them I borrowed your money. I can’t go there myself. I’m on a job.”

“I don’t understand any of this.”

“You don’t have to. But listen – you won’t call the police or involve the local people in this in any way. You’ll go to your boss and tell him the news. He might even reimburse you.”

Allard turned and walked away, leaving the youngster gasping.

Allard would have robbed any prosperous looking man but he didn’t want any more police after him. This way was the best.

By the time Allard had walked to Itlo’s central plaza it was dark. The plaza was lit by hundreds of glaring white acetylene flares. During the day the Plaza was market place but now it was deserted.

Allard smelt frying pork and saw a little restaurant on the other side of the square.

A fat man stood beneath his counter tending dozens of pots and pans on the big gas-range. Allard ordered totopo – thick tortilla fried in butter and piled with beans, onions and chilli. He ate at the counter.

“Very good,” he told the fat man as he paid.

The fat man smiled.

“I’m looking for a house, friend,” Allard added, leaving the change where the man had put it. “I think it is called the House of the Wax Chandler. An odd name. Do you know it?”

“I know it. It is one of the larger houses on the out-

skirts of the city – in the hills to the north. An old wax chandler used to own it. A rich man. Some foreigner owns it now, I hear. He is not a wax chandler – though the old building where the wax was boiled is still in the grounds. The house was empty for some years after the chandler died. It has only recently been sold – to the foreigner.”

“Do you know this foreigner?”

“No, but I have seen his daughter. Blonde. Very beautiful.”

Allard described Reana Pedersen.

“That’s the one.”

Allard pushed the change towards the man. “How do I get to the house?”

The restaurant owner gave him instructions and Allard left.

As he crossed the square, on his way to the outskirts of the city, he didn’t notice the well-dressed man who followed him.

The *casa* overlooked the city, standing on the crest of a hill. Allard looked down and saw the lights of Itlo. He guessed that the house was in a good position. You could see the city on one side and the wooded hinterland of Yutaxa on the other.

The chandler must have paid a lot to have the wall built around his property. Even in Yutaxa, where labour was cheap, an eight-foot brick wall cost money. The wall was topped with cement and broken glass.

Allard tried both the heavy wooden gates – one at the back and one at the front. They were locked.

Allard was now at the back of the house. He reached up and ran his hands carefully along the top of the wall.

There didn’t seem to be any alarm wired of any kind – just the jagged glass. He got a safe grip and raised himself slowly until his eyes were level with the top. The grounds looked deserted. He could see the house and, further away, the white building where the wax had been boiled in the days of the previous owner.

He dropped back to the ground. He rested a moment and then reached up and gripped the wall again. Flexing his knees to give himself the necessary bounce, he flung up one leg and caught the top of the wall with the tip of his shoe. The other followed until he was straddling the wall precariously, one piece of glass cutting slowly through the thin leather of his shoe. Then he straightened and flung himself outwards.

The dark grass came at him with a rush and he met it with a lax shoulder. He rolled and scrambled to his feet.

Ahead of him now was a miniature jungle of brush and trees and overrun flowers. Allard dropped to his knees and groped ahead of him. There was still the possibility of trip-wires, so he continued moving along like that until he was sure his way was clear.

Cautiously, he approached the sleeping house. Long and low, he saw the verandah ahead of him. He made little sound as he circled the building, his gun in his hand.

The verandah ran round the house on three sides. Allard moved softly on to it and did a tour of the building again, peering in through the shutters.

He could see very little of the interior.

Then a light went on at one side of the house, round the corner. Allard doubled up and approached cautiously. Peering into the lighted room through a gap in the shutters, he saw a kitchen.

He recognized than man who was putting a coffee pot on the electric stove.

It was the small one. The one who had fired the gas-pistol into his face that night in Hampstead.

Allard felt better. Now he knew where his enemies were. And they were linked with Reana Pedersen, as he'd all along suspected. That was how she had been able to find him and follow him so easily.

He had to take a chance. He got his fingers in the chinks of the shutters and prised them open.

The man looked startled and began to reach for his gun in its shoulder holster. But when he saw the .45 in Allard's hand he remained motionless. Allard signalled for him to open the window.

Blasco came forward and did as Allard ordered.

"Recognize me?" Allard whispered as he stepped carefully into the kitchen over the low sill.

Blasco frowned, then looked surprised. "Allard – the agent!"

"That's right, pretty boy. Where are the Toriellos?"

"Who are the Toriellos?"

"Your ex-minister of agriculture and his beautiful daughter." Allard was tired. "Where have you got them?"

"We have not got them . . ."

Allard waved the gun menacingly and stepped closer, running the barrel down Blasco's left cheekbone.

". . . here," Blasco added.

"I don't believe you."

Blasco swore. Allard tapped him sharply at the base of the jaw.

Blasco winced.

Allard moved the barrel towards Blasco's crutch.

"She's in the cellar," Blasco said rapidly. "There is only the one. We do not hold her father."

Allard made Blasco lead him down to the cellar. He peeped through the judas-window and there was Gregoria Toriello. He saw what had been done to her and he turned and smashed Blasco twice on the head with the pistol barrel. Blasco moaned. Allard hit him again, this time on the back of the neck. Blasco dropped.

Allard felt in Blasco's pocket and found a bunch of keys. He took Blasco's S&W Manstopper and slipped it into his own pocket. Then he straightened up and kicked Blasco's ear for good measure. Ht 'em when they're down was Nick Allard's doubtful motto.

He found the key which fitted the door and opened it.

Gregoria Toriello still had what was left of the clothes she'd been wearing when Allard had first seen her. She still looked beautiful in her big-boned way, too, in spite of everything she'd been through.

She was chained on the wide truckle bed, spreadeagled. Her skirt had been forced up to her thighs. She was still wearing the jacket of her suit, but it was thrown open and her blouse was torn, exposing her breasts. Allard hadn't the slightest doubt she'd been raped.

Another key fitted the padlocks on the chains. Allard undid them. As he did so Gregoria's eyes opened. She hadn't been asleep, just feigning slumber.

"What . . .?" she murmured, her voice dull and hopeless.

"It's okay," Allard said. "I'm taking you away. We'll get out of here first, then you can tell me all about it."

He helped her rise and straighten her clothes. With the buttons of her suit done up she didn't look too bad. She

wincing as circulation started to return to her arms and legs, and Allard steadied her.

“We’ve got to get away from here as soon as possible,” he murmured urgently. “Who did this to you? Him?” He pointed with his gun at the prone figure of Blasco.

She shook her head.

Allard almost felt sympathetic then.

“Let’s go,” he said.

He was uneasy. He was satisfied nobody would have been likely to anticipate this action of his. Probably they thought he was dead – killed by the Indian. But the prisoner hadn’t been particularly well guarded, and it had the feel of a trap.

But it wasn’t a trap.

Within minutes, Allard had opened the main gate of the *casa* and was helping the girl to stumble down the badly made road towards the city.

It was the first real stroke of luck he’d had since the case had started.

They managed to get a taxi after walking for half-an-hour. Allard winked at the driver and asked for a hotel where they would not mind his sister sharing a room with him.

The hotel was sleazy, which was just as well. It was in a quiet part of the city, and even though they charged Allard double rent it was the cheapest he’d ever used.

The Toriello girl could be mistaken for a draggled drunk and Allard for a péon with some money to spend. That was good, too.

Allard ordered some food, coffee and tequila to be brought to the room. The note he gave the old woman

was more than enough to pay for it. She nodded and went away.

Allard made the girl lie down while they waited. She turned on the bed, buried her head in the coarse but clean pillow, and began to sob.

There was a knock on the door.

Allard opened it and took the tray.

He brought it over to the bed and poured a shot of spirit into a tumbler. He turned the girl over and propped her up, making her drink the stuff. She spluttered but got it down.

“I ought to let you sleep,” Allard said, “but I want every bit of information you can give me. Your safety and mine could depend on it.”

“Who are you? I know you – in England?”

“I’m from England. Nick Allard. We were worried about your disappearance. We wanted to check that you were okay. It’s as well we did.”

“You do not know about the plot? Gila’s plot?”

“I want to know everything. I’m ignorant. You tell me?”

She straightened her shoulders and smoothed her hair. She drew a shuddering breath and then reached forward to pour them both coffee. Allard knew what Campbell had been talking about that day at Freeman-Trulove. She seemed quite a woman.

“I was tricked,” she said. “They told me my father had returned to Yutaxa with the idea of staging a revolution and had, instead, fallen ill. He was in hiding at Señor Zubillaga’s . . .”

“Zubillaga?”

“An old acquaintance of my father. He knew Zubillaga well when he was Minister of Agriculture. They had

some business together – I don't know what it was. Probably crooked. My father is a corrupt man, Mr. Allard."

"Is he at Zubillaga's then?"

"I am not sure of it. When we arrived we were not taken to Zubillaga's – we went straight to that house. Gila's house."

"Gila? Fill me in."

"He calls himself Gila – everyone calls him that. He is deformed." Gregoria described him.

"He sounds a dream – and his description resembles one I read in a file. A free-lance *agent provocateur*, I think."

"That is more than likely."

"Is he the one who raped you?"

"He is the one."

"I'll make a special note of his name."

"It is over now," she said dully. "It was horrible at the time – but it is over now."

"Not quite," said Allard, half out of false heroics to impress her, half sincerely.

She drew another deep breath. "They produced tape recordings and a photograph of my father. I was told to work in a laboratory Gila had there. If I did not – my father would be tortured to death. I have little in common with him, but I had to work. I delayed as long as I could, making excuses about the equipment, about the conditions that made it difficult for concentration, and so on. Every day I went to the laboratory. Every night I went back to the cellar. Gila would follow me – touching me with that horrible hand of his. Once he beat me with a cane – not very hard, not for very long. I hated that most. Then tonight. . ."

"What were you doing in the laboratory?"

"For some time I have been working on a serum that will counteract the effects of ergot poisoning. You know what ergot is?"

"A germ that infects wheat isn't it – and flour and bread?"

"And bread. When it gets into bread it can kill thousands, drive many thousands more insane, produce a disease which makes the limbs wither and rot away."

"Surely ergot poisoning is a thing of the Middle Ages," Allard said. "We don't get it these days."

"We could get it again," she said simply. "In germ warfare or in some natural form. Besides, a new strain of the culture was developed here in Yutaxa by Professor Borges. I studied under him. He was shot in the riots five years ago. He was a brilliant scientist, but a rank Fascist – worse than my father."

"You are not a Fascist?"

"I am not interested in politics – not in joining any party, at any rate."

"So you were working on this serum to counteract ergot poisoning, both in its old and new form."

She inclined her head, her mass of black hair falling forward. "That is so."

"And that is what Gila wanted you for?"

"He wanted me to find a way of producing large quantities of the serum – yes. I arrived at a formula that might give him what he wants, but as yet it is untested."

"Is that all you know?"

"No. I am sure that Gila is working for the Chinese. I overheard him talking with his men. Somehow the work I am doing is to help the Chinese, but I do not know how."

“If foment cost a quid a minute,” Allard mused, “the Chinese could buy a couple of days at most. I wonder where they’re getting their money – and why they should be so interested in the serum.”

“Perhaps because they are also interested in the new strain of ergot derivatives,” Gregoria suggested. “There are some powerful drugs around now – and an antidote against them would be valuable.”

“The set-up seems more complicated than that,” Allard said, frowning. “Why should Zubillaga have your father and Gila have you?”

“I think they were working together, but have been double-crossing each other. Originally, I believe, my father was brought here by Gila’s men, but Zubillaga got my father away from them. I do not think, by the way, that Zubillaga knows Gila is working for the Chinese. I also have the idea, from scraps of conversation I have overheard, that Zubillaga is getting support from the Americans. He fully intends to use my father as the puppet dictator in a revolutionary government, and the Americans, who want to get rid of Gutierrez, are backing him. I do not think they know about his meetings with Gila, about my presence in Yutaxa – or about the nature of the work I am doing that Gila is so interested in.”

“So they’re planning a revolution. But how? There’s no discontent in Yutaxa to speak of. The peasants and the army are both behind the régime.

“The army is not so solid as it was under the old general. The old general backed Gutierrez. The new one is not so open in his choice of leaders – he does not say whether he supports Gutierrez or not. But the péons – yes, they are behind the régime. It has done much for them.”

“An army coup wouldn’t be enough,” Allard said. “They’d need a big section of the peasants, too. I’ve lived native since I came to Itlo. There seems no evidence of any impending trouble – nobody going around trying to whip up the people’s anger. It’s about the most a-political Central American city I’ve ever been in.”

“Perhaps their plan is over-ambitious. Perhaps they will fail,” she suggested.

“Maybe. We’ll have to find out.”

“Where do you intend to take me tomorrow?” she asked.

“To the British Consulate. You’ll be safe. Then I’ll try to get your father out. I have enough information now. I can get help from British Honduras. They’re expecting me to contact them. Maybe we’ll be able to rescue your father.”

“I hope so. While they have him, they can always try to blackmail me, wherever I am.”

Allard nodded.

“He is very old,” she said.

Suddenly she began to cry. Allard seized his opportunity. He came towards her and cradled her head on his shoulder, stroking her hair and shoulders.

A little later he let her lie back on the bed.

“Be gentle,” she said.

Allard knew that this was a reaction to all the things that had happened to her, that she was not perfectly rational and that he was taking advantage of a disturbed girl. But he consoled himself with the idea that this was probably the best cure. He was very affectionate and he was very gentle.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NEXT morning Allard and Gregoria left the hotel on their way to the consulate on the other side of the city. It was early, with a few carts moving along the narrow streets, a few péons stretching outside the doors of their hovels.

As they turned a corner, a car came bumping along the street. It was an old-fashioned Citroën. In it sat a well-dressed man in a grey flannel suit. He was bronzed and hard-looking and he could have been from virtually any country.

He stopped the car near them and gestured, glancing around to make sure they hadn't been seen.

"Recognize him?" Allard asked.

She shook her head. "He's not one of Gila's men."

With his hand inside his shirt and resting on the .45, Allard took Gregoria's arm and steered her to about three yards away from the car. Then he stopped and signalled for the driver to get out.

The man in grey shrugged, climbed from the Citroën and walked towards the pair. Allard heard a train pass some way behind him, a woman call her son, a wheel squeak.

"Mr. Allard?" The man spoke in a British accent that held a trace of something else – a Canadian accent, perhaps.

"And you?" said Allard, his hand still on the gun.

"I'm Ben Groves. From Honduras. You needed some help, I believe."

"Identification?"

Groves reached into his inside jacket pocket and took out a small wallet. He opened it. In a plastic cover was an identification card showing that Ben Groves worked as a representative for Morgan's Machine Accessories. Allard recognized the card and the name. It was an authentic cover. He relaxed.

"How did you get here so fast?"

"We were already on our way – after you got into trouble in Mexico. Where were you going this morning?"

"Consulate."

Groves frowned. "That wouldn't be wise. You don't want anyone to see you having anything to do with the British. We've got our own place outside of town. I'll take you there."

"Is that wise?"

"It's for the best," Groves said. They climbed into the back seats of the Citroën and Groves started the engine, turning the car round and roaring up the narrow, cobbled gully that was the street.

"What have you found out so far?" Groves asked. "Anything interesting?"

"Quite a bit. My main job was to locate Miss Toriello here, but there are lots of loose ends. I think something really big is going on in Yutaxa. I don't think it will just affect Yutaxa, either, otherwise so many people

wouldn't be so interested in this little country. I think it might have real international implications."

"That house where you found Miss Toriello – what goes on there?"

"How do you know about the house?"

"We've been following you ever since you robbed Murchison – the youngster from the consulate. He did a lot of talking as soon as he got back. He was very angry."

"The fool. I told him only to tell the Consul himself!"

"Not to worry – at least we knew where to look for you." Groves grinned. "And we gave you some help."

"Help?"

"Sure. You were seen when you entered the house. There's a guard who sits near the gate. We clobbered him for you."

"Many thanks."

"Not at all."

They were driving through the western outskirts of the city now, the buildings thinning and patches of jungle becoming more frequent.

Soon they were heading through the jungle itself, along a hard, concrete road.

About two miles further along a man suddenly stepped out into the road. He wore a light-weight raincoat and a fedora. Something about him looked familiar to Allard.

Ben Groves slowed the car. "He's one of ours," he said.

Allard wondered if he'd worked with the man somewhere else at any time, but couldn't place him.

The man got into the front seat beside Groves.

"This is Nick Allard," Groves said. "John Garadine." He didn't bother to introduce Gregoria.

Garadine nodded and kept his face towards the road. Jungle stretched on and on, the road a narrow ribbon through it, the sky bright, hard blue above.

The car came to a side road, an unmade track, and turned into it, bumping and thumping along.

"This track," Gregoria Toriello said suddenly. "I know it. It leads to Zubillaga's ranch!"

"That's right," said Garadine, turning, the .38 Webley automatic coming up in his hand and covering Allard.

Now Allard remembered where he had seen Garadine before.

He had been the driver of the car – the Buick – when Knightly had been killed.

The implications of this were too many to consider at once as the car bumped its way towards Zubillaga's ranch. Allard sneered at his own gullibility. He had been truly and expertly suckered.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The big, old-style hacienda stood in its own grounds, stretching away over several acres and marked by a wire fence. The hacienda itself was white, with rococo ironwork and baroque stucco on balconies, windows and gables. The roof was tiled with green slate and the shutters of the windows were also painted green. Flower beds were outside the hacienda and in the quadrangle beyond. This was surrounded by a high wall and was entered through an arch.

“Shades of Zorro,” Allard said, casting a cynical eye around the place.

Garadine laughed. “Yeah. I’d forgotten about those old movies. Who’s going to play the Fairbanks part?”

“I wouldn’t mind leaping away at the moment,” Allard said. The automatic was still under his nose. “Why did you kill Knightly?”

“He was due for it. It would put you out of the picture, too, we thought.”

“So now you’re going to try and put me out of the picture again.”

“You got it.” Garadine Grinned. He had a New York accent, Allard noticed.

Groves stopped the car by the steps that led up to the main entrance of the hacienda. A door opened and a tall, emaciated man came out. He wore a full beard and had pale blue eyes.

“Zubillaga,” said Gregoria. Since Garadine had got into the car she had sat hunched in a corner, completely depressed by the turn of events.

Garadine reached over and felt for Allard’s gun. He lifted it out of his waistband and slipped it into his own. “Out you get, buster.”

Allard climbed slowly from the car, Gregoria following him.

Garadine covered them as Zubillaga came down the steps. Groves stayed in the car, then, with a wave, he reversed out of the arch, did a U-turn and roared away.

Zubillaga looked at Allard carefully. “You are the Britisher. What happened to my Indian?”

“So you sent him, did you? He’s rotting back there in the jungle. His gun’s in the mud and I sunk his boat before I reached Itlo.”

Zubillaga’s mouth twitched. “I see. Come inside.”

Garadine prodded Allard with his gun. They walked up the steps and into the house. It was furnished in a consistent 18th-century style. The hall had a rosewood bureau, with a delicate veneer and ormolu mounts. On a shelf above it was a bracket clock in a brass case, with filigree silver work, an engraved face and gold-finished centre and dial. The room they entered was in half-darkness; the shutters had only been partially opened. It was full of furniture in the same style as the desk in the hall.

If the stuff was genuine – and it looked it – it must have cost thousands to furnish the room alone.

“You will soon be reunited with your father, Miss Toriello,” Zubillaga said. “He has not been well, but he is recovering. I will have you taken to him.” He went to a bell-cord by the fireplace and tugged it.

An Indian entered. He wore a white suit and could have been the son of the Indian Allard had killed in the jungle.

“Pepe,” said Zubillaga, “will you take this lady to see Señor Toriello? She may try to escape. Do not let her.”

The Indian nodded and reached inside his jacket. His hand emerged holding a large knife. He jerked his head at the girl. She looked pleadingly at Allard, but he was in no position to help. He gave a tiny shrug.

Gregoria left with the Indian.

“So that’s it,” Allard said. “You let me do your dirty work. Now you’ve got Toriello and his daughter, and your partner is cut out altogether.”

“He was never cut *in*,” Zubillaga said. “He was trying to blackmail me, using the girl. Now perhaps he will not bother us further.”

“From what I’ve heard of him, I wouldn’t count on that. Besides, you have been working together. You got the Pedersen girl to get that bullet from my gun. She passed it on to you – you shot Knightly and framed me.”

Garadine smiled. “Ingenious, Allard, but not accurate. The Pedersen girl – is that the blonde you went to the hotel with that night?”

“Yes.”

“She wasn’t just a casual pick-up?”

“I didn’t think so,” said Allard. “I thought she was

working with you. You mean she didn’t shoot my gun through the mattress?”

“Sure she didn’t – Groves did that while you were having breakfast and the girl was down the hall in the bathroom.”

“But she works for Gila. I thought . . .”

“She works for Gila, eh?” Garadine said. “Talk away, Allard. We’re interested.”

“That’s all I know. Who are you working for, Garadine?”

“The U.S. Government, friend. Or, to be more specific, Security Intelligence Control.”

Allard should have guessed. Knightly had warned him that the SIC killers were interested in this case. The frame-up was a typical SIC operation – almost standard procedure.

“You knew Knightly and I worked for British Intelligence.”

“Naturally. U.S. and British interests are in direct conflict in Yutaxa, Allard. You want to keep Gutierrez in at any price – we want to kick him out at any cost. He’s a Commie. Your damn’ government never could see Communism when it was stuck under their noses. It’s in their interest and ours that Gutierrez is booted out of Yutaxa. You’ll see.”

Allard sneered. “You sound as hysterical as Joe McCarthy. That’s the trouble with you Yanks – you don’t know when or how to relax.”

“Skip it, Allard. You’ll be relaxing soon enough – out in the jungle, six feet under.” Garadine was breathing rapidly. His equable mask had slipped a little.

“You’re backing a revolution, are you?” Allard went on mockingly. “A revolution headed by a sick old man in

a country where there's massive popular support for the present régime. How are you going to pull it off?"

"Zubillaga has the chief of the army in his pocket," Garadine said. "That's so, isn't it, Zubillaga?"

"Exactly. And the peasants will soon be stirred up. Toriello was the most popular figure in the old régime."

"What was the deal you and he had when he was Minister of Agriculture?" Allard asked. He was playing for time, partly, trying to jitter the opposition.

Zubillaga looked startled and that made Allard a little happier. "What do you know about that?"

"Enough," said Allard. He guessed, then . . . "It's tied up with Miss Toriello's experiments, isn't it?"

"Nonsense," said Zubillaga. "We need Miss Toriello to ensure her father's good behaviour, that's all."

"Then why was she working in a laboratory Gila had fixed up for her?"

"Take him out of here," Zubillaga said to Garadine, who was frowning slightly. "I know nothing about this Gila – I know nothing of any experiments. He is playing for time, Garadine – trying to make you suspicious of me."

Garadine nodded – just a shade uncertainly, Allard noticed.

"I guess he is," he said. "Come on, Allard. Let's take a walk in the jungle."

Allard hadn't given up. He left the house by the back entrance, Garadine's gun still on him. He picked up the spade when Garadine pointed it out. The haft of the spade was straight, without a cross-piece. It stood by a large greenhouse.

They went through a gate in the wall and were in the jungle.

Five minutes of walking and they were alone together. By the peeling trunk of a coyoba tree they halted.

"Dig," Garadine ordered.

"Dig what?" said Allard – as if he didn't know.

"Your grave – natch."

Allard gripped the spade tightly and plunged it into the black, mushy soil.

There was still a chance, he thought.

"Did you know . . . ?" he began.

"Dig, you sonofabitch," said Garadine. "You're a real gabber, aren't you?"

"That's me." And Allard began to dig. He had to get Garadine off-guard somehow. He might be able to do it by using the information he had about Gila and the anti-ergot serum – if only he could get Garadine's attention so that the SIC agent would let him talk.

A little later he pretended clumsily to drop the spade and scramble for it. In the shelter of the shallow trench he gripped it by the very end of the haft and then climbed on to firm earth again, as though to clear away more dirt.

"You know Gila's working for the Chinese," he said as casually as he could, pretending to pant heavily and mop his forehead.

"Keep digging."

"We shouldn't be fighting one another, Garadine. I think the Chinese are using Gila, who's using Zubillaga."

"Not any more," Garadine said. "Zubillaga's got the girl and Gila hasn't any hold over him. What does this Gila look like?"

"I haven't seen him, but I've been told." Allard described Gila as Gregoria had described him the previous night.

Garadine scratched his head. "I'm not sure about you, Allard. I've heard of this Gila – he used to be called Klein when he worked for us in Guatemala."

"I'm telling the truth, Garadine."

"Maybe. We'll check it ourselves. There's no need for your help, Allard."

"I think Zubillaga's fooling everyone," Allard said. "I think he's using you to get his revolution going, sure – but what does he want Toriello in power for? I don't think it's anti-Communism that's inspiring him, Garadine."

Garadine scratched his head, frowning. "Then what?"

"I know what . . ."

"Then you'd better . . ."

Allard whirled and dropped to one knee, swinging the sharp end of the spade up in a vicious arc.

He heard a sharp crack and a whistle as a bullet left the Webley. As the spade was about to make contact, Allard twisted himself off his knee and threw his whole weight behind the three feet of hickory and steel. He felt the edge drive home. In between the legs; into the soft lower belly.

Garadine screamed and rolled over, clutching with tearing, agonized fingers at his crutch.

Allard scrambled for the gun, but Garadine seemed to have half a dozen arms and legs that thrashed wildly as Allard tried to grab the Webley from where it had fallen among the rotting leaves of the tree.

Garadine was tough. In spite of his injury, he kicked

Allard backwards, sending him off-balance. Allard kicked out at Garadine's crutch again, shoved himself forward to chop at the man's neck. It should have been a lethal blow, but Garadine managed to swing himself to one side, his hands clutching at Allard.

Allard saw the gun – grabbed for it – got it. Garadine had him by the throat, his eyes glazing. Allard knew it was an instinctive reaction, that Garadine hardly knew what he was doing.

Allard shoved the gun deep into Garadine's chest, over the heart, hoping the clothing would muffle the sound of the shot.

He pulled the trigger.

Garadine's hands convulsed on his neck and then fell away limply. He toppled backwards.

Allard got up, panting. He dusted down his battered clothes, paused for a moment and then, with his foot, rolled Garadine's body into the trench intended for himself. He covered him lightly with a few shovels of earth, then dropped the spade and began to head back towards the hacienda.

Even if they'd heard the shot, they'd think Garadine had shot him, Allard decided.

He walked through the jungle and into the clearing. Before him was the low wall of the house. He peered over it, keeping low, trying to decide what to do.

He decided to wait it out.

From a broad branch high in the mulatto tree, Allard watched the hacienda. He had seen Zubillaga and Gregoria cross to the big greenhouse earlier. He had seen a bunch of Indian servants go out into the jungle and come back carrying Garadine's body. He had seen Zubillaga greet

them on the patio and he'd seen the look of fear on Zubillaga's face. Now Indian guards had been posted at intervals around the wall. It was going to be hard to get in.

He decided to wait for dark.

He had a hunch and he wanted to test it.

It was a hunch about the greenhouse.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WHEN it was dark enough, Allard climbed out of his tree. He had considered overpowering one of the guards on the wall, but that would only have given him a few minutes before the man was discovered.

Keeping his distance from the wall, he began to walk round it towards the main entrance. As the vista at the front of the hacienda came into sight he drew back into the shrubbery. A car was coming up the long drive – a black Thunderbird with what looked like four occupants.

The spotlights were turned on as it got to the main gate and there was the honking of its horn. Peering hard, Allard recognized one of the people in the back seat – Reana! A pale man in a white suit sat next to her and in front was a bloated form sitting by the driver. The driver was Lomas, Blasco's old *companero*. The man next to him must therefore be Gila.

Why was Gila calling openly on Zubillaga? Did he think that Zubillaga had fixed the escape of Gregoria Toriello? Unless Blasco was dead, which was unlikely, then he would have told Gila that it was Allard who rescued the girl. Then what?

Perhaps there was still a deal on. Zubillaga might need the help of Gila's services – and the people Gila knew who were past-masters in stirring up discontent. But would Zubillaga risk the chance of the Americans finding this out? No, Gila must have come here on his own initiative. The car honked again. Allard heard voices.

Then silence.

At length the gate opened and Zubillaga himself stood in the glare of the car's headlamps. He gesticulated, shrugged, waved Gila away, but Gila stuck his head out of the car window and said something. Zubillaga stood aside to let the Thunderbird through.

Allard sprinted for the gate as soon as the Thunderbird was inside. He held a rock in one hand.

Behind the car, the gate was being closed by an Indian servant. Allard was invisible to him, on the other side. He knelt and jammed the rock under one door. The door stopped moving and Allard slid back, hugging the wall.

An Indian emerged. He looked down at the stone, frowned. Then bent to remove it.

Allard hit him on the head with his pistol butt, dragged him inside and locked the gate. Swiftly he ripped up the man's clothes and bound and gagged him with them. He looked up towards the house. Far away, Gila, Reana and the other two men were getting out of the Thunderbird.

He'd love to hear what they were going to talk about, but his first objective had to be the greenhouse. Then he might have confirmed his guess and wouldn't have to rely on so many guesses in future.

Luckily the garden was full of shrubs and small trees. By running at a crouch and crawling in places, Allard managed to get round the house and up to the greenhouse.

He wasn't going to go through the door because it might be rigged for an alarm. The panes near the bottom were large and if he broke one he would be able to wriggle through. The moon would be out soon. He had to hurry.

He wrapped his tattered jacket around the gun and swung it at the pane, praying it would make too much noise. Greenhouse glass wasn't usually that sturdy. This wasn't. Two more swipes and it cracked. Allard pressed the two pieces inwards until he could grip them, using his jacket to make sure he didn't cut himself. He prised the two pieces of glass apart, drew them towards him and then laid them neatly on the ground. He pushed himself through the gap.

The greenhouse was like a miniature jungle, with the humidity and smell of a jungle at mid-day. Moonlight illuminated it.

Virtually the whole large greenhouse was full of banana palms at various stages of growth. Sheets of glass divided them.

Allard began to feel that his hunch was leading somewhere. At one division he stopped and inspected the leaves of a plant. They were covered in a brown-black fungus. Allard checked other leaves along both sides of the greenhouse. All bore the fungus. Some were completely covered by it, other had only small patches.

Allard was no chemist, but Gregoria Toriello had already described ergot to him. This was not exactly the same, but it was obviously a very similar fungus.

Then Allard had it.

He knew drugs. Not in the way that a chemist or biologist would know them. He knew them because he had used some in the past and because he had known, before

being shanghaied into the Service, many addicts. He had read about drugs and their effects on people.

He knew of a drug that was a derivative of ergot and which, presumably, could be induced to thrive as a natural but mutated fungus. It could be processed and cross-bred until it could then be induced to infect the leaves of the banana tree. It would spread rapidly. A péon, already used to chewing ritual berries, mushrooms and the like to induce dream-like hallucinations during his half-Indian, half-Christian religious rituals, might experimentally try a little of the fungus. He would find that it made him feel like a god – or like a devil, depending on his basic psyche. He could show all the symptoms of insanity. He might become a raving lunatic, or perhaps become passive, unwilling to act or to move, completely depressed.

The hard-worked, half-staved péons who, in spite of Gutierrez's tremendous efforts on their behalf, were still on the borderline of survival, would seize upon the drug as a release from their hard existence. They would become addicted.

A whole country's economy would collapse as its labour force was put out of action. A nation of drug addicts.

If the fungus spread fast enough – and Allard had an idea that it might – it could sweep through Central and South America, infecting every banana tree – and every peasant.

Economic breakdown.

Chaos.

And the Chinese would have their greatest ever opportunity to get supreme influence in the nations south of the U.S. border.

Zubillaga?

Perhaps he was planning to seize power himself . . .

No.

Zubillaga now had Gregoria Toriello.

She was working on an antidote. Once she had it – and she had already arrived at a potential formula – Zubillaga would be able to sell it to the respective governments, or perhaps the UN for a fantastically high price. He could hold nations to ransom and become the wealthiest man in the world.

If the Chinese had it they could produce it and use it effectively to equip 'heroes' who would save the situation, be set up as presidents and dictators, giving China at least a dozen puppet governments in the continent – probably more.

But the U.S. and its allies wouldn't just sit around watching, Allard suspected. They would try to counter this; once they discovered what was going on. They would try diplomacy, the use of under-cover agents – everything but open aggression.

Until they found that nothing worked.

For nothing would work in circumstances like those. It would be too big.

War would be the answer that the U.S. and their allies, in their wisdom, would come to.

Allard could see it so clearly.

It frightened him.

He knew the drug. He knew its name. Lysergic acid diethylamide. LSD-25.

Discovered by a Swiss chemist in 1943 while he was making experiments on ergot, the drug could be taken orally or by injection. It was dangerous – even the people Allard had known who were willing to try anything had

agreed on that. Few of them would touch it after trying it once.

It induced fantasies – fantastic, transcendental hallucinations, dark visions. It encouraged latent psychoses to manifest themselves. A man could go through life leading a normal, everyday existence, but potentially have the seeds of homicidal mania within him. Nothing would occur to him that would foster those seed, nothing would happen which would trip them off into taking control of him. He would be a model husband and a good employee. But he would also be a potential killer.

Many people were. Few ever had the circumstances which would send them insane – would let the latent tendencies manifest themselves.

Only extreme mental disturbance, emotional pressures, social demands and responsibilities, would encourage them. And even then, if the man or woman was discovered soon enough, they could be put in charge of a psychiatrist, sent to a mental hospital, cured or stopped from satisfying their new, insane needs.

The homicidal psychopath was a rarity in society. The hysterical schizophrenic was less of a rarity, but still apparently small in number compared with the rest of the population. The manic-depressive type was everywhere – but only in extreme cases would he or she become a raving lunatic descending on the curve to become a totally depressed personality and often descending to catatonia.

Insanity was there, potentially, in all of us. But there was nothing to bring it out.

No circumstances. No *natural* circumstances.

But an artificial one?

LSD-25 was capable of releasing anyone's psychotic tendencies.

Now Allard knew for what purpose Gregoria Toriello had been kidnapped.

And he knew why, perhaps, old Toriello was so important. He'd been Minister of Agriculture – a friend of Zubillaga, and corrupt. Perhaps old professor Borges had been in on the deal, too. He, after all, must surely have been responsible for producing the LSD fungus in the first place. What had their plans been?

To take over Yutaxa and, gradually, other neighbouring states, by means of the drug? Build an empire in Central and South America? Possibly.

They might have started then. Toriello as Minister of Agriculture would have been in a perfect position to let Zubillaga go ahead with the project. Toriello, in all likelihood, was working against his own government, planning to take all the power himself.

It might have worked.

But then along came Gutierrez at the head of a popular movement, got the support of the army and destroyed the plans of the lot of them, killing most of the members of the old régime and easing the only survivor out of the country.

An important survivor. Toriello knew everything. But he couldn't do much about it and Zubillaga, needing secrecy and the opportunity to introduce his fungus into the banana in large quantities, and only able to do it with the connivance of someone like the Minister of Agriculture, was frustrated for five years.

Then, somehow, this scheme had been cooked up. Get

U.S. support for an anti-Gutierrez revolution, get Toriello back as a figurehead – *and* because he might start talking sooner or later – feed the LSD, by degrees, to numbers of péons here and there. Outbreaks of insanity would occur. A few riots. The revolutionaries had the support of the army – they had had to get rid of the old general to achieve that – and they could step in, backed perhaps by unobtrusive U.S. support.

Then Zubillaga would be in a perfect position to get his big scheme going.

But what he and the Americans didn't realize – Allard grinned maliciously to himself – was that the whole thing was being encouraged by the Chinese.

The Americans didn't know about LSD.

The Chinese did.

That was where Gila came in.

Allard suspected that the whole plot had been presented to Zubillaga by Gila.

There were still some questions to clear up, but Allard believed that he had been right in his hunch and that his speculation was correct.

But now he had to do something about it all.

And he didn't have any friends in Yutaxa. Everyone was against him.

He was in for a tough time.

Now he'd better go and see if he could find out what Zubillaga and Gila were up to.

He left the greenhouse by the way he'd come.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ALLARD stood in the shadows of the patio, close to the half-open french windows of the room where Zubillaga and Gila were talking.

He risked a glimpse into the room. Zubillaga and a couple of impassive Indians stood on one side; Gila, Reana Pedersen, a pale man in a white suit and the bulky Lomas stood on the opposite side, like miniature armies drawn up to do battle.

“. . . I still insist that the girl is my property,” Gila was saying in his strange, fluting voice. “After all, Zubillaga, I went to all the expense and trouble to bring both the Toriellos to Yutaxa. Then you have the gall to steal the girl from me. I never expected you to sink to that.” His tone was sardonic.

“I told you – Allard got the girl away from you.”

“So Blasco told me. But you know that the Americans were going to let Allard get the girl and then they arranged to bring them both to you.”

“No.”

“You must have known it, Zubillaga,” Gila rasped.

“These SIC people are very secretive. I wasn’t sure what they were doing.”

“Neither, it seems, were they. Now one of them is dead – killed by Allard, who is free again. You and your American friends have proved yourselves extremely inept. Three times you have tried to get Allard out of the way – and three times you have failed. Really, Zabillaga, does not that alone indicate that I am the better person to make sure the Toriello pair are kept safely?”

“You didn’t manage to keep the Toriello girl very safely,” Zubillaga reminded Gila.

“I shall know better next time. I thought Allard was finished, that the American agents were deceived and that you were honourable. All these illusions were shattered. It is enough to make a man become a cynic, Señor Zubillaga. Now – deliver the girl to me, at very least, and we shall leave.”

“It is no good, Gila. You had better go. We have little left in common. You are finished, Gila.”

“Finished? My friend, I was the man whose brain planned this whole thing. All you had were a few failing LSD cultures and some plan to introduce them into a few loaves of bread which *might* have been eaten by Gutierrez and his government. No popular support, no insurance – nothing. I told you to contact the Americans with the revolution idea. I told you to get Toriello as your front. I told you to get his daughter to work on the antidote. It was my whole scheme. Where it has been held up, Señor Zubillaga, is where you have interfered, tried to double-cross me. If you had left all the planning in my hands and followed my instructions, we should be ready by now.”

“I am almost ready myself,” Zubillaga said. “I have the

LSD growths fully prepared. I will soon have the antidote. The Americans are ready to support the revolution. The army is prepared to act as soon as I give the orders.” He paused.

Then he said: “You do not fit into the scheme any longer, Señor Gila.”

“Brainless fool! I can still expose you to your American friends. I can tell them about the LSD. I can tell them that Señorita Toriello is not simply here to guarantee her father’s good behaviour. I can tell them what you really plan – to hold the whole South, Central and North American continent to ransom!”

“You would tell them everything that is likely to happen in the next year?”

“Everything.”

“Your masters would appreciate that.” Zubillaga said drily.

“Masters?”

“I am assuming that you are working for Peking.”

“Nonsense.”

“You made a mistake, Gila. When you had us deliver the tapes of old Toriello’s voice – and the photographs – to that student organization in the city, I had it investigated. It is a Chinese Communist front organization. It would be too much of a coincidence for you both to be using the same building.”

“If I had certain dealings with the Chinese government,” Gila said, evidently shaken and probably cursing himself for the mistake, “that has nothing to do with the present situation.”

“Oh, come now, Señor Gila. I think you must consider me very naïve.”

“Indeed. Indeed I do. If the Americans discovered the whole truth and were informed about my affiliations, they would drop the scheme at once. In fact, I would not be surprised if you were not eliminated by your colleagues in SIC.” A strange noise followed this statement. It took Allard, who could see nothing of what was going on, a moment or two to realize Gila was laughing in his weird, reedy voice.

“I will risk that,” Zubillaga said.

“You risk much. Anger the Americans, señor, and you lose powerful friends. You will have no-one to protect you against *my* anger.”

“You have lost your own power, Señor Gila. I do not think Peking will allow you to fail with impunity. And you *have* failed, señor.”

“Not yet, señor.”

“There is nothing you can do, Gila, except admit defeat.”

“There is something I can do, much as it goes against my sense of protocol. My man Max” – the man in the white suit, Allard guessed – “has a gun in his pocket and it is directed at your stomach. Move – speak – try anything to stop us – and he will shoot.”

“This is a trick.”

A pistol shot sounded, slightly muffled. Allard heard a man groan. It was not Zubillaga.

He chanced peering into the room again.

One of Zubillaga’s Indian bodyguards was clutching his left arm.

“An illustration, señor. It is not a trick. Now – you will take us all up to the laboratory where you have the Toriellos.”

Allard heard Zubillaga grunt. He heard movements within the room. Then a door closed.

Allard looked into the room and saw it was now empty. He slid inside.

He went to the door on the other side of the room and pressed his ear to it. He heard the sound of several pairs of feet tramping upstairs.

There was nothing else to do but follow them and hope none of Zubillaga’s servants would spot him. Even if one did, he might think Allard was with Gila and say nothing for fear of endangering his master.

Allard crept warily into the deserted and familiar hallway. Along the far side of the wide hall ran the first flight of stairs leading upwards.

He waited a moment or two more, then darted across the hall and began to ascend the stairs as silently as he could. They were of stone. None boards creaked.

There was a chance that if he made the most of the situation as it arose he would be able to save both Gregoria and her father during the time when they were being taken back to Gila’s house – or, with luck, even before.

The group above him had stopped at the very top landing. He flattened himself against the wall on the landing below and heard Gila flute:

“Unlock the door, señor.”

“I will find a way to repay you for this, Gila,” Zubillaga replied as a key turned in a lock.

Allard heard Gila mutter something, but didn’t catch what it was.

He heard the door open and close.

He turned the bend and went up the last flight of steps –

to come face to face with Lomas, whom Gila had left outside as a guard.

Lomas grunted in surprised and pawed beneath his jacket for his gun. Allard covered the last couple of stairs, tackling Lomas below the knees and flinging him down with a crash.

Lomas had his gun out. Lying on his back like a landed hippo, he tried to point it at Allard. Allard kicked it from his hand and stamped on his face. Lomas's head snapped back with a moan of agony and Allard kicked him in the windpipe. He scooped up Lomas's gun, hearing voices inside the room. Excited voices. They'd heard Lomas fall. They'd heard the scuffle.

The door began to inch open.

A face and a gun.

The face was Max's. So was the gun.

Allard swiped down at it with Lomas's gun, the barrel smashing on Max's hand. The gun went off, firing two bullets in rapid succession. The first one ploughed into the unvarnished wood of the landing; the second hit Lomas squarely in the head where he lay.

Allard wrenched the gun from Max's now-limp hand, and with an automatic in either hand kicked the door open, forcing Max backwards.

The room was long, with a low ceiling and poor ventilation. The windows were small. Strip lighting was in the roof. It was laid out like a laboratory, with racks of chemistry equipment – test-tubes, filters, retorts – and some electronic equipment, too. At the far end were two camp beds, stapled to the ground. There were chains on the legs with manacles at the ends.

The Toriellos' sleeping quarters, doubtless.

In a little group at the other end, near a big laboratory bench, were the lot of them – Zubillaga and his Indians; Gila, Reana Pedersen, a scowling, hunched-in-pain Max, old Toriello, grey, sick and looking like death cooled over – and his distraught daughter, still with firm mouth and steady eyes that looked surprised and a little pleased as they saw Allard come in like Jesse James into a saloon.

Nick noted that Gregoria and her father had chains on their ankles. No modern refinements for Zubillaga.

“Señor Toriello – Gregoria – over here,” said Nick, praying that his luck would hold and that the surprise would rob the group of action for at least a few seconds.

Gregoria, her feet dragging under the weight of the chain, began to help her father forward.

The excitement had been too much for him. Unless Zubillaga had been very careful, he wouldn't have had a puppet president at this rate.

Slowly the couple approached him while Nick kept an eye on Gila, Zubillaga and the rest.

Gila said in his fluting tones: “You must be Mr. Allard. I've heard so much about you.”

Allard ignored him. He noticed that Reana looked startled and that she was frowning, too.

“Do you intend to kill us, Nick?” she said suddenly.

“I'd like to kill the lot of you,” Allard answered. Slowly, dragging themselves warily over the floor, the Toriellos approached.

Then, as Toriello was almost at the door and Nick Allard was stepping aside to let him through, the old man stumbled, falling heavily towards the agent. Gregoria tried to support him and in doing so tripped in her chains.

They both fell towards Allard. He tried to step out of

their way, but Toriello's shoulder knocked his hand as he fell.

Allard was thrown off-balance. He saw one of the Indians draw his gun and he fired at the man but missed.

Then the other Indian, the one with the wounded left arm, had his gun out.

"Careful how you shoot," Allard said. "If you hit the girl or the old man your plans are finished."

All at once Zubillaga was grinning. Allard wondered what was funny.

He found out a second later as he felt a gun barrel pressing into the small of his back.

In Spanish, a soft Indian voice told him to drop his guns. In the confusion, one of Zubillaga's men had come up the stairs, evidently hearing the earlier shots.

Allard cursed.

The gun prodded his back again.

There was only one sensible thing to do at this moment.

He dropped the automatics to the floor.

Gregoria began to weep suddenly.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ZUBILLAGA must have got himself a corner in manacles, Allard decided as he, Reana Pedersen, the gruesome Gila and the malevolent Max were all chained together while Zubillaga covered them.

They were still in the laboratory. An Indian kept an eye on Gregoria and her father who had been ordered to their beds and chained to them.

Gila was furious.

"You seem to thwart my plans continuously, Mr. Allard. If the opportunity ever arises, I should like to repay you for that."

"Me, too," Max snarled. His wrist was badly bruised.

Reana said nothing. Personally, she had little to reproach Allard for. Quite the contrary. Even in the present circumstances she seemed to be making the most of her opportunity to press a nyloned leg against his knee.

There wasn't much he could do for her at the moment, he reflected, even if he had wanted to.

Zubillaga was grinning all over his face. "Very neat," he said. "Thanks to you, Mr. Allard, I have all my enemies

in one little group. Now I have to decide what to do with you."

From the bed, Gregoria sobbed. "Do not kill Allard, please."

Zubillaga raised an eyebrow. "No?"

"Shut up, Gregoria," Allard warned her, knowing that Zubillaga and his kind never missed a chance to make full use of any affection existing between captives. "You don't give a damn about me – and you're more trouble than you're worth."

"Very feeble." Gila sneered, knowing what was going on. "And probably unnecessary. Why should Zubillaga interrogate you? He knows all about you."

"Does he know that the police are due to arrive here very soon?" Allard bluffed. "I didn't waste time before I came up here."

"The police listened to you?" Zubillaga scoffed. "A man wanted for murder. Two murders, if you count the SIC operative."

"It would be too embarrassing for you to bring up Gardine's death," Allard reminded him. "I phoned the police before I came up here. I just told them there had been a killing. There hadn't been then. I thought there might be."

Zubillaga frowned. Then he said to the Indians in Spanish: "Quickly, take the dead man outside and dump him in the forest – as far away as possible." The Indians left the room. Zubillaga stepped backwards one pace, keeping the four of them covered.

"When the police come – if they come – I will say it was a practical joke. That will delay them, if nothing else."

"Nonsense," Gila snorted. He turned his head towards Allard. "See how stupid he is, Allard? He is an amateur, wouldn't you say?"

"I'd say so," Allard agreed. "The police will want to search the whole house before they are satisfied nothing's up. They'll find everything – us – the lab – the Toriellos. You won't be able to stop them looking, Zubillaga not without throwing a lot of suspicion on yourself. If that happened, you might just as well give up altogether. We'll wait for the police to arrive."

Zubillaga rubbed his bearded chin.

Bit by bit, Allard gathered in the slack of his chin. Soon Zubillaga would get the idea of phoning police headquarters and asking if any message had come from his estate.

There wasn't much time.

He struck out with the chain. The heavy links hit Zubillaga's gun, knocking it into the air. Zubillaga winced and clutched his hand, then dived for the gun as it fell.

Reana Pedersen caught it first.

"Very good, Allard," she said, pointing it at Zubillaga.

The whole thing had only taken a few seconds.

"Now," Reana said, "unlock the chains, Señor Zubillaga."

Zubillaga came forward reluctantly, pulling keys from his pocket.

Slowly, glowering, he undid the padlocks. First Max, then Gila, then Reana, then Allard.

"Now the Toriellos," Reana said. Gila seemed content for the moment for Reana to take the initiative.

Zubillaga crossed to Gregoria and her father and unchained them.

"You will leave with us, Allard," Gila said suddenly.

He crossed the room to where Allard's gun – the Webley that had belonged to the dead SIC agent – lay on the bench. He pointed it at Allard.

"I was telling the truth about the police," Allard said.

"Very well. Then we must leave as soon as possible."

Allard made a move towards Reana, hoping to get the gun from her, but Gila shook his head.

Allard realized that Gila was in a class entirely different from the others he had encountered on this job. Gila was a wise old bird, he knew all the angles. Like Allard, he was a professional – but his experiences went back to before the war. He had stayed alive and operating by anticipating every possibility.

Allard was going to find it much harder to get out of Gila's hands.

They walked down the stairs, Gregoria and Allard helping the shaking old man between them.

Reana stayed behind for the moment with Zubillaga.

By the time they had reached the front door, Reana came hurrying down the stairs behind them.

Suddenly there was a shot. Reana turned on the stairs and retaliated. Allard looked back and saw one of Zubillaga's Indian bodyguards crumpling to the floor.

"Quick," Reana said. "The car. The others will be coming back soon."

Allard, Gregoria and old Toriello were bundled into the back of the Thunderbird.

Gila, Max and Reana got into the front. Max drove while Gila and Reana kept the three prisoners covered.

"Back to the house, Max," Gila ordered.

"There are guards on the walls. They must have heard some of the shooting," Allard said. "How are you going

to deal with them? They'll have thought Zubillaga was in control, but when they see us leaving, they'll shoot.

"Then we'll drive very fast." Gila smirked. "And hope for the best."

"What about the gate?" Max said in a mutter as the outer wall of the hacienda loomed towards them and a searchlight beam suddenly focused on them.

Shots began to sound from the walls. Bullets whined overhead and struck the ground near the speeding car. For the sake of Gregoria and her father, Allard thought he'd better tell Gila.

"They're open," he said. "I left it ajar when I came in – thought I'd need a fast escape route."

"Then we'll hope the hinges break or bend," Gila said. "Keep going, Max."

They burst through the gates amid the sound of tearing metal and splintering wood. The engine stalled for a second and a window cracked.

Then they were through, with only the wooden perimeter gate to worry about – and the guard on it.

They tore down the private road, their headlights blazing and the motor going full out.

The barred gate was ahead, the startled guard with the rifle. He shouted, raised the weapon.

Max was a crazy driver but had fantastic control over the Thunderbird. It swerved slightly, heading straight at the guard, knocking him over with the fender and swerving back towards the gate in seconds.

Max hunched over the wheel as the crash came. The Thunderbird was taking more than Allard had thought possible. Its front was a mass of dents, but it was still going.

Max didn't slacken speed as they bumped down the narrow forest track until they met up with the main road, half skidded onto it, and began to roar along the highway between tall trees towards the house of the Wax Chandler.

It was cramped in Gila's cellar and old Toriello had the only bed.

Gregoria and Allard bent over him. He seemed to have partly lost his senses and was breathing with difficulty.

Allard hoped he'd die, but he had to help Gregoria do what she could for him, though he couldn't help thinking that with old Toriello out of the way part of the original scheme would be ruined altogether.

He wondered what Gila planned to do. Presumably Reana had killed Zubillaga, which meant that American assistance for a revolution was out of the question.

Was Gila going to try and get one going without U.S. backing? He'd be foolish to try. And Gila wasn't that foolish.

How was he going to keep the U.S. out of Yutaxa now? So far he'd managed to beguile them completely – fazed them beautifully by using Zubillaga as a front. Now Groves, the surviving SIC agent, would soon be on to Gila and everything SIC could do would be done to hunt Gila down.

Allard might be blamed for most of the mayhem at Zubillaga's hacienda, but when Groves arrived there – as he must do eventually – he'd soon learn that Gila had been there, too.

What then?

Gila must scheme to consolidate his plans in some way. If he had intended to give up he wouldn't have bothered

to bring the Toriellos out there. Either he'd have shot them at the house or just left them where they were.

Gila must know something extra. But what?

Allard racked his brains as he helped Gregoria make her father comfortable. But he hadn't a clue what Gila was going to do.

He and the girl eventually huddled together on the floor to get some sleep.

As he nodded off, Allard decided that even if he did know what Gila was up to it wouldn't do him much good in his present situation.

Max came in next morning. Allard, stiff from lying on the floor with Gregoria's head cradled in his arm, started to get up.

Max didn't waste any time.

He hit Allard smartly on the base of the skull as he began to rise.

Allard hardly felt a thing. And all he heard was a scream from Gregoria before he went into a deeper sleep than the one he'd just woken from.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AS THE light shone harshly into his eyes, Allard swore. Then a heavy boot crashed into his ribs and he doubled up, realizing his hands were tied behind his back. He retched dryly. His stomach was empty and his throat was full of pain.

The water helped. It was ice cold. It wet his lips and he felt better. He was lying on stone. He opened his eyes and saw Max, grinning, standing over him, the water jug still in his hand.

“Feeling better, Allard?” Max asked.

Allard turned his head. He was in a long, stone building lighted by a few dim, dirty electric light bulbs stuck at intervals in the wall. Barrels and metal drums were stacked here and there.

“Careful, Max,” came the fluting voice of Gila, invisible to Allard. “Don’t waste him.”

Max laughed. It was a hoarse, thick laugh. A sick laugh. A sadistic laugh.

“We have all been badly used by Mr. Allard,” continued Gila. “And now we repay him. But let us use a little finesse, Max. A little finesse. We want to find out every-

thing we can about his organization. It will be useful trading information.”

Gila came into view now, walking on flat feet like an overweight lizard. “We want to know about your firm, Mr. Allard.”

Allard knew what to do. It was the best way. The tried and true way. He had a complete story for anyone who interrogated him. It sounded good – but it actually told his interrogators nothing about Cell 6 that was of any importance. The trouble was, thought Allard, he’d have to go through some of the preliminary torture evidently intended for him before he pretended to let the information come out.

“I’m saying nothing,” he said.

“Now, that’s stupid,” Gila said. “Stand Mr. Allard up, Max.”

Allard was hauled to his feet. He straddled the floor, still hurting from the blows Max had given him.

“This is where the old wax chandler used to make his candles,” Gila explained. He pointed at a squat tank in one corner. “There is still a drum of palm oil left. You pour the oil into the tank and light a fire under it so that the flames cannot reach the oil. You see the rack above it?”

Allard looked up. He saw the rack – a long, narrow iron frame on a pulley system, hanging crookedly by a rope. It was much like the sort of rack used to dry clothes on – you put the clothes on it and then raised it to the ceiling.

“The chandler used to dry his wicks from that,” Gila went on. “Then he dipped them into the oil when it was hot. How hot used the oil to get, Max?”

“Oh, very very hot.” Max smiled. He licked his lips.

Allard got the message. He shuddered.

“How long will it take to heat the oil, Max?” Gila asked next.

“No time at all, Gila.” They were grinning at one another now.

“And how long will he take to die?”

Max shrugged, his grin broadening. “As long as we choose.”

Gila snorted with laughter. “We tie you to the rack, Mr. Allard, and dip you in and out of the oil as it spits and bubbles. You will scream and writhe and beg me to let you free. But we shan’t let you free. We intend to kill you.”

“Unless I tell you about my organization?” Allard said.

Gila shook his head. “You will tell us about your organization. You will tell us the whole truth – when you have had your dip, once or twice. We are offering you nothing, Mr. Allard. We shall – later, perhaps – offer you a swifter death. Do you think you will be grateful to us?”

Allard nodded. “By the sound of it.”

“You are a realist, Mr. Allard.”

Allard’s mouth was bone dry and his legs were trembling. “I’m afraid so,” he said.

“Get the oil, Max. And light the fire.”

Allard remembered all the burnings he had had in his life. There had been the hot candle grease on his hand. The time he’d fallen against the red-hot grate as a kid. The numbness, then the searing pain of scalding water. The grinding of the cigarette into his cheek when he’d been caught by UB4 in Berlin. The minor burns when he’d picked up something hot.

He began to sweat. He knew that those experiences had

been nothing at all. He tried to think of a way of escape, but Gila had been uncompromising. The fat, grotesque free-lance trouble-maker was too wily to be tricked. And he was telling the truth. Allard had nothing to offer him. Nothing that wouldn’t come when the pain became unbearable.

“For Christ’s sake, Gila – don’t . . .” He stopped. It was no good. Tears of self-pity came into his eyes.

He tried to work at the ropes binding his hands, but they were secure, tight.

There was no way out.

Max was fumbling in his pockets, standing by the tank’s oven. He took out a handful of charcoal and some paper. He knelt on the floor by the long, iron tank and opened the small door set into the brickwork underneath.

He stuffed in the charcoal and paper. Then he struck a match. The paper crackled and blazed. He shut the door and walked to a door in the wall, leaving the building and returning a short time later, staggering in and half-wheeling, half carrying a ten-gallon drum of palm oil.

The room was full of noise. The door slamming, the fire crackling as it took hold, the ponderous rumble of the drum and then a click as Max stopped by the door on his final journey to turn off the light switch. The lights went out and the room was lit only by the red, flickering glare from the fire.

Gila chuckled. “A nice effect, eh?”

The fire was roaring now as Max drew back, having rammed home a thick log.

Allard tried again to work the ropes off his hands, but he didn’t have a chance. He couldn’t stop his legs trem-

bling and they seemed to move in sympathy with the unearthly beat and rhythm of the now bubbling oil.

He saw Max lift the drum once more to the top of the tank and he saw the drum slip slightly. He saw the brief, vivid flash as a goblet of oil splashed from the floor and into the open door. The flames reached out and snatched it hungrily.

Max, more careful now, gently poured the rest of the oil into the tank.

Smoke rose as the cold oil met the boiling oil. Burning wood and boiling oil. Red, flickering light and a mad creature gloating over his slow and agonizing death.

Allard lost track of time, but eventually he heard Max's voice say: "Gila. I'm ready."

There was a faint chance that he could get away somehow if they untied him before strapping him to the rack.

It was his only chance. He'd have to make the best of it.

"Now we are going to tie you to the rack," Gila said.

Allard tensed.

The Max struck him in the face with sufficient force to knock him to the floor. He tried to get up, but Max was on him, turning him over, untying the rope. He tried to heave Max off, but he hadn't realized how weak he was until now. He struggled desperately, ready to risk any kind of death other than the one prepared for him.

Max hit him on the back of the neck.

Allard woke up on the rack. He coughed. The fumes stung his throat and eyes. He was spreadeagled on the metal frame. He looked down and saw the bubbling surface below him.

Almost mesmerized, he watched the yellow globes form,

the domes shot with red, blue and purple, then burst in a little gush of splattering heat. The fire crackled.

He felt a jerk as he was lowered towards the oil. He shouted. He heard laughter.

Lower. Another jerk. He caught a glimpse of Gila standing away in the distance; of Max, like some latter day demon, gradually lowering the rack towards the hot oil.

"No!" Allard shouted. "No! No lower. Please, Max!"

Max chuckled.

Allard threshed on the rack, feeling the heat rise in intensity. Oil began to splatter on his hands and face, searing the skin.

"NO!"

He waited for the next jerk. The final jerk that would send him into the stinking, bubbling oil – the oil that would burn his skin and turn him into a screaming, inhuman creature.

It didn't come.

Instead he heard Reana Pedersen's voice calling to Gila.

"Stop! Stop, Gila! Stop! We need him!"

Need him? What did she mean?

It could be a reprieve. And anything was better than the oil.

Allard even thought the whole thing could be a set-up – a wicked scheme they'd worked out between them to soften him up for something. But what?

He didn't care. He was alive and, reluctantly, Max was winding the rack into the smoky air again.

"Later, Max," Gila consoled his lieutenant as they swung the rack down to the ground and began to untie Allard. "You can have him back later. Keep the oil hot."

So it was only a reprieve, Allard thought hazily. They were going to do it later. Still, later was better.

He stumbled up when they told him to.

He managed to keep standing when the cold air of Gila's garden struck him.

He moved painfully back towards the house, wondering mistily what was going to happen next.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"WHAT do you think of our little lab, Allard?" Gila asked, moving his repulsive, fingerless hand to indicate the modern equipment in the room. "Better than Zubillaga's crude affair, eh?"

It was a perfectly equipped laboratory, with the latest in instruments. A hunched, shaking old man sat in one corner. He wore a white coat and rubber gloves.

"Let me introduce you to my little secret, Mr. Allard," said Gila. Max prodded Allard forward. "My ace up the sleeve, you might say. A genius, this man. Professor Borges."

"Borges! But he was shot during the take-over," Allard said, genuinely surprised.

"So it was thtought," Gila nodded. "But I cornered him for myself. It was through him that I found out all about Toriello and Zubillaga and their ill-conceived schemes. I could quite easily have put the whole plan into operation myself – had it not been, of course, for the Americans, who have such an unwelcome interest in Central American affairs. I needed a smoke-screen. Zubillaga was perfect. The Americans were taken in by his story. They believed

that he was merely a revolutionary and supported him. They took no interest in my activities, though aiding them without realizing it. Zubillaga is out of the picture now, and that is a pity. I will have to speed things up. But he was completely unnecessary in any other way.”

“He had the fungus – the LSD to infect the banana crop,” Allard said.

“And I have the man who processed the fungus.” Gila waved his fingerless paw at the impassive little man in the corner. “Professor Borges. Zubillaga thought the fungus was important. His scheme was crude and might easily have failed. Fungus! It takes time to spread, Mr. Allard.”

“Not that long.”

“Long enough. It has no refinement. I have something extra. The fungus can be introduced into the banana plantations, certainly. It will help. But I have a swifter, more imperceptible method.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll tell you shortly, perhaps. Reana is bringing Miss Toriello along. She has been tending her father as best she can. The poor fellow has had a heart attack. That is why we had to hold up your dip.”

They had approached Borges. Allard looked at the blank face and glazed eyes looked back at him.

“The professor,” Gila explained mockingly, “has for some time been a victim of the drugs he has himself processed. He has lost much of his will. I don’t expect him to last much longer, happily. His work is done. We had faith in him, and that faith was rewarded.

Gila slapped the old man across the face with his fingerless hand. There was no reaction.

“He is as good as dead,” Gila told Allard. “But we

keep him up, one way or another. He has flashes of coherent thought, given the right drugs. We need him for the odd question.”

“How come Doctor Toriello didn’t tell me about him?” Allard asked.

“Professor Borges has only just arrived here. This house is not my only residence.”

The door opened and Reana came in, forcing Gregoria before her into the room. The Pedersen girl had twisted Gregoria’s arm behind her back so that she was wincing with pain. It was unnecessary. Reana seemed to enjoy it. Allard already knew her sexual needs well enough to understand that Reana enjoyed inflicting pain – as well as receiving it.

“Now, Miss Toriello,” Gila said, smiling a little as she looked at him in fear. She remembered his raping her. “Now – we have asked you before to process the formula for the LSD antidote you were kind enough to prepare for us. Do you still refuse?”

“Yes.”

Gila sighed heavily. “We had intended to offer you an inducement. You know what large doses of LSD-25 can do to a man.”

“Yes.” The word was whispered.

Gila went over to the girl, running his deformed hand over her body, pressing her here and there so that she squirmed and gasped with revulsion.

“We had intended to use your father in a little experiment,” Gila said, smiling as the girl tried to twist away from the exploring stump. “But we need him alive and his heart would not stand what we had hoped to do with him.”

“You must – aah – you – must get him a – proper doctor . . .” she gasped.

“Miss Pedersen has good first-aid training,” Gila said.

“He – aah – he will d-die . . .”

“Leave her alone!” Allard shouted suddenly, hardly realizing what he was doing. “For god’s sake!”

Gila smirked. His deformed hand stayed where it was.

“We will bring a doctor, perhaps,” he said. “If you process the antidote. We need to see if it works. You may have deceived us with this formula. We had hoped that Professor Borges would be able to check it for us, but as yet we have not been able to bring him round.”

For the first time Gregoria seemed to notice the old man in the corner. Before she could say anything Gila’s stump had given her another cruel stab of pain. “Aaaaaah!”

“If,” Gila went on, “you prepare a reasonable quantity of the antidote, you might save Allard’s life.”

“You would kill him?”

“You would, perhaps – by default.”

“Ignore him, Gregoria,” Allard said. “They intend to kill me whatever you do. They intend to kill us all. Don’t go along with anything they say.”

“Mr. Allard exaggerates. I could kill you all or not. But I might just as well leave you alive – it will mean nothing to me – when you have proven yourselves useful.”

“He’s lying,” Allard said.

But Gregoria frowned, half-believing Gila.

“What do you mean – by default?” she asked.

“We intend to give Mr. Allard a good dose of LSD-25,” Gila explained with a smirk. “He will grow to need it in a very short time. How long would you say?”

“Sixteen hours at most – as soon as he’s had the first dose,” Gregoria murmured.

“Quite. He will need it then. He will go insane if he cannot have it. Eventually he will go berserk. We shall have a very large dose for him which we shall allow him to take orally. A very large dose. A lethal dose. He will kill himself – unless the antidote is ready.”

Gregoria seemed completely without will now. She nodded. “I understand. I will prepare a quantity from my formula. But do not give Allard any LSD.”

“But I must, do you see?” said Gila. “For that is the best way to test it. Max, take Mr. Allard to the chair, will you?”

Max forced Allard towards a chair very much like a dentist’s chair. He made Allard sit down, pulling up straps from the arms which he tied securely. A big canister stood near the chair. A gas canister. Allard wondered what it contained – what kind of gas. It was unmarked.

Max opened one of the white cupboards and took out a mask. Connected to it was a long length of hose. He strapped it to Allard’s face, covering the nose and mouth like an airplane pilot’s oxygen mask. Max began to screw the other end of the hose into a valve on the gas canister.

Gas?

There was no such thing as LSD-25 *gas*! What were they giving him?

He held his breath, hoping that when they turned on the gas it would not be for long. He might survive.

Yet it must have something to do with LSD-25. Otherwise, why should they be using him to force Gregoria to process a quantity of the antidote?

Maybe this was just a preparation.

Gila stepped forward and adjusted the valve. Allard tasted the bitter-sweet vapour in his mouth. He couldn't identify it, yet it was vaguely familiar.

Then, as a feeling of pleasant euphoria began to sweep over him, he realized what it reminded him of. The subtle scent that he had noticed in Zubillaga's greenhouse.

Somehow Gila had got Borges to process an LSD gas. The implications were fantastic and terrifying. No wonder Gila thought Zubillaga's plans crude!

All Gila had to do was spray the countryside with LSD gas, driving all who inhaled it into insanity. They would also become addicted. The slower-growing fungus would be discovered, encouraged to grow by addicts, until the whole of the south and centre of America would be infected.

Gila would have found it easier to work from a country already – through Zubillaga, through Toriello – under his control, but it wasn't necessary. Not now he was ready. He could take over Yutaxa virtually single-handed. He could still put Toriello in as President – without U.S. aid. All he had to do to let the army get control was to issue only the army with gas masks, if they didn't have them already.

A single plane could drop enough of the gas into the centres to paralyse the whole of Yutaxa. What a malleable populace, too, thought Allard.

It seemed to him that he could see the infected banana plantations – the individual palms waving finger-like leaves towards him. Grasping fingers. They *were* fingers, of course – great black, monstrous fingers. Reaching for his throat. Fantastic colours – reds, yellows, greens, purples, milky blues and smoky scarlet – swarm before his eyes. Faces

formed from the colours. Malevolent faces that hated Allard.

He screamed.

Dimly he was aware of something being taken from his mouth and nose, but didn't know what it was or who took it away.

He drifted through infinite jungles. Brightly coloured jungles in which vast, grotesque birds flew, obscuring the sky. The birds turned on him, their huge beaks wide. Lions prowled, their bodies green and their manes orange, turning into blindingly bright, abstract patterns that were no less terrifying.

For an eternity Allard was alone in an icy limbo where all the colours were bright and sharp and comfortless.

For another eternity Allard swam through seas without end, all green and cool and deep, where distorted creatures drifted, sometimes attacking him.

And then, at last, he had reached the real world – the world he had created, where he was God and could create or destroy whatever he wished.

He was supremely powerful. He told planets to destroy themselves, and they did. He created suns. Beautiful women flocked to be his. Of all men, he was the mightiest. Of all gods, he was the greatest.

But then, after several lifetimes of this marvellous existence, where he had destroyed and created many, many things, he began to descend swiftly into darkness.

Into hell. Into fire. Into torture of the most dreadful kind.

Infinity upon infinity. Eternity after eternity. And Allard was all things. Sometimes he killed. Sometimes he

brought to life. Sometimes he was incredibly strong, at others despicably weak.

Time meant nothing.

While Allard experienced a cycle of eternities, the laboratory clock ticked out four hours. Four hours in which Allard, strapped in the chair, raged, groaned, smiled, laughed, wept, mewled, cursed and voiced strange, unearthly cries that were ululations from the depths of his mind – the language of the unconscious, which the religious call the voice of tongues.

During that four hours, Gregoria Toriello sweated over her laboratory equipment while Max, gun in hand, looked on – lusty for her, but too afraid of Gila to do anything yet – until Gila was tired of her and passed her on, as he had passed on Reana Pedersen. But whereas Reana had been forced to submit to Gila and his whip, she was under no compulsion to obey him – Max. But Reana was at least something of a free agent. Gregoria, once she had proven the serum effective, would not be.

Sweating, looking as often as she could, with eyes full of sympathy, towards the chair, Gregoria worked to save Allard's life.

Six hours later Allard left an ice-bound world where the ice was unimaginable coldness and impossible colours, and discovered that he was shivering.

He began to shiver all over. He couldn't control it. The visions slowly evaporated and he realized he was looking into the laboratory, seeing Gregoria Toriello's back hunched over the bench, while Max, gun in hand, leaned against a wall eyeing her legs.

He was very cold.

He was very clammy.

He needed something, but he couldn't think what it was. Not food. Not sex. Not water.

He couldn't name it. But it was a need that consumed him.

He said, in a voice that was hollow and dry: "I – ah – w-want more!"

Gregoria wheeled, her eyes blazing now. "Nick. You don't want more. Try to control yourself. Remember what has been done to you!"

"M-more . . ."

"No, Nick. Try to resist the need. Try to remember what it is you want. Remember it will kill you the way they have planned it!"

"Shut up!" Max slapped her face with his open hand. "Get on with what you're doing."

"LSD-25," she said. "I am preparing the antidote."

"Get on with it."

Nick Allard's brain cleared a little. Then it cleared more. Then it was very clear. Clearer than usual.

He knew what was being done to him.

And the need consumed him.

Max had opened the door and was calling along a passage: "Gila. He's woken up."

Gila came in, smirking. "How's the patient?"

Allard stopped himself from talking. Stopped himself from begging for more. But only just.

"If this works, I can begin stage three at once," Gila mused, staring clinically at Allard, pulling down his eyelids. "The crucial stage."

Allard could not stop himself letting out a gasping groan.

“You want more,” smirked Gila. “Of course you do. And you shall have it.”

The mask was fitted over Allard’s face again. He began to breathe gratefully. Once again he set off on his bizarre adventures, through eternity, knowing great misery and great joy, great sexual pleasure and great sexual need. All emotions and delights and miseries were supra-human in their intensity. It was like the Arabian Nights a million times more powerful. He could not resist it.

The next time Allard woke up Gregoria looked much paler, more haggard. Reana Pedersen had taken over guard.

Allard’s mind cleared faster, but his need seemed even greater. He knew he would kill to get what he wanted. He would kill anyone who tried to stop him getting it.

He heard the women talking, as if from far away.

“It is finished,” Gregoria said. “Tell Gila. We can give it to Allard and he will be all right.”

“You have a look at him,” Reana’s voice said. “I think he’s woken up. Check.”

Gregoria came forward.

“More,” said Allard weakly, all insensate need.

“No, Nick. We will make you better soon.”

Reana stepped forward. “One of his straps has come loose,” she said. “I’d better tighten it.”

Gregoria tried to grasp Reana then, but the blonde prodded her away with her gun.

Reana bent over the strap.

Suddenly it came loose.

“More!” Allard screamed, pushing Reana backwards. “More!”

Reana stumbled and fell, her gun skittering across the floor.

“Nick!” Gregoria shouted. “Stop, I have the drug to cure you!”

Allard was still in a haze that was occasionally shot through with fantastic colours, marvellous yet frightening shapes and visions. He stumbled on. He felt himself pushed, resisted and went on. Down steps, across turf.

Completely crazed, he heard shouts. A couple of shots.

Gila’s voice: “Get him! Who let him escape?”

Reana: “One of the straps was loose. When I tried to tighten it he grappled with me.”

Gila: “No, Max – don’t shoot to kill. We still need him.”

Weeping like a child, Allard tried to escape the voices, searching for something he did not know the name of but which he needed . . . needed . . . needed . . .

“The candle house. Drive him in there!” Gila’s voice.

He felt himself manhandled, and shrugged the hands aside.

He saw Max’s face and ten other faces behind it, each more alien than the last.

The world swam. There was no top, no bottom, no sides. There was no north or south, east or west. There was only chaotic limbo.

But it was becoming hot. Too hot. He moaned. There was that smell he recognized. Somehow he blinked his eyes into normal focus and knew where he was.

Again the clarity of mind. He knew what had happened, why and how. And the need consumed him.

He was near the tank where the oil still bubbled. That was it. After this they were putting him in there. No more of what he needed. Only death. He had suffered worse deaths now, but it meant the end, this death.

Max, uncharacteristically, was standing with his back to the tank, trying to coax him, a contortion on his face that might have been a smile.

“More!” said Allard.

“Yes – later!”

Allard growled like an animal and seized Max in his hands, gripped him around the throat and began to tear at him, snap at him with his teeth. He felt another arm on his and tried to resist it, shoving backwards with his feet, then forward, ripping himself away from his prey.

Max screamed and lost his footing.

Hot oil splashed as he fell into the oil, scrabbling to get out.

Gobbets of oil splashed on Allard’s face. The pain made him temporarily forget the need. He howled and then was motionless, watching as Gila dragged the screaming Max from the oil. The man’s face was peeled – a horrible red. He screamed and screamed – and screamed.

“Stop that screaming, Max,” Gila shouted irrationally. “Stop it!”

But Max wouldn’t – couldn’t – stop.

Allard saw Gila take out his gun.

Shuddering with the withdrawal symptoms, but now in sufficient control of his own mind and body not to give in to them entirely, Allard saw Gila shoot Max through the head – the way a man would kill an animal in pain.

It was probably the most merciful thing that could have been done for Max.

Allard dashed for the door.

Gregoria had an antidote. Would it work?

He slammed the door and dropped the bar on the outside before Gila could lower Max’s body to the floor.

He didn’t know how he’d escaped, but he had to make the most of it. Gila would get out sooner or later, perhaps, but by that time Allard, Gregoria and her father would be out of it, safe in the British Consulate at Itlo.

Allard had had enough. He wanted to go home.

A great, cold, clammy shudder racked his body again and he gasped. The withdrawal symptoms brought physical pain and mental torture.

He forced himself to remain rational as he reached the house. Somehow he had to deal with Reana.

And, he realized suddenly, with Blasco, who must still be in the house somewhere, although maybe too ill to be much assistance to Reana.

He didn’t know where the laboratory was located in the house. Somehow he must have left it and got into the garden, been forced into the candle-making building, but he didn’t know how it had happened.

He saw something in the hall as he entered – a figure moving stealthily. He remembered where it was going – towards the cellar where Toriello and Borges were probably still being kept.

He followed cautiously. It was probably Blasco and if he could get Blasco’s gun he’d be at less disadvantage.

Down the cellar steps after the figure. Watch it open the cellar door. Listen to it talk. Leap for it. Hands going for the throat.

Allard, in better condition, would never have made such an obvious mistake. The man he attacked knew judo. Allard’s hands were grasped and he sailed over the man’s head to land with a bone-jarring thud on the stone floor inside the cell.

As he prepared to fight, he noticed, briefly, that Toriello

was in the cell, but not Borges. Perhaps the old scientist had already been eliminated.

In the semi-darkness he made out the face of the man he'd attacked.

It was Groves, the SIC man – Garadine's colleague.

"I owe you something," Groves muttered. "Don't I, buddy?" And he leapt for Allard.

A shot sounded and Groves yelped, fell off-balance, clutching his shoulder.

A girl stood in silhouette in the doorway, a gun in her hand.

"Gregoria!" said Allard.

"Wrong," came the purring voice of Reana. "She's upstairs putting finishing touches to the serum you're going to need very, very soon."

Shivering, Allard huddled on the floor, too miserable to move. Groves was cursing horribly.

"Get up, Allard," said the Pedersen girl. "We can have the American in with Toriello for the time being. A couple of sick men together. They can commiserate with each other."

Allard got up. He was bathed in a clammy sweat. He needed the LSD. He had to have it or a different kind of madness would sweep over him again. The killing madness.

Reana stood aside as he slouched and stumbled out. She slammed the door and locked it.

"Quick, up the stairs," she said.

He began to stumble up the stairs and tears came to his eyes.

"The LSD," he said. "You must give me some."

"The sooner you get up there the better," she said grimly.

That thought gave him extra energy. He began to climb faster.

It seemed an age before they reached the first landing.

Then they both heard the shot from the cellar.

"I should have taken the American's gun," said Reana.

Another shot. The sound of splintering wood.

"In here," she said. "Quick." She pushed him ahead of her into the main room on the ground floor.

"I must have the . . ."

"Shut up," she hissed.

A footfall in the hall. Reana, crouching, opened the door an inch, poked her gun through and fired.

Allard heard someone curse. A gun sounded and a bullet ploughed through the wood of the door.

Reana fired again.

Another shot answered her. Reana spun backwards and fell on top of Allard, who was lying on the floor.

The door opened gradually. Reana was still breathing but she didn't move. Allard felt something cool against his hand. It was her gun.

His hands were trembling as he took hold of it. With a fantastic effort of will he managed to steady his arm as he raised the gun and fired from the floor at the man who entered.

Groves shouted. His gun went off, firing high. Then he fell backwards out of the room. He cursed and Allard heard him stumbling about in the hall. Keeping a grip on his mind and body, Allard waited for him.

There was a crash and then silence.

Allard tried to struggle out from under Reana, but he felt too weak. Instead of coldness, he now felt a prickly

heat going through his whole system. He wanted to vomit but couldn't.

He lay face downwards, trying to gather what was left of his will-power, trying to fight the need that ate him up.

He began to shake, hitting his head up and down on the floor in a regular rhythm.

A little later, with saliva drooling from his mouth, he began to crawl slowly out from under Reana's still-warm body. It took an age. He clawed himself to his feet, standing swaying on legs of jelly.

He had to get to the LSD. He had to have it.

He staggered out into the hall, stumbling over Groves's body. He reached the stairs. On hand and knees he began to climb. He got to the first landing, pulled himself erect and then began to sway backwards. He tried to clutch at a banister for support. Missed it by several inches and fell backwards down the stairs.

Unconsciousness brought relief from the need.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ALLARD woke up as his face was being bathed with a cool sponge. He still felt cold and trembly. He still needed the LSD. He was certain he would die if he didn't have it.

It was a woman bathing his face.

It was Reana. She smiled at him, picking up a hypodermic syringe from a kidney dish she's placed beside him.

She forced up his filthy sleeve and plunged the syringe into his upper arm. The prick went unnoticed.

He was still in the hall, propped up on cushions with an Indian blanket across him.

"What are you doing this for?" he asked. "Where's Gila? Where's Gregoria?"

He noticed that she had a big bandage on her shoulder. It must have been where she was shot last night. When she moved her right arm, she moved it very painfully.

"I'm doing it partly because I like you," she said. "Gila and Gregoria have gone."

He began to feel better. The injection.

"Was that the antidote?" he asked.

“No – a small dose of LSD-25. Enough to keep you going without particularly impairing your mind.”

“How long will it last?”

“A few hours – perhaps longer. I have had no training in this sort of thing. I cannot say.”

He suddenly realized what she had said.

“Gone? Both of them? How? Where?”

“Gila must have come back to the house while we were unconscious,” she said. “I think in leaving he must have woken me up. He has taken Gregoria with him – and the antidote.”

“Where?”

“To his hide-out in the jungle, I should think.”

“We’ve got to get there – save the girl . . .” He was still confused. “Why aren’t you with him any more?”

“I never was.” She smiled. “Who do you think saved you on two occasions? Once when you were in the candle place and the other when you were in the lab. A strap didn’t come loose. I loosened it. I had hoped to save the situation in the confusion, but you ran away from the house.”

“Who are you then?”

“Call me Reana Pedersen, Allard. Toriello is dead, you know.”

“How?”

“Another heart attack – all the shooting last night did it. The place was full of corpses. Groves is dead – it must have been you who shot him. He got what was coming to him. That’s SIC out of the way, anyway. And Zubillaga.”

“But Gila – what about him? The most important one.”

“He is crazy. I don’t know. It is not our concern. Unless . . .”

“Unless he decides to spray Yutaxa with LSD gas,” Allard said.

“He has a plane,” she said thoughtfully. “A little airstrip. The whole place was once a guerrilla camp – deep in the jungle. That was where he kept Borges – where the early experiments were carried out. That’s where he’s gone with the girl . . .”

“What he’ll do to that girl, too . . .” said Allard. “We’ve got to get there, Reana.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “He could still cause so much chaos in Yutaxa that Gutierrez will be overthrown. Come on – there is a car in the garage.”

She helped him up. They made a strange pair. She was wounded and he was full of LSD, not knowing when the effects would wear off and turn him into a crawling, mewling sub-human thing again.

He drove the old Chevrolet out of the garage and through the hills towards the jungle at her directions.

Then came the thing they were least prepared for and yet should have expected sooner or later.

The high whine of a police siren.

Behind them came a fast, big, Buick sedan. Allard stepped on the accelerator, driving the car madly along the dreadful road, but inch by inch the police car gained on them.

Allard zig-zagged across the road as they tried to overtake. Then the wheel went into a ditch and the engine stalled.

Allard, cursing in frustration, stopped the car.

Four uniformed policemen got out of the Buick. They

were dressed in black uniforms, with shiny peaks on their caps, shiny belt, buckles and boots. They all had their guns out of their belt-holsters.

They signalled for Reana and Allard to get out of the car.

With some difficulty they both stumbled out.

The officer in charge was a sergeant. He had a round, pleasant face to which he contrived to give a stern expression.

“You have just left the place called the House of the Wax Chandler?” he said to Allard.

Allard nodded.

“There are four dead men there. Two old, two between thirty-five and forty years old. You know them?”

“Yes,” said Allard.

“You will come back to Itlo with us for questioning,” the sergeant said.

One of the other policemen muttered to him, pointing at Allard.

“Are you Nicholas Allard?” asked the sergeant.

“I am,” Allard said.

“Wanted for the murder of your friend in Mexico.”

“I was framed,” Allard said heavily. “I am a British secret agent and the future of Yutaxa is at stake. Your President and all his government are in danger. Will you listen to me?”

The sergeant considered. Allard’s grim, weary tone had impressed him. It seemed sincere. He nodded.

Allard told him as much of the story as he could. He gave him the facts without giving him the details. He finished with: “As you know, Britain has been a good friend of President Gutierrez. We are trying to help him.

I have been through a great deal. Now I must try to stop this Gila before he endangers your whole country. I realize the story seems fantastic – but it is nevertheless true.”

“It sounds so fantastic, it must be true,” the sergeant said seriously. “The only part I wonder about is this . . .” He paused, then: “Are you a British agent? You could be working for anybody. *You* could be the man who means to throw Yutaxa into chaos.”

Allard shrugged. “I could be.”

“Where is the jungle hide-out of your enemy?” the sergeant asked.

“Twenty miles along this road, you turn off into a cart-track, then you walk through the jungle,” Reana said.

“We will go with you to this place,” said the policeman. “Get into the car with us.”

Wearily the two of them got into the car. They had got to find Gila at the jungle hide-out now. If he wasn’t there, they wouldn’t have another chance to get him or to save Gregoria Toriello. They would be under arrest for murder. And they would probably hang.

The drive seemed to take an age and Allard began to feel uncomfortable as the big Buick sped along. At Reana’s instructions it turned off the main road and bumped along a cart-track for about five miles. They were now deep in the jungle.

Then they walked.

By the time they had been walking for two and a half hours, Allard felt the clammy sweat begin to cover his body again. He needed another shot of LSD soon. He couldn’t hang on much longer.

That was another reason for finding Gila. If he didn’t, he would become a raving madman again.

Reana whispered to them all to go quietly. "We are nearly there," she said. "This is a part of the jungle where there are swamps. It is not good farm land. Nobody ever comes here." She squashed the mosquitoes settling on her face. "The airstrip is camouflaged so that it cannot be seen from above. A good place for a hide-out."

Stooping low, they cautiously approached a large clearing. They saw the grassy airstrip first, then the plane. Under its wings, Allard noted, were two large drums, of the kind used for spraying crops. He knew what sort of stuff they would spray if ever the plane took off.

On the other side of the clearing was a rising bank, thick with undergrowth. A wooden shaft seemed to have been let into it. The wood was old.

"It was a mine a hundred years ago," Reana whispered. "Someone thought there was silver here. They never found any."

Now came the danger.

The six people began warily to cross the clearing towards the mine shaft.

And then it happened.

A machine gun began to roar from just within the shaft. A hail of bullets ploughed up turf, whined over their heads and thudded into the trees behind them. They flung themselves flat.

Two of the policemen became bloody corpses in seconds. The sergeant and the other policeman began rolling for cover. Allard and Reana followed their example, rolling in the opposite direction.

Allard fell into a gully at the edge of the clearing and dragged Reana in on top of him. The machine gun chattered away.

Allard peered over the top of the gully as soon as the machine gun stopped firing.

All four policemen were dead, riddled with bullets.

Allard felt the need rise in him even as he looked. He must have another shot of the drug. He must.

And it was in there. Past the machine gun.

Past the deformed monster who operated it.

He felt his mouth stiffen in a rictus of desperate craving. He had to have more.

He began to climb from the trench. No bullets flew.

He began to run towards the entrance of the mine as Reana shouted, "No, Allard!" from behind him.

He covered the first ten yards, the next ten. The entrance was immediately ahead. Dimly he could see the faint gleam of the machine gun barrel as he neared it.

Why wasn't Gila shooting?

Into the entrance itself.

And then the machine gun opened fire.

He flung himself against one wall, glimpsing Gila who was feeding the first part of a new drum into the gun. That was why he hadn't fired. He had only stopped firing after he had run out of ammunition. If only Allard had realized that he would have made it into the shaft before Gila could open up again.

Now bullets thudded and shrilled and screamed against the walls. But Allard was still desperate. His life meant very little to him unless he could have the LSD.

Somehow he managed to duck the ricocheting bullets and hurl himself over the top of the machine gun onto the clawing, cursing, grunting human monster.

Gila was strong and Allard was weakened by drugs and the privations of his experiences.

Gila used his deformed hand like a club, striking, striking, striking at Allard.

Allard was an animal. An animal crazed by hunger. He hungered for the drug.

He hit back. He struck Gila on the face, on the reptile-like body, on the throat.

And at last Gila was still.

In the back of the mine a girl was crying. It was Gregoria. Gregoria, naked and filthy and bleeding from the marks of a whip.

Allard hardly noticed. He said throatily: "The drug, Gregoria. I must have the drug. Where is it?"

Gregoria seemed to pull herself together for a moment. "No, Nick – not the drug. The antidote. You will feel better." She scrabbled around in the darkness of the room which had been made in the mine. It was one of several others, it appeared. The laboratories and other places must be behind this. Dimly, as the girl searched through a metal box for what she wanted, Allard realized that if Gila has not given in to his lust for Gregoria he would probably have killed her by now and be spraying Yutaxa with the insanity-inducing drug.

Gregoria found what she wanted, filled a hypo, plunged it into his arm.

"It might send you to sleep for a little while," she warned. "Not too long – just for a quarter of an hour or so."

As he became drowsy he realized that he should not have let her do this. He was needed awake. Gila was still alive.

Had Reana been killed by the machine gun fire? She wasn't here. It was likely.

Then he was asleep.

He awoke feeling miraculously fit. But then a boot thudded into his stomach and he groaned. Gila stood over him snarling. Gregoria cringed in a corner. Reana was nowhere to be seen.

He rolled, noting that Gila seemed to have no pistol. He sprang up, crouching in the low cavern.

Then he sprang at Gila. He was going to kill him. Kill him with his own bare hands.

It would be satisfying.

But it wasn't so easy. Gila was an old fighter. He was older than Allard, but preternaturally strong for his age, and very fast. He was cunning, too.

Allard no longer had insensate animal fury on his side and, though he felt fitter, he was in a poor physical state. But he hated Gila, and that helped.

Gila had picked up a metal crowbar from the floor. He swung it at Allard now, holding it in his good hand. Allard ducked and the crowbar thudded against wood, splintering it. The floor was uneven and, in ducking, Allard threw himself off-balance for a moment.

The crowbar swung at his legs. He tried to skip aside, but it caught his right leg and sent him flying. He lay on his back, Gila standing over him with the crowbar raised. He couldn't roll very far to either side. He was a sitting target.

Then he thought of something.

He felt in his trouser pockets as Gila raised the crowbar again. It was there.

It had been through everything with him.

He got it out even as the crowbar began to descend

He jabbed at Gila's leg. The man yelled and the descent of the crowbar halted.

Allard stabbed upwards into Gila's belly with the little knife-pen. The crowbar fell on to his shoulder as Gila dropped it, screaming.

Allard drove in again, ripping at Gila's flesh. Gila flailed at him with his malformed hand, tried to stop the knife with his other hand. Allard twisted the knife and forced it across the soft belly, slashing and hacking at his enemy. It was butchery.

Gila turned and, groaning, holding at his ruined belly, began to scramble down the passage towards the exit.

Allard lay back panting. Gila couldn't last more than half-an-hour in that condition. His fat had protected him to some extent, but not that much.

Gila would go into the jungle and die.

Gregoria crawled towards him.

"Oh, Nick. Thank God . . ."

She began to cry. He comforted her as best he could, but he rather wanted to be comforted himself.

Then he realized.

"Fool!" he said to himself. "I've been a stupid oaf. He's crazy. I know what he'll do."

He heard the sound of a plane's engines roaring into life.

He began to run forward, out of the mine-shaft towards the airstrip.

But the plane was already taking off. He ran after it, but it was in the air now, flying up into the blue sky, the deadly canisters ready to spray Yutaxa with LSD-25. Gila would do it. He would take a nation with him in his death agonies.

And then, as quickly as it had taken the air, the plane began to spiral downwards, whining out of control. Allard watched it in amazement. Had Gila died so soon?

He watched fascinated as the plane dived down over the tops of the trees.

"I think that is a swamp just about there," said Reana's voice behind him. She seemed pleased with herself.

"A – swamp?" said Allard stupidly.

"I hope so. It should take Gila, the plane and the canisters. I don't think we'll see any more of them, Allard."

"What did you do?" Allard turned to look at her pale, smiling face. She wiped a strand of hair out of her eyes.

"I emptied the petrol tank, that's all," she said.

"So that's what you were doing while I was in the mine! Why didn't you come and help me?"

"I had my duty to do first," she said. "I had to make sure that the gas – and Gila – were destroyed. Do you realize that only three people now know about this plot in any detail."

"All the rest are dead," mused Allard. "Christ! A lot of people died, thanks to that drug, didn't they?"

"You nearly did," she said, stroking the back of his head with her good hand. "I hope you are properly grateful, Mr. Allard, for the services I rendered you."

"I suppose so," he said. "But I thought you'd set me up for that murder. You didn't fire my gun through the mattress, then?"

"No. I left hastily – for a good reason. I thought I knew one of the SIC men – the one called Groves. I was sure he would recognize me. So I had to leave quickly. If he had done, it would have ruined everything I was trying to

accomplish. It took me months to infiltrate Gila's organization – it would all have been thrown away."

"But why infiltrate Gila's organization in the first place? Who do you work for? Don't tell me – Cell 5 or 7."

She grinned. It was rather an impish grin. "I'm afraid not," she told him. "I work for Moscow."

"*Moscow!*" Allard began to laugh. "You're a Russian agent. And you infiltrated Gila's organization. Why? Because you knew he was working for China?"

"Quite so. The two great Communist countries do not always see eye to eye, Mr. Allard." She grinned. "Much as the two great capitalist countries, eh? It was SIC tried to kill you, not me."

"So Moscow supports Gutierrez, like Britain, while China and the U.S.A. want him out. A turn up for the book." Allard laughed. "And Moscow and London have teamed up against Washington and Peking. Pretty bloody good, Reana."

He had another thought.

"Gutierrez wouldn't actually be a secret Communist by any chance, would he?" he asked.

"That's not for me to say," Reana answered with a smile.

It was a clear enough answer.

Allard burst out laughing again. "That's even better!" he managed. He realized he was laughing, half hysterically, in relief as much as anything. "I bet Moody will be peeved – if I decide to tell him. I'm not sure that I shall."

Gregoria came out of the mine entrance. She had a sheet draped over her.

Allard felt slightly guilty laughing. Even he felt some sympathy for the girl. She'd had a very rough time. He

went over to her and put his arms round her gently so as not to hurt her back, still raw from the whipping.

"It's over, Gregoria," he said softly. "All over."

She straightened and managed a smile. "Thank God," she said.

"And now," Reana said briskly, evidently somewhat jealous of the attention the other girl was getting from Allard, "back to Itlo."

"What about the murder charges?" Allard said. "I'm not out of the woods yet by any means."

"I have contacts," Reana said. "I think they will be able to give the President all the relevant information. I do not think you will have any trouble leaving Yutaxa."

"He's got to be warned about the traitor general in his army, too, I suppose," Allard said as they walked back though the jungle to where the Buick would still be parked.

"When do you plan to leave Itlo after this is cleared up?" Reana asked him.

He glanced at her – he glanced at Gregoria.

He was in real luck, he decided. It had been worth it all just for this. He hoped they were willing to share him.

"Not for a while yet." He grinned. "I think I deserve a holiday, don't you?"

They seemed to agree.

THE END