

The shadow man

By Hugh B. Cave

A hunger-sickened flophouse bum, without even a memory of better days.... He couldn't be expected to balk at a little well-paid deception¾ but how about Murder?

CHAPTER ONE

"YEA, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies . . ."

The pale young man opened one eye and looked indifferently at the speaker. He could not have repeated the speaker's words, not even if bribed with the offer of a shave, clean clothes and a job. He knew them, of course, or had known them, but like a number of other things he had known, the words of the Twenty-third Psalm were buried in a mostly forgotten past, overlaid with more recent memories of hunger and suffering and an inexplicable terror of certain harmless noises.

He wondered, for something to do, how many of the human wrecks around him were listening to the verbal ministrations of the man on the platform, and for something else to do he shifted uncomfortably on the hard seat of his chair, and looked around.

They weren't listening. Some were pretending to, but that was a matter of self-preservation, because the Reverend Windham Long had been known to lose his gentility at times and become wrathful when too many in his audience displayed lack of interest.

He had on occasions singled out certain offenders, notably those who slept with their mouths open, musically, and informed them harshly, in "class," that the least they might do in return for food and shelter was open their ears to his message of comfort and inspiration.

You couldn't blame him, of course. The soup was free for the asking, and the beans were plentiful. In return, you were expected to sit for an hour or so in a warm room, while Long Wind prayed for the good of your soul. You were

expected to stay awake and listen, and then do a bit of singing. "If you can't sing, whistle. If you can't do that, why then. make a noise of some sort, anyway! Let the Lord hear you! Even the smallest sparrows he takes care of! Remember that, and be of hope!"

This was a bad evening for hope. More than half of the unwashed souls now soaking up the warmth of the Friendly Mission would have no beds tonight. Those in the mission itself were spoken for, all eighteen of them. The other unfortunates faced a prospect of tramping icy sidewalks in temperature ten degrees above zero, Fahrenheit, with a bitter wind whining in and out of doorways which otherwise might be slept in.

Bill Smith considered himself fortunate. He had the necessary dime for a flop. He had soup and beans under his belt in sufficient quantity to keep the all too familiar pains out of his stomach. He had shoes, one of which had not yet been stuffed with newspaper, and he possessed the exquisite luxury of an overcoat. Moreover, his front tooth had stopped aching.

He closed his eye again and let the words of Long Wind roll over him. "And I say to you there is always hope, there is always that wonderful word Future. I say to you . . ."

Long Wind stopped, cleared his throat ominously. "Er . . . the gentleman at the rear of the room. The one whose mouth is open." Snickers from the assembled unwashed. "I—er—I believe I feel the draft even up here." Loud laughter.

Bill Smith opened his eyes again and wearily turned his head.

A pal nudged the offender, who slouched with his head lopped over the edge of the bench at the rear, his mouth agape as though to catch drops of water falling from the cracked ceiling. Strange sounds issued from his internals.

The pal whispered hoarsely: "Hey, Beak! Wake up!" An elbow to the stomach, forcibly

administered, brought Beak to a more erect position and he blinked his eyes, looked around him in comical bewilderment.

"Thank you," intoned Long Wind. "Thank you very much, my friend. Now we may continue."

Less interested in Beak's discomfort than were most of the others, Bill Smith was perhaps the only one who saw the door open.

He stared. It was not the stranger's height that held his attention so much as the spats, the fur-collared overcoat and the all-over effect of solid, muscular well-fedness. Well fed visitors to Reverend Long's mission were as rare as debutantes in the soup line.

THE gentleman paused just inside the door and looked about him. He was in shadow there and inconspicuous. To Long Wind, who had discarded his heavy glasses for the moment and was vigorously blowing his nose, the fellow was probably invisible.

He removed his hat, apparently as an afterthought. His head was big and bald, not partially bald but entirely. He sat down beside Weasel Snider. and the Weasel, who was small anyway, looked infinitesimal by comparison.

Weasel glanced at him. appeared unimpressed. Bill Smith was curious and went on watching.

Once or twice in the memory of Bill Smith, sad-eyed women in mink coats, or solemn, head-shaking young men in monkey suits, had ambled into Long Wind's mission to get an idea of how the other half lived. They usually left contributions and went away looking more sad, more solemn, than when they had arrived. This, however, was obviously not that kind of visit.

Baldy was deliberately and unobtrusively striking up a conversation with Weasel Snider.

It went on for some time. The Reverend Long was unaware of it, because he had not replaced his glasses. But Bill Smith watched.

Baldy talked and the Weasel listened. Now and then the Weasel nodded, frowning in a way that stretched his thin mouth to an inverted crescent. Baldy leaned sideways, thrust a hand into a pocket of his trousers, pulled out an immaculate handkerchief and wiped his lips with it.

He pulled something else out, too, without intending to. Into the aisle, near his right foot, fluttered a rectangular scrap of paper, green enough to be folding money, and the right size for it.

Bill Smith held his breath, long enough for the Reverend Long to intone dramatically: "Opportunity, my friends! Opportunity plays no favorites! She may knock next at your door!" Bill stood up.

The bill lay where it had fallen, neither Baldy nor anyone else having seen it. Baldy and the Weasel were deep in quiet conversation, their heads close together. Bill Smith stepped into the aisle, staggered a little and made for the rear of the room.

He did it well. The Reverend Windham Long saw him and stopped talking. Most of the others wondered why he had stopped talking, then followed the Reverend's gaze, saw Bill Smith and gaped. Bill was apparently a sick man.

He reeled as he walked. He went down the aisle in a limp-legged stagger that caused him to collide with the ends of most of the benches en route. He held one arm out in front of him, gropingly, and wrapped the other around his chest.

The Reverend came out of his trance and said anxiously, in a loud voice: "My good man, my good man, what—"

He didn't get a chance to finish it, because Bill Smith collapsed.

Baldy was one of those who rushed to Bill's assistance. Weasel was another. The Reverend Long churned down from his platform, forgetting his glasses, and elbowed through the rush.

"Get him into my office!" he sputtered. "Dear me! The poor fellow must be ill! Into my office, I say!"

Baldy and another man picked Bill up. They were gentle about it, lifting him as though he were made of crystal. They carried him along the rear of the room, into the corridor outside, and with the Reverend leading the way, Baldy holding him beneath the arms and walking backward, the other man clasping his legs and staring without much emotion into his face, they lugged him into the office.

They put him on a couch. The Reverend produced a glass of water.

Bill Smith moaned a little and opened his eyes. He hoped he looked sufficiently pale. He gazed blankly up into the Reverend Long's pudgy face and mumbled: "Where—where am—what happened?"

"You fainted."

"Uh?"

"When did you eat last, young man?"

"I—I had some soup," Bill mumbled. "Before that—I don't remember."

THE Reverend Long sadly shook his head. "Hunger," he said. Obviously that explained everything. "Malnutrition." That appeared to be an afterthought. "Young man, you need food and rest. Remain here. Please, until the meeting is over; then we'll see what can be done for you." He glanced at the handful of curious souls who had accompanied Bill Smith to the office. "You," he said, blinking near-sightedly at Baldy, "will you stay here with this unfortunate young man until I am able to return?"

Baldy nodded.

"Good! Now then, the rest of you . . ." The Reverend Long obviously intended to finish his sermon on opportunity, come hell or high water. Officially he herded the others out ahead of him, then looked back, grunted, and closed the office door.

Baldy pulled a chair closer to the couch, sat down and lit a cigarette. "Well," he said, "you got it." His eyes, Bill noted, were small and shrewd. Set deep into his ostrich-egg head, they appeared to work independently of the rest of him, shifting, staring, blinking, boring, while his mouth remained expressionless and his big, firm, well-fed body lazily flowed into the curves of the chair.

"What?" Bill said.

"Clever of you," Baldy declared without animosity. " Damned clever, that little stunt. I didn't know I'd dropped it until you fell on it. Wouldn't have known then, except that you scratched my ankle in scooping for it." He leaned forward, reaching for Bill's clenched fist. "What was it? A fiver?"

Bill Smith did not know what it was, and did not particularly care, so long as it would buy food. He did know that no one was going to take it away from him!

He snatched his hand away from Baldy's reaching fingers, sat up with a jerk and swung his feet to the floor. His fist arched back menacingly as he lurched to his feet.

Baldy waved a hand at him and said soothingly: "Now wait, wait. I'm not after your money. You earned it. It's yours."

"You 're damned right it's mine!"

"I want to talk to you."

Bill voiced a dry, mirthless laugh at that and started for the door. He had been talked to before. The big man grabbed him.

Bill turned. He wanted no argument, no shouting that would bring the mission people. He snarled darkly, "I'm leaving here!" and launched a fist at Baldy's jaw.

He was surprised. The fist smacked into a cupped hand and did no damage whatever. Baldy's grip on his arm tightened and then the big man was erect, towering on wide-spread legs, his face warped in a determined scowl.

"Sit down!"

Bill Smith struggled. Perhaps back in the unremembered past of him he might have been strong enough to break the grip of those big hands and shove his assailant aside, but what little strength was in him now went out like air from a squeezed balloon. Sweat was hot on his face. He gasped for breath, began cursing in a low, strangled, helpless voice. Then Baldy forced him relentlessly back to the couch and made him sit.

"I want to talk to you," Baldy said again. "If you'll stop being a fool and listen for a moment, you'll realize that I may have something to offer you."

Bill glared at him.

"You're smart and you're aggressive," Baldy said, less tension in his voice now. "It so happens that I came here tonight to find a man with those particular qualities. You want a job, don't you?"

"What kind of job?"

"Does it matter? I didn't think it would."

Bill frowned at him. In the beginning, the impressive part of Baldy had been the elegance of his clothes. That was changed now. You noticed the clothes less than the supple enormity of the man's hands, the peculiar fullness of his face, which was not fat but looked fat.

It occurred to Bill that Baldy might change in appearance again at any moment; that he could, and perhaps did, change at will. No cursory examination of the man could more than scratch the surface of what appeared to be a deep and complex personality.

"Suppose we talk this over," Baldy said. The small, round mouth of him curved in a tentative sort of smile and he put a paternal hand on Bill's shoulder. "It's a decent job I'm offering you, with decent pay. We can't discuss it here. Suppose you come up to my place."

"Why not?" Bill said.

"Good!"

But this much was certain, Bill realized. Looking at Baldy, you could not know whether he meant to adopt you or murder you, whether his talk was truth or subterfuge. The man might be saint or Satan.

Bill got off the couch. In the big room at the end of the corridor the Reverend Windham Long was shouting: "And that, my friends, is why I want you to know and to believe in the wonderful words of the Twenty-third Psalm. 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me!' That, friends, is a comforting promise!"

"My name," Baldy said, "is Martin Townsend." He offered no hand, but smiled again. Either the Reverend Long's words or Bill Smith seemed to amuse him.

"Mine's Bill Smith. "

"Not really! You mean—that's your real name?"

"It's as good as any," Bill shrugged. He turned and walked down the hall, and Townsend followed him.

CHAPTER TWO

You got a better conception of Martin Townsend's bigness when he emerged from the

murky twilight of the Friendly Mission into the glare of Friendly Street. Not that there were bright lights and a dazzling cleanliness on Friendly Street; far from it. But snow was falling, had been falling all day, and now, at half past eight, it lay white and deep except in that blackened aisle between the gutters. And against that whiteness, Townsend loomed immense in his black overcoat, a great, square-shouldered hulk of a man who strode forth into the cold and the snow as though even they were expected to dissolve before him.

"We'll take a cab." he announced.

They found one after walking a block, and he flagged it with a peremptory upward thrust of one arm. To the driver he said crisply: "The Alden Court. Riverway."

It was a large, comfortable apartment with an air of permanence that seemed to indicate it was Townsend's home, not merely a stopping-off place. Bill looked around with frank curiosity and wondered if he had ever before been in a place like it. It was in a world apart from the flops and soup-lines of his limited scope of memory. He sank into a chair.

Townsend, patently amused, smiled at him. "Drink?"

"Thanks."

"Scotch, rye, sherry?"

"The last I had was out of a bottle marked 'Milk of Magnesia.' It cost me a quarter and tasted like antifreeze. Scotch, please."

It was excellent Scotch. "Now, Mr. Smith," Townsend, said, pulling a huge leather ottoman close to Bill's chair, "suppose you confide in me. Tell me about yourself, who you are, where you come from, how you happened to be in that—in the Friendly Mission tonight."

Bill's smile was mechanical. "Suppose you tell me, first, what this job is."

"I see. Well, why not? The truth of the matter is, I'm an insurance investigator."

Bill was silent.

"Which is to say," Townsend went on, mistaking the silence for bewilderment, "I work for a large chain of insurance companies, in the capacity of—shall we say—investigator of irregularities. Nothing very mysterious about that, is there?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Now and then," Townsend declared gravely, "certain rackets spring up to menace the insurance companies. Some are small and easily squashed. Others attain frightening proportions and require months of investigation before even the first step can be taken to smash them. One of these rackets is now flourishing, and my job is to crush it. I need a man with your peculiar qualifications, Smith—a man who can worm through to the inside of this game and do some undercover work for me. That's a rather streamlined version of my reasons for bringing you here tonight, but it will give you an idea."

"In other words, you need a desperate down-and-outer who will risk his neck for you?"

"Quite right. Have I made a mistake?"

"Did Weasel Snider turn you down?"

Townsend stopped his glass midway to his lips, thinned his eyes above it and stared for a moment. Self-contained he might be, but not above being surprised. "You don't miss much, do you?" he said softly.

"I saw you come in."

"I see."

"How much does this job pay?"

"For a trial period of—say—two weeks, fifty dollars a week. After that, one hundred."

Bill Smith took in a slow breath and shut his eyes. "It sounds too good to be true."

"Suppose you tell me something about yourself."

"What, for instance?"

"Your real name, to begin with."

"I've told you. It's Smith."

Townsend was hurt. "You don't seem to understand me. I'm not asking these questions merely out of curiosity. Before I can take you into my confidence, before I can even begin to coach you in the complex problems of this job, I must know something about you."

"I don't know my name."

"I beg your pardon?"

"All right," Bill said, "let's take our hair down. There's something wrong with me, mentally. I don't know what it is; I don't know what caused it. My life goes back to a night I escaped from some sort of institution, but who put me there, or why, or how long I was there, or what I was before going there, I don't know."

MARTIN TOWNSEND gravely studied him, first with suspicion, then with unveiled bewilderment. "My dear fellow—is this true?"

"It's true."

"But you don't have the appearance of—that is to say, you don't look ill. I see signs of malnutrition, of course, and exhaustion, but—"

"When I got out of that place," Bill said, "I was wearing pajamas and a stolen overcoat. There was a foot of snow on the ground and I damn near froze to death. I don't remember much of what happened to me after that, except that I did a lot of walking; I slept in barns and unfinished houses. You know—houses under construction. They always wedge the windows with sticks, but you can knock the sticks out by pounding the sash with your fist."

"It seems to me I found or stole some clothes somewhere, and bummed some money, and finally got a job. I lost that job and got another, lost that and—" He emptied his glass and stared at it a moment, then shrugged. "I guess that's about all."

"You don't remember anything more than that?"

"If you mean of my past, no. I remember some of what's happened to me since I got out of that place, but you wouldn't be interested."

"Then you have no home, no family, not even a name?" Townsend said, frowning.

"That's about the size of it."

"Have you ever been arrested?"

"I've been picked up."

"Booked?"

"Once, for vagrancy, in a town in upstate New York. They turned me loose the next day, with orders to move on."

Townsend nodded gravely. "Were you fingerprinted?"

"Well—" thoughtfully, "I don't know. I mean I don't know whether or not you'll do, Smith. Frankly I need some one with more than the average—not exactly intelligence, but initiative. No, that isn't the word, either. What I'm after is a man who can obey orders, yet get himself out of tight spots, if necessary, by using his wits. You asked if Weasel—whatever his name is—turned me down. He didn't. He would be here now, in

your place, except that your little demonstration of quick thinking, in the matter of that money, made me think you'd be a better man for the job. But if you're mentally ill—"

"I'm not mentally ill. I'm a man without a memory, that's all. I don't take fits or anything like that."

"Well, we'll see. I suppose you're hungry."

"I could eat." Bill Smith admitted.

"There's food in the refrigerator, in the kitchenette," Townsend said. "I keep bachelor quarters here. You'll have to see to your own needs. You can sleep on the studio couch, and tomorrow—if after consideration I decide you're the man for the job—I'll advance you money for clothes and an overhauling."

"Thanks," Bill said. He got up and went into the kitchenette, opened the refrigerator door and gravely studied the array of food laid out on the shelves.

No soup. No beans. Townsend's dietetic habits had not been acquired in breadlines and ten-cent flops. Here were delicatessen dainties: roast chicken, savory duck, buckwurst, watermelon pickles, a jar of sweet cream, radishes and crisp moist lettuce.

Without compunction, Bill spread a banquet for himself on the table and consumed food until his stomach rebelled. That done, he made coffee, drank four steaming cups of it. Tomorrow his good Samaritan might suffer a change of heart and evict him; he might be walking the streets again, looking for a job, any job, and counting the handful of coins in his pocket to be sure he had enough left for a bed.

When he went back to the living room his stomach ached exquisitely but he was content. Not in the limited span of his memory had his stomach rebelled for so comforting a reason. What he had consumed tonight would last him a week.

Townsend, appearing in the bedroom doorway in monogrammed pajamas and dressing gown, gazed at him approvingly and handed him a blanket. "See you in the morning," he said.

Bill Smith spread the blanket on the studio couch and went into the bathroom.

He studied his image in the mirror. It did not shock him. There had been other mirrors in the past, and at night, every darkened store window

near the glow of a street lamp had served as a looking glass.

His black hair, crudely trimmed with borrowed scissors, curled about his ears and humped in a peculiar wave above his forehead, which was high enough to reveal a better than average intellect, if you put any stock in such nonsense. His eyes were good until you looked closely and saw the tiny crimson whorls in them—red curls of shorthand with a message. His angular face had hollows for cheeks, darker in the mirror than otherwise because the overhead light whitened his high, protruding cheekbones and left the rest in shadow.

He looked, he supposed, about thirty. He had shaved last night with a blade found days ago on the windowsill of a house being built on Gorton Lake Boulevard—a blade discarded after being used to scrape paint from windowpanes, and since carried, wrapped in a scrap of newspaper, in his shoe. There were healed cuts beneath the day-old stubble on his chin, and a deeper-cut, collected in a flop house argument some weeks ago, extending from the left corner of his mouth to a mole under his eye. Not he decided glumly, an inspiring picture.

He stripped to the waist and washed himself, taking his time about it and reveling in the warm, tingling glow that crept through him as thirsty pores seemed to soak up the water. Hot water was a luxury not found in hostelryes for the great unwashed.

Lacking a toothbrush, he squeezed an inch of paste into his palm, sucked it up, filled his mouth with water and worked up a lather with tongue and teeth, and spat it out.

IN THE morning, Townsend said matter-of-factly, "I've decided you'll do, Smith," and took out his wallet. "Go out and get yourself a haircut, some clothes—not too flashy—and some shoes. While you're at it, get breakfast," He counted out ten fives and casually dropped them on the table.

"Suppose I don't come back?"

Townsend's smile was disarming "Suppose you don't. I could go with you, of course, to protect my money. I could make sure you did buy clothes and shoes and a haircut. What then? Could I bring you back here by force if you decided then to walk out on me?"

"You could raise a heap of fuss," Bill answered him dryly.

"I don't go in for that sort of thing. If I can't trust you, I don't want you. Fifty dollars is chicken feed, Smith; you'll find that out. If you choose to take this fifty and do a disappearing act—" He shrugged, but retained his smile. "By the way, what was that bill I dropped in the mission?"

Bill Smith took the crumpled bill from his pocket and looked at it for the first time. It was a one.

"That dollar," Townsend said, "may be the biggest thing in your life. Clear out now and do your shopping." He walked to a window, carefully drew the shade to blot out the nine o'clock sunlight.

Bill went out.

He had gone some distance, four blocks at least, before he knew for certain that he was being followed. It had been merely a hunch at first, a sort of sixth sense developed in him by months of being forever on the prowl, ever alert against unfriendly policemen and underworld enemies in whom he had aroused petty hates in the complicated process of acquiring food and shelter.

When he crossed the street and paused to peer into a drugstore window, and the fellow stopped on the other side to tumble with a shoe lace, he knew that it was not coincidence.

He was not annoyed. Fifty dollars, he reflected, was a sum worth watching. Moreover, he had no intention of jumping ship until he knew more about the captain, the crew and the ports of call.

He bought a haircut and shave in a small barber shop where his unsavory clothes induced only a mild eyebrow lifting. For less than thirty dollars he purchased a decent gray suit, a couple of shirts, a tie, some socks, underwear and other essentials. Laden with purchases, he ate a thirty-five-cent breakfast, after which, slightly amazed but not in the least uncomfortable, he returned to the Alden Court.

His shadow saw him to the door. When he entered the apartment, Townsend had a map and some photographs spread out on the table. The window shade, Bill noticed, had been raised again.

CHAPTER THREE

"HIS man," Martin Townsend declared, when Bill had put down his purchases and returned to the table, "is a doctor. He's a very good doctor—which does not alter the fact that he is also a criminal of no mean talents."

He handed Bill an eight-by-ten glossy photograph, and Bill frowned at a round, jovially smiling countenance which seemed as remote as a cherub's from any connection with evil.

"Pruett is his name," Townsend said. "Don't be misled by his looks. The fellow is a ringleader in one of the most elaborate schemes ever conceived to defraud the insurance companies. Study this picture well, Smith. I want you to know this man on sight."

There was a small but important something on Bill's mind. He squinted at the picture, turned it this way and that in an apparently futile effort to avoid the glare from the window behind him: then, turning, he stepped to the window and reached for the shade.

"Mind if I pull this? The sun's bad."

Townsend replied quickly: "We'll need all the light we can get. I want you to study these maps."

Satisfied, Bill returned to the table. It would be a shame, he agreed mentally, to give Martin Townsend's accomplice, waiting outside, a misleading signal. Without further complaint he scrutinized the picture, nodded, put it aside. Townsend handed him another.

"This is another of the ringleaders. Her name is Marian Stern."

She was attractive. About thirty years old, she had expressive eyes and a softly sensual mouth. Her hair was loose and luxurious, draping her face as though carelessly piled into place with a quick toss of her head—an effect maintained, no doubt, by frequent visits to a stylist.

"The connection between Marian Stern and Dr. Pruett," Townsend explained, "is rather a delicate one. They meet secretly at Mrs. Stern's home in Altondale—that's a little picture-postcard town in Vermont, just over the line from New York State. Tomorrow, Smith, you're going to Altondale."

Bill nodded.

"You're to drive there," Townsend said. "I've marked the route on the map here."

Bill looked at the map.

"You *can* drive a car, can't you?"

"Yes."

"Now then, here's a map of Altondale itself. Not a very large place, you see. And here"—with a blue pencil Townsend carefully drew a small neat circle—"is Mrs. Stern's home. Think you can find it without asking directions? You're not to ask directions, Smith."

"I can find it."

"Good. Here's a photograph of the house itself."

Martin Townsend, it seemed, was nothing if not thorough. This particular photograph showed a small Colonial home with dormers, a stone wall, an attractive cluster of birch trees. Again wielding the blue pencil, Townsend drew on the border a small compass.

"You're to be at this house, Smith, at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon, leaving the car on Elm Street—here—and going the rest of the way on foot. Dr. Pruett has a date with Marian Stern at three-thirty. When he arrives, you've got to be concealed behind the stone wall, about here." The pencil made a small blue dot. "This will put the sun behind you, which is important because you're going to take some pictures." He peered searchingly into Bill's face. "Understand, do you?"

"Yes."

"Know how to use a movie camera?"

"I'm not sure."

"I'll show you."

Returning from the bedroom, Townsend placed a motion-picture camera on the table took it apart explained in detail its workings. "We've been promised fair weather for tomorrow," he said then, "and you should have no trouble. What I want, Smith, are pictures of Dr. Pruett getting out of his car walking up to the door and going in. If the woman opens the door to him and you're able to get her as well, so much the better. Now play with this a while to get the feel of it."

Bill Smith took the camera in his hands and drew a bead on the window with the dubious shade. He did not remember ever having used such an instrument before, yet the camera felt

familiar to his fingers. This puzzled him. He thumbed it into action.

Fortunately, Martin Townsend was close beside him.

Townsend was amazingly quick for one so big. His hand shot out; he caught the camera as it fell from Bill's nerveless fingers. Clutching it he stared with blank astonishment into Bill's twitching, colorless face.

Something had happened to Bill Smith. Something Townsend did not understand.

"What the devil, man! What's eating you?" the big man said harshly.

BILL clung to the edge of the table head lowered, eyes wide but focused on nothing. It had happened before, of course. It happened often. Certain mechanical noises, quite harmless in themselves were forever knifing out of the past to needle him with blind unreasoning terror. The unexpected purr of an approaching automobile on a hitherto quiet street. The sudden rumble of an oil-burner motor, once, in an empty house in which he had crept to spend the night. Little things. Harmless things. And now, the whirr of the mechanism in Townsend's utterly harmless movie camera, which he had held too close to his face.

"What is it, man?"

Bill let go the table, turned slowly and wet his lips. "Nothing."

"Now look here, Smith." Anger was reddening Townsend's face. "You told me there was nothing wrong with you. You gave me to understand that you were physically all right."

"I am. It's just that—I don't know. You can't live for months the way I've lived without feeling it." He sat down, still shaky. "Things went black for a second. I'm sorry."

Townsend put the camera aside, leaned on the table and scowled at him. "How do I know this won't happen again at some critical moment when much depends on you? How am I to know it doesn't happen often?"

"You'll have to take my word for it."

"Does it happen often?"

"No."

"I don't like it," Townsend said darkly. "I don't like it at all." He shook his head. "I'm not at all sure you'll do for this job, Smith." Patently

upset, he picked up the camera and went into the bedroom.

Bill Smith slumped in his chair and hated himself for his weakness. Before, it had never meant much—merely a few moments of inexplicable fear then recovery and bewilderment. But this was different. This was a major tragedy.

He thought of storming into the bedroom, seizing the camera and showing Townsend that he was not afraid of it; but of course Townsend did not know that he was afraid of it.

Bill just sat.

"Well," Townsend said later, "I suppose I can take a chance on you. We've gone so far now that I hate to begin over again with some one else." He shrugged unhappily. "Study those maps Smith, and go over my instructions carefully. Tomorrow won't be an easy day for you."

All afternoon Bill studied the maps, guessing that he would be subjected to a searching quiz before being entrusted with the mission. He was right. Townsend went out, returned at eight and verbally X-rayed him. Seemingly pleased with the results, the big man said then: "A breath of air, then a good night's sleep and you'll be ready, Smith. I'll walk around the block with you."

"I could do without the breath of air," Bill shrugged. "When you've walked the streets as long as I have—"

"Nonsense. You've been cooped up here all day."

It was not worth an argument Bill decided.

They went down the stairs together, Townsend chatting idly about the weather. "A beautiful night, Smith. No doubt the beauties of nature mean little to you. After what you've been through, but you'll come to appreciate them. Ah, yes. When a man has a good job, money in his pockets, life takes on a new meaning." He opened the downstairs door, glanced curiously at a stoop-shouldered man who was peering near-sightedly at the list of names beside the mailboxes. "That fellow at the Friendly Mission was right, Smith. There's a place in this scheme of things for each of us if only we—"

"Beg pardon," the old fellow interrupted, turning. "I'm looking for a party named Henderson. Paul J. Henderson. I can't seem to find his name here, and I wonder—" He moved his hands helplessly.

"Henderson?" Townsend fingered his chin a moment, frowning. "I believe—Wait a moment." He stepped to the list of names.

The old fellow smiled feebly at Bill Smith.

"Here you are sir," Townsend said. "Paul J. Henderson. Apartment number nine."

"Thank you, thank you. These eyes of mine—"

"It's the poor light in here," Townsend said gallantly.

He and Bill Smith went for their walk.

JUST what time it was when the telephone rang, Bill had no idea. He had been asleep. For that matter, he had not known there was a phone in Martin Townsend's apartment; but the echoes of its ring were in his ears now, as he sat up, and he could hear Townsend getting out of bed in the other room.

He did not hear the conversation. The closed door of the bedroom muffled it.

He went back to sleep.

In the morning, Townsend knocked on the bathroom door while Bill was shaving. Bill opened the door. "Thought I'd tell you." Townsend said, "that there's no rush. The plans are changed. You're not going to Altondale after all."

"You mean—I'm fired?"

"I mean nothing of the sort. A bigger job has come up. One that will mean more money for you, and for a much longer time. Matter of fact, Smith"—this with an easy smile—"you may wind up in Florida."

Bill Smith was puzzled. Last night's telephone call, he supposed, was the answer to this sudden change of orders. He wished he knew more about the enigmatic Martin Townsend, about the man's associates. Why, for instance, that little bit of business of signaling with the window shade?

Townsend had breakfast laid out when Bill emerged from the bathroom. He said quietly: "For two or three days, Smith, I'll have to ask you to remain here in the apartment. There'll be a good deal of running around to do for me—but this new job calls for the utmost secrecy, and I don't want it known that you're connected with me in any way whatever. Think you can stand being cooped up here for a while?"

That, of course, was a laugh. You take a bum in off the streets in mid-winter, give him a bed, warm clothes, plenty to eat, and ask if he can stand it! Bill smiled crookedly. "I won't run away."

"Good. I'll tell you more about it later."

Townsend went out. Bill looked about for the morning paper, found none, and sat down with a magazine. All the maps and photographs connected with his canceled trip to Altondale, he noted, had been put away.

At noon Townsend returned, carrying a bulky package. From it he took a collection of yellowed newspaper clippings, some books and a stack of heavy manila envelopes. These he arranged on the table, fussing over them like a sentimental old woman with a collection of heirlooms.

Bill watched him.

For some time after that, the big man was inactive but silent, sitting in a chair by the window while he smoked cigarettes one after another. Apparently lost in thought, he occasionally glanced up at Bill, moved his lips as though to begin a conversation, then changed his mind.

Finally he said: "Do you know anything about flying a plane, Smith?"

Bill was properly astonished. "Me? Good Lord, no!"

"Ever hear of a chap named Carey Locke?"

This, evidently, was a question of importance. Bill sensed it in the man's tone, the almost hesitant manner in which the words were permitted to leave his lips. Because of this feeling, Bill was slow to answer, and Townsend leaned toward him, intently scrutinizing him. The man's hands were tense on his knees.

"Carey Locke?" Bill said. "No."

"Are you—sure?"

"Positive."

Townsend's hands lost their rigidity. He relaxed, smiling. There was in his smile a smug satisfaction, a cat eat-canary curl that revealed to Bill still another idea of the man's kaleidoscopic personality.

"I'll show you a picture of him," Townsend said.

BILL saw nothing unusual in the picture. It showed him a young man with angular, pointed

features. a determined thrust of chin, unruly hair and a boyish, altogether charming smile. He studied it, frowned up at Townsend, and the latter said quietly: "Locke was a second Lindbergh. Courageous young fellow with a flair for flying."

"Was?"

"He died six months ago. Left Miami on a solo flight to Santiago, and was never again heard from."

"That's too bad," Bill Smith said.

"You're going to take his place."

"What?"

Townsend, still smiling that smug smile, walked into the bedroom. Returning, he placed a mirror in Bill's hand, held the photograph of Carey Locke beside it and said simply, "Look."

Bill slowly realized what the man was getting at.

There was a resemblance. You had to look closely, because the face in the mirror was so deeply etched with lines of fatigue and hunger—lines acquired over a span of months and not easily put aside. Yet there was, without question, an uncanny likeness in the shape of the jaw, the straight, thin nose, the spacing of the eyes.

Perhaps not too long ago, before Bill Smith's eyes had grown over bright and restless, he and Carey Locke had looked enough alike to be mistaken for twins.

"You see?" Townsend pressed.

"I see, but I don't understand."

Townsend placed the mirror and the picture on a table beside his chair. He leaned closer, the palms of his big hands nuzzling each other. "No one has ever found Carey Locke. No one can prove that he is dead. For our purpose, Smith, he is not dead. He is coming back."

"For the next few days, Smith, you are going to learn how to be Carey Locke. You are going to read about him, hear about him, study pictures of him. Then—"

"It won't work," Bill said darkly.

"Why won't it?"

"I'm a tramp. No one in God's world would ever take me for anything else. What's more, I don't know the first thing about flying a plane."

"Mere details."

"What?"

"I say those are mere details. You forget, Smith, that no one in God's world—to use your own phrase—knows what actually happened to Carey Locke. Therefore, as Carey Locke, you can invent any sort of lie and make them believe it. You say you don't know how to fly. Very well, you *did* know how to fly, but since the crack-up that nearly took your life, you no longer can endure the thought of flying. That lets you out. As for the rest of it, you've been through hell. Your mind is not what it used to be. Your memory plays tricks with you. That sort of camouflage will cover a multitude of sins, Smith."

"It sounds fantastic."

" Nothing is fantastic. "

"But what's the point of it? Why must I impersonate this fellow?"

"All that," Townsend said gravely, "will be explained to you in due time. Your job now is to learn to be Carey Locke."

THERE was a lot to learn about Carey Locke, Bill Smith discovered. He culled some of the more important facts from the mass of material provided by Townsend, and listed them chronologically. Born 1908, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Mother's maiden name Alice Kell. Father an assistant professor of aeronautics at M.I.T.

Graduated Rindge Technical School 1925. Parents died following year in plane crash.

Went to Texas, worked here, there, everywhere at odd jobs, returning to Cambridge 1928. Entered M.I.T. Out in '32. Licensed pilot same year. Honored two years later for outstanding work in airplane design.

With Southern Airways, 1935. Nationwide publicity for radical changes in propeller design, 1937. Winner of Miami-Nassau air race, '38. Reported engaged to Miss Paula Blaine, '39. Lost, and given up for dead after dramatic search, same year, while attempting flight Miami to Santiago.

It was a lot to assimilate. All that day and the next, Bill Smith studied newspaper clippings, notes, photographs, maps. Townsend interrupted but seldom, was in and out often. Bill ate his meals in the apartment, got his exercise by walking the floor.

He did well. Townsend was agreeably surprised when, at the end of the third day. Bill was able to talk of the events of Carey Locke's career as though he himself had actually lived them. He had learned the names of professors at M.I.T. He could draw from memory a reasonably accurate map of the city of Cambridge. "You know more," Townsend declared, "than you'll ever need. Don't forget, this new Carey Locke will have come back from the dead. He won't remember all of his past. He will be excusably vague about a great many things."

"This girl, for instance?" Bill suggested. "This Paula Blaine?"

"He was in love with her. They were to have been married. "

"I know, but—"

"Do you know how to make love to a woman, Smith?"

Bill stared at the girl's picture. "I don't know."

"She's very lovely."

She was, Bill realized.

"But that, I believe," Townsend murmured, "will take care of itself, when you get to Key West."

"You're sending me to Key West?"

"Tomorrow."

"And what then?"

"A colleague of mine—chap named Austin—will take care of you and tell you what to do."

That night, for three hours, Townsend tested the results of Bill's studying. He asked questions. He put himself in the position of a Doubting Thomas, refusing to believe, as others might, that Bill Smith was actually Carey Locke. Armed with the newspaper clippings, pages of notes, photographs of Locke's parents, associates and sweetheart, he grilled Bill until thoroughly satisfied.

The next morning he gravely shook hands, wished Bill luck and introduced him to a short, chunky man named Cleaves, who took Bill to the train.

Cleaves had arranged for a compartment. He hurried Bill along through the crowd at the station, permitting him to stop for nothing, though for three days Bill had been completely cooped up in Townsend's apartment and was naturally

inclined to loaf along, soaking up the sounds and sights and smells of the city.

"We're not ready to have you recognized as Carey Locke yet," Cleaves warned him.

The shades were drawn at the windows. Cleaves made himself comfortable with cigar and magazines. He, it seemed, was going to Key West, too. Martin Townsend was a methodical man and thorough.

Bill tried to open a conversation, got nowhere, and glumly bottled up his curiosity. He still did not know, he realized, why he was being sent to Key West. He did know that there was money in his pockets—more money than he had ever before owned—and that he had been promised a fabulous weekly wage if all went well.

The train bore him southward, into warmer weather. "You know," Bill complained, "I haven't seen a newspaper for days."

"You don't want a newspaper," Cleaves told him curtly. "You want to keep your mind on Carey Locke, not clutter it up with a lot of junk."

That, it seemed, was that.

In Jacksonville, though, the chunky little man was asleep when the train stopped. Bill furtively opened the door and bought a paper when the boy came through the car. Possibly, just possibly, the papers contained something he was not supposed to see—and for that reason he had better see it.

A page two item supplied the answer.

Altondale, Vt. Feb. 19. (UP)—Police today were questioning additional suspects in connection with the slaying last Tuesday of Mrs. Marian Stern, Altondale resident. The young woman mysteriously shot to death in her home some time Tuesday night was buried yesterday in Mount Rose Cemetery, Greenview.

Few clues have thus far appeared to aid the police in their search for the slayer. Robbery was apparently not the motive since more than two hundred dollars in cash, in full view on a dining-room table, was left untouched. Police are endeavoring to check on rumors that the victim, an attractive blonde, had frequently entertained an unnamed male guest during the absence of her husband on business trips.

Mrs. Stern was 29 years old. Her husband, who denies all knowledge of the shooting, is 48.

Bill Smith read it through again, turned quickly to glance at his chunky guardian and was relieved without knowing exactly why, to find the fellow still sleeping. He stepped into the corridor and pulled the door shut behind him, quickly tore the murder item out of the paper and stuffed it into his pocket.

The paper itself he folded and slid along the floor, where it would be picked up and disposed of.

Cleaves was gently snoring when Bill sat down again.

(To be continued next week)

Shadow Man ***Part Two***

Along with a stolen identity, they gave Bill Smith a gun and a few hours later provided a corpse to go with it.

HIS name was BILL SMITH—at least he pretended that was his name—and he was on the bum. He'd been eating handouts and sleeping in flophouses as long as he could remember, but he couldn't say how long. There was something wrong with his memory....

Slumped down in the Friendly Mission, only half aware of the droning voice from the pulpit, Bill Smith sees a well-dressed newcomer drop a bill on the floor while pulling a handkerchief from his pocket. Pretending faintness, Bill staggers from his seat, snatches up the bill. A few minutes later the stranger introduces himself as MARTIN TOWNSEND and offers Bill a mysterious job.

"Why me?" Bill asks.

"Because I liked your ingenuity in getting that bill," Townsend replies, smiling.

At Townsend's apartment, fed and shaved, Bill learns his new job entails a trip to Altondale, Vermont, the following day. There he is to lie behind a fence and surreptitiously photograph a Dr. Pruett calling at the home of a Mrs. Marian Stern.

Bill has no recollection of ever having used a movie camera and yet the instrument feels familiar to his hands. But when Townsend demonstrates the action, the whirring mechanism seems to unbalance Bill temporarily, for a reason he can't explain.

The following morning Townsend announces a change in plans. Instead of going to Vermont, Bill is to assume the identity of one CAREY LOCKE, a flyer given up for lost during a flight to Santiago. The main problem Townsend explains, will be passing himself off to PAULA BLAINE, Locke's fiancée, and when Townsend shows Bill a picture of the dead aviator, Bill can see enough resemblance to make the plan feasible.

After days of schooling in Locke's background and habits, Bill boards a train for Key West, Florida, accompanied by Cleaves, one of Townsend's men. Bill is not allowed to look at

newspapers, but en route he sneaks one long enough to read the following:

Altondale, Vt.—(AP) Mrs. Marian Stern was murdered in her home here yesterday by an unknown assassin. Police are investigating the rumor that the attractive blonde frequently entertained a male visitor during her husband's absence.

CHAPTER FOUR

NICHOLS was an odd little man, fussy and critical as an aged seamstress, yet patently gifted with better than average intelligence. He cocked his head at Bill Smith and clucked his tongue, scowled fiercely, entwined his fingers behind his back and walked up and down the room very slowly.

"I think you'll do," he said finally. "Go take a look."

Bill stepped to a mirror and frowned at himself. It was not so much his clothes that astonished him; they were the ones he had worn from New York, and Nichols had merely messed them up a bit.

It was his face. With devilish cunning the little man had given him a look of dissipation.

Not with make-up or theatrical aids. Nothing like that. Nichols had done it with a very slight application of grime, a prolonged and exhausting period of massage, and as a final touch a painful pinching of the lips to induce swelling and redness.

Bill Smith studied his image and knew that he closely resembled Carey Locke, but with a difference. This Carey Locke had gone down hill, had suffered, was unmistakably not well.

"You'll do," Nichols declared. "I had my doubts when Cleaves first brought you, but you'll do." He took from his pocket a small hammerless revolver, minced forward and with a good deal of ceremony tucked the gun into a secret pocket of Bill's coat. "Run along now," he said, rubbing his palms together. "And good luck to you."

"How shall I get in touch with you?"

"The boss." Nichols said dryly, "will get in touch with *you*—when he's ready."

Bill nodded and went out, with a brief backward glance at the ancient, shadowy house where for two days he had absorbed the little man's advice and instructions. He wondered if he would ever see Nichols again, or the house.

It was a beautiful night even for Key West, where the nights are more apt to be beautiful than otherwise, Miss Paula Blaine said so to the attentive young man leaning on the vine-covered wall beside her. "Isn't it lovely?" she whispered.

"It would be lovelier," he declared, pouting, "if I thought you were thinking of me."

"Please. Jim."

He grinned, rudely studied a side view of her face. "It's lovely anyway. I especially like the impudence of the dimples, the slight upward tilt of the nose."

"Silly! I mean the night, the flowers and the water, the moonlight!"

"I hadn't noticed. I was thinking how lovely it would be to marry all your father's money, and you with it."

"I think," Paula said sternly, "we'd better dance. In fact, I'm sure of it."

The orchestra had come down from Miami and was good. The party itself was good, as were all affairs given by the Hallingtons. The Hallington residence, of impressive Spanish architecture, stood amid a beautifully groomed garden of poinciana and hibiscus, now suitably strung with pale blotches of color.

Key West's important people were in attendance. This was Mr. Hallington's wife's birthday, and therefore an occasion.

Bill Smith stopped to listen to the music.

He was not nervous. It had been dinned into him so many times by Martin Townsend and later by Nichols that the risk of failure was negligible, that he had come to believe it. Thoughtfully he approached the gate, inhaling with appreciation the night-sweet scents of the Hallington's gardens.

The orchestra, vaguely Hawaiian, played *Aloha Oe*, and the tenuous twang of steel guitars accompanied the creak of the gate as Bill pushed it open.

To his right, dim forms moved about the grounds, under dangling paper lanterns.

He put a thumb against the bell and held it there until the door was opened. When that

happened he hooked his mouth into an unlovely grimace and glowered with hostility into the blank face of the servant.

Before the latter could speak, Bill snarled: "I want to see Harrison!"

Uneasily the servant blinked back at him, then ventured a mild but nervous: "I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Harrison! I want Joe Harrison! Tell him I want him!"

"But this is Mr. *Hallington's* residence, sir. Quite likely you have made a mistake."

Bill paused but an instant to wonder ruefully how thorough a mauling he would get, then shoved past the man and went snarling down the hall inside. His act was better if possible than the bit of make-believe perpetrated at the Friendly Mission some time ago. He looked and sounded drunk. Unpleasantly drunk. Mean.

THE servant's squeals for assistance filled the hall as Bill reached the doorway of a large, brilliantly lighted room filled with guests. He swayed there, glaring, and the guests looked at him in blank amazement.

In the genteel establishment of Mr. Prentiss Hallington, this sort of thing was cataclysmic.

"Where's Harrison? I want to see Harrison!"

The servant, brave but foolhardy, clutched at him and was flung aside. At this, some of the sturdier male guests rose for action. But Mr. Prentiss Hallington, a round man with paunch and chin alike protruding, came hurrying from an adjoining room, abruptly sized up the situation and took over.

"What do you want?"

"I want to see Harrison!"

Prentiss Hallington hipped his hands, sucked his chin in close to his chest and said in a tone of voice oddly akin to that used by the Reverend Windham Long: "My name, sir, is Hallington, not Harrison. There is no Harrison here, to my knowledge. I suggest that you leave without causing further annoyance."

The orchestra had stopped playing. The servant whined: "I tried to reason with him. Mr. Hallington, but—"

"It's a dirty lie! Bill stormed. "He's here and I'm finding him!" He surged forward and Hallington grabbed at him.

In the ensuing scuffle Hallington's spectacles tinkled to the floor and were ground underfoot, his hair flew, his face became scarlet and he lost his breath. But he hung on until younger and huskier men leaped to his assistance.

Bill Smith fought noisily but was shoved and dragged down the hall to the front door. He stumbled there intentionally, and went down the outside steps in a headlong sprawl.

The fact that he landed unhurt was due to the patient teaching of Nichols, who had foreseen every possibility, including even this.

He picked himself up. He had been told what to do if his first venture failed, and it had failed because the girl had not been there to witness it. He eyed the hostile group on the steps and knew that his chances of getting into the house again were slim. Muttering threats, he slunk through the gate, apparently beaten.

Five minutes later he scaled a wall and went prowling across the dark end of the garden, and this time spied the girl, saw her in conversation with a young man in the patio, before staging his act. Consequently he was able to pick a better spot for it.

Selecting a quiet group at one of the patio tables, he burst upon them from the shadows, viciously clutched the shoulder of a middle-aged victim and hauled the fellow erect.

"I'm lookin' for Harrison, see?" he drunkenly shouted. "Where is he?"

Paula Blaine and everyone else within hearing distance turned abruptly to see what on earth was happening. The man who was not Harrison shook himself loose and began sputtering. Out of the house stormed Prentiss Hallington and some of the sturdy males who had evicted Bill before.

They meant business this time!

Bill stood his ground. All eyes, he knew, were on him and failure was impossible unless Martin Townsend had played a wrong horse from the beginning.

Prentiss Hallington came to a quivering stop in front of him, thrust forth a rigid finger and said almost hysterically: "Get out!"

"I don't leave this place," Bill snarled back. "until I see Harrison."

"Young man, do you want me to call the police and have you arrested?"

"I want to see Harrison!"

The sturdy males closed in again. Bill braced himself, made ready his fists. At that moment it happened.

She had been watching him since his appearance in the patio, staring as one might stare at a person returned from the dead. Now she shook herself out of the trance induced by the sight of him and stumbled forward, crying: "Wait!"

This, of course, made *her* the object of attention, but thrusting aside everything in her path, she halted only when her hands were clutching Bill Smith's arms. "Carey!" she gasped then, her voice a sob. "Oh, you've come back! You've come back!"

Remembering his instructions, Bill blankly stared at her. Oddly, he felt no elation, no sudden surge of triumph such as he had expected. This was it, of course; this was the moment toward which all his arduous preparation had driven him. This was success. But the girl was so very lovely, so unbelievably sincere. He felt like a heel.

He shook himself loose. "Let go of me," he muttered sullenly.

HER FACE white, she caught his arms again and continued to look at him, amid a silence that crowded upon them from all sides and forced them closer to each other. Her eyes widened then with a slow-dawning realization of the truth, or what she thought was the truth. Pity and horror drained her face of color.

"Carey, darling, don't you know me? Don't you know who I am?"

He said roughly: "What are you talking about?"

"It's Paula, Carey. Oh my dear, you're not well. There's something wrong."

Prentiss Hallington evidently thought it was time *he* settled his curiosity. Frowning fiercely, he jerked forward to demand in a voice of authority "Do you know this man, Miss Blaine?"

"Know him? Know him? Oh, you fools! You stupid fools! It's Carey Locke!"

Bill Smith did not enjoy the consternation that followed. It was more than he had anticipated, and for an uneasy moment he yearned desperately to break loose and bolt for the street. They crowded in on him, men and women alike. A sea of gaping faces formed about him, startled exclamations blending into one continuous tide of sound that beat over him, numbing him. "Carey Locke! But my *dear*, it's not possible! Oh, how wonderful, how divinely wonderful! Think of it . . . back from the dead! . . . Good heavens, he *is* Carey Locke! Carey, old man, don't you remember me, don't you remember Erskine? Carey! Oh, I say! Poor devil, he's ill. Poor . . . poor fellow . . ."

Paula Blaine suffered as much as he did. He could read her anguish in her eyes, feel it in the pressure of her clutching fingers. Finally with a delicious outburst of temper she whirled upon Hallington and his guests, shouting: "Leave him alone! For heaven's sake, go away!" And in a less vehement voice, for Bill alone: "Come with me, Carey, out of this. Please, darling."

They were a bit afraid of this girl with the flashing eyes and quick temper. No one interfered as she led him to the house. They still gaped, though, and the act Bill staged would have made Martin Townsend proud of him. He played the part of an utterly bewildered automation, mumbling darkly to himself for their benefit as the girl steered him away.

Not until he was alone with her in Hallington's music room did he stop mumbling; then he sank onto a divan, pushed his fingers through his hair and glowered at the girl with no sign of recognition.

"Carey," she whispered, "don't you know me—really?"

He shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about. My name's not Carey."

"Oh, it is, it is! My dear, you're ill. You just don't remember. "

"Remember what?"

"Us, Carey. Yourself. Your flight to—to Santiago."

He did it well. Even Townsend, who had drilled him to the point of exhaustion, would have admitted it was a delicate job well handled. Bit by bit he permitted the girl to lead him back, yet not sufficiently far back for her to be sure. Santiago?

The name stirred something inside him, or seemed to. Santiago—flight—Carey Locke.

"I don't know," he muttered at last. "There's something wrong. Something wrong with my head. Has been, for weeks "

SHE hadn't questioned him about his immediate past, and for that he was grateful. When she did, he would be more solidly entrenched behind his barriers of defense; knowing her better, he would know better how to handle her. Yet the thought of handling her at all, of lying to one so desperately sincere, left a dark taste in his month.

She said finally: "You'll come back with me, Carey? Let me take care of you? We mustn't be impatient, dear. Oh, it's such a heavenly miracle, having you back again!" Her hands trembled and were hot against his own, and her face was close, her eyes bright with a light that told him more, infinitely more, than Townsend ever had. "You *will* come, Carey?"

He nodded.

"You said out there that you were looking for a man named Harrison. Who is he, Carey? A friend? Can I help you find him?"

"Harrison?"

"Yes, you said—"

"It doesn't matter," he muttered.

"Have you any things, Carey—where you're staying? At the hotel, perhaps?"

His laugh was intentionally bitter. "I'm not staying at any hotel. I have nothing."

"You poor boy."

He frowned at the floor, shaking his head. "It's all so hellishly mixed up, Paula. It comes and goes again, like the headaches. If only I could get hold of it, just once and hang on for a while."

She said softly: "Dr. Pruett is coming down tomorrow, Carey. He'll know what to do." Then quickly: "I'll get my things. You can't face that crowd again. I'll tell Fritz. You won't run away, Carey?"

"I won't run away."

She left him sitting there in the music room, tormented by a mental picture of her in all her loveliness. In a way, of course, he had been prepared through a study of photographs of her; but photographs were cold things at best, and had

done little to steel him against the moment of meeting a girl so warm and alive, so deeply in love.

"It's going to be hell for her," he thought bitterly, "when Townsend pulls the switch to put an end to this farce. I've brought back the dead, opened old wounds. I've ripped aside months of forgetfulness, and when I throw away the mask and leave her, she'll never believe in anything again."

Suddenly aloud he said savagely, "To hell with it!" and made for the door. But he stopped even before the door opened. Stopped because of an acute realization that if he vanished now, leaving the job cold, he would be building a wall permanently behind him and would never see the girl again.

The door opened while he stood scowling at it. A tall, lean man, bronzed but dissipated, strode briskly over the threshold, stopped, frowned at him and said abruptly:

"Ah, here you are Carey. I'm Fritz. You remember me, of course."

"No, Bill said.

"No? Well—that's quite all right, old man. I understand. I'm Paula's brother."

Fritz Eichler was entirely like his photographs, too tall for his weight, immaculately put together, slack and sensuous about the mouth. And of course he was not Paula's brother but her step-mother's son through an earlier marriage.

"Paula sent you?"

"Right. She's to meet us at the boat landing." He smiled disarmingly, did his staring discreetly. Evidently it was against his precepts of good breeding to be openly curious, even about a man returned magically from the dead.

"All right," Bill muttered.

They went out.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE trip to Randall Blaine's private island, in Blaine's deluxe cabin cruiser, gave Bill Smith an hour in which to review the rush of events of the past few hours and prepare himself for the immediate future.

So far he had done well, and darkly disliked himself for it. The girl believed in him. He was Carey Locke, he had come back, his past was a mystery even to himself and he was mentally not well. As for the guests at Hallington's party, no doubt most of them were convinced because Paula was convinced. After all, she should know.

Now what?

He had orders to go slowly, pull himself up from the depths with an apparent maximum of struggle, meanwhile strengthening old ties. This was going to be harder than he had imagined. It meant making love to Paula, and he could not remember ever having made love to a woman. There had been no women, certainly not sincere ones, in the short stretch of life that he recalled as his own. How did one make love to a girl like Paula Blaine?

The whole idea discouraged him, and to get away from it he shifted his thoughts to his destination. Randall Blaine's island was known as the Retreat, a name supposedly given it by Blaine himself, the multimillionaire mastermind behind the mighty Blaine chemical empire.

It was a small island south of Key West by some fifteen miles. There would be a house on it. In the house would be, according to Martin Townsend, various members of the Blaine clan, including Randall Blaine himself, his wife Sofia, servants, and probably a few guests.

It was all rather frightening.

Fritz, he realized, was eyeing him with uncomfortable severity. That was frightening, too.

But worst of all was something that festered within him, defying analysis. It was the stifling knowledge that he was, in spite of all this, a nameless derelict, a nobody—that his only known background was one of stealth and petty crime. And now for the first time in his memory he desperately wanted to be something else, something at least as decent as the man he was impersonating.

He jerked his gaze up from the floor of the cruiser's cabin, looked at Fritz, looked away again and rudely stared at the girl. She looked back at him and smiled. It was a gentle, comforting smile, full of confidence.

At that moment was born in Bill Smith a determination that was to grow to a fever within him. "I'm going to find out who I am," he promised himself, "if it takes the rest of my life!"

The cruiser slid neatly against a pier made white by the boat's searchlight. Paula Blaine said softly: "We're here, Carey."

He stood up. "And mighty glad to have you back," Fritz declared, his tone less enthusiastic than the words.

The girl took Bill's arm and he walked with her up a moonlit path toward the house, which loomed huge and bleakly modern, white as a mausoleum in a setting of sapodillos, sand and palm trees. Fritz stayed at the boat, talking to the fellow in charge of it.

Suddenly the girl halted beside Bill Smith, put her hands on his arms and gazed at him—not as a young woman should gaze at her lover, but as an anxious doctor might study a patient. "Before we go in," she said softly, "there's something I—something I want to show you, Carey."

She led him up a low rise of ground to the high point of Randall Blaine's island, a sandy knoll white as an outcropping of marble in the moonlight. A rustic bench rested upon it, and she drew him down beside her.

"The lights, Carey," she whispered then, pointing to the west. "Our lights. Remember?"

He saw them, two glowing eyes like low-hanging stars, alone above an empty sea. Not knowing what to say, he played safe by scowling at them in silence.

"Remember, darling," she said softly, "what we called them that night? What we always called them?"

"I want so much to remember," he faltered, "but—"

She bit her lips, tears in her eyes.

"Tell me," he muttered.

"No, Carey. I want you to remember without my telling you." She stood up, forced a smile. "Don't worry about it, dear. It's just that I'm a woman—in love."

On the way back to the house she was strangely silent.

HE MET some of her people in the next half hour, though the girl did her best to prevent it. Her step-mother, Sofia Blaine, proved to be a small, willowy creature of unguessable age, with an enthusiasm that seemed to be more than slightly artificial. She fussed about him like a bright-eyed

bird, gushing over the miracle of his resurrection, asking innumerable questions.

Next came a small, heavy-shouldered man named Abel Kimm, who gravely shook hands, volunteered the fact that he had not known Carey Locke before the accident but was glad, now, to make his acquaintance. Abel Kimm was not on Martin Townsend's list. He did not appear to be a man of wealth or even of culture. He had thin gray hair and a disconcerting pair of eyes which said more than his tongue. Bill instantly catalogued him as one to watch.

Finally, despite Paula's attempts to get him away, he was cornered in the hall by a granite-faced hulk who thrust past Paula, shoved out a hand that was a ham, and after gazing at him for a moment with a sort of dog-like worship, whispered hoarsely: "Mr. Locke, don't you remember me? Don't you remember Jedno?"

"Mr. Locke is very tired, Jedno," Paula said loudly, her mouth close to the fellow's ear.

Jedno either did not hear or was not to be dismissed so easily. "Mr. Fritz tell me you come back," he breathed. "I come right away. Don't you remember Jedno, Mr. Locke?" His eagerness was pitiful.

Bill Smith looked at him for a moment and then smiled. "Yes, yes, of course I do!" He shouted the words, because Jedno was hard of hearing. Moreover, he was supposed to know the man, since Jedno had been caretaker of the Retreat for years. Martin Townsend had made quite a point of that.

The big fellow beamed like a fondled child, stood at the foot of the stairs and gaped adoringly as Bill went up to them. From the deep end of the long upstairs hall came sounds of music—Schubert's *Wiegenlied*, played softly and beautifully on a violin.

"Lianov," Paula whispered. "He comes here often. He loves it here."

Bill Smith wondered how he knew that the man to whom she referred was the famous concert violinist, Nicholas Lianov. He did know, and recognized the song. These things puzzled him.

From a window of the room which was to be his, he could see the two low-lying lights to which Paula had called his attention on the knoll. He stood watching them, and the girl moved to his side.

"You don't remember, Carey?"

"There are so many things I don't remember," he muttered. "You—even you seem strange. This house, this island—I reach out for something and it's there, almost, and then suddenly it isn't."

"Poor boy," she whispered compassionately.

"I shouldn't be here, putting you to all this trouble," he said.

"But you belong here!"

"I wonder. Perhaps I did—once. But do I now?"

She held his arms. "Carey, listen to me. I've never believed you were dead. Even when the search was abandoned, all hope given up. I refused to believe. You had to come back, darling, and I knew you would. I've waited. I can wait even longer, contentedly now, for you to come all the way back. You will, Carey. Oh, you will! Tomorrow Dr. Pruett will be here. He'll know what to do."

Doctor Pruett. She had used that name in Hallington's house in Key West. So much else had been happening that he had let it pass, but now it was here again, bringing with it disturbing whispers from afar.

Doctor Pruett. Townsend. Mrs. Marian Stern. "Don't be misled," Townsend had said, "by his looks. The fellow is a ringleader in one of the most elaborate schemes ever conceived to defraud the insurance companies." Murder in Altondale.

Did Paula know about these things? Was she even remotely, perhaps innocently, a part of them?

HE REMEMBERED something else then. "Next in importance to winning the love of Paula Blaine," Townsend had said, "is our need for information about the girl's father. Find out all you can."

He said casually "When shall I meet your father, Paula?"

She did not answer.

"Is he here? Here on the island?"

"No, Carey."

"But surely, at this time of year—"

She silenced him by rising on her toes very quickly and touching her lips to his. "It's much

more important to us," she said rapidly. "that you remember the lights my dear. Our lights. Please." Her smile was mechanical. "Good night, Carey." The door closed behind her.

He stood there by the window, fingering his lips and staring blankly into space not seeing the lights or the moonlit sea or the dark, leaning palms on the island. He wondered if any girl had ever before kissed him like that.

The muted strains of Lianov's violin seemed to whisper an answer in the affirmative.

Troubled and unhappy, he removed his shoes and lay on the bed.

He did not sleep, had not expected to this first night on Randall Blaine's island. The questions that plagued him now were not the simple ones of a few weeks ago. Murder had come since then. With it, a realization that he was working not for one man but for a complicated organization directed by a mastermind who might or might not be Martin Townsend. Intrigue in New York, murder in Altondale, mystery in Florida, with himself the central figure in a monstrous fraud. And yet the wheels had hardly begun to turn.

He could get out of it, of course. He could chuck the whole thing and go back to a life of ten-cent flops and hunger, unwashed companions and meals at Friendly Missions. Or could he? Perhaps here on the island the guiding hand of Townsend's organization had placed eyes to watch him to circumvent any such move.

It hardly mattered. He would not quit now no matter what happened. He would not quit until he knew for certain who he was. Until then there would always be the burning hope that before the blackout of his memory he had been something decent, something Paula Blaine might learn to love as she now loved the ghost of Carey Locke.

It was confusing. He wanted desperately to sleep on it but the violin at the end of the hall now playing Massenet's *Meditation*, kept him awake. It should have been soothing, restful but was not. He put his shoes on again and opened the door.

The music swelled down the hall and beat against him full-bodied, vibrant. Only a master could have wrung such tone from a song so essentially shallow, but of course Nicholas Lianov was a master.

Unchallenged, he went down the broad staircase through the living room and out. The

sea breeze was cold. He shivered. Without a destination, he let his feet take him aimlessly and presently found himself on the knoll again. The same two low-lying lights winked at him from across the water.

What were they? Why were they so important?

HE WATCHED the lights awhile then resumed his walk. It carried him to the south end of the island where the breeze was stiffer and a lively sea beat noisily against the shore. When he turned again, he saw something.

There was another light now on the knoll itself. Stiltedly it blinked out a series of dots and dashes.

The message, if such it was, made no sense. Over and over again the light flashed one word KEDO—and then in a halting, labored fashion, as though the sender were an amateur and had to pause at intervals to refresh his memory: Q SN S OTUDIMWD O SN S OTUDIMWDDRME KEDO KEDO KEDO.

A code?

Warily he retraced his steps along the shore. A circuitous route brought him close to the knoll again where the light still flashed its cryptic message. Close enough now to make out the shadowed form of the person doing the sending. He thinned his eyes.

Paula Blaine had told him her father was not on the island. She had lied. The man with the flashlight standing there beside the rustic bench on the knoll was Randall Blaine, short, stout, king of the Blaine chemical corporation!

Suddenly Bill Smith saw that he was not the only one interested in Blaine's strange pastime. A prowling shape had detached itself from the shadows of the boathouse, two hundred yards distant. It approached slowly, stirring up no sound that could be heard above the whisper of the coconut palms. At the rear of the knoll it vanished, appeared again, climbed slowly and advanced upon Randall Blaine from the rear.

The prowler was Abel Kimm, phlegmatic little man of mystery, the one person on the island whose status had not been explained, or presence foretold, by Townsend.

Randall Blaine turned with a start when Kimm spoke to him. He dropped his flashlight.

Kimm scooped it up, pocketed it, put a hand on the millionaire's arm and talked to him. What he said might have been audible on a windless night, but the rattle of the palms kept the words smothered.

Yet there was no mistaking Kimm's attitude. It was one of severity. He was angry and giving orders. Maintaining a firm grip on Blaine's arm, he led the older man back to the house.

THE house was wrapped in its former eerie stillness when Bill Smith entered. Kimm and Randall Blaine were nowhere in evidence. There was no longer any sound of music.

He went upstairs on tiptoe, convinced now that his prowling had best be kept secret. Voices from Sofia Blaine's room stopped him and he stood scowling in the dark of the corridor.

The woman was talking to her husband he supposed. Listening, he heard a few scattered words a low voice responding, but the conversation was being conducted guardedly, almost furtively and the little he caught told him nothing.

He went on into the deeper shadows by his own door, opened it and turned. Her door had opened, too. The man who stepped off was not Randall Blaine but Jedno—Jedno, who was supposed to be hard of hearing.

Unhurriedly, the granite-faced caretaker paced along to the stairs, went down them and vanished. Bill closed his own door behind him.

The tour of the island had cleared up none of his problems. On the contrary, it had added to them. Why had Paula lied about her father? Why the midnight meeting between Sofia Blaine and Jedno? Who, and what, was Abel Kimm?

He undressed, lay in bed watching a play of moonlight on the window. Then another question plagued him. How had he, Bill Smith, been able to pick up the meaningless code flashed by Randall Blaine from the knoll? That sort of thing required special training, a knowledge of telegraphy. Where had he picked it up?

"I'm finding things out about myself," he muttered. "It was different in the flop-houses. Nothing ever puzzled me there. But this job is turning an X-ray on me. I'm learning things—"

A soft click interrupted this line of thought and caused him to look sharply at the door. A key had whispered in the lock.

Out of bed, he reached the door in three long strides, gripped the knob. At his feet a slip of paper crept across the sill, into the room. He watched it until it stopped moving. Scowling, he stooped and picked it up.

On it a penciled message read:

Your orders were to win the confidence of Miss Blaine. Additional activities on your part may lead to extreme danger both for yourself and for others. Disobedience will not be tolerated. Destroy this.

There was a whisper of receding footsteps in the corridor, and Bill Smith grabbed for the doorknob again.

The door was locked.

CHAPTER SIX

RANDALL BLAINE was not in evidence the following morning. At breakfast were Sofia, Fritz, Paula and the internationally famous violinist, Nicholas Lianov. The latter, physically less significant than his reputation, gravely shook hands with Bill when Paula introduced them. "It was always a deep regret of mine," he said severely, "that I had not the honor of knowing you before you disappeared." His smile put no strain on his lips; they barely moved. "Your activities, Mr. Locke, always amazed me."

He was an ascetic sort of chap, not more than middling old" middling heavy, middling tall. Bill had an idea that if the black beard were plucked, he would be drably ordinary.

"I enjoyed your playing last night," Bill said. You were supposed to say that sort of thing to Nicholas Lianov. He expected it.

"My playing? Here I play purely for my own amusement. But I, too, enjoy it." The lips smiled strainlessly again. "After the rigors of a concert tour it is restful to come here. Perhaps you, too, will find this lovely island of benefit."

"I'm sure Carey will," Paula said.

Breakfast was quiet. Either Paula had cautioned her step-mother about firing too many questions, or else Sofia had other things on her mind at the moment. Jedno, the deaf hulk who could hear whispers, was not present—but of course Jedno was a servant, as was the young man who had piloted the cruiser.

Bill wondered where Abel Kimm had got to.

What little talk circulated was of the impending visit of Dr. Pruett, and while Bill was eager to know more about Pruett, he cautiously refrained from asking questions. The writer of last night's warning might not like it.

Disaster came with the coffee.

He had the cup in his hand, half way to his lips, and was listening abstractedly to talk of big game fishing by Fritz. He was aware of the sound before the others heard it—something inside him began to vibrate to it. His face paled. Desperately he tried to lower the coffee cup but failed.

Not long ago he had been terrified by the whirl of a motion picture camera in Martin Townsend's apartment. Now he was stricken by the matter of an airplane overhead. The cup slipped from his palsied hand, struck his plate with a clatter and broke into four jagged pieces.

He lurched erect, face white, both hands clutching the back of his chair while his lean body trembled.

Paula Blaine took one startled look at him, cried out in dismay and ran to his side.

It passed quickly, as it always did, but left him weak. He sank into his chair and stared dully at the fragments of the broken cup, his mouth twisted with shame, perspiration gleaming on his face. The sound of the plane was a roar now, but his fear of it was gone; only bitterness and a sense of futility remained.

"What is it, Carey?" Paula begged. "Oh my dear, what's wrong?"

He could see no harm in hiding the truth from her, or from any of them. They were all gaping.

"The plane " he muttered. "Any sudden noise like that—"

They exchanged glances. Tactlessly Sofia burst out with: "But of course! After nearly being killed in a plane crash—" and stopped. No one added to that.

Paula's anxious face took on a look of understanding. She said softly: "It's all right, darling. Let's go outside."

THE ship, a big amphibian, was on the water when they got their first glimpse of it. Silver fuselage glittering in the sun, it nosed toward shore and slowed to a stop, lay rocking gently on the smooth green sea. Randall Blaine's launch, with Abel Kimm at the wheel, purred out from the pier to meet it.

Thinking he owed the girl an explanation even though it had to be an imagined one, Bill said dourly: "I suppose it's a hangover from the crash, as your mother said. Noises themselves don't bother me except when they're totally unexpected."

She squeezed his hand. "Dr. Pruett will know the answer, Carey. We'll talk to him."

"He's coming here to see your father?"

"He comes regularly," she said, "to—" She caught herself, stiffened. Her tone changed. "Father is not here. I told you that."

"I forget so easily, Paula."

She seemed satisfied and smiled at him, but the smile held a hint of weariness. When the launch returned, they were both at the end of the landing, awaiting it. Abel Kimm nodded as he clambered out, then turned to lend a hand to a tall, boney, chalk-faced man who appeared to need assistance.

"Dr. Pruett!" Paula caught him by an arm, gave him a smile that made Bill positively envious. "We have the grandest surprise for you. Look!"

She turned enthusiastically to Bill, and Pruett turned too, grimacing at her exuberance. He swayed a little, caught himself, frowned at Bill without recognition.

"Don't you *know* him?" Paula cried. "It's Carey! Carey Locke!"

Pruett's colorless face registered disbelief. He fumbled in his pocket, brought out a pair of horn-rimmed glasses and jabbed them uncertainly at the bridge of his nose, then peered through them.

"Why, great heavens, it is Carey Locke! But you're supposed to be dead, young man! You've been dead for months!"

"He's very much alive." Paula declared.

"Well, I'll be damned! Amazed! I'm delighted!" He thrust out a hand. Bill took it and found it clammy, no strength in it. Withdrawing it, Pruett looked away, shook his head weakly and swayed again.

"Not feeling too good," he mumbled. "Damned airplanes may be all right for this young man of yours, Paula, but they raise fury with my system. I'll go in and lie down." His voice wavered. Abel Kimm steadied him, sent a glance at Paula and led the doctor toward the house.

"I want to talk to you, Carey," Paula said softly, "about us." She sat down. Bill Smith lowered himself beside her.

THE rain began about four o'clock, suddenly. It brought a screaming wind with it and looked ugly. For half an hour Randall Blaine's private island was a scene of frantic activity as boats were put under cover, the plane made secure, lawn furniture carted into the house.

Bill Smith sat alone by a window in the study, looking out at the big amphibian. It fascinated him, pitching and tossing in the sea, and he had a strong desire to get out to it, make sure the ship had been properly moored, her cockpit covered against the flying spray, her instruments protected. These thoughts disturbed him. He knew nothing about planes, had never been up in one. Unless, far back in his unremembered past . . . somewhere . . .

Housebound, he wandered about, picked up and glanced at a few books, found himself at the piano. His fingers tentatively touched the keys, picked out a fragment of melody. There had been no pianos in the flophouses of his recollection, certainly no desire or opportunity for musical training, yet to his amazement his hands came to life, flowing over the keyboard.

He recognized the melody as the Paderewsky *Minuet*. From this his fingers slid smoothly of their own volition into a Chopin Etude. Then astonishment stiffened his reflexes, he struck a discord, stood up and backed away from the instrument as though it might suddenly scream at him.

Things. Little things, one atop another. They bewildered him.

He went up to his room, sat for an hour listening to the wind, the roar of the rain against shut windows. Then, restless and on edge, he

went prowling again—this time down the corridor to the room from which, last night, had flowed the melodic strains of Lianov's violin.

The door was closed. He knocked and a voice that was not Lianov's, not a voice he recognized at all, said sharply: "Well, what is it? What is it? Come in, can't you?"

He hesitated. Footsteps behind him on the stairs made up his mind for him and he beat a hasty retreat, reaching the safety of his own room just in time.

Abel Kimm, the grim little man who was not a member of the family yet seemed to have the run of the house, came up the stairs, went along the hall and entered Lianov's room without knocking. A fragment of that same shrill voice spilled sharply into the hall as he shut the door.

He did not reappear. Encouraged by this, Bill Smith went down the hall again, this time warily, without noise. It occurred to him that he would be embarrassed if caught by Paula Blaine. It further occurred to him that the writer of last night's cryptic warning might not approve, either. But there were questions to which he desperately wanted some answers.

Voices issued from Lianov's room as he paused outside the door. Disappointment, however, warped his mouth as he listened. Abel Kimm was saying: "My move, Mr. Blaine? Okay. But the board looks funny. You sure you haven't been monkeying with it since I left?" And the talk, every word of it until Bill gave up in disgust, was of chess.

THE rain continued and was depressing. He sensed its depression at dinner, where conversation hit a new low. Lianov talked of music. Fritz Eichler fished again, but without enthusiasm. Mrs. Blaine was unusually silent and so was Paula.

Neither Abel Kimm nor Dr. Pruett put in an appearance.

After dinner Lianov played for them in the study. Dreaming through Schumann's *Traumerei*, he smiled at Bill, shifted his gaze gently to Paula. Following that gaze, Bill found the girl intently watching him, as though the song should mean something to him.

It did. With ghostly fingers it reached through shadowed memories to pluck at something buried

deep in his past. But what it meant, for what it was groping, he did not know.

With more serious things on his mind he excused himself and went to his room.

It was dangerous, this plan forming in his mind. Martin Townsend would censure him for it, beyond a doubt. Yet he had begun darkly to doubt Martin Townsend, and here was an opportunity, perhaps, to learn the truth about the Altondale affair, or at least to get another man's reaction to it.

He went down the hall and knocked on the door of Dr. Pruett's room. No answer. He knocked again, called softly, guardedly: "It's Carey Locke, Doctor. I'd like to talk to you."

Thwarted by silence, he put a hand on the knob, turned it, and found the door locked. No sound came from within.

He went back to his own room to wait. Faintly from downstairs came the silvery singing of Lianov's violin.

Bill dozed.

He did not hear Lianov come upstairs. But when a violent gust of wind rattled the windows and waked him a while later, the source of the music had shifted to the room at the end of the upper hall, the room in which Randall Blaine and Abel Kimm had played chess. The rest of the house was abnormally quiet.

He looked at his watch. The time was twelve-twenty. His head ached as it sometimes did after one of his mystifying periods of blankness. He dozed again.

Hours later he regained consciousness to find himself in bed, the night over, the room murky with daylight. He knew then that he had passed through one of his periods of torpidity, induced probably by anxiety and too much thinking. He did not remember going to bed. His head throbbed as after a night of violent insobriety and he was exhausted.

The rain had ceased. His watch, still strapped to his wrist, read nine-fifteen—and he was late for breakfast. Weary from head to foot, his head fuddled and sickness in him, he dressed and went downstairs.

The body was found an hour later, apparently quite by accident. Fritz Eichler, returning with Jedno from a session of surf

casting at the north end of the island, fell over it, looked down, voiced a startled oath.

Arms outflung, the body lay like a sodden scarecrow in the path, beneath the most beautiful royal poinciana on the island.

Fritz Eichler burst into the living room a few moments later and shouted hoarsely: "Dr. Pruett's been shot!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

ABEL KIMM had done this sort of thing before—that was apparent from the moment he took charge. He was efficient. In his grim, tight-lipped, humorless way he accomplished much with a minimum of talk and effort.

No one in Blaine's household seemed anxious to question his authority.

Kimm ordered Jedno to bring the body to the house. It was placed in Blaine's study. He carefully examined it and made an announcement.

"Dead at least five hours, folks. Probably more. That puts the time of death at about four A.M. I don't suppose one of us"—his eyes rapidly swept the group with a gaze that left chills in its wake—"has an alibi that can be corroborated. All in bed, eh?"

No one answered him.

"Pruett was shot," Kimm declared, "with a thirty-two, twice, in the back." He held in his palm a bullet which, with the aid of a penknife, he had dug out of the body. Who had given him permission to molest the corpse, or what the police would say when they learned of it, Bill Smith did not know. Apparently unworried about it, Kimm continued matter-of-factly: "There was nothing accidental about this. A man might stop one bullet accidentally, but not a pair of them. So it's murder, and we know who was here on the island with the opportunity, and before we go dragging in the police perhaps we can get somewhere without them."

No one protested.

"Who," Kimm demanded, "last saw Pruett alive?"

This was a poser. Sofia Blaine timidly suggested that she might be the one. "I took

some tea and toast up to him after dinner. He didn't want it. He wasn't feeling at all well, he said."

"What time?"

"Almost—almost eight o'clock, I should say."

"No one else went up there?" Kimm's gaze traveled from one to another, accusingly.

No one spoke.

"Well—he may not have been feeling well, which I know for a fact he wasn't when I took him off the plane, but he was able to get dressed in the middle of the night and go out. Why?"

"Perhaps," Fritz suggested, "he went for a walk because he *didn't* feel well. A breath of air, sometimes—"

"Perhaps. Where were you at the time?"

"In bed, of course!"

"And the rest of you?"

"In bed, of course."

Kimm turned to the plane's pilot, a young, sandy-haired fellow whose name was Kincaid. "You?"

"You ought to know," Kincaid shrugged. "I shared your room."

"That's right, you did."

"Look here," Fritz interposed. "It's entirely possible, isn't it, that some one *not* on the island did this? I mean to say, suppose Dr. Pruett went for a walk last night, stepped out for some air. Some one could have come here in a boat, stepped ashore, shot him and departed again" all without leaving a trace."

"It's possible," Kimm admitted. "Hell of a night for that sort of thing, though. Was it generally known that Pruett was coming here?"

"We all knew it."

Kimm scowled at the pilot. "Who owns the plane?"

"I do." Kincaid declared. "He hired me to fly him here."

"Miami?"

"West Palm Beach."

"All open and above board, was it?"

"Far as I know," Kincaid shrugged. "He told me he'd come down from New York by train, stopped off in West Palm to see an old friend,

and wanted to get here without wasting any more time."

"I think," Paula Blaine said emphatically, "we should call the police!"

Kimm looked at her steadily. "Do you?"

"Well, I—I certainly think something should be done!"

"Something will be," Kimm said. "Clear out now."

BILL SMITH went up to his room, knowing that he wanted to be alone, *needed* to be alone, to think this thing out. That it was deeper and more complicated than it looked, he was certain. Its roots reached back to New York, perhaps to Altondale, certainly to the huge, soft-handed, slow-voiced man who called himself Martin Townsend. He, Bill Smith, was a part of it, too.

He felt stifled. Up to now this strange affair had gone along rather quietly, leaving him unfettered except for the disturbing knowledge that some one on the island, some one associated with Martin Townsend, knew his real purpose in being here and was watching him.

The first murder, that of Mrs. Stern, had happened afar—had not touched him except through his own dark suspicions. But this was another story. This would mean an investigation, the police, questions and answers. He could not expect the police to swallow all that Paula Blaine had downed.

Desperately he realized that his time for action was drawing close. If anything were to be done, it must be done at once. But what could he do? What move could he make until Martin Townsend re-established contact with him and gave him new orders?

Thinking got him nowhere. He paced the floor, was standing with fists clenched at a window, looking out at the gray sea, when a knock on the door brought him about. Tonelessly he said: "Come in."

It was Jedno, the deaf one. In his hands he held a small cardboard carton, and there was a halfwit smile on his heavy lips as he thrust it forward, waiting for Bill to take it.

Bill took it, wonderingly. The smile on Jedno's lips broadened, revealing yellow teeth, and he said gently, too gently: "Yes, Mr. Locke. For you." A couple of short steps took him back

over the threshold. and the foolish grin was the last thing Bill saw as the door closed.

He looked at the box. A piece of string held its flaps down. He placed it on the table, broke the string, spread the flaps and found a folded sheet of newspaper spread neatly beneath. This removed. he stared with troubled eyes at the thing the box contained.

It was a gun, carefully placed in a nest of newspaper. A glance told him it was the one given to him by Nichols in Key West. The significant thing about it now was that it was coated with wet sand.

With unsteady fingers he lifted it out, examined it. Sand clung to the three inch barrel and black rubber stock. Wet, sticky sand had jammed the cylinder and trigger action. The gun was a thirty-two caliber safety hammerless, selected by Nichols because it was small enough to be carried without bulge in the pocket, yet sturdy enough to be efficient.

It fired five shots. It had been fully loaded. Now but three of the cylinder slots were filled.

He placed the gun on the table, turned and walked unshakably to the bedroom closet. The gun given him by Nichols had been concealed in the suit he had worn when he crashed the Hallington's party.

He lifted out the suit, nervously fumbled in the hidden pocket. The pocket was empty. His face growing paler by the instant, he mechanically reached in to rehang the suit—then caught a quick choking breath and stood stock still.

Two other suits hung in the closet, both of them generously donated by Fritz Eichler upon his arrival at the island. One of them, a tan tropical worsted, he had worn last night.

It was wet.

Beneath it, placed neatly side by side, were the shoes he had worn last night. They too were wet—and coated with sand.

He backed up to the chair, shakily lowered himself into it and sat gaping at the open door of the closet, at the suit and the shoes. Frantically he tried to remember.

There had been a concert last night, downstairs. Lianov had played his violin. With an idea of talking secretly to Dr. Pruett, he had slipped! away, come upstairs, found Pruett's door locked. Then he had dozed in his room, in this

same chair, fully dressed; had waked shortly after twelve with the storm still raging outside, sounds of music whispering from the end of the hall.

He had dozed again—one of his periodic spells of torpidity, in which time had no meaning. He had waked in bed, at nine-thirty or thereabouts, with no recollection of having undressed or put himself to bed.

The intervening hours were a blank, as were so many other hours in his life. They would always be a blank. It had happened before, it would happen again.

But this time, during the blackout, a man had been murdered. A man had been shot to death with a thirty-two, out there on the island, in the storm.

Here on the table, delivered by the insipidly grinning Jedno, was a thirty-two caliber revolver with two bullets missing. There in the closet were wet clothes, wet shoes . . .

"No!" Bill whispered brokenly: "Oh God, no—*not that!*"

(To Be Continued Next Week)

Shadow Man
Part 3

***Was this little gem-like island part of
Randall Blaine's mad scheme of dictatorship?***

IT WAS BILL SMITH'S fate to be in a mission house the night MARTIN TOWNSEND came there in his quest for an employee. And after Bill, seeking to snake away a dollar Townsend dropped from his pocket, had demonstrated his cunning and courage, Townsend hired him and took him home.

The following morning Bill was to go to Altondale, Vermont, to sneak a picture of one DR. PRUETT paying a call at the house of MARIAN STERN. The assignment puzzled Bill—as did many other things, principally about himself. What was his real name for instance? Why did certain noises, like the whirring mechanism of Townsend's camera, seem to stultify his brain? How long had he been on the bum?

Next morning Townsend announces a change of plans. Instead of going to Altondale, Bill will travel to Florida to assume the identity of CAREY LOCKE, an aviator given up for lost on a flight to Santiago. En route with CLEAVES, one of Townsend's men, Bill gets a glimpse of a newspaper story that gives a new significance to Martin Townsend's mysterious scheme.

The story reports the murder of Mrs. Marian Stern of Altondale, Vermont.

At Key West, Bill gets further instruction in his part from a man called NICHOLS, and finally, with a gun in his pocket, he is sent forth to crash a party where PAULA BLAINE, Carey Locke's fiancée, is known to be. Apparently the deception succeeds. Paula and her step-brother, FRITZ EICHLER, take Bill to the retreat, an island off the coast where RANDALL BLAINE, the chemical king, makes his home.

There, Bill is greeted by SOFIA BLAINE, Paula's stepmother, a stranger named ABEL KIMM; JEDNO, the huge caretaker, and NICHOLAS LIANOV, the famous violinist. But Paula's father, Randall Blaine, is not there, Paula tells him.

Bill learns the reason for Paula's reticence in discussing her father, later, when he discovers

Mr. Blaine flashing strange signals on a lonely part of the island. And even while Bill watches, Abel Kimm appears and leads the elderly man off.

What is behind this business? Bill cannot guess and is even more puzzled to learn he himself can do things he had not suspected—like playing the piano. Paula assures him some one is coming who will help clear his befogged memory. And the next day Dr. Pruett arrives, flown in by a young pilot named KINCAID

From his headache the next morning, Bill knows that a blank period of torpor gripped him the night before, and he is powerless to recall his actions. He soon learns that Dr. Pruett has been shot to death on the beach during the rain-soaked night. Shortly, the enigmatic Jedno presents him with a box containing a sand clogged revolver—Bill's revolver! Horrified, Bill looks in his closet and finds his suit is wet and his shoes caked with sand.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DESPITE the day's ugly rush of activity, there was little sleep this night in the island home of Randall Blaine. Bill Smith paced the floor of his room, crushed by the knowledge that he had murdered a man—or had been framed for it with such diabolical cunning that even he himself could not swear to his innocence.

Abel Kimm, the grim enigma of the island, was doggedly concluding his investigation, still unwilling to admit defeat and telephone the police.

Jedno, the deaf hulk who could hear whispers, sat in his quarters over the boathouse and watched the clock . . . and waited.

It was after midnight when Jedno prowled across to the big house, and after one when he returned. A little while later Paula Blaine emerged from her room, moved stealthily down the stairs and out of the house.

The night was cold and the girl shivered as though the task she had set for herself, or the task set for her, was more than she dared contemplate. Her face was drawn and white, her lip caught in her teeth. Just once she glanced up

at the dark windows of Bill Smith's room, then moved toward the pier.

Clutched in her hand was a pair of high rubber boots.

It was not luck that Bill Smith watched the girl as she stepped into a dingy at the pier's end. Nerves raggedly on edge, he had heard Jedno come prowling upstairs to her room, heard the girl steal out of her room a short time later.

When Paula Blaine left the house, Bill followed. Now he stood motionless near the front door, inhaling a drugsweet scent of jasmine while watching as the girl took up the oars.

What did he really know about her, after all, except that she had been in love with Carey Locke? In New York, Martin Townsend had hinted that this girl was involved in a gigantic scheme to defraud the insurance companies. Her father might be part of the game, too.

Whatever the game, whoever the players, Bill knew that he had lost his last opportunity to back out. Proof existed that he was a murderer. One man, at least, knew it. He had a hunch that if he attempted to desert now, with the drama rapidly approaching an explosive climax, the croupier in this game of life and death would brush him aside—to the death house or an unmarked grave—as lightly as a cigarette stub might be discarded.

He could trust no one, not even Paula. Could believe no one. Worst of all was the realization that here on Blaine's island lay some tenuous thread of his own forgotten past, perhaps the secret of his true identity.

Growing within him was the disturbing belief that his identity was known to those who pulled the strings.

He watched the girl. Bending her slim form to the oars, she rowed the dingy away from the pier. Then the darkness took her and the boat became merely a black blur on the velvet surface of the sea.

But it remained visible, hugging the shore as it crept toward the northern tip of the island.

Bill trod silently through the sand, keeping the blur in sight, if, indeed, he had been framed for the murder of Dr. Pruett, was this a part of the framing?

At the island's end the girl beached her boat and clambered out of it. But now she was wearing hip boots.

She trudged along the shore a short distance, turned to her right and climbed a low shelf of rocks. Less than fifty feet from the poinciana tree beneath which Fritz Eichler had discovered Pruett's body, she stopped.

She stood there a moment, a slim dark shadow against the blackness of the night. Then she turned, retraced her steps, got into the boat and pushed it clear.

She rowed into the dark, out of Bill's range of vision. Bill did not see her ship the oars. He did not see her kneel to fasten a heavy boulder to the rubber boots and drop them overboard. He was unaware of the fear in her eyes, the transparent whiteness of her lips as she did these things.

He was watching, though, when she rowed the dingy back to the pier, made it fast and hurried into the house. Ugly suspicions sent him prowling to the boat, to look it over. Except for the oars it was empty.

He went back to his room, not to sleep but to pace the floor and think. A little while later the silence that poured through his open window was shattered by a querulous voice outside. It shrieked, "I tell you I don't intend to—" and then was silent. as though smothered by a quickly applied gag.

Bill stepped to the window. Outside in the dark, three dim shapes moved toward the pier, one of them stubbornly resisting as the others pulled him along.

Abel Kimm was easily identified by his short, shouldery build. The protesting one was Randall Blaine. The other might have been Lianov, the violinist, or Fritz Eichler.

Bill stared in bewildered silence as the three men reached the moored cruiser. He was still staring as the cruiser nosed slowly away from the pier, its engine muted to make a minimum of sound.

Ghostlike, the craft slipped away from the island, no lights dotting its shadowed sides. When Bill last saw it, its bow was aimed at the two winking lights to the north—the same two mysterious lights to which Paula had so often called his attention.

He waited. After a long time the cruiser returned, but Randall Blaine was not one of the two men who hurried toward the house. To all

appearances Blaine had been removed against his will from his own island.

After that the island slept.

ABEL KIMM admitted defeat in the morning, and telephoned Key West. By noon the police had arrived; an official investigation was under way, in charge of a tall, tanned man named Hawkes, whose stern matter-of-factness warned that he would tolerate no foolishness, brook no interference.

It was Hawkes who discovered the footprints in the sand. He came upon them while making a tour of the island, after questioning every individual on it.

He seemed surprised. Abel Kimm seemed surprised, too.

"I thought you told me," Hawkes said, giving Kimm a stare, "that you looked this island over, didn't find anything." His finger stabbed at the prints. "What do you call these, man? Nothing?"

Bill Smith had accompanied the expedition for reasons not altogether clear even to himself. He watched Abel Kimm's face now, saw little wrinkles of bewilderment curl at the corners of his mouth as the chunky little man frowned at the footprints.

Those prints—and the mark made in the sand by the prow of the boat—had been overlooked by Abel Kimm for an excellent reason. They had not been in existence before three o'clock this morning.

Kimm chewed a thumbnail, scowled at the sand and said awkwardly: "I guess I missed these. Thought I'd covered the ground pretty thoroughly, but I skipped a trick here, all right." He looked owlishly up at Hawkes. "This sort of sheds an outside light on the kill."

Hawkes said it did. Elaborating, he added cautiously: "Looks as though some one came ashore here in a small boat, walked up to the shelf of rock,"—pointing— "shot the doctor and made off again." He squinted at the prints. "Can't tell much from these. Big—wore boots, probably."

Abel Kimm, Bill thought, was not being very bright, or else was playing possum. This tardy discovery of the footprints should have meant only one thing to Kimm—that the prints had been made since his examination of the island, to

throw suspicion elsewhere and relieve pressure on the killer.

Bill could not understand it. His own part in the murder was maddeningly obscure, and perilous. The girl's actions bewildered him. The silence of Jedno, who knew about the gun, confounded him.

There was but one apparent answer. Paula and Jedno knew the truth but were keeping it to themselves for a reason. At their own convenience they would let him know the reason.

The police questioned him later, but Paula hovered close to protect him. Did he know, Hawkes asked, that his antics at the Hallington's party, his return from the land of the missing, had set in motion a wave of talk which had swept from Key West to the mainland and half way across the country?

"You're news, Mr. Locke," Hawkes declared. "I suppose you know that."

"He doesn't," said Paula quickly. "I've kept the newspapers out of his reach. Carey needs rest and quiet, not excitement. I've answered all phone calls, told all reporters they won't be allowed to set foot on the island. It's been awful, just awful, the way they've hounded us!"

Bill had wondered about that angle, and was grateful. But Hawkes gave him a malevolent grin, said warningly: "You'll have to face your public sometime, Mr. Locke. Better be prepared for it. Hero worship's a wonderful thing!"

At four in the afternoon the police left. At five Abel Kimm took the cruiser out, and Bill thought he knew the little man's destination.

Awaiting his chance, Bill wandered down the upstairs hall to the room occupied until last night by Randall Blaine. He tried the door, found it unlocked, opened it and slipped inside.

It was a prison room. Its twin windows, overlooking the west shore of the island, were closed tight and held fast with screws. The lock on the door was a sturdy affair that could be manipulated only from the outside.

Of furnishings the room contained a bed, a chest of drawers, a wall-to-wall carpet. A clothes closet held two neatly hung suits, a raincoat, four pairs of shoes without laces. In an adjoining bathroom were towels, soap and toilet articles—but no razor, nothing with which a man might do himself bodily harm.

As for the chest of drawers, it held only an assortment of clothing, a flashlight and a notebook. Bill glanced hurriedly at the notebook and slipped it into his pocket, sent a quick look around the room to be sure he had left no traces of his invasion, then turned to depart.

The door swung open. On the threshold, coldly eyeing him, stood the giant Jedno, Blaine's caretaker.

They faced each other, Bill uneasily aware that he had been trapped at last in an act not in keeping with his impersonation of Carey Locke, an act that branded him an impostor, a prowler. The gray walls of the room moved closer, smothering him.

The road to freedom was blocked by the gangling hulk of the man who stood in the doorway.

CHAPTER NINE

IN DESPERATION Bill said at last, hoarsely: "Well, what is it? What do you want?" And though his voice was not loud, not even loud enough to carry into the hall, the supposedly deaf Jedno smiled at him with complete understanding.

"I think it is time, Mr. Locke," Jedno murmured, "that we have a talk, you and I. Only we better not talk here. I wait for you in my place over the boathouse, yes?"

He smiled again, showing uneven yellow teeth and a slack mouth, then turned without a sound and went down the hall.

Bill closed the door of Blaine's room behind him, leaned against it and recovered his composure. Should he obey Jedno's command? If not, the big man might tell tales. Even more disconcerting was the chance that Jedno might take matters into his own hands; and they were huge hands, capable of tearing a man in two.

Bill decided to obey the summons, but not without protection. He slipped into his own room and hurried to the bureau in which he had carefully hidden the gun given him in Key West.

The weapon was gone.

For a moment fear tugged at him. He flung the drawer's contents to the floor, searched frantically. Then stopped to think.

Jedno was the one person on the island who knew about the gun. Jedno had found it after the murder—or pretended to—and had returned it.

Bill decided to see Jedno.

"Got to find out where I stand with him," he muttered. "And with some of the others."

When he climbed the stairs to the caretaker's rooms, he did so with a determination to get at the truth even if it meant open warfare. Smoldering within him was a cancerous urge to drag the whole mess into the open, and to hell with the consequences.

Jedno opened the door, nodded, closed it again after Bill had entered. He motioned his caller to a chair.

They were comfortable quarters but not elaborate. The floor was bare. A faded studio couch filled one wall, table and chairs took up most of the remaining space. A connecting door was open and Bill saw that the adjoining room, smaller, was a bedroom. He lit a cigarette.

Jedno sat on the couch, stared at him a moment, then said: "Maybe I should have tell you the truth about some things before, Mr. Locke—when you first come here. I want to, but I say to myself: "If you talk too much, Jedno, you lose your job here. You don't tell anyone if I talk to you now, huh?"

"I won't give you away," Bill promised.

"Good. So I begin with Mr. Blaine. *They* tell you he is not here on the island, no? But I think you know better by now."

"What's the matter with Mr. Blaine?" Bill demanded. "Is he ill?"

"He is sick up here." Jedno touched his temple with a leathery forefinger. "That is why so many queerish things happen around this place."

Bill recalled the locked windows in Blaine's room. He pinched out his cigarette and nodded, waiting for the rest of it.

"Just after you start for Santiago, Mr. Locke, and disappear," Jedno said, his voice rumbling. "Mr. Blaine take sick. Serious sick. For weeks Dr. Pruett and other doctors try to cure him, but he have en—enceph—like sleeping sickness, whatever you call it."

"Encephalitis." The word came readily to Bill's tongue and startled him. Where in God's name had he acquired a knowledge of medical terms? But where, for that matter, had he learned to play, or even to recognize the works of the masters?

"That's it, what you call it—encephalitis," Jedno said. "Mr. Blaine terrible sick for weeks. They think he will die, but he get over it. But, when he get over it, his mind is not the same like it used to be, Mr. Locke. He is queer up here." The forefinger tapped Jedno's temple again. "He have crazy notions."

There was something childishly naive in the big man's eagerness to make himself understood. His hands clutched the knees of his baggy slacks, his sneakered feet gripped the floor as he hunched forward to impale Bill with his voice.

"Mr. Blaine tell everyone he will be dictator, like Hitler, like Mussolini. No one can stop him, he say, because he have money, he have power, he have control over the biggest chemical business in the world, which he now turn into a munitions business instead. You see? He go crazy. He want to be like the crazy men in Europe.

BILL was shocked and horrified. If true, this side of Randall Blaine was something new, utterly at odds with the man's normal personality. For years Randall Blaine had pressed the political leaders in Washington to campaign for world peace. Despite foreign pressure strong enough to crush the resistance of a man with less fortitude, he had steadfastly refused to deal in munitions since his rise to power, though a word from him could have transformed the Blaine chemical empire into the mightiest munitions producer known to the world.

Randall Blaine a dictator? It didn't make sense!

"Just the same," insisted Jedno, sensing Bill's unwillingness to believe, "it is true, what I am telling you. Mr. Blaine go crazy with this idea of power. He do queer things. So they bring him here to the island and lock him up.

"They? Who do you mean by 'they'?"

"Mrs. Blaine. Paula. Fritz. A few others like Dr. Pruett and Lianov, who are very close to him and wish to protect him from himself. They keep his craziness a secret, Mr. Locke, from the world outside." Jedno paused to glance fearfully at the

door," as though afraid his words might escape and be caught up by hidden listeners. "They tell nobody outside their own group what happen to Mr. Blaine's mind. They keep him here under—what you call it?—observation. Even the chemical people do not know the truth of what happens, except one man very high up, who keeps things going like the real Mr. Blaine would want them to go, until he is well enough to think straight again."

Jedno leaned back and was silent, letting this sink in. Sink in it did. Here, Bill knew were answers to many things that had perplexed him. The strange actions of Randall Blaine. His being smuggled off the island before the arrival of the police—because, of course, those close to him would not want the police, and subsequently the newspapers, to learn the truth.

Still, Jedno might be lying or telling merely half truths.

"Does Randall Blaine know he's being held prisoner? Bill asked suddenly.

"He thinks he is in the hands of his enemies, Mr. Locke. He is a dictator and they have captured him, he thinks. He signals for help from a window up in his room. Sometimes he gets out and goes wandering around the island." There was something not so naive, now, in the big man's gaze as he watched Bill's face. "He do that a little while ago. Maybe you see him. He sneak up to the knoll and flash a message for help—only it is not a message for help, because the code book they give him to play with is no good. It is crazy like himself.

"Where does Abel Kimm fit into this?"

"They hire him to keep his eye on Mr. Blaine. He is a private detective from New York."

The mist was clearing, but in the core of it a number of important points were still obscure. Nothing had been said, for instance, of Martin Townsend, or of any insurance scheme, or of Paula's excursion in the dingy. Or of Jedno's simulated deafness.

"Just why did you bring back my gun instead of turning it over to Kimm, after Pruett was shot?" Bill demanded. "Why didn't you tell the police about it?"

"I think maybe Paula will not like me if I get you in trouble, Mr. Locke."

"Where did you find the gun?"

"Nearby where Fritz find the body."

"You think I killed Dr. Pruett?"

Jedno shrugged. "All I know, I see you out walking that night in the rain. I look around next morning. I find footprints where you walk. I find the gun. I say to myself: "This gun belong to Mr. Locke. Maybe *he* kill Dr. Pruett. Maybe he do it because he is sick in the head a little, or for some other reason. It is none of Jedno's business, what happen here on this island. So I take the gun back to you."

"A lot of things have happened on this island," Bill said grimly. "I think you're holding out on me. I think you know more than you've admitted."

"Yes."

"Well?"

"What I tell you already I know for a fact." Jedno said candidly. "The rest—what I tell you now—is maybe true, maybe not. One night I hear Fritz talk to Lianov in Mr. Blaine's library. I listen. Pretty soon I hear another man in there talking with them. I listen harder. This man work for the government. He come to the island because there is trouble with agents of another government. His name is Townsend."

"Townsend!" Bill caught a breath that set his heart to sledging. "Martin Townsend? *Was that his name?*"

Jedno shrugged again. " All I know, they call him Mr. Townsend. He is from the Department of Justice, what you call it—a G-man."

"What did you overhear?" Bill demanded harshly.

"This Mr. Townsend tell Lianov and Fritz how foreign agents learn the truth about Mr. Blaine's sickness. These foreign agents scheme to get control over Mr. Blaine's business. Mr. Townsend, it is his job, he say, to make sure they do not succeed. He tell Lianov and Fritz not to worry if some queer things happen. He say it is necessary to fight fire with fire, and these are dangerous men who will stop at nothing. He tell them to keep Mr. Blaine locked up and watch him close all the time, and say nothing to nobody, and be careful of strangers."

"When was this? When did you overhear this talk?"

"Two—three weeks ago," Jedno declared.

It was clear now, Bill mused. But good Lord, why hadn't they given him some clue, some scrap

of information that would shed light on the truth and keep him from going mad? Well—the reason for that was more or less apparent, too. He'd been a derelict without a past, a man to be used but not to be trusted with confidential secrets.

TOWNSEND'S elaborate story of the insurance racket had been a colossal hoax, then. In reality the man was a leader of Uncle Sam's counter-espionage forces, involved in a sinister game of chess with agents of a foreign power who sought to control Blaine's empire. In such a game the pawns counted for little; they were tools to be moved about at will.

He, Bill Smith, was such a pawn.

To be sure, certain questions still lacked answers, but these answers, when supplied, would no doubt fit into the pattern without disturbing it. The murder in Altondale, for instance. Dr. Pruett's clandestine meetings with the now dead Mrs. Marian Stern. The slaying of Pruett himself.

These were parts of the whole, darkly mysterious as separate items but of less importance when viewed against the midnight storm of drama looming behind them.

There remained but one major question in Bill's mind. Why had he been ordered to impersonate Paula Blaine's dead sweetheart? Why, if Townsend were working *with* the Blaines to protect the demented head of the family, had such an elaborate scheme been carried out to deceive Paula?

The answer to that, he felt, would not be long coming. The murder of Dr. Pruett might hasten it. Events here were rapidly nearing an explosion.

He stared intently at his informant, scowled, said gently: "Who told you to tell me all this, Jedno?"

"Nobody, Mr. Locke."

"Then why *have* you told me?"

The giant moved his shoulders. "I think to myself, 'If Mr. Locke is get in trouble for what happens to Dr. Pruett, maybe he better know what goes on around here.'"

"Just why did you pretend to be deaf when I first came here?"

"Up to a little while ago, Mr. Locke, I am deaf. Deaf like a post. You know that. But then I take treatments from Dr. Pruett. He fix me."

"But why go on pretending?"

"I think maybe if only a few people know I can hear, maybe I learn more."

It was queer reasoning, Bill thought, but then Jedno himself was inclined to be queer. At times the fellow seemed not too bright, his mind that of a child. Then without warning his mastery of guile amazed you.

"Better keep all this to yourself, what you've told me." Bill warned. "And keep it mum that you have told me."

"I think so too, Mr. Locke."

"Good. "

Bill went back to the house, to his room, feeling better about a number of things. He no longer doubted Martin Townsend. Townsend might move in mysterious ways, but there was a reason for it. The one great shadow hovering over Bill's future was his probable complicity in the murder of Pruett.

He tried to shrug it off. If guilty, his guilt had not been intentional. There would be time enough to worry when and if the police stumbled upon the truth.

He studied the notebook taken from Randall Blaine's room. It added weight—at least the first few pages did—to Jedno's story. These pages were covered with a false International Code. Any messages sent in such code would be meaningless to an observer.

What was it Paula's father had flashed from the knoll? Snatches of the garbled message gnawed tantalizingly at the edges of Bill's memory. KEDO—that was the word used most often.

He looked it up. Randall Blaine had thought he was flashing the word HELP.

Jedno had been right.

But the notebook contained something else. Penciled on its last few pages were fragments of writing which, pieced together, formed a sort of diary.

January 8. All day today I played chess with Abel Kimm. He is a clever fellow, this Kimm, but difficult to understand. I tried to pump him for information. No good.

January 11. Fritz told me today that Paula does not yet know the whole truth. He may be lying, but I see no reason for lying at this stage. The time for Paula to learn the truth is when I am passed by Pruett, who continues to fend me off with promises. Chess with Kimm again. He seemed worried about something but my attempts to get under his hide were futile.

February 2. Had another of my spells last night, confound it. Got out and spent half the night prowling.

February 12. Lincoln's birthday. A grand man, Lincoln. Were he alive today, with the world the madhouse it is, he would find problems worthy of his greatness. I told Kimm today that Hitler's next move would be South America. He laughed, but we shall see. Had another lesson this evening and am nearly as good as the master.

Were these the thoughts of a man whose ambition was to be a dictator, plunging the world into war? Bill studied them carefully, shook his head over them. After making a copy of the code, he returned the notebook to Blaine's room.

The diary troubled him, but something else troubled him more. His gun—the weapon given him in Key West, by Nichols. It was missing, and he was reasonably certain now that Jedno had not taken it.

Who had? And why?

CHAPTER TEN

RANDALL BLAINE returned to his island that night, secretly, with Abel Kimm his sole companion. The police had gone. The house had settled into an uneasy routine, most of its occupants apparently convinced that Dr. Pruett had been slain by an outsider.

Bill Smith was waylaid by Kincaid, the sandy-haired young pilot of the plane which had brought Pruett to his rendezvous with death.

"Like to look my ship over, Mr. Locke?"

Bill hesitated. Time and again during the past few hours his gaze had wandered to the big silver ship moored beyond the pier. It had a

strange and inexplicable fascination for him, drew his interest continually. Yet he knew nothing about planes, and unless this burning eagerness were a voice out of his past, he could not explain it.

"All right," he said.

His blood tingled with anticipation as Kincaid rowed him out in the dingy. In gathering dusk the plane lay like a huge silver moth, dim with shadow, mysterious as some strange visitor from another world.

"The very latest thing," Kincaid murmured, making the dingy fast. "But you can see that for yourself, Mr. Locke. No need for me to tell you what a beauty she is!" His tone was that of a student addressing the master.

Bill looked the ship over with a practiced eye and was astounded to realize that he knew what to look for. She was a beauty, all right. Streamlined to the nth degree, she lazied on the water with a trim buoyancy that promised a smooth liquid rush of speed in flight. Her instruments were the very latest.

Watching him, Kincaid said eagerly: "How about trying her out, Mr. Locke?"

It was on Bill Smith's tongue to admit that he didn't know the first thing about flying. But he remembered in time that he was not Bill Smith any longer, and Carey Locke had been a dare-devil pilot.

"I haven't flown," he muttered, "since the crash."

"Oh," said Kincaid with understanding.

But there was a hunger in Bill's heart that would not rest. His gaze swept to the shadowy skies. He hesitated, then said abruptly, "You take me up, Kincaid! That is, if you—"

"Why sure! Glad to!"

Even so, Bill was unprepared for the first defiant roar of the engine.

A violent shudder shook him and a scream beat against the shut barrier of his lips. His face blanched; he could feel the blood rushing out of it, streaming to his nerve-ends where it beat with sledge hammers in an effort to escape the hot, quivering shell of his body. By a miracle, Kincaid was not looking at him and did not see his terror. By another miracle it lasted only a few seconds—not longer than the fear which had struck at him in

Townsend's apartment, or the terror at the Blaines' breakfast table.

This fear was different, though. He sensed in it the ultimate, the final strangling terror of all terrors, the solid black substance of which all other attacks had been merely transparent shadows.

Then the sleek ship was in motion. The sea fell away beneath him and the throttling hand of fear loosed its grip.

Still white, shaken, Bill watched the blurred outlines of Randall Blaine's island grow smaller and slip southward under the plane's tail. He caught a deep breath and took hold of himself, realized suddenly that Kincaid, beside him, was grinning at him, awaiting comment.

"She is a beauty," Bill said

Kincaid said: "Want to take over now?"

"No!" The terror returned with the thought itself, but the word dispelled it, and Bill heard his own voice amending vaguely: "At least . . . not yet."

What in God's name was he saying? You don't just take over and fly a plane for the first time without study, practice, hours of instruction! What was he thinking of?

And yet, watching Kincaid's hand, he seemed able to sense what those hands would do before they did it. He knew what they were supposed to do. He was utterly confident that his own hands could do as well.

The island had vanished. The shallow sea was empty and dark, and off in the distance two tiny lights winked in the void. Bill frowned at them.

"Those lights, Kincaid. What are they?"

"Some one's private island," the pilot said. "Want to take a look?" He grinned again. There was a devil lurking in his grin.

IT WAS an island. Looking down on it, Bill thought he had never seen a more beautiful spot. Like a black pearl reflecting pinpoints of light, it lay sleepily in the gathering dark, far below, and the houses upon it were doll's houses, caressed by the four winds. It would be close to heaven, living in such a place, with a great silver moth like this one to link the world outside.

"Any idea who owns it?"

The plane plunged into a rocky stretch of sky as he asked the question. Getting no answer, he turned to look at the pilot. His breath caught in his throat.

Kincaid had hunched forward, his open mouth gaping at the instrument board. His eyes were shut, face twisted with pain.

"Better—take over, Mr. Locke. Damned heart of mine—bad—doctors warned me—" His hands fluttered to his throat. He opened his eyes, focused them with apparent maximum effort, then let them flicker shut.

The plane's nose dipped violently. Bill's gaze fastened in horror on the tachometer as that instrument recorded a perilous rise in revolutions per minute. Kincaid hung limp in his safety belt.

For a handful of seconds the terror that gripped Bill numbed his muscles and left him helpless. Then he went into action. Frenzied fingers unfastened the pilot's belt, dragged the inert shape from the controls. Bill slid under him, and without time to wonder if he knew what to do, did it.

His feet steadied the rudder automatically. He drew back on the stick, slowly, gently, easing the big plane out of its dive, leveling out as though the sky were greased to permit no humps.

The twin winking lights on the island were lights again, where but an instant before they had been the glittering eyes of an open-mouthed monster waiting in glee to gulp the plane and its occupants. But then the terror returned. The first great emergency was over and he had time to think.

He sent a frantic, imploring glance at his companion, but Kincaid was out cold, his face a lifeless mask of mockery. The plane roared on.

"We'll crash!" Bill thought wildly. "We've got to crash! You can't fly a plane the first time you step into one! It can't be done!"

But he was doing it. Not smoothly or with any confidence, it was true; yet he knew how to read the instrument board, knew what to do with his hands, his feet. And suddenly an electric wave of confidence flowed through him, tingling every nerve-end, warming him.

He *had* done this sort of thing before. He knew it now. Any other thought was inconceivable.

The feel of the plane returned to him and he no longer feared it. It no longer reeled drunkenly through the sky. He had its number. It was a pal of his, an old friend, obedient, responsive. And in that moment of triumph, of jubilation, something out of Bill's past crept to within clutching distance.

For one fleeting second the groping fingers of his mind came within a tantalizingly small margin of capturing the imp that mocked him. Then it was gone again.

He took the plane back to Blaine's island, dipped it neatly to an effortless landing. He leaned back then and let his sharpened senses soak up the beauty of the night around him, while his mind played with the mystery of this newly discovered accomplishment. Tardily it occurred to him that Kincaid might be seriously ill.

He turned. The sandy-haired pilot was grinning at him, and a devil danced in the grin. "You're better than ever," Kincaid said with genuine admiration. "If that's possible, Mr. Locke!"

A cloud swept Bill's face. "You were shamming?"

"Sure!"

"But damn it, man, don't you realize what—" No. Those were not the right words. To Kincaid he was Carey Locke, and with Carey Locke at the controls there could have been no danger. "But why?" Bill finished lamely. "Why did you pull such a stunt?"

Kincaid eyed him soberly. "Orders."

"Orders? From whom?"

"I'm in this, too. Mr. Locke," the pilot said gently. "Just what it's all about I don't know, but when your Uncle Samuel needs the services of Joe Kincaid they're available, and no questions asked." He fumbled a billfold out of his pocket, extracted a sheet of paper and handed it over. Bill read:

Be ready to fly Pruett to Blaine's Island when he arrives in West Palm Beach. While there get Carey Locke into the air and make him fly. Phone Nichols Key West for further instructions.

It was typewritten, even to the signature. The signature was that of Martin Townsend.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BILL looked up from the typewritten sheet and said darkly: "How did you happen to run into Martin Townsend, Kincaid?" His own thoughts were back in the Friendly Mission.

Kincaid shrugged. "I never did get to meet Townsend himself. Nichols looked me up." He grinned and the grin was that of a small boy eager for any sort of adventure. "Hell, Mr. Locke, I didn't need much convincing. If the G-men need me, I'm ready, able and willing!"

He talked while making the plane fast, kept up a steady stream of it while rowing Bill back to the pier. But, Bill realized, the sandy-haired pilot knew nothing that he himself did not know. Kincaid was merely another of the many pawns in Townsend's chess game.

Alone, Bill made his way up to the house, buoyant with an elation brought on by his success in the air. Up there in the enormity of the sky, the doubts and fears of this whole macabre business had momentarily slipped away from him. He felt as though he had just stepped out of a cold shower.

Suddenly he stopped.

The girl had not wanted him to discover her; that was obvious. She drew back now, into the shadows of the veranda. Come to think of it, she had avoided him ever since the murder of Pruett. At least she had not gone out of her way to be near him.

Bill went toward her impulsively. "I've been up, Paula! I can fly!"

"I know." Her voice was low, unsteady. "I've been out here and was watching when you landed. I—I'm glad. Carey. Glad you've overcome your fear."

He hadn't meant it that way. Now there seemed to be nothing more to say, and he could only look at her, realizing how very much he was in love with this dark-haired trusting girl who thought him something other than he was.

The thought was depressing, and he released the girl's arms, walked to a hammock and sat down. She joined him. "Little by little," she said presently, "it comes back to you, doesn't it? I've been watching, Carey— more than you suspect."

He nodded. Little by little something was coming back, but what it would be when the shadows cleared he did not know and was horribly afraid to find out. Yet one thing was certain: he had not always been the unwashed derelict discovered by Townsend in the Friendly Mission.

Hidden in his lost background were a knowledge and appreciation of good music, the ability to fly a plane, an instinctive use of good manners, good speech. These things, one atop another, meant good breeding.

What lay behind the wall against which his memory struggled so fiercely?

Paula's hand found his. "Carey—there are some questions I want to ask."

HE STARED at her. She was so desirable, so lovely. But she was in love with Carey Locke, a ghost, and if she knew the truth he would have no chance.

"Did you bring a gun here to the island, Carey?"

The question caught him off guard. "Yes."

"But why, Carey? And how? You had no things. You came just as you were when you burst into the Hallington's party!"

What was it Townsend had dinned into him? "If you get into a tight spot, Smith, fall back on vagueness. You're a sick man. You've been through hell. Your mind isn't just right."

"I don't know." Bill muttered, looking away. "I had it with me, that's all. I don't know why." Suddenly he realized the significance of her question and was numbed by it. "What do you know about any gun?"

"I know more than you think, Carey."

Bill fell back to a defensive, evasive, "I don't understand."

"But you—you do own a gun?"

"Yes, I own a gun. Is that anything to be upset about?"

"Where is it, Carey? Oh, my dear, listen to me. The gun is dangerous. It can get you into trouble! I want you to give it to me, let me keep it!"

"You mean I might have one of my bad moments and use it?"

"I mean you—" She caught herself. Her hands trembling on his arm. "I'm just afraid, Carey. Terribly afraid something will happen."

"Nonsense! "

"But you don't need a gun. Surely—"

"After what happened to Dr. Pruett," Bill muttered. "I may need it at that. You certainly won't have any use for it."

That was the wrong thing to say, he realized immediately. Paula Blaine was upset, her nerves at the breaking point. She withdrew her hand, stared at him queerly for a moment as though seeing a side of him she had never seen before. A dark side, untouched by the hero's halo that made radiant the rest of him.

She said in a low, constrained voice, "Good night, Carey," and was gone.

Bill sat there, hating himself. "So she *does* know," he thought savagely. "First Jedno, now Paula—or anyway, she's been told about the gun and suspects the rest of it. Before long they'll all know. " He looked around, half expecting the police to be watching him, waiting for the one false move that would justify them in seizing him.

"I killed Pruett." The thought refused to let him rest. "Now the gun is gone. Some one has it. Some one's watching every move I make, mocking me, just waiting for the proper time to scream the truth to the whole world. Then . . . "

Then prison. Or if he could prove himself insane, he might win the pleasant alternative of a madhouse.

He wasn't flying a plane now. His feet were on terra firma, but terra firma was a treacherous mire that might open at any moment and suck him down.

He went upstairs. From the room at the end of the hall floated the silvery tones of Lianov's violin, weeping gorgeously through *Liebesleid*, but he was in no mood to listen.

There was an envelope on the floor, just inside his door. He tore it open. The typewritten message read:

Congratulations on your talk with Jedno and your success in the air. You now know something of what we fight for and will appreciate that absolute obedience is essential to our success. No matter what happens in the next hour you are to leave the house secretly at the first opportunity

after midnight, take the plane, fly to Key West where Nichols will meet you and issue further orders. You must not fail!

There was a typewriter, Bill recalled, in Randall Blaine's study. Anyone could have used it. He read the message over, with the uncomfortable sensation that the eyes which had been watching his every movement—were watching him now.

Suddenly the stillness of the house, marred only by the song of Lianov's violin, was rudely shattered by another sound. Two sharp biting reports lifted Bill from the chair into which he had sagged.

A man screamed in the night outside.

CHAPTER TWELVE

OTHERS in Randall Blaine's strange household had heard the shots too. Sofia Blaine rushed from the music room to the front door and collided there with her son, Fritz, who came striding from somewhere at the rear of the house. Bill saw them as he reached the head of the stairs. Saw them and heard Fritz say sharply: "No hysterics now, mother! Better stay inside!"

The woman did appear to be on the verge of hysteria. Her hands were at her throat; her plump little body quivered like jelly around the confining walls of her corset. She clutched at Bill's arm, cried gaspingly: "I just know something terrible has happened, Carey!"

Bill muttered a reassuring word and went past her, went out. A light was already winking out there in the dark, between the house and the boathouse. Jedno's huge bulk loomed behind it. Suddenly Paula was at Bill's side.

"What's happened, Carey?" The fear that rode her voice was no ordinary fear, but a kind of panic.

"Don't know. I heard shots, a scream." He went toward the light, stopped short when the beam swung to encompass his face. Jedno called to him. Fritz had vanished.

Lianov appeared then, with the young man whose duty it was to care for Randall Blaine's

several boats. All were here except Kimm. All had been roused by the shots, the scream, so vividly clear in the quiet night.

Who had screamed?

It was Fritz who organized the investigation. Striding into the group with a show of authority peculiar to one so normally indolent, he snapped out orders.

"You, Locke—take the south end of the island. Look it over. Jedno can take the north end. Lianov, you stay here at the house, with the women. After what happened to Pruett we can't take chances! I'll go to the boathouse—"

It was a weird affair, and the night was weirdly black, utterly moonless, to provide the proper atmosphere for it. Flashlight in hand, Bill prowled the shore.

Now and then other lights blinked close in the dark, only to veer away again. Voices rode the wind.

He found nothing.

When he returned to the house, Paula and her stepmother were nervously waiting on the veranda, Lianov standing on the steps, peering into the dark. Startled by Bill's approach, the musician whirled, caught a noisy breath. He recognized Bill and relaxed, exhaled heavily.

"You have found anything, Mr. Locke?"

"No."

The others returned with the same answer. Two shots had shattered the night's silence. A man had screamed. But that was all.

"Abel Kimm," Bill said, "is missing."

Fritz nodded, his face drawn, a thin scowl on his slack mouth. "Probably heard the shots as we did, and went exploring on his own." It seemed an indifferent way of disposing of the man's absence, Bill thought, but Lianov grunted in agreement. The others appeared to be satisfied.

"Perhaps," Fritz said, "the best thing we can do is go inside and wait for Kimm to return. He'll probably have all the answers." He lit a cigarette, held his watch close to the flaring match. "Midnight," he declared.

MIDNIGHT, Bill thought. "You are to leave secretly at the first opportunity after midnight, take the plane . . ." He hung back as the others went into the house. No one seemed to notice.

The door closed, and Bill was alone.

Once again that uneasy feeling possessed him that he was being watched. He looked around and the feeling grew, though the darkness was impregnable, the island a black blur blending into a blacker sea. After what had happened, should he obey orders or wait?

His hesitation lasted but a moment. This was a big game, far more important than any mysterious gunshots in the night. At Townsend's direction he had been tested for the job at hand. "You must not fail!"

The darkness swallowed him as he moved toward the pier. Nerves tingling, he loosed the dingy and dropped into it, groped for the oars.

The plane was a black shadow in the night's blackness, and at thought of taking it up alone, Bill's blood raced. He could do it, of course.

The big ship dipped under his weight as he kicked the dingy loose and clambered aboard. No need for a light here. He knew his way.

But his groping fingers struck something that was not familiar! He drew the hand back, stifled an outcry. "I thought I was doing this job alone."

The man in the passenger's seat nodded—or perhaps that was merely the motion of the ship itself. With a shrug, Bill took the controls, fastened his safety belt. The engine came to life with a roar.

He let it roar. They would hear it at the house, of course, and no doubt it would startle them into another mad rush to the veranda. But he had his orders.

"Well—here goes!"

The plane moved through the dark, gathered speed, slipped free of the sea's grip as easily as a gull. The blood raced in Bill's veins, throbbed at his temples.

It had not occurred to him before that he might not know the way to Key West. He thought of it now, and realized that he did know the way, knew every light to watch for, every guiding beacon that would keep him on course. Yet he had studied no charts.

Thoroughly enjoying himself, he sent his charge roaring through the night. Still the man beside him had uttered no word of greeting.

"I suppose you issued the order for this," Bill said.

No answer.

"Good Lord, man, you don't have to treat me like a leper. I'm in this, too. Even if Townsend weren't paying me, I'd still be in it, doing my damndest to help!"

The continued silence galled him. He turned his head, scowled at the shadowy shape beside him. The cockpit was dark because he had not flipped the switch to illuminate the instrument hoard.

He flipped it now and found himself scowling into the face of Abel Kimm!

"Well, I'm damned!" Bill declared.

His voice whispered to silence, and the thrill that leaped through him was of a kind far different from the exultation preceding it. He saw suddenly why Abel Kimm was so quiet.

The chunky man's head hung on his chest. His knees were drawn up. His lap was full of blood.

(To be continued next week)

Shadow Man

Part 4

DISPIRITED and hungry, cut off from the past by a curtain of amnesia, BILL SMITH jumped at the security MARTIN TOWNSEND held out to him the night of their meeting in a Mission house for derelicts. Bill went home with the big, well-dressed stranger, not worrying much over what his new job entailed. He was to go to Altondale, Vermont, he found out, to sneak some pictures of a certain DR. PRUETT calling on a woman named MARIAN STERN.

But in the morning Townsend had a new plan. Bill was to impersonate CAREY LOCKE, an aviator given up for lost on a flight to Santiago. After much schooling in his role, Bill started out for Key West, Florida. He got a shock, en route, when he read in a newspaper of the mysterious death of Mrs. Marian Stern.

After further coaching in Florida by NICHOLS, one of Townsend's men, Bill crashed a garden party and was immediately accepted—even by PAULA BLAINE, Carey Locke's fiancée—as the missing flyer, miraculously returned from the dead. That night Paula and her stepbrother, FRITZ EICHLER, took Bill back to the island of their father, RANDALL BLAINE, the chemical tycoon. There Bill was greeted as Carey Locke by SOFIA BLAINE, Paula's step-mother; JEDNO, the caretaker; NICHOLAS LIANOV, a concert violinist, and ABEL KIMM, an enigmatic guest.

Randall Blaine was away, Bill was led to believe, but later he came upon him flashing strange code toward a nearby island. At that moment Blaine was hustled away by Kimm and later Bill got a warning not to prowl around at night.

Bill was startled at the arrival of Dr. Pruett on the Island, but his confusion turned to dismay the next morning, when he learned that Pruett has been murdered on the beach and he, Bill, has been neatly framed for the murder. Returning Bill's revolver—the death weapon—Jedno explained that his action was based on loyalty to Paula. The rugged caretaker revealed that Randall Blaine was mad with ambitions to become a dictator and that Kimm, a private detective, is guarding him. Townsend, Jedno said, is a G-man, put on the case to forestall

scheming foreign agents from gaining control of the chemical empire.

After the police depart, Kincaid, the pilot who brought Dr. Pruett to the island, invites Bill to inspect the plane. In the middle of a short flight, Kincaid feigns illness—and Bill, to his astonishment, finds that he can fly the plane. Later Kincaid explains he was carrying out Townsend's orders "to get Carey Locke in the air and make him fly."

Back in his room, Bill finds a note telling him to fly at once to Key West to meet Nichols for further orders. Even as he puzzles over the implications of this message, two shots ring out and a man screams. When Bill slips into the cockpit of the plane a few moments later, he finds it already occupied—by the corpse of Abel Kimm.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SOMETHING white fluttered on Abel Kimm's sleeve. Bill Smith saw it after recovering from the initial shock of finding a dead man in the seat beside him. He reached for it with nerveless fingers, plucked it loose.

It was a note.

Not a typewritten note this time, but a few words hurriedly scribbled in pencil across a ragged scrap of paper torn from an old envelope. "Get rid of Kimm before reaching Key West," it read. "Feed him to the sharks."

There was no signature, and the handwriting meant nothing. The cold-blooded nature of the message itself sent a prickly chill through Bill's tense muscles.

He crumpled the note and stuffed it into his pocket, while the plane sped through the midnight sky. The night seemed less attractive now. The sky was not a vault of freedom but a shadowy cell with four crowding walls. The corpse of Abel Kimm sat there enshrouded in accusing silence.

Who had killed him, and why?

Bill's mind raced back to the sound of the shots, to the scream that had ripped through the peace and quiet of Blaine's island. He himself had been in his room. From the room at the end of the

corridor had issued the weeping strains of Lianov's violin.

But what about Fritz, Jedno, the two women? What about Kincaid, and the lad who took care of Blaine's boats?

What about Randall Blaine himself?

Get rid of Kimm before reaching Key West! That was easily ordered but less easily carried out. Unless he chose to obey the rest of the command and drop the corpse into the sea.

He looked down through the dark. Here and there tiny points of light on scattered warts of land were visible. A shudder ran down his arms. Throw Kimm overboard? No!

To be sure, he had feared Abel Kimm from the beginning. Had never understood the phlegmatic little man. But the thought of tossing Kimm's body to the sharks was more than he could stomach.

Something else worried him. *Why* should those in charge of this devilish game wish to dispose of Kimm in such a manner?

A little group of lights far below caught his attention and he dipped the plane's nose toward them. They were the lighted windows of houses on an island—what island, he did not know. But he had been ordered to get rid of Abel Kimm enroute to Key West, and would do so. If his method deviated from instructions, what of it?

He silenced the ship's roar, descended soundlessly, set the plane down with a dexterity that could have been achieved only through years of knowing how. This no longer astonished him. The plane was a part of him, a responsive comrade eager to obey his touch.

He turned again to the man beside him.

There was no more expression on Kimm's face now than there ever had been in life. The eyes were half open, as though cynically watching. The thin lips curled a little, their frown accented by a knife-edge line of blood caught between them, dark at the corners.

Jedno had said that Abel Kimm was a New York detective hired to keep an eye on Randall Blaine.

Bill did not believe it.

His gaze swept the dark contour of the island, the lights glowing upon it. With instinctive attention to details he had brought the plane down

as far as possible from the house. The water was calm as a pond.

He turned to give the corpse a thorough examination.

Abel Kimm had been shot twice. The bullets had entered his back, one between the shoulder-blades, the other a foot lower. One of the slugs had ripped its way through the body, tearing a hole in the little man's abdomen. The other was apparently still imbedded in bone or muscle.

There was nothing in the man's pockets. Not even a pack of cigarettes, a book of matches. The killer had found time, despite his haste, to take precautions!

Satisfied, Bill eyed the nearby shore, shed his coat and shoes, lowered the corpse over the side of the cockpit and slid over after it. There would be no sharks in water as shallow as this.

He was a good swimmer. That might have surprised him a few days ago, because never before to his knowledge had he done any swimming. It would take more than that, he mused murkily, to amaze him now!

With an eerie shudder as the warmish water gurgled blackly around him, he towed the corpse of Abel Kimm to the island, got his feet under him and pulled the body up on the beach.

While doing this, he discovered that there was something in one of Kimm's pockets. He could feel it against his fingers, through the fabric.

He looked again, but the pockets were empty. The thing he felt was in a sleeve of Kimm's coat.

Disliking the job, Bill tugged the coat loose, turned the sleeve inside out. In the dark, the tiny zipper sewed into the lining was almost invisible, but his fingers discovered it, pulled it open. A wet, sealed envelope fell out into his hand.

BILL stared. The address typed on the envelope brought to his face a frown of acute bewilderment. The letter had been destined for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Justice, Washington!

He ripped it open, examined its contents as best he could in the dark. There were thin, white cards, three of them, carefully tucked into tight-fitting envelopes that appeared to be made of cellophane. There was a photographic copy of

a letter. There were small photographs of Fritz Eichler and another man.

But the light was bad. A more careful examination had to be postponed until his return to the plane.

Hurriedly he probed Abel Kimm's clothing in search of other possible secrets, but found none. With a glance at the house lights and a last scowl at the corpse, Bill turned and waded into the sea.

They would be surprised, the good people of this peaceful island, to find a corpse on their private beach in the morning, he thought. They would be horrified to find that the corpse was a victim of violence. But at least the little private detective from New York would not become a shark-stripped skeleton at the bottom of the Gulf.

He swam back to the plane and climbed into it, Kimm's envelope held high and dry—or at least no wetter than it was—in his mouth. There in the light from the instrument panel he studied its contents again.

The three thin cards so carefully wrapped in cellophane were lifts of fingerprints, of some significance to Abel Kimm and the FBI, perhaps, but not to Bill Smith. The photograph of Fritz Eichler was a snapshot and a good one, showing Sofia Blaine's son in hipboots and fishing garb beside an impressive catch of amberjack.

Bill frowned over the other photograph a long time. It bothered him. It showed, not too clearly, a stoop shouldered, bespectacled man of slight build, utterly benign in appearance. The man was a part of Bill's past. Somewhere they had met.

He shook his head over it, put it aside and took up the letter. This, too, was not remarkable for its clarity. It appeared to be a hurriedly made enlargement, the original taken with a small copying camera of the sort used to photograph fingerprints.

It was a copy of a typed letter that bore no signature, no mailing address, not even the name of the person to whom it had been dispatched.

"Instructions followed," it read. "Pratt leaving for Key West on schedule. Nichols ready, but warns Kincaid headstrong, not to be trusted; suggests you obtain some one else if possible on such short notice. Believe absolutely without question Kimm is FBI man watching us since Lalonde episode. Awaiting instructions. All in readiness. "

Bill scowled over it, put it aside, went back to the benign little man in the photograph.

Somewhere, not long ago

Suddenly he knew! The little man in the lobby of Martin Townsend's apartment house! The apologetic fellow to whom Townsend had given directions, the evening before the startling decision to bring Carey Locke back to life.

What possible connection could Abel Kimm have with *him*?

Bill stuffed the envelope and its contents into his shirt, where they lay warm and damp against his skin. He shook his head, scowling. There were two courses open to him now, he realized. He could obey orders implicitly, or pretend to obey them while secretly pursuing a line of action dictated by his own suspicions.

The clustered lights of the island faced below as the plane soared into the night sky again. It was an odd situation, and grim. In death, Abel Kimm had told more than in life.

The lights of Key West brightened in the blackness ahead as Bill turned a plan over in his mind. He was expected to go straight to the old house occupied by Townsend's Key West agent, Nichols. Would there be time to reach a telephone first?

WITHOUT difficulty he located the plane basin and set the big ship down, its wing tips lighted now according to regulations. The roar of the engine died from his ears and he looked around, impressed by the gentle stillness of the harbor.

A dingy moved toward him from the pier, with a familiar shape Nichols at the oars.

Bill scowled at this enforced alteration of his plans. He waited, and while waiting put his brain to work thinking up an explanation for his wet clothes.

Kimm's death would have to be reported, of course, and a lie told to cover his disposal of the body. Certain sinister souls on Randall Blaine's island were probably in constant communication with this fussy, ferret-eyed little man who called himself Nichols.

The dingy came alongside, Nichols' womanish face pale in the semidark. "Kincaid!" he called softly.

Bill frowned. "Not Kincaid," he answered. "Smith."

Townsend's agent seemed surprised. His slender body stiffened at the oars. His bent back straightened and the whites of his eyes showed for an instant. "Smith? But I was told . . ."

Bill Smith decided to keep quiet about the death of Abel Kimm. He lowered himself into the dingy, smiled thinly into Nichols' perplexed stare. "All I know, I was ordered to fly here and get instructions from you."

"Very well," Nichols said. "But they might have let me know!"

He rowed to shore in silence, his gaze constantly stabbing at Bill's face. With the pier looming above his head he said pointedly: "How does it happen you're able to handle a plane? You didn't tell me that."

"I didn't know it."

"You—er—Kincaid tried you out?"

"Yes."

"I begin to understand," Nichols said. "Well—so, much the better. I can trust you, Smith. Kincaid I wasn't so sure of. Too young, too headstrong."

Someone else, Bill recalled, had used that word in describing the sandy-haired pilot. He caught the pier as Nichols swung the dingy against it, climbed up and gave the agent a hand. It seemed inconceivable that here, in the soothing quiet and pungent salty smell of the Key West waterfront, flourished a tentacle of the monstrous international plot to gain control of Randall Blaine's mighty empire.

Nichols made the dingy fast, put a hand on Bill's arm and spoke softly. "The game is about over, Smith. I think you'll enjoy the last inning more than you anticipate." He allowed himself just the slightest hint of chuckle. "Things are about to happen at top speed, Smith."

Bill shrugged. Little Mr. Nichols, he realized, was an enigma quite as baffling as Martin Townsend. And quite as clever, in his own peculiar way, as any player in the game.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THEIR destination was the same ancient house in which Nichols had put the finishing touches on Bill's impersonation of Carey Locke, before sending him out to crash the Hallington's party.

Dark, drab, it huddled in a narrow lane near the waterfront—a hand-me-down perhaps from the days when Hawk and Black Caesar flew the black flag of looting buccaneers, or Cuban patriots plotted for freedom—a grayish, twin-balconied structure in the shadowed depths of which more than one plot had been hatched and more than one still would be.

Nichols closed the door behind them and slid a bar into place, turned a heavy, old-fashioned key in the lock. A lamp burned on a mahogany table in one corner of the wide sitting room, its glow tracing designs in the cracked paint on the walls.

"You're wet," he said as though merely stating a fact, not questioning the reason for it.

"Had to swim out to the plane," Bill shrugged. "The boat got loose at Blaine's island."

"Coffee?"

"I'd like to know what I'm here for."

"For nothing, tonight," Nichols said, vaguely smiling. "I'll make coffee." He pattered into the kitchen.

Was there a phone in the house, Bill wondered. Would he get a chance to use it, to obtain the answers to certain questions that troubled him?

Ten minutes on a telephone and he would know whether or not Abel Kimm had been a Federal man. He looked around, saw no phone, guessed that if there were one, Nichols would have been informed of his coming and told of Abel Kimm's death.

"You've one more job to do for Martin Townsend," Nichols said over the coffee a few minutes later. The oil lamp on the antique table sent shadows creeping over the walls, and the house was eerily quiet, heady with an odor of night-blooming jasmine that entered through a window. "One more job, Smith, and then you can give up this impersonation of Carey Locke, go your own way again. With, of course," he added,

a smile dimpling his cheeks, "a handsome bonus for your services."

"What's the job?"

"Tomorrow night a man named Anderson will arrive in Key West. He's dangerous. In fact he is the key man in this whole set-up, one of the cleverest spies ever to plot against the best interests of our country."

"So you know I've been told," Bill said gently.

"I know more than you think."

"I see you do."

"Anderson—and that, incidentally, is not the name by which he is known to the Embassy staff of the country that employs him—is coming here to find out for himself why his plans are missing fire with such uncomfortable—for him—regularity. His destination is Blaine's island. You're going to fly him there."

Bill fingered a cigarette and was silent.

"I mean to say," Nichols amended, "you're going to pilot the plane that he *thinks* will fly him there. Actually he won't be there."

"I see."

NICHOLS paced into an adjoining room and returned with a large map which he carefully unfolded and placed on the table, moving aside coffee pot and cups to make room for it. His forefinger traced the Florida Keys, touched Key West and slid south across the Straits of Florida to Cay Sal Bank and Santaren Channel.

"We've prepared a little home for Anderson on a small island here," he declared matter-of-factly. "Not a final resting place, of course—unless his own actions make such a step necessary. But it will be a detention spot, an out of the way place where he can be held under close scrutiny until the time shall have passed when he can be dangerous to us. Think you can find this island, Smith?"

Bill studied the map, nodded.

"I have a little surprise for you," Nichols said then.

"It takes a lot to surprise me these days," Bill shrugged.

Leaning over the lamp to ignite a cigarette, Nichols eyed him with more than passing interest. "I can see that," he murmured. "I can see, too, that you've acquired poise, Smith, along with a

certain amount of confidence in yourself." He paused, scowling at the end of his cigarette. "Don't let it engender too much independent thinking. This is a complicated business and dangerous. You're but a cog in a big machine."

"I'm beginning to realize that."

"Cogs," Nichols warned, "can cause havoc if out of line. Just remember that the minds controlling our activities are far better trained than ours, Smith. We merely obey orders."

Bill nodded.

"Now, then, the surprise I mentioned. You're going to meet your Good Samaritan again."

Bill Smith raised an eyebrow. "You mean—Townsend?"

The little man's smile was benignly innocent. "Yes," he murmured. "Townsend."

"Where?"

"On this island I mentioned."

Bill said with studied indifference, "Is Townsend the head of our organization or is he, too, just a cog?"

"You ask too many questions, Smith."

"I'm just naturally curious."

"Perhaps Townsend himself will give you an answer, when you two meet again." Nichols chuckled for no apparent reason. "But now—getting back to Anderson and our plans. The fellow is due in Key West tomorrow. I've got a picture of him here; want you to study it. You won't be in on the—er—kill, Smith. Others will attend to that. But a lot will depend on you afterward."

ANDERSON did not look the part of an internationally feared foreign agent. Not, at least in the newspaper portrait handed to Bill by Nichols.

The picture showed a plumpish, middle-aged man in business attire, straw hat clutched in one hand, the other hand mopping his broad and bulging brow with a handkerchief.

The picture's caption had been torn off, along with the name of the newspaper and the date of publication.

"Study that," Nichols advised. "Then get to bed and get some sleep. You may need all the sleep you can store up." He walked briskly to the

foot of the dark, uncarpeted staircase. "I've fixed you a room upstairs."

"I could stand a drink," Bill said experimentally.

"There isn't any."

"Well, hell, the town's still awake."

Nichols concentrated a stare on him, scowled, said in a voice gentle but deadly: "You're not to leave this house, Smith, until I give the word. Is that quite understood?"

Bill knew what he had wanted to know. He grinned. "The drink will keep."

He went past Nichols, went upstairs and found the room assigned to him—the only upstairs room that was not entirely bare. With him he took the newspaper portrait of Anderson.

It was a dreary little room, even with a lamp burning unsteadily on a table beside the bed. Its single window had been painted over. No one—through the window, at least—could watch his actions. By the same token his own view was limited to the four walls.

He tried the window and was unable to budge it. Nailed, he supposed, from the outside. He sat on the bed and lit a cigarette. Two hollow distant notes seeped in from a less dormant part of town, indicating the time.

Bill turned the picture over and studied the broken columns of newsprint on its back. A small heading read: COSSACK CLUB TO CHANGE NAME.

Under that: "Norby Walton's elite casino on Flagler Street, known for several successful seasons as the Cossack Club, is to be renamed, according to a statement made today by Mr. Walton. 'Since the invasion of Finland', Mr. Walton declared heatedly, 'people have no love for anything with a name of Russian connotation. We are Cossacks no longer. The establishment has been one of Miami's finest for several seasons.'"

It was this year's paper, anyway, Bill mused.

The item in the adjoining column, much of it deleted in trimming the photograph, had to do with horse racing. CHAMPION DOUBTFUL STARTER, was its headline.

"Pre-dope favorite in the Flamingo Special, to be run here one week from today, F. L. Killiam's outstanding gelding, Killarney Kell, is reported still suffering from train sickness

contracted during the journey here from the West Coast, and may not start—"

Bill tucked the clipping into his pocket and tiptoed to the door. No sound filtered up from the rooms below, to indicate that Nichols was moving about. More than likely the man had gone to bed.

Bill opened the door quietly and went to the head of the stairs, heard nothing, descended without too much noise but with no obvious attempt at stealth that would betray his intentions if he were caught.

Nichols dozed in a chair in the barn-like sitting room, his feet propped between coffee cups on the table. He opened one eye. It seemed to open gradually, with spaced jerks, as in an animated cartoon.

"What's the matter?"

"Cigarettes," Bill said easily. "I'm all out."

Nichols indicated a pack on the table and closed the eye again. Bill shook two cigarettes out of the pack and went back upstairs.

That was out, he told himself darkly. The little man was not sleeping in that room without reason; he was there because the sitting room was the only passageway between stairs and door.

The window, then?

He tried the window again, put a knife to it, but gave up after ten minutes of hard work. It was an odd situation. He was not a prisoner, exactly. No threats had been made nor any warnings given, other than hints.

Yet he was not to be permitted to leave the house until Nichols approved the departure. And if he did contrive to leave, it would have to be without the little man's knowledge; otherwise there was no point in going.

Nerves on edge, he prowled into an adjoining room, tried the window there. Tried others. All were securely fastened. The front door—via the sitting room—was the only exit.

He went back to his room, smoked, let his mind toy with a number of schemes. But all of them on further consideration were too involved.

THE distant clock chimed three. Suddenly there was another sound—a peremptory rap on the downstairs door. He heard Nichols' chair creak as the little man quickly came to life. Heard the door open. Heard voices.

The voices were loud enough at first to carry distinctly to the bedroom, but the words were rapid and gutturally spoken. Bill caught only scraps of them.

". . . ahead of schedule! Ja, ja! I tell you it is so! In Key West now! I tell you, Gott!—he is up to something—"

At this point the sounds were suddenly muffled, as though at a gesture of warning by Nichols. The rumble of voices continued, but only as a background. It went on for five, ten minutes and was followed by a sound of footsteps on the stairs.

Bill was already sitting on the bed. He had only to kick his shoes off and swing his feet up, pull a blanket across his legs and pretend to be asleep. The door opened quietly and Nichols was in the room with him, scowling at him.

"Why did you not tell me about Abel Kimm, Smith?"

Bill sleepily blinked into the little man's sultry gaze. "Huh?"

Nichols gravely repeated the question.

"How do *you* know about Abel Kimm?" Bill countered.

"Never mind that, Smith. Answer my question!"

"I wasn't instructed to tell you about Abel Kimm."

Nichols stood very still. He had not anticipated such a reply and apparently did not know whether to take it at face value or not. His eyes explored Bill's face thoroughly. He said at last, "You were told not to tell me?"

"I didn't say that. I just wasn't told *to* tell you. What the hell"—Bill took from his pocket the crumpled piece of paper which had been attached to Kimm's body—"here's the note. Read it for yourself."

Nichols read it. "I see, Smith. And did you obey these instructions?"

"Yes."

"I see. Thank you." The little man's smile was but a ghostly twitching of his upper lip that vanished abruptly as he turned. It might have meant anything. He closed the door behind him.

Bill lay quietly nibbling at a thumbnail.

He heard them go out of the house a short while later, but how many of them went, how

many stayed, he could not be sure. After the departure the house was a church, not a sound whispering up the shadowy staircase.

He opened his door and strolled to the head of the stairs, looked down. He could see a small portion of the sitting room, and it appeared to be empty. With no attempt at stealth he descended.

A heavy set, baldish man was seated in Nichols' chair, at the table, scowling at a tower of tiny wooden blocks which appeared to be some sort of puzzle.

He turned. "Thought you were asleep," he remarked indifferently.

"You can't sleep in this barn," Bill complained. "Too damned creepy."

The heavy set man laughed.

Bill sat and watched him. The fellow took the puzzle apart, put the base of it together, got stuck, scowled at it and took it apart again. He had a lot of patience but his pudgy fingers were clumsy, awkward, and kept destroying the thing's balance.

He glanced around at Bill and said with a sheepish grin, "You any good at puzzles? Been after this for days now. Think I've got it, then haven't."

Bill moved to the table, examined the gadget and went to work on it. He, too, failed to get beyond the foundation stage. His mind was on a different sort of puzzle. After a while he leaned back, shaking his head. "You suppose there's a drink around here?"

"There isn't."

"Any chance of getting one?"

"No."

"Well—maybe Nichols will bring something back with him."

"Maybe he will," the heavy set man said dryly, lifting his gaze but not his head. "But it won't be a drink."

Bill put a finger against the half-constructed tower, pushed it over and stood up. He walked to the door.

"You thinking of going out?" the fellow asked softly.

"No. I suppose not."

"Nichols wouldn't like it. He seems to think you don't appreciate the importance of the job ahead of you."

"Hell," Bill said, shrugging, "it isn't that. It's just that I can't stand being cooped up."

"Better get some sleep."

Bill shrugged again, strolled to an overstuffed chair near the door and sank into it, pulling up another chair for his feet. On one point he was satisfied. The door might be locked, but the key was in it.

He closed his eyes and pretended to sleep. Every few minutes he stole a glance at his companion. The latter worked at the puzzle for a while, then sat back and smoked half a cigarette, snuffed out the butt and just sat.

Bill made his breathing audible and regular. In a little while the fellow reacted normally to this, and dozed. Still Bill waited. As a test he shifted position, lightly kicked the chair on which his feet were propped. The heavy set man slept through it.

Still without any obvious attempt at stealth, Bill rose quietly, wandered to the door and opened it. His companion slept on.

Bill stepped out, pulled the door shut behind him and strolled into the garden. Others might be watching. If so, his actions were those of a man wanting a breath of air, nothing more.

A moment later, satisfied, he put the ancient house behind him and headed for town. The clock struck four.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DAGO JOE'S was not one of Key West's better drinking establishments. On a small lane off Duval, it huddled between two gray houses and catered principally to night owls, while the town's more respectable citizens slept.

That he knew of the existence of Dago Joe's and had no trouble finding it, was another link in the long chain of mental puzzles which had perplexed Bill Smith since his arrival in Florida.

There were two patrons in the place when he entered. Neither paid him any attention. The girl was a swarthy, sloe-eyed Carmen, the crimson flower in her hair drooping with the droop of her shoulders. Her companion was a middle-aged Northerner—you could tell—yellow polo shirt sweat-glued to his paunch.

Bill went past them to a telephone booth at the rear, carefully shut the folding door, looked for a book and found none.

He slotted a coin. "Get me the Daily Express in Miami." More coins. A long wait. "This is Ed Kelly, special cop in Key West." There was bound to be a Kelly on any police force. "Like to have some information, please."

A pleasant voice said: "Go ahead."

"What day was the Flamingo Special run at Hialeah?"

"January ninth," the voice said without hesitation.

"Then what I want was in your paper January second. I can't tell you the page, but on the reverse was an item about a horse named Killarney Kell being a doubtful starter in the Special. Another article on the Cossack Club. I'm interested in a photograph with those two stories on the back of it. Picture of a middle-aged man holding a straw hat, mopping his brow. Can you look it up, tell me that man's name?"

"Hold the line a minute."

Bill waited, impatiently fingering the coin slots. The booth door had no glass through which he might watch the bar. But he heard voices.

One was familiar.

He pressed the folding door and it yielded a fraction of an inch letting the voices beat against him with more force. The familiar voice was Nichols'. Peering through a fold of the door, he saw the little man standing with two others at the bar.

".... tell you we can't afford to wait," Nichols was saying. "Orders or not. We're expected to use our heads in an emergency." Dago Joe's barkeep slapped three Cuba Libres on the bar and Nichols was momentarily silent while reaching for his.

The barkeep glanced at Carmen and her drunken boy friend, made a corner-mouthed comment to Nichols and his two companions. He grinned, showing large white teeth. He moved away.

"No telling why he arrived early," Nichols declared heatedly. His words were audible because Bill was close enough to touch him with an outstretched hand. They were probably not audible to the barkeep, because that stout gentleman had idled to the far end of the bar and was perched on a chair, reading a newspaper.

Carmen and her paunchy escort were not interested.

"No telling, either, what he's up to. We act now! Schmidt, you and Wakeman get him out of the Melosa. The method used on Lalonde will work here. If it doesn't—"

The voice of the *Express* man crackled from the phone receiver and Bill jammed the instrument painfully against his ear to keep the sound from escaping to alien ears. "Found it for you, Kelly! The pic you refer to is a shot of Ellison Pratt, big shot from New York who was visiting here at the time."

Bill hooked a finger in the door handle and carefully closed the door. He said with his lips touching the mouth piece: "What is his business?"

"Chemicals. He's Randall Blaine's partner."

Bill did not bother to murmur his thanks. He gently hooked the receiver and put his eye to the door-slot again. Less than a moment had elapsed since his last look, but in that moment Nichols' two companions had departed.

The little man stood alone at the bar, worriedly sipping his drink.

Hands clenched and damp with perspiration, Bill waited.

THE seconds crawled. Damn the man, why couldn't he finish his rum and be gone? The booth was hot, stuffy. As though by capillary action the sweat on Bill's hands crept to his whole body.

Suddenly Nichols slapped his glass on, the bar and swung about. The movement was impulsive. Impulsive, too, was the outward thrust of his hand as he reached for the booth door!

Before the man could realize that the closed door meant an occupied booth, Bill smashed his hip against the barrier, sent it flying open and launched a fist.

This, too, was impulsive. And effective.

The little man caught the blow with his jaw and might as well have ploughed into a lamp post in the dark. He staggered, stopped a second savage smash as Bill stormed out of the booth.

Reeling on limp legs, Nichols tripped over the bar rail and went down.

The barkeep came erect with a bull's bellow. The drunk in the polo shirt turned to stare through bleary eyes. The girl with the wilted flower in her

hair looked up, genuinely interested, as though welcoming anything to shatter the boredom of her evening.

Nichols, still conscious, put a trembling hand to his bruised jaw and savagely muttered a string of invectives that were not English. Then, suddenly, he recognized his assailant. His actions became grotesque.

He voiced a weird, strangled cry of rage, whipped his hand from his jaw and stabbed it toward an armpit, while his face lost color and his small, hitherto mild eyes glittered with venom.

But Bill Smith's eyes were glittering, too. Without compunction he swung a foot at Nichols' darting hand. The kick crushed the little man's wrist against his ribs. His face twisted with sudden agony.

Bill swept down, ripped the gun from Nichols' harness, then straightened abruptly to face the barkeep, who was lumbering at him around the end of the bar.

Eyes big in his florid face, the barkeep slewed to a halt and ogled the gun, backed up. The face of the girl at the corner table wore a rapt expression. Here, at last, was a man with red blood in him—the man of her dreams!

Bill hit the street running.

Done it now, he thought grimly as the darkness swallowed Dago Joe's behind him. "They know I know. There'll be no more pulling the wool or fooling around. It means fight, now! A fight to the finish!"

Oddly enough he felt good about it. Felt better than he had since the first meeting with Martin Townsend at the Friendly Mission. A strange elation flooded him, pumping strength and new life into him as he ran. At last, long last, he had raised his banner into the snarling darkness that threatened to engulf him. He was on his own now, taking orders from no one!

It might be a tattered, bloody banner, doomed to be torn from its stall in the storm aroused by its appearance, but it was up and he was under it, fighting. What more could a derelict demand?

He ran on. The darkness was complete around him, the silence eerie, though he had reached Duval and was surrounded by the heart of the city itself. But at this hour Key West slept. Bill's destination was the Melosa Hotel.

And he clutched in his hand the gun snatched from Nichols' armpit holster.

The building loomed ahead, a modern structure shadow-blended into its ancient surroundings. A handful of cars stood in front of it; a light burned above the entrance.

Bill slowed to a walk, put his gun hand into his pocket and got his breathing under control.

The "method" used on Lalonde, they had said. What that meant he had no idea. But the man they called Anderson—the man whose other name was Ellison Pratt—was here at the Melosa and their intent was to kidnap him.

He went in.

THE drowsy atmosphere of the hotel was typical of the town itself. Here was none of the all-night vigilance common to hostleries in hustling cities. A few night-lights dimly illuminated the carpeted lobby. Chairs and divans were shadowed sentinels. On a bench near the desk dozed a lone bellhop; behind the desk a pale, sleepy-eyed clerk read a magazine.

The clerk looked up as Bill advanced. He seemed surprised, put the magazine aside.

"Ellison Pratt!" Bill snapped. "What room is he in?"

The clerk was bewildered. "Pratt? I don't believe, sir . . ." He shook his head, frowning, and the movement helped to overcome his drowsiness but not his bewilderment. "Pratt? We haven't a guest by that name. I'm—"

"You must have!"

"No-o-o, I'm quite sure."

"A short, stout man," Bill bit out, fists clenched on the counter. "Bald. Middle-aged. Think, man!"

The clerk's weak smile was merely a gesture. "So many men answer that description, sir. Short, stout—He stopped talking because Bill was suddenly not listening.

A carpeted staircase curved into the lobby from the floor above. A voice poured down it in a drunken babble, whining, protesting. "But I tell you I don' wan' any fresh air. I don' *like* fresh air at thish time o' night."

A sound of stumbling feet accompanied the words, and whispers cautioned the speaker to be quiet, lest he cause a disturbance.

"All I wan' ish to be let alone, shee? Jus' let alone to get shome sleep . . . lotsh of sleep . . . no fresh air thish time o' night!"

The clerk's professional frown implied that this sort of thing was apt to try the patience of the Melosa's management. If the frown was for Bill's benefit, it was wasted. Hands clenched at his sides, Bill stared as the drunken one staggered into the lobby.

Two others held him erect. One of them glanced at the clerk, grinned feebly, shook his head with a show of weariness.

The drunken one babbled on, his head drooping, gaze fixed on the feet that were giving him so much trouble. "Tell y' I don' wan' t'go for a walk. Jus' wan' to be lef' alone an' get shome sleep!"

Bill sucked up a breath of amazement, not unmixed with admiration for the cunning of Nichols' agents, as the truth of the situation dawned on him.

The drunken one was Ellison Pratt. But if your eyes were sharp, your wits on edge, you saw that Ellison Pratt was not doing the babbling that appeared to issue from his slack mouth!

The man on Pratt's left, clutching his arm and assuming most of the burden of holding him erect, was responsible for the drunken chatter.

The fellow might not be expert enough to appear on a stage, but here in the dim lobby of the Melosa his ventriloquism was more than convincing!

Bill's hand slipped to the gun in his pocket as he turned from the desk.

That was his mistake.

He had not expected to be recognized. It had not occurred to him that Pratt's abductors might know him. He swung about.

A sheepish smile, intended for the clerk, froze on the face of the man nearest him.

"Smith!"

Bill's thoughts raced. He strode forward, snapped in guarded tone, "Not here, you fool! Outside! There's been a change of plans!"

Wakeman hesitated but an instant, then shrugged. At close range, Bill realized that the man they held between them was not able to stand without assistance. Pratt's eyes were open, dazedly staring, but he was out on his feet, unable to resist. Drugged, Bill guessed.

THE two men continued their macabre parade to the door, one keeping up his ventriloquistic babble for the benefit of the clerk. Bill followed, pulled the door shut.

With a show of authority he snapped, "Get him away from here! Out of the light!"

They obeyed. With darkness shrouding them, the swarthy Schmidt swung about, scowling. His mouth curled on a question. Before he could voice it, Bill said crisply, "He goes straight to the plane. Nichols' orders!"

"Ja? Where *is* Nichols?"

"At the house," Bill snapped.

Schmidt shrugged. He lacked the intelligence of those who directed this sinister game. His qualifications were physical—a lean, muscular body, thick chest, a pair of shoulders rippling with strength. His companion was the same type.

They pulled Pratt along between them, the dark street whispering the echoes of their footfalls. Bill followed, awaiting an opening.

And then with cataclysmic suddenness, the darkness spawned another sound—the quick soft slap of rubber-soled shoes at Bill's back!

Instinctively Bill threw himself aside. Nothing else would have saved him. The bludgeon in his assailant's hand raked the side of his head and crashed with sickening force against his shoulder.

He staggered, fell against a high iron fence, reached weakly for his gun and missed it and collapsed.

Momentum carried his attacker past and sent the fellow to his knees, but he was up again, whirling. Panther-like in his movements, he leaped to Bill's side, stooped, sent a swift, searching glance into Bill's face and snatched Bill's gun. Whirling again, he barked out an order.

"Get Pratt out of here! Get him away! Take him to the house!"

Bewildered by this sudden change of tempo, Pratt's abductors stood scowling at him. Wakeman mumbled, "What the hell, Mr. Nichols, we—"

But Nichols was not a man with whom to argue. He surged forward. "Get him out of here, before the whole town is on our necks! I'll attend to Smith!"

They were not too intelligent. In their astonishment they had relaxed their vigil over Ellison Pratt. Pratt had come to life. He had regained a measure of control over his feet. Like a punch-drunk boxer he went weaving across the street.

Nichols shrilled a warning and sped after him, cursing his careless assistants.

Bill Smith's befuddled brain soaked up the situation and he realized his opportunity. He might not get another! Dazed, he pulled himself to his feet by grasping the iron fence, then staggered along the fence, found a gate and slipped unseen into the heaven-sent blackout of a garden.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE house that loomed beside him in the dark was an old one, bedecked with two-story veranda. He stumbled toward it, clung to the mahogany spindles of the veranda rail until his head cleared and stability returned to his wobbling legs.

His shoulder was numb. Blood oozed from his lacerated face and wet his neck. Out in the dark side-street, Nichols had recaptured the stumbling Pratt, turned him over to his agents and was striding back to where Bill had fallen.

The little man stopped short and voiced a guttural cry when he discovered his victim gone. He whirled, his beady eyes probing the darkness.

Bill crouched motionless against the veranda, protected by that same darkness and by dense tropical foliage.

Nichols' voice rose in a scream of frustration.

"Schmidt. "

The two strong-arm men stopped. Schmidt turned. For a moment the other man hesitated, then gripped Pratt's arm more firmly and continued along the sidewalk.

Schmidt hurried to Nichols' side. "Ja? What is it?"

"He's gone! That damned Smith—gone! If we don't find him, God help us!" The little man's tone was less shrill now, and contained a note of fear. The heavy hush of the neighborhood had returned. Nichols and Schmidt were shadows in

the dark. Wakeman and the drugged Pratt were vanishing ghosts.

Search that yard! I'll go around the hotel . . ."

Bill Smith slipped over the low rail of the veranda with no eye now for the graceful delicacy of its hand-carved mahogany spindles. If he made any noise it was smothered by the echoes of Nichols' footfalls, loud in the night as the little man hurried along the walk. In a low crouch Bill went the length of the veranda, swung with it around the side of the house.

Just ahead, Wakeman was savagely hauling Ellison Pratt along the sidewalk.

Nichols' agent had no warning. Bill cleared the veranda in a headlong dive and the weight of his body hurtled down on Wakeman's shoulders. The big fellow pitched forward as though cut by a flying tackle across the backs of his knees.

There was no outcry. There was almost no sound at all, except the thud of the impact, the gust of breath that hissed from Wakeman's lungs as the sidewalk reared up to smash him.

Bill's fumbling fingers snatched a gun from the man's pocket. He raised it, brought it down on Wakeman's skull. The squirming shape beneath him was suddenly still.

Staggering erect, he caught Ellison by an arm and pulled the dazed chemical magnate into a run that under other circumstances would have been comical.

THE darkness took them. The night's blessed silence returned. Still, despite the older man's whimpered protests, Bill gave him no rest. There were professional killers in this town whose major aim in life at the moment was to remove Ellison Pratt from the land of the living. Pratt might not realize it but Bill Smith did!

"Got to get to the plane," Bill gasped, "and away from here. Pull yourself together, man! Find your nerve!"

He took the shortest route to the plane basin but it was a long one, through slumbering lanes where their footfalls resounded like those of late drunks reeling homeward from a night's revelry, past gaunt houses trimmed with iron lace, along the waterfront, past moored boats.

Most of the way, Pratt had to be hauled bodily. More helpless than any drunk, the stocky partner of Randall Blaine had no control over his

legs, stumbled continually and mumbled apologies for the trouble he caused.

Drenched with sweat, almost as rubber-legged as the man he had rescued, Bill finally steered the fellow out onto the pier, beyond which the plane loomed gray in the dark. It took all his strength to lower Pratt into the dingy. He did it, dropped down himself and snatched up the oars.

One other small boat was moored there. He loosed it and pushed it adrift.

The last of his reserve strength was expended in heaving the drugged man into the plane's cockpit. His shoulder throbbed mercilessly. Spots danced in front of his bloodshot eyes. Weakly he climbed aboard, kicked the dingy loose.

At that moment two racing shapes, one of them Nichols, reached the end of the pier. A roar of frustration boomed across the water. Bill turned his head, curled his mouth in a weak grin as the plane's motor hurled out an answer.

Blocked by open water. Nichols dropped to one knee and leveled a gun. He took careful aim. Flame spurted from the muzzle.

Bill Smith heard the scream of the bullet as it struck the plane's fuselage and ricocheted. His face paled. "Down, Pratt!" he said hoarsely, and yanked the drugged man down as Pratt turned stupidly to gape at him.

Nichols emptied his gun. Like angry hornets the bullets bit at the big ship as Bill sent it surging forward. The quiet waterfront and the sleeping town snatched up the sounds and hurled them back and forth in the night, crazily.

Then Nichols cursed, turned like a madman to Schmidt, who stood scowling behind him. "It's your fault!" the little man shrieked. "You muddling idiot, all this is your fault! Yours! The Leader will never forgive it!"

Schmidt licked his lips, stood staring at the big silver ship as it reached the end of its take-off and roared into the sky. His face was ashen with fear. From head to foot he was trembling.

"*Nein* . . ." he whispered. "*Nein*, Herr Nichols! You will not tell the Leader it was my fault. You—you will never tell—"

He drew his gun, fired from the hip.

Nichols rose on tiptoe at the end of the pier and screamed once in a voice that tore the night

to shreds. He turned slowly on one foot, closed his eyes, fell backward with both hands grotesquely groping.

The water gurgled over him.

Schmidt uttered a wet, whimpering cry and fled into the darkness.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"BETTER now?" Bill Smith asked the man beside him. ...

Ellison Pratt nodded. "Yes, thank you." His round face, designed to reflect a buoyant, jovial nature, was still pale. His hands shook and he could not stop their shaking. But the effects of the drug had worn off somewhat and his brain was clearing.

"What happened at the hotel?" Bill demanded.

Pratt pitched his voice up to make it audible above the plane's motor as the blackness flowed past and the big ship ate up distance. "I don't really know. I was in bed, of course, at that hour. Some one knocked on the door. I got up, opened the door, and they seized me." A shudder shook him as a cat shakes a mouse. "They forced me back on the bed and used a hypodermic needle. After that, everything was vague, unreal . . . I knew what they were doing but couldn't prevent it or cry out."

"Ever hear of a man named Lalonde?"

Pratt scowled. "There's a Jules Lalonde who used to be quite friendly with Sofia Blaine. He was on the French embassy staff at the time. Got mixed up in a messy scandal. "

"He'll be the man," Bill said grimly, "The method used on you was first used on him. Scopoline, probably. Or a derivative." He turned his head, frowning. "What brought you to Key West, Mr. Pratt?"

"It's a long story, Carey."

Bill had forgotten momentarily that he was supposed to be Carey Locke. An impulse gripped him now to confess the truth, but he hesitated.

As yet he had tapped only a small part of this gigantic scheme. Reason told him that the man beside him, though hardly prepossessing in

appearance, represented the last major obstacle between The Leader and his objective.

Pratt would talk confidentially to Carey Locke, fiancée of his partner's daughter. But would he talk as freely to Bill Smith?

Bill did not think so.

"I know some of the story," Bill said. "I know Townsend's part of it, Nichol's part—"

"Townsend? Who's he?"

"He's either the head of the ring or close to it."

Pratt sighed. "I'm afraid you know more than I do, Carey. I know what they're up to, what they mean to accomplish. I know some of the hellish things they've done. But who they are—any of them—is beyond me." His voice took on an edge and was suddenly bitter. "The past six weeks have been horrible. Every move I've made has been watched. I even used a fictitious name at the Melosa, in hopes of evading them. They've given me no rest, no peace. They knew that I knew what they were up to. They—"

Pratt's voice died in mid-air. "What—what's wrong?"

Bill had hunched himself forward, a scowl warping his face as his gaze swept the instrument panel. Nothing had happened yet. But his ear caught an alien hesitation in the motor. He sensed that something was about to happen.

Those shots fired from the pier by Nichols had taken their toll.

An inexplicable, icy fear tugged at him. A low and half-strangled sob escaped his lips and pallor drained his face of blood.

The big ship staggered in its flight. Ahead, on the horizon, the sea's edge and the sky's edge were graying with the approach of dawn, but below, the night lay black and deep, the sea invisible. Nor were there any pinpoints of light to guide him.

"What is it, man?" Pratt gasped. "Are we falling? Carey! Are we *falling*?"

No answer was needed. The ship's motor reared once, defiantly, and then came a silence so intense, so complete, that the whine of the wind in the wings was a banshee scream of unbearable intensity. Her nose dropped. Bill turned to stare blankly at his passenger, his hands quivering, a weak, vacuous, half-apologetic smile trembling on his lips.

They had been flying high. The power dive that took them hurtling into the abyss was a terrifying thing that increased the wind's scream to a siren-shriek. Pratt's scream rivaled it in intensity. "Good God, man, *do* something!" But Bill Smith did not hear it. He no longer knew that a man existed at his side.

Fear had taken him.

Once before, in this same plane with Kincaid at the controls, he had experienced a soul-twisting terror which had sucked some of his past out of the empty sky.

HIS movements were sluggish, mechanical. His feet jabbed at the rudder, seeking to steady it. His hands were frozen to the stick.

By a miracle the big ship reeled out of its power dive and staggered upward—but the cost was monstrous.

Wing fabric let go with the explosive blast of a sail torn by hurricane winds. The plane lurched drunkenly, dropped again. Pratt was frantically pawing the air in front of his face, his mouth open, screaming, but the sound was gulped by the gleeful shriek of the wind itself.

So were the sounds issuing from the transparent lips of Bill Smith.

Strange sounds, those! Ravings, they might have been called, if this were a time for raving. But that first numbing attack of terror had passed, and Bill was saner than the man beside him.

Yet his eyes were glazed. His mutterings were merely mechanical movements of his lips.

"Dark here, Paula—too damned dark—and I'm done for. You can be glad now that you didn't come along, as you wanted to. Jungle down there, darling—jungles no white man has ever explored. And I'm going to crack up in them—lost—maybe hurt—maybe killed—"

He stared at the instrument panel, wet his lips as the plane shook itself for a final plunge to destruction.

"Should have known better, I suppose," Bill muttered, hands and feet moving as mechanically as his lips. "Risky stunt to begin with—everyone warned me. Now it's about over. Not a chance in a million of getting out."

His wide, unblinking eyes were those of a sleep-walker. But now, suddenly, his chest swelled with an indrawn breath; his eyes flashed,

and his shoulders were thrust back. "But it had to be done, darling! Don't you see? What good is red blood in a man's veins if he doesn't use it? What good is money if you don't spend it to make the world bigger? I belong in the air!"

His shout reached the ears of his passenger, and Pratt gaped at him. But the shout subsided. The plane had its head and was a wild horse in the black sky, plunging downward now with sickening speed. Wind screamed against the fuselage, howled with Gargantuan glee.

But for Bill Smith the darkness beneath that plummeting bird was not Florida darkness. It concealed the steaming tropical jungles of South America. Behind him lay the Andes, with dusk settling over isolated villages nestling in the purple shadows of mighty snowclad slopes. Beneath him now, under the veil of night, lay fever swamp and miles of savage wilderness.

"So long, darling," he whispered fervently. "Forgive me for washing up our plans—like this. You'd have made a grand Mrs. Carey Locke—pal—"

His hands moved through a last mechanical gesture, pulling the stick back into his lap. For a split second, as the darkness solidified below, the plane's nose rose and the wounded bird leveled to skim the water.

Then it struck, and his safety belt caught the whole hurtling weight of Bill's body.

(To be Continued Next Week)

Shadow Man ***Conclusion***

Bill Smith discovers himself—and Carey Locke

SUFFERING from amnesia, a down and outer who calls himself BILL SMITH is picked up by a stranger, MARTIN TOWNSEND, and hired to photograph a meeting in Altondale, Vermont, between a doctor named PRUETT and a woman named MARIAN STERN. But before this plan is carried out, Townsend announces a new undertaking. Bill is to assume the identity of CAREY LOCKE, an aviator believed lost on a flight to Santiago. En route to Key West the home of the lost flyer's fiancée, PAULA BLAINE, Bill learns from a newspaper story that Mrs. Marian Stern has been mysteriously murdered.

After further coaching in his role by NICHOLS, Townsend's associate in Florida, Bill makes contact with the Blaine family and is immediately accepted as Carey Locke. RANDALL BLAINE, the chemical king, is away from his Island home, it is explained to Bill. Those present in his household, besides Paula, are: SOFIA BLAINE, the magnate's second wife, and FRITZ EICHLER, her son, JEDNO, the caretaker, ABEL KIMM an unidentified visitor, and NICHOLAS LIANOV, a violinist.

Paula tells Bill that his amnesia will be properly treated on the arrival of DR. PRUETT who is flying in with a young pilot, KINCAID. But the day after their arrival, Pruett is dead; Bill is framed for his murder and Paula is involved as an accessory. Believing Bill guilty, she has planted evidence to turn suspicion away from him.

Still, there are no accusations. Randall Blaine, Bill is told, is deluded with dictatorial ambitions as the result of a sickness, and is held prisoner in his home to keep him from falling into the hands of unscrupulous foreign agents. Kimm is a private detective and Townsend is a G-man, according to this story which Jedno advances.

Acting on instructions from Townsend, Kincaid gets Bill aloft and makes him fly. The purpose of this move is revealed shortly when Bill receives orders to fly to Key West to meet Nichols. In the cabin of the plane Bill finds the body of Abel Kimm. Instead of feeding the corpse

to the sharks, in accordance with a note pinned to the body, Bill leaves it on an Island nearby—after first recovering papers from a secret pocket in the sleeve of Kimm's jacket. Among them is a picture of Fritz Eichler and a photostat of a letter saying that Kimm is a G-man "who has been watching us since the Lalonde episode."

At Key West, Nichols tells Bill he is to fly an enemy agent called "Anderson" to an Island where he will be held prisoner. Later, after sneaking out of Nichols' house, Bill learns that "Anderson" is ELLISON PRATT a partner in the Blaine chemical empire. Rescuing Pratt, he makes a getaway in the plane.

But the shots that Nichols fired at the ship just before he is gunned down by SCHMIDT, one of his own men, found their mark. The motor stalls, and in the roaring descent toward black, merciless water, Bill Smith's mind gyrates back to another time when his plane fell out of control. To the frenzied amazement of Pratt, Bill cries out meaningless phrases while the ship plunges seaward. ". . . jungle . . . good-by, Paula . . . never make Santiago now . . ."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

OUT of the mud and ooze of a jungle river wrapped in noisy darkness, Bill Smith pulled his agony torn body to the comparative safety of shore. The echoes of the crash had been dead twenty minutes, yet the blackness around him teemed with protests aroused by his coming. Unseen birds shrilled in the night. Monkeys chattered their terror. A thousand nameless voices kept up the macabre symphony set in motion by the roar of the plane's drunken descent.

Inch by inch he hauled himself to dry ground, pulling himself along with his hands, fighting off recurrent waves of blinding pain as his mangled leg dragged behind.

Then the blackness that was all around him, threatening him with its raucous din seeped into his brain also. He lay still.

Dawn brought rain. The rain revived him. The rain sucked a steaming mist out of the matted jungle and hid the sky, and transformed

into a ghostly, unreal shape the wrecked plane out there in the river's mud.

He staggered erect, but the pain of his mangled leg sent him stumbling to his knees again. Teeth clenched, he crawled to the water's edge and stared, and knew without staring twice that escape by air from this place was impossible, even in a ship that was whole, which his was not.

Somewhere near the headwaters of the Amazon he was lost. Injured. His clothing torn and bloody, wetly clinging to a body already racked with gnawing aches that warned of fever and delirium to come. For company a thousand pairs of hostile eyes watching him, questioning the intentions of this unwanted stranger.

Civilization—where? To the east, perhaps—by river.

Black mud sucked at his knees when he waded out to the plane, sucked higher as with arms and shirt laden with the few supplies not ruined by water he waded back to shore, his loot a handful of maps, an automatic pistol with three clips of cartridges, a flashlight and a few odds and ends now priceless.

Radio? There was one in the plane—smashed beyond reclamation.

Somewhere in the jungle—lost. Two days of preparation while the mangled leg swelled and festered, filling with poison. Two nights beside a fire, with the jungle muttering its challenge, watching eyes gleaming in the crowding dark. Then a crude raft completed, and the beginning of hell.

Days, weeks of suffering. Water unfit to drink, and no matches with which to light a fire. Beady eyes of snakes, and glittering hostile eyes of small brown men who feared the white man's gun but kept up a dogged pursuit, awaiting their chance.

Crocs. Tawny, stalking cats with bared fangs. Sickness and swarms of insects and fever and the river, with its warning roar of rapids, its dripping canopy of jungle that hid the sun and transformed the world into a blast furnace.

Then . . . a rubber plantation. Chattering half-civilized Indians and amazed white men who stared. A clean bed, medicine. "But good heavens, man, don't you remember anything? Your name? Where you came from? Not *anything*?"

"Nothing."

Sickness and recurring waves of fever, and the mangled leg a bloated shapeless burden that healed with maddening slowness. And no memory except of the snakes, the insects, the heat and rains and pursuing savages, the hunger and fear, the agony that still tenaciously retained its grip.

Days and nights and weeks of delirium, and a slow accent from hell's depths. But no memory. No name. No past.

"You've been good to me. I'll move on now. The coast. Civilization.... "

TRAMP freighter out of Braganca, bound for Tampico, with a scowling, bearded captain shaking his head, rolling tobacco juice under his tongue. "Sure, bud, if you got money. Take you to China if you can pay for it." Harsh laughter. A stream of tobacco juice flashing in the sun, over the rail into an oily sea. "If you can pay for it. Haw!"

"I can pay for it."

"Don't kid me, mister. I've seen your kind before. Every port has 'em. You're wasting my time."

"I can pay for it. Here."

"Well for God's sake! Lookin' at you I never would've believed it. What's your name, mister?"

"I don't know."

"You—huh? Oh, I get it. Sure. We-e-ll, that's all right with me, mister, only it'll cost you more. Feller can't take chances these days less'n it's worth his while."

"That's quite all right."

"Good! Fine! But you need a name, mister, just to keep the busybodies from bein' too curious. Smith. How's that for a name? William Smith!"

"It doesn't matter."

"William Smith it is!" A stream of tobacco juice to clinch it. "And mighty glad to know you, Mr. Smith. My name's Bayha. Now about these clothes you're wearin. About done for, I'd say. Better take the loan of some things of mine, hey? Tough crew I've got. Might get some wrong ideas. All right? You just bundle up them clothes of yours and heave 'em overside."

Overside. Tattered trousers, tattered shirt—clothes that might, just might, have aided in

identification. A sodden mass on the sea's surface, then gone.

Tampico. Tankers. A greasy, stinking stench of oil. Barrooms and brown-skinned girls with sly smiles. Loud laughter and savage, angry shouts of drunken rage. Rum. And officials scowling over papers cunningly prepared—for a price—by the freighter's Captain Bayha.

"William Smith?"

"Yes."

"Of New York City?"

"Yes. "

"Passage arranged?"

"No. But I expect—"

"You're not without funds, of course?"

"I have enough. If you could help me get inexpensive passage to the States...."

"What part of the States?"

"It doesn't matter."

Suspicious looks, whisperings. Shrugs of official shoulders.

"Captain Andrews, this is Mr. William Smith. He is anxious to get to the States."

A callused hand with an indifferent grip, and frowning eyes that missed nothing. "You ever travel on a tanker before, Mr. Smith?"

"No."

"It won't be any pleasure cruise."

"It doesn't matter. "

"Up to you. But we're slow, we're no Queen Mary for comfort. And there's been talk of subs here and there. This damned war!"

"It doesn't matter."

OIL. The stink of oil, the feel of it. Heavy seas pounding day and night, and a laden ship building through them. William Smith. "I suppose . . . I suppose it's as good a name as any . . . until the past comes back, if it ever does. I can get a job. I've a little money left. Not much but a little. I can find work."

Fort Worth, months removed from the crippled silver bird lying half submerged in the mud of that jungle river. "Sorry. We're not hiring anyone at this time. Sorry. No vacancies. Sorry. You don't appear to be strong enough for this type

of work. Been sick, have you? Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry...."

Twenty dollars. Ten. Eight. Four. One. Seventy six cents. Sixty-nine cents. Sorry.

A thin, black-eyed woman with leprosy complexion and bad teeth. "How much? You can read, can't you? Twenty-five cents if you want soap and towel; fifteen for just a flop. That's what my sign says and that's what it means!"

"I—I just want a place to sleep. It's so cold..."

"Sign the book."

Thin, trembling fingers struggling to hold a pen. Fingers blue with cold, knuckles raw. "William—Smith."

"In advance."

"Yes, of course, Fifteen cents." Blue fingers fumbling. "Ten, eleven, twelve . . . fourteen . . . I—I'm afraid that's all I have."

Black eyes scowling. "You been talkin' to Jigger Cranby? He's the one always pulls that gag! You a friend of his?"

"I don't know any Jigger Cranby."

"Well, all right. Let's have what you got."

Unwashed men eyeing him with suspicion. "New around here, ain't you?"

"Yes. New."

"Well, just keep your nose in your own business and nobody'll get rough."

Broke. Hungry. How do you get food without money? How do you find work when your clothes and body are worn out, unwashed, your belly empty and aching? The nights are so cold. The flinty-eyed woman with the bad teeth and leprosy complexion shakes her head, curls her lip. "Nope. If you can't pay you don't sleep here. I ain't in business for sweet charity's sake. Out!"

Somewhere—a doorway. A slum doorway, where the cold wind whines and the rain slants and the dampness creeps on legs dipped in sickness, chilling what they touch.

"Hey you! Get movin', now. You can't be sleepin' here! "

"But ... but officer...."

"Clear out, I'm tellin' you!"

Bloodshot eyes staring out of a sunken face. "But you don't understand, officer...." Thin, fever-eaten body trembling, the doorway a long

black tunnel full of noise, an endless tunnel blocked by a uniform with blurred brass buttons. "You . . . you don't understand."

Collapse.

"Hey! What's the big idea? What . . . for the love of the saints, I guess you are sick, buddy! Up with you now. Hang on, now. Starved, hey?"

"He ain't drunk, Lieutenant. Sick, if you ask me. Sicker'n a fool. Look at them eyes. You ask me, what this poor feller needs is a hospital. Yes, sir, a hospital."

Tall blond woman in white, scowling. "Name?"

"William...Smith."

"Where are you from, Mr. Smith?"

"I don't—I don't know."

Questions. Questions. Questions. Long white corridors. White room and white bed and gentle low-voiced nurses exuding professional pity. Rest. And food. And whispers.

"Physically, yes . . . but not mentally, doctor. Something wrong mentally. A most curious case. Better hold him a while longer. Observation, perhaps. Perhaps . . . better . . . an institution."

You hear that, William Smith? You hear what they're whispering? An institution! You were dragged off the streets, wild-eyed and sick and starving. You were brought here to this place and it's a hospital, and you've been fed, you've been allowed to rest. But now—an institution. You hear that? An institution! They mean a madhouse! You've got to get out of here! Got to get out! Out!

Easy, now. At nine o'clock the nurse will come in to see if you're all right. You *will* be all right. You'll tell her so. Then—the window over there. See it? The window.

"Yes, thank you, Miss Moore. I feel much better tonight. Thank you...."

Now!

". . . Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies."

"Townsend's my name, Smith. You're going to Key West."

"I'm Nichols. Now listen carefully, Smith."

"I tell you I want to see Harrison! Harrison!"

"Oh, you fools! You blind, stupid fools! This is Carey Locke! "

Carey Locke. Carey . . . Locke!

"Carey! Carey! Good heavens, man, you've been delirious for hours! Snap out of it! Stop mumbling! We're safe here. Safe, I tell you! Don't you know me, Carey? It's Pratt—Ellison Pratt. We crashed. We fell into the sea. But we're safe here! Carey...."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BILL SMITH stared with slowly dawning recognition into the anxious face above him. His tongue wet his lips. He sat up.

He knew, now. During the past few weeks his past had mocked him a score of times, creeping close and then darting out of reach again, always there but eternally wrapped in a protective cloak of shadow. Now he knew. The wrenching nervous explosion of the crash had brought the past back to him in all its lurid details. *He was Carey Locke!* Townsend had coached him to impersonate *himself!* No wonder the macabre plan had met with such unbelievable success!

Other things were clear now, as well. Martin Townsend had not recognized him at the Friendly Mission. There, Townsend had been interested only in the capacity for cunning displayed by a nameless derelict who had contrived to steal a dollar bill out from under the nose of its owner.

Later, in the apartment, Townsend had still not known. But he had found out, and his discovery of the truth had caused that abrupt change of plans.

It had seemed queer at the time—Townsend's sudden shift from talk of Altondale and Dr. Pruett to a seemingly fantastic scheme involving the impersonation of a man supposedly dead. But there'd been a reason for it.

Some one in Martin Townsend's organization had recognized Bill Smith as the missing flyer. And from that time on, Martin Townsend had played his cards with devilish cunning, taking trick after trick, building up to a final paralyzing smash.

The smash had failed. Or had it?

An uncontrollable eagerness burned in Bill Smith now. Paula Blaine, whom he loved, was no longer hopelessly out of his reach. She loved

Carey Locke and he was Carey Locke! Good Lord, why hadn't he guessed it, after reaching the borderline of remembrance so many times?

There'd been the incident in Blaine's music room. There's been those awful moments in the air with Kincaid.

There'd been a score of other episodes, small in themselves, but significant. Everything dovetailed. The crash had fused the links into a chain, and now his past was clear, all of it. Now there were no blind spots.

The derelict of the Friendly Mission was dead. It was Carey Locke, the real Carey Locke, who turned now to clutch at the man beside him.

"Pratt! Are you all right? Not hurt?"

"I'm not hurt." Pratt muttered, scowling at him. "But you! Good Lord, man, you've been moaning and tossing all day long. The crash must have brought back all the horrors of your experience in South America. You've been raving about the jungle, about your wanderings." Randall Blaine's partner weakly passed a hand over his perspiring face, shook his head. "I tried to bring you out of it, but you raved on and on."

Carey Locke looked around him. The sun glittered low in the west, and neither the clump of palmetto behind him nor the few leaning coconut palms nearby offered any protection from the dazzling glare. He and Pratt were on a tiny patch of land surrounded by the green-blue sea.

To the east, across an indeterminate distance of water, lay the dim outline of a larger island with a house on it. There was something familiar about that other island.

"What happened?" Bill asked weakly. "How did we get here?"

"We crashed."

"I know that. I mean how—"

"I don't really know," Pratt said. His stubbled face wore a pallor that told of the hell he had been through.

"We crashed in the dark. You seemed to be hurt. I got you out of your safety belt and pulled you from the plane while it was sinking. Then you took charge. I don't really know what did happen. You were out of your mind, I think. Kept talking to yourself about Paula, about the crash. I honestly believe you thought you were swimming in some jungle river, Carey. But you pulled me along and

we got to this patch of land. We've been here all day."

"Must he one of the Marquesas Keys."

"I don't know. You know more about these islands than I do."

BILL stood up, limped across the hard, white beach to the water's edge and stared under the shade of his cupped hands at the one patch of land visible in the distance. A plan formed in his mind even as he stared, but he was too weak to pursue it. It called for endurance.

His anxious gaze swept the sea in all directions and found it empty. Shaking his head, he returned to Pratt, sat down, said with a gesture of impatience: "We'll have to wait. Perhaps a boat will be along. They do a lot of fishing hereabouts."

There was no sign of the plane in which he and Pratt had fled from Key West. It had either drifted away or gone to the bottom.

"Suppose you tell me what you know of this Randall Blaine business, Pratt."

"I'd rather not talk about it," Ellison Pratt declared. He was a sorry sight. The sun had dried his clothes, but they were torn and sloppy. He needed shaving, and his was a face that should have been kept groomed. Something sharp, beach sand probably, had pitted his forehead and stripped the skin from his nose and chin. "If you don't mind. Carey, I'd rather not—"

"Better tell me," Carey said firmly. "Then we'll know what we're up against."

"Well...."

"Randall Blaine is really sick, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Wants to be a dictator?"

"A dictator? Good heavens, no, nothing like that! He's mentally cracked up. Aftermath of a serious illness. But he's harmless, Carey. Just childish, irresponsible."

This was an odd place for a conference, Carey mused. Yet he had to know the facts. Many of them he already knew, and with added information from Ellison Pratt, the whole dark scheme might become transparent.

"We kept Randall's illness a secret," Pratt declared, warming to the subject, "for his own sake and the safety of the business. The Blaine Company is a closed corporation, Carey. You

know that. Randall, Sofia, Paula, Fritz and Dr. Pruett and myself—we've run the business for years, with no outsiders. But Randall's illness didn't remain a secret. Somehow the truth leaked out."

"Jedno told me this," Carey said darkly, "but colored it just enough to change its entire complexion. Go on, Pratt."

"Some one," Pratt said, "began a systematic and devilishly cunning campaign to get control of the business. Not through Randall himself, but through the rest of us. The first victim was Sofia."

Carey nodded. He said quietly: "She was having an affair with Lalonde, of the French embassy staff." He was merely stating a fact that had come back to him in the flood of memories from his past. "What happened?"

"A messy scandal in Washington, at Lalonde's hotel. Lalonde drunk—or so it was whispered around—with a woman. Pictures that would have impaled Sofia on a lance of public ridicule, if permitted to circulate. The price for silence was Sofia's pledge to do as she was told."

"I see."

"That was merely the start. With Sofia under control they went after Fritz. I'm afraid Fritz wasn't too difficult. He's weak, you know, with all his mother's faults."

CAREY nodded. It seemed quite natural that with his new identity he should know a great deal more about Fritz Eichler than he had known as Bill Smith. Son of Sofia by her early marriage to a foreign diplomat, Fritz had been the black sheep of the Blaine circle for years. Women, gambling, liquor, too much money were responsible.

"They're holding a gambling debt over Fritz," Pratt declared with a shake of his head, "that would ruin him. But that isn't all. There's a girl in Baltimore, they tell me. I haven't investigated, haven't had time, but no doubt it's true enough. A girl and a child—both too simple to cause trouble by themselves, but dangerous if used as weapons by the devils behind this business."

Carey Locke looked away in disgust and was infinitely glad that Fritz Eichler was in no way related by blood to Paula.

"Then," Pratt said wearily, "there was Dr. Pruett. They did their damndest to trap him on a trumped-up illegal operation in Altondale,

Vermont, after buying off one of his patients. Messy business. It didn't go off. They re-set the trap and made it murder, but Pruett defied them. You know what happened when he reached Blaine's island."

Carey Locke said slowly, his hands clenched and moist: "Do you know who killed Pruett?"

"No. But I know he was murdered."

"Yes," Carey muttered. "Yes, he was murdered. But—" His thoughts lashed back to the night of the doctor's death, to the missing revolver, the rain-soaked clothes hanging in his own room.

And yet, was it not reasonable to suppose, now, that Pruett had been slain by his enemies? Perhaps by Jedno?

Then why the frame? Why the deliberate attempt to lay the blame for that killing on Bill Smith, in such a way that even he himself could not be sure of his innocence?

Carey Locke thought he knew the answer. With almost savage intensity he turned to his companion. "Have they broken Paula's resistance yet?"

Pratt's gaze was unsteady. "I—I don't know."

"I think you do, Pratt."

"Sue loves you, Carey," Pratt muttered. "She'll do anything on earth to—"

"I know," Carey Locke snarled. "And so do they, damn them! But it won't work, Pratt. I was drugged. I *must* have been drugged! The whole thing was a vicious scheme to force Paula to her knees and get rid of Pruett at the same time. By God—" He caught himself, stood up. "What about Lianov? Where does he fit into this?"

"It was Randall who gave Lianov his start, years ago. Being grateful, Lianov agreed to spend a few months on the island, at Pruett's suggestion. Pruett was of the opinion that his music, along with the peace and quiet of the island, would help Randall over his trouble." Pratt's lips curled. "Peace and quiet! Lord!"

"How do you know all these details?"

"A letter."

"Letter?" Carey frowned his bewilderment. "You mean—from them?"

"From them." Pratt acknowledge wearily. "A letter outlining every step they had taken, explaining the holds they had over Sofia, Fritz,

Paula, with Pruett dead and Randall Blaine too sick to know what is going on.

"They knew better than to try to buy me off, Carey, as I suspect they bought off Jedno, who has been Randall's servant for years. No. The pressure they put on me was worse, worse than any threat to myself, even. It was simply this: unless I agreed to their demands they would turn on the others, expose Fritz, strip the veil from Sofia's foolish affair with Lalonde, and break Paula's heart by sending you to prison for murder."

Carey Locke stared, was silent.

"IT ALL added up to one thing," Pratt said bitterly. "Either I yielded or they would shatter Randall Blaine's world out from under him. In his present condition it would have meant a complete mental breakdown. Madness. "

"And your answer?"

"I stalled. One of their agents called on me and I stalled. Told him I didn't believe their allegations. Told them I was going to Blaine's island to find out if the charges were true. If they *were* true, then perhaps—perhaps I would yield." He shuddered. "God, what a spot it put me in! Randall's best friend...."

"If you had turned over to them your part of Blaine's corporation, they'd be in control?"

"With what they've squeezed out of the others, yes. Pruett held an interest, too, but with his death it went to Paula. Everything, in the end, will be hers. Randall arranged it that way."

"I'm beginning to understand."

"But *now* what will they do, Carey? Will they carry out their threats?"

Carey Locke was silent a moment, his gaze fixed on the sea, the sand, the handful of leaning palms. "I don't think so," he said at last. "In the first place, they knew they had lost when you balked and made plans for a trip to Blaine's island. They planned to kidnap you in Key West, take you to a prepared rendezvous and use different tactics on you. Having failed in that, they now have only one course open—to get at Randall Blaine himself, apply pressure to *him*. It's risky because of his mental condition. He may balk. He may wreck everything by refusing to be ground underfoot. But they'll be desperate now, Pratt. This is their last roll of the dice!"

His fingers busy with a shoelace, he had been talking more for his own benefit than for Pratt's. Now he kicked one shoe off, tore loose the other and began to strip to his trousers.

Pratt gaped at him. "Good Lord, man, you don't intend—"

"Got to," Carey muttered. "If I can make it—" He was suddenly silent, his eyes narrowed. Fumbling with his coat, his fingers had encountered a button affixed to the lining, and the button brought back ugly memories.

He had not worn this particular coat, he realized, since the night of Pruett's death. Now it meant something. What it meant he was not sure, not quite certain, but for a moment he scowled at the button, while Pratt said anxiously, "But there are sharks in these waters, Carey! Barracuda! You'll be cut to pieces!"

Carey threw the coat aside, in his eyes an odd glitter of understanding. "There may still be time," he snapped, "to reach Blaine's island first. Nichols is not the leader of their organization. He'll have to report his failure to kidnap you, get new orders. They may send new men."

He gripped Pratt's hand. "If I don't make it, do one thing for me, Pratt. Tell Paula—tell her I know what those lights are, will you? She'll understand."

Shivering a little, he strode across the beach and waded into the sea, his gaze fixed on the island that was his destination.

CHAPTER TWENTY

IN MANY ways it was a repetition of his blind struggle in the jungles. The same dogged determination went into it, and the same physical weakness rose up to thwart him. After half an hour of forcing his haltered body through the water, he knew that he had underestimated the distance to his goal.

He rested, treading water. Went on again, mechanically forcing his arms through the motions.

And the same driving force which had kept him alive on that other occasion, until fever had robbed his mind of all memory, kept him alive now.

There was a girl waiting. Paula Blaine. And this time he would go to her not as Bill Smith, derelict, but as Carey Locke, a man with an honest past and a future!

There was a moment of blackness toward the end, an interlude in which the sea became an endless, leering waste, mocking his efforts, and a wave of sickness threatened his mind again. But he battled through it.

His feet touched bottom. Exhausted, he staggered up on the beach and collapsed, picked himself up and stumbled toward the house that was now visible.

This was the island over which Kincaid had flown him. Her island. The island with the lights. And he knew now that the lights were beacons atop the twin towers of a private landing field. He knew that the island itself belonged to a wealthy New Yorker named Abbott, who wintered here. He, Carey Locke, had taught that man how to fly.

Their island. Abbott, its owner, had offered to sell. Paula Blaine and the old Carey Locke had planned to buy it for their honeymoon. No wonder she had asked, with tears in her eyes, if he remembered the lights!

He remembered them now, though the island lay still and gray in gathering dusk, and the lights had not yet been turned on. There was a plane here. Abbott's plane. In it he could reach Randall Blaine's island!

But why was the house so dark?

He shouted, waved a hand as his bare feet carried him drunkenly forward. The deepening shadows caught up his voice and flung back to him the echoes of it, but from the house came no response.

A moment later he knew the truth. Bitterly he cursed the turn of fate which had caused the Abbotts to be absent from their island home at this crucial time. The house was empty. Abbott's plane was not in its hangar.

Here, after his hour-long battle with the sea, he was no nearer his ultimate destination than he had been with Pratt.

Despair bred inspiration. It took him but a moment to smash a window and force his way into the deserted house, turn on some lights, locate the switch that operated the twin beacons.

Would she be watching?

"She's got to be," he muttered, biting his lip. "Got to be! You can see these lights from anywhere on Blaine's island. If she moves about at all, looks this way even once, she'll see!"

Atop the beacons the lights blinked their message. That she could read the message if the flashes drew her attention he was certain. He himself had taught her.

Like the mate of another winged explorer; she had planned to accompany him on flights to far places, assuming the duties of radio operator.

"P-A-U-L-A," the lights flashed. "C-O-M-E A-T O-N-C-E. C-A-R-E-Y." Over and over, the same words. "Paula! Come at once. Carey." And then another thought! These same lights, visible for miles because of their height, might easily be spotted by the Coast Guard, or by pleasure boats who would report them.

After that the two winking beacons flashed only one signal. "S-O-S!" And when his right hand on the switch grew numb with the exertion, he used his left.

An hour passed.

He did not hear the cruiser's approach. Body drooping with exhaustion, he had dragged a chair to the light switch and was slumped there, his fingers still mechanically moving the switch up and down, up and down, to spell out the signal of distress.

But he heard the footsteps and came erect with a jerk, clenching his fists.

"Carey!" the girl whispered. "It—it *is* you!"

She ran toward him. "Oh, my dear, are you all right?"

CAREY LOCKE held her in his arms for but a moment, his blood tingling to the nearness of her. Then his hands gripped her arms and he said hoarsely: "Your father. Is he safe, Paula? Has anything happened?"

"Nothing has happened, Carey. What—"

"How did you get here?"

"I took the cruiser."

He muttered a savage, "Good!" and pulled her to the door. When the cruiser streaked away from the pier a moment later, Carey Locke was grim and tense at the wheel, and the twin lights of the island—the island that belonged in sentiment

to himself and the anxious girl beside him—were dark again.

He spoke rapidly as the cruiser ate up the distance to Blaine's island. Time was short. The boat was speedy for her size and tore a lane through the night. But there were certain facts the girl had to know, if she were to be of any help to him.

"They're after your father, Paula." The words came in clipped, fragmentary phrases from his drawn lips. "If they haven't struck yet, it's because Nichols was unable to contact the leader and report their failure to take Pratt. But they will strike. They've got to. It's their last chance—to get your father before Pratt or I can summon help."

That Paula understood part of what he was saying was obvious. She gazed at him soberly, clung to his arm as the cruiser roared on. But bewilderment clouded her eyes, too.

"They tried to kidnap Mr. Pratt, Carey?"

He nodded.

"But who are they?"

"It isn't who they are. It's *what* they are. They want control of your father's business. They mean to turn it into a monstrous munitions plant, sell those munitions to the country of their choice. They could do it, too. They're clever enough to buck the government if once the Blaine Company falls into their hands!"

"But *who* Carey? "

"An organization of devils whose one aim is to serve their fatherland. So far the leader has remained in the background, directing activities. We know only a handful of names—Townsend, Nichols, smaller fry such as Schmidt and Wakeman. And there's one man on your father's island."

"I think I know," Paula said, biting her lip. "Jedno."

"I don't mean Jedno."

"But—"

Carey Locke said savagely: "It wasn't Jedno who framed me for the murder of Pratt! He hasn't the brains. Some one else did that. And I think I know who it is!"

With a light in her eyes that challenged the darkness rushing past, Paula seized his arm with both her hands. "Carey! You *were* framed? You didn't kill Dr. Pruett?"

"I didn't kill Dr. Pruett, darling. That was for your benefit. Then you were duped into being an accessory, into planting footprints to steer the police away from me. They wanted a hold over you that couldn't be broken."

"Jedno told me—"

"I guessed as much."

Tears welled into the girl's eyes and were dried by the wind. Her shoulders straightened. A moment ago she had been trembling; now her slim body was steady. In a level voice she said: "We're almost there, Carey. What are we to do?"

"Get your father away. Take him to a safe place until the police or Federal men can round up this mob."

SHE was silent, staring ahead. The night was a jet curtain around them and the cruiser raced on, Carey's hands white on the wheel. It was dangerous, this speed, but he had been over the course before, more than once, and was sure of himself. And time was important. Not for long would Townsend's forces fail to strike back.

Five, ten minutes rushed by. Carey Locke stared ahead with anxious eyes and voiced a grunt of satisfaction when he saw the low-lying lights of Blaine's island ahead.

The twin beacons behind them, if turned on, would be visible for miles. But Randall Blaine's refuge was a flat strip of land hugging the water. Now that the lights upon it were visible, the island must be close.

He cut the cruiser's speed. At that moment his ears caught another sound—the warm-up dirge of another motor, close ahead in the dark.

"There's a boat at the island! Was it there when you left?"

"No, Carey."

His lips thinned. "We're late." Then he realized that those aboard the other craft must be aware of his approach. The cruiser's roar would have been audible for some time.

Proof of their awareness, and of their ominous intentions, lay in the absence of lights aboard the alien craft. It had left the pier. Its motor-growl was rising to a fluid whine. But no riding-lights glowed above the sea's velvet surface.

"Cut our own lights!" Carey ordered curtly.

The girl obeyed. The cruiser had slowed to a crawl, its motor purring. With aching eyes he searched the dark for a rush of motion that would betray the other boat's whereabouts.

"Your father is on that boat," he muttered, certain that he was right. "They came during your absence, took him. We've got to stop them." His voice was low, sultry. This was a time for swift, careful thinking.

The high whine of the invisible boat's engine came closer. They, too, were probably searching the sea, aware that he was lying in wait. They had heard the approach of the cruiser and watched it until the blackout. Now they were alert, confident of the superior speed of their own craft, but afraid of a collision.

So, at least, Carey Locke sized up the situation. An instant later he knew he was right. "There they are!" he snapped. "Dead ahead!"

She was a low, lean streak, built for a speed of which the cruiser was hopelessly incapable. So low against the sea's surface that she appeared to be a part of the boiling wake churned up by her own sharp hull.

Carey Locke fingered a gun he had taken from the cruiser's locker. He estimated his chances. They were not good, but what other possible course was open to him?

He took careful aim, swung the gun's muzzle along with its racing target for an instant, then squeezed the trigger. The answer astonished him.

A guttural voice bit through the night shouting orders in an alien tongue. The prow of the speeding boat sliced toward the cruiser. Slivers of yellow-edged flame cut the darkness as an automatic rifle began a furious, staccato chatter!

Carey lunged at the legs of the girl beside him. "Down!" She went sprawling. He himself fell to one knee, his face drained of color as the other boat bore down on them.

No chance now to avoid it. If they meant to ram him, he could do nothing but take it!

But they had other intentions. Yards from its goal the sleek craft slewed broadside, and for one hellish moment the automatic rifle spat a rain of bullets against the cruiser's side. A machine-gun at that range could have been no more vicious.

Paula Blaine's slender body shuddered against Carey in the cruiser's engine pit. "You—are you hurt?" she gasped.

He countered with a curt question of his own. "Can your father swim?"

"Yes, but—"

"Is he a *good* swimmer?"

"Yes, Carey!"

WITH sweat beading his face, he put into action the plan half-formed in his mind. His revolver, a small one used by Fritz Eichler for shooting sharks, spat defiantly at the surging speedboat, to let its occupants know he was still alive.

Knowing that, they would return to finish him. They could not afford to let Carey Locke live!

The challenge worked. At top speed the other craft swung about in a wide circle, its low hulk a lunging shadow against the sea's blackness. Once more it roared down on the cruiser. But this time Carey Locke was ready.

The cruiser leaped ahead, its engine thundering on a wide-open throttle. Too late, the man at the wheel of the darting speedboat sensed the counter attack.

"Hang on!" Carey yelled.

For one breathtaking instant he thought he had missed, as the speedboat's prow reared in a frantic effort to pass him to starboard. A stop-watch could not have timed the interlude between success and failure. Then the cruiser's bow battered its greyhound target and Carey Locke was flung bodily from the wheel, the girl a tangled heap on top of him.

It seemed for an instant that Blaine's sturdy boat had seized the swifter craft in its teeth, bulldog fashion, and was shaking it in sullen anger. Screams shredded the darkness. The deck under Carey Locke rose skyward at a weird angle, hung in that position for a moment and then shuddered, slipped back to normalcy as the two boats separated.

The cruiser was taking water. Its engine had stalled. Carey staggered to his feet, reeled forward, and the cruiser's searchlight stabbed the night.

There was no rifle fire. He had expected none, after a crash of such terrific intensity. The sleek speedboat lay on its side, pointed prow high

out of the water, stern submerged. A gaping hole sucked the sea into its internals. Dark human shapes struggled in the water.

He swung the searchlight to pick out the white, startled faces of the struggling men. Jedno's face swam for an instant in the moving glare. Other faces—one of them cursing, another shouting out orders. Townsend's. Wakeman's. At last the one for which he was searching.

Then, mysteriously, a gun barked in the darkness, from the direction of the island itself. A bullet snicked the sloping deck of the cruiser close to Carey's feet.

He jerked aside, scowling.

"The house!" Paula cried. "Some one is shooting at us from the house, Carey!"

That settled it. His half-formed scheme had included a plan to send Paula to the assistance of her father, out there in the water. He knew she could swim. He himself had hoped—fantastically, perhaps—to come to gripe with Randall Blaine's abductors.

Now he pushed the girl forward. "Get to shore!" he told her. "Wait for me there. Stay away from the house until I join you!"

"But—"

"Do as I say!"

The rifle barked again. This time the bullet was closer. The girl sent a last imploring look at Carey Locke, then turned, disappeared. Carey paused only long enough to center the searchlight of the disabled cruiser on the white-haired, struggling shape of Randall Blaine. Then he too went overboard.

They must have guessed his intention, for one of them, letting go a grip on the overturned speedboat, struck out to block him. A snarling face loomed blackly in the searchlight's glare. A voice said venomously: "This time, Smith, you don't succeed!"

Carey Locke did not argue. He knew how meager was the strength left in him. Swerving aside to avoid the hands outstretched to seize him, he went deep, swam under water, came up beside Randall Blaine and dragged Blaine out of the light.

"Got to make shore," he gasped. "Can you do it?"

Blaine's white hair was a grotesque mask around his face, but his eyes flashed

phosphorescently in the dark, his mouth curled on a bitter string of invectives. "Not going to shore! Damn them, I'm going to teach them a lesson!"

"No!"

"Let me go!"

Carey raised an arm weakly from the water and smashed his fist to the older man's face. His fingers groped for a hold on Blaine's clothing. "Damned—fighting—fool!" he muttered.

Then with slow but powerful strokes he towed Blaine to the island.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

RANDALL BLAINE was sputtering again when Carey hauled him up on the beach below the house. Out of the dark Paula came running. At the house itself no sign of activity was visible, and the sniper's rifle was silent.

He stared for a moment at the searchlight on the cruiser, at the shadowed hulk of the other craft nearby. He said darkly: "They won't drown. They won't give up the fight, either. We've got to risk the house, sniper or no sniper. Got to hold them off until help arrives."

Randall Blaine said sharply, "I don't understand all this, but by heaven, no one can march me out of my house that way with impunity!"

Carey gave Paula a glance. She took her father's arm, and he drew them both toward the shelter of the boathouse. The revolver he pressed into the girl's hand was the one from the cruiser's locker, soaked now and probably useless, but it was all he had. "Stay here," he warned, "until I've investigated."

He turned abruptly and walked up the path to the house.

Lights glowed in half a dozen windows on the first floor, but the upstairs was in darkness. The silence that enshrouded the structure was ominous. Where, he wondered, were Fritz and Lianov? Where were the others?

He went warily up the veranda steps, opened the door and entered. A low cry stuck in his throat. Seated on the floor in the main entrance hall, with legs out-sprawled on the carpet and

head tipped back against the door frame between hall and living room, was Kincaid.

Blood had run from an ugly wound in the youth's chest and puddled the floor between his legs. His glassy eyes stared sightlessly into space. An automatic pistol lay on the carpet near his trailing hand, and Kincaid was dead.

Carey snatched up the gun and found it loaded. Clutching it, he prowled past the dead pilot into the living room. Here were signs of tremendous upheaval, the carpet humped like a turbulent ocean, chairs and tables overturned, a silver service scattered from a splintered coffee table.

He went through to the dining room, through that to the staircase leading to the rooms above. The house rang with the echoes of his footfalls, mocking him with its emptiness.

In the upstairs hall he moved warily toward the closed door of Sofia Blaine's room. That room, more than any other in the house, was likely to be the sniper's base of operations. The door was locked.

"Mrs. Blaine!"

The answer to his call came not from her room but from the end of the hall. Some one there pounded frantically on a door. Carey hurried toward the sound.

"Let me out of here! Let me out, I say!" The voice was Lianov's, shrill with anger.

"Get away from the door," Carey said curtly.

"Let me—is that you, Carey?"

"Yes. Get away from the door. Stand aside."

He heard Lianov obey. A shot from Kincaid's gun shattered the lock. The door swung open and Lianov staggered into the hall.

"What is it that happens in this place? What is the meaning of all this?" The musician's face was haggard with anxiety, his eyes wild, his hair a disheveled mass cascading about his ears.

"What did happen?" Carey snapped.

"I do not know! I was in my room, playing on the violin. Suddenly there were shouts and screaming. I rushed to the door. It opened in my face and a strange man threatened me with a gun. Me!" Lianov's voice shrilled along the hall, sucking up echoes. "Then I was locked in my room and left there!"

Carey cut him short. "Where are the others?"

"I do not know!"

CAREY strode down the hall to Sofia's door and shouted her name again. Getting no answer, he stepped back, threw his weight against the door and cracked it open. Lianov was on his heels as he stumbled over the threshold.

Sofia Blaine lay face down on the bed, unmoving.

Lianov gasped. "Is she—is she—" He staggered forward, stood over the woman and wrung his hands. Carey shoved him aside, bent closer, turned the woman over.

"Not dead. Looks as though she's fainted." He gave the room a swift, searching examination, went down the hall again, down the stairs. Paula's voice reached him anxiously from the front hall.

"Carey! They're coming!"

His movements were rapid then, and more or less mechanical. He knew what had to be done, despite the risk involved. Herding Paula and her father upstairs, he ordered them into Sofia's room and warned them to lock the door. Then he flung a staccato string of orders at the bewildered Lianov.

"Get the doors locked, all of them! If they try the windows we may be able to hold them off, but an open door would be too easy. Move, man!"

Lianov was a man of dreams, not of action, but he moved.

Carey snatched the telephone from its cradle in the hall and sweated while a connection was established with Key West. He strode to a window then and sized up the situation. Shaking his head, he went upstairs and joined the others.

It was a grim situation at best. Here in Sofia Blaine's room, three men and two women—one of the latter sprawled helplessly on the bed—were besieged. The door was locked.

The black night outside would sooner or later spawn a formidable number of their enemies: men who would now stop at nothing in order to salvage what was possible of their shattered plot to control Blaine's empire.

And somewhere in the house itself, a prowler lurked, making this one room the last haven of safety for the besieged five.

"I've phoned for help," Carey said. "All we have to do is hold out." He took from Paula's hand the revolver he had given her. The sea had

left a sticky film of salt on it. Jamming it against the mattress of the bed, he squeezed the trigger. There was no report.

Swearing softly, he threw the gun aside, glanced down at Kincaid's automatic clutched in his other hand. It was their only weapon. With it, he returned to the window.

Dark out there. Momentous things had happened tonight and this was a night for it—moonless, starless, the island a black blot in an undulating black carpet of sea. But a thin line of surf glowed dimly where sea met shore, and shadows moved along it.

Seven shots in Kincaid's automatic—to hold off a pack of resourceful wolves who were determined to capture Randall Blaine and silence Carey Locke forever. He could waste no shots. Their automatic rifle was at the bottom of the sea, probably, but they would be armed, and the sea would not have destroyed the effectiveness of all their weapons.

A pulse throbbed rapidly in Carey's throat as he waited. A glance showed him the white, strained faces of his companions. Paula Blaine stepped close, put a hand on his arm.

"Whatever happens, darling," she whispered, "I—" A shot shattered the night's silence. Inches from the girl's face, as she inadvertently stepped in front of the window, a tiny hole appeared as though by magic in the glass, a spider-web of lines forming to center it.

Carey jerked the girl back. "Put out the lights!"

This, he knew, was only the beginning.

IT WAS a nerve-racking job, waiting for them. On the other side of the world where a gigantic war raged, uniformed soldiers were perhaps undergoing a similar tension—but this was of a far grimmer pattern. If *they* failed, a battle might be won or lost. If he failed, munitions to feed a thousand such battles would pour into murderous hands.

This shadowed room in one man's house on a tiny, peaceful island, was the heart of a gigantic web of wholesale murder.

"Carey, look!"

They were getting bolder. One of them had left the dark shadow of the boathouse and was prowling forward.

Carey Locke took aim, fired. The shape crumpled and crawled, stopped crawling, lay still.

"One less," he muttered.

Randall Blaine laughed harshly and said in a cracked voice: "You give *me* that gun and I'll put an end to this in short order!"

Paula quieted him. Lianov, at the other window, said anxiously: "I don't understand this. I don't understand any part of it. *Why* do they want to kill us?"

Carey ignored him.

"But *why?*" Lianov demanded more belligerently. "I have a right to know! And where's Fritz? Why isn't *he* here?"

"Fritz," sneered Randall Blaine, "is paralyzed drunk somewhere, as usual." He snorted, blew his nose violently into a sodden handkerchief. "Oh yes, he's never around when needed. Where was he when those devils dragged me out of here? Where were the rest of you?" His voice became shrill with condemnation. "That young lad Kincaid did his best to help me, but the rest of you—and Fritz! Bah! He was roaming the island with a skinful. Began guzzling right after dinner. God knows where he is now. Fishing, probably—if you can fish in the dark. Or else holding his head under a palm tree!"

"Which simplifies things," Carey said in a sultry voice.

"Eh?"

"We've trouble enough without a drunk on our hands." Blaine snorted again. Carey glanced at his watch. Half an hour had passed since the phone call to Key West. Out there in the dark, the shadows were moving again.

Suddenly Paula was clutching his arm. "Over there, Carey! Two of them—carrying something! They—they've got a mattress!"

Carey jerked his gun and fired, but the shot was wasted. The two shapes prowling toward the rear of the house, already half hidden by the sloping roof of the rear porch, separated rapidly.

One of them darted back. The other, bent under a heavy burden, used his head and staggered forward, reached the house and was out of range.

They had come from the boathouse, circled wide.

Sweat poured from Carey's face as he guessed their intentions.

He turned to the door. "I'll be back," he said bitterly. "Don't worry—they won't rush the house. Not yet." The hand holding his gun was moist and sticky, and his face was gaunt. He had been through a lot in the past few hours.

He closed the door behind him and heard the key click as Paula relocked it. His bare feet stirring up faint whispers in the hall's stillness, he prowled to the staircase and descended.

THEY meant to fire the house. They had raided the boathouse, obtained a mattress from the bed in Jedno's sleeping quarters. His shot had driven one of them back, but the other had reached the house and would even now be slashing the mattress apart, jamming its inflammable contents against the porch.

If the fellow had also lugged kerosene or gasoline from the boathouse—and he probably had . . .

His near-naked body glowing in the dark. Carey sped like a ghost along the downstairs hall to the kitchen. But one line of attack was open to him. He took it. Soundlessly crossing the inlaid linoleum floor, he threw himself at the rear door, thumbed the key and wrenched the door wide.

It was dark there on the porch, but not dark enough. And he had known the porch would be the place. Kindling wood for the outdoor fireplace was piled there, in a huge box. The wind would beat the flames into an inferno.

The man on his knees brought his head up with a jerk that should have dislocated his spine. He grunted and hurled himself at Carey's legs without attempting to rise. Carey's gun descended, missed its mark. The two went staggering back from the threshold, into the kitchen, where the polished chrome legs of a table stopped them.

He was a big man. In the dark he appeared fat, sloppy fat, but his hands were rocks and he fought with a flowing, easy confidence that was surprising.

To Carey Locke it was not surprising. Carey recognized him and knew better than to underestimate him.

They fought from one end of the kitchen to the other, neither uttering a word. The table went

over with a metallic clatter. A chair came between them. Carey's gun lay on the threshold where it had fallen after the failure of his first ill-timed blow.

He used his fists.

Martin Townsend was not so particular. He used his fists *and* his knees, and when that failed to bring victory he snatched up the chair.

Using both hands, he seized the chair and raised it high for a death blow. Carey went under it. He took Townsend by the knees in a headlong lunge. The big man staggered.

The chair descended and missed its mark. Townsend had lost his balance, his poise. Both hands wildly clutching, he struggled frantically to get his legs loose, his feet under him, but his feet carried him back in crazy, skidding little steps across the kitchen.

And Carey Locke was erect again, hurling punch after punch to Townsend's exposed face.

The big man went down. A crushing right kept him down and stilled the strangled sounds that issued from his battered lips. Carey scooped up the gun and stepped to the porch door.

He'd been right. A mattress lay there beside the woodbox, its stuffing piled atop the mound of kindling. But Martin Townsend had not had time to put a match to it.

He pulled the mattress inside, shut the door and locked it. He stepped over Townsend's inert body and went down the hall to the stairs, running. The house was still quiet.

There had been no sounds to indicate a renewal of the attack. But then, with Martin Townsend setting the house on fire, the others would have held back, awaiting developments.

Carey climbed the stairs and rapped at the door of Sofia's room, called out to identify himself. The key turned in the lock. He stepped over the threshold, into the room's stifling darkness. "Everything all right?"

The lights suddenly flared on. "Quite," an ominous voice said.

A gun was jammed into Carey's back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

IT WAS funny in a way. Not that he had failed. Not that he had blundered into a trap after avoiding their cunningly laid pitfalls right up to the closing moments of this complicated game. What was funny was the consternation that swept the faces of Randall Blaine, Lianov, Paula. And of course it was his own fault, because he had not warned them.

Now they gaped in utter amazement, unable to believe their eyes.

The voice at Carey's back said gently: "I'd drop the gun if I were you, Locke."

He dropped it. Had to, with that other weapon threatening to blast away the middle of his spine.

"Now sit down," the voice said. "On the bed."

Carey walked slowly toward the gaping faces. His own face was probably as white as theirs, but for a different reason. He was not amazed. Not even surprised. He had known. But his soul wanted suddenly to shriek to high heaven at this hellish trump card which Fate had held back for a final crushing blow in the face of success.

He turned, stared darkly at Fritz Eichler and said bitterly: "Well, you've won."

"I intended to win," Eichler declared without apparent animosity. "With so much at stake, Carey, it was not permissible to fail."

He wasn't drunk. That, more than anything else, even more than the heavy Luger pistol in his hand or his sudden acquisition of a deadly, catlike kind of poise, appeared to impress Randall Blaine, who gaped at him as though unable to picture him sober.

No, Fritz Eichler was not drunk. He had not been drinking. And the fact that his clothes were dry and neat indicated that he had not come ashore from any disabled speedboat.

He seemed rather pleased with himself. Ignoring the others as not worth his attention, he turned a thin-lipped smile on Carey and said: "I take it you are surprised."

"I'm not."

"I beg your pardon?"

Carey wet his lips. Almost unbearable within him was a desire to hurl himself at the gun, tear it aside and come to grips with this devil who, through mistaken allegiance to a foreign power,

had calmly gone about sacrificing the lives of those near and dear to him.

But a small voice urged Carey to talk. Talk! Keep up a conversation! There was a thin, feeble chance that Eichler, with his supreme egoism, had not yet stepped to the window to inform the waiting shadows outside of his conquest.

"It's been obvious for some time," Carey muttered, dragging the words, "that you were mixed up in this. All along it had to be some one inside the Blaine household. No one else could have struck at its members with such hellish certainty of success, knowing their mistakes, their shortcomings, the weaknesses in their armor."

"Quite reasonable, Locke," Fritz acknowledged.

"You were the gray-haired little man in the lobby of Townsend's apartment house. It had to be some one who knew me well enough to recognize Carey Locke under the mask of grime and sickness. Had I been myself at the time I might have seen through your disguise. Kimm did, in the course of his investigations. He had photographs."

Fritz enjoyed a chuckle. "I believe," he murmured, "you're only guessing now. A remarkable guess, however. Go on, Locke."

CAREY LOCKE wet his lips again, and eyed the Luger. More than likely this maddening sideshow was an utter waste of effort. Fritz Eichler must have signaled his men outside. No man would be fool enough, in such a situation, to endanger himself just for a chance to gloat. Still...

"The murder of Dr. Pruett had its angles, too," Carey said, "but I didn't spot the important one until a few hours ago. Obviously, Eichler, I was drugged. How you did it I don't know, but I suspect you worked it by sending Jedno into the kitchen, during dinner. One thing I do know. The suit I was wearing that night was one of yours, and you wear fancy togs. The coat had a button attached to the lining, to keep it form-fitting. Most coats don't have such a button.

"Some one undressed me that night, Eichler, and put me to bed after I'd been drugged. Nine out of ten men, in removing that coat from an unconscious victim would have torn the hidden button off, unaware of its existence. It was loose anyway. I'd ripped it just about off myself, forgetting it. But it wasn't gone the morning after

Pruett's death. It still isn't gone. *You* undressed me that night, Eichler."

Fritz Eichler said softly: "Clever! Exceedingly clever! And why didn't you act on this information?"

"Because I wasn't smart enough to see through it at the time," Carey said bitterly. "And because other things that pointed to you were fantastic. There had to be a motive. There had to be some reason for your guilt. Nothing made sense—until I talked with Ellison Pratt."

"And now, my dear Carey?"

"Now I know. You framed me. It was your only way to get Paula. You framed me with such diabolical cleverness that even I couldn't be sure of my innocence. Through Jedno, Paula was told of my guilt and persuaded to take steps that would make her an accessory. The rest was rather simple, I suppose. Either she obeyed instructions from that point on, or faced the prospect of having me sent to a madhouse, and herself to prison."

Fritz smiled. "I think we shall find other ways of keeping Paula in line now." He had an unpleasant way of laughing with his eyes, though they seemed never to blink.

Carey Locke glanced at the white, frightened face of the girl and felt his body grow tense.

"Well, Carey? What else?"

"I have Abel Kimm to thank for the rest of what I know," Carey muttered.

"Ah, yes. Our ambitious Federal agent, who managed to establish himself as Randall's bodyguard after a certain hotel affair in Washington, involving a member of the French embassy staff. A troublesome fellow, Kimm. He—er—talked to you?"

"No."

"But you said—"

"Abel Kimm's death," Carey snapped, "was your biggest blunder, Eichler."

Fritz frowned. His voice soft but deadly, he said: "I dislike blunders. Explain, please!"

"GO BACK to the time of Kimm's death, Eichler." Carey's voice was low, too, and his sweating hands were clenched at his sides as he stretched out the words, desperately hoping for an opening. "We heard two shots, a scream. We

rushed out of this house. You, Eichler, took charge."

"And so?"

"Later, I found Kimm's body in the plane. You put it there."

"Did I?"

"The dingy in which I rowed out to the plane was dry. The oars were dry. Therefore Kimm's body was taken to the plane in another boat—one from the boathouse. It was you, Eichler, who went to the boathouse while the rest of us were searching the island."

"You amaze me," Fritz Eichler murmured. "And was that so frightful a blunder?"

"In your haste, you overlooked some papers in the lining of Kimm's sleeve."

"Ah!"

"The papers are now on their way to Washington!" It had been a stab in the dark, a desperate lie put forth with but feeble hope of prompting a reaction. But Fritz Eichler did react. Through thinned lips he sucked a breath that froze his lean body to almost military stiffness. A telltale pallor flooded his face and accented the glitter of his eyes.

"Locke, for that I—"

Carey Locke snapped up the momentary lapse and struck without warning. A rapier left sliced down across Eichler's gun-wrist. A cannonading right burst against Eichler's jaw.

Fritz stumbled, lost his gun. Carey Locke sent him reeling with a devastating blow to the mouth and went for the weapon in a headlong dive.

The door opened. A guttural voice said, "All right, Chief, we—" then thundered with abrupt and ominous change of tone, "Hold it, Locke! Let that gun alone!"

The man was Wakeman.

Maniacal fury blazed in Fritz Eichler's slitted eyes as he picked himself up off the floor. With savage gestures he brushed himself off, glared at Paula, at her father, at the open-mouthed Lianov. A vicious slap of his hand sent Carey stumbling against the wall. Regaining his poise. Eichler retrieved the Luger, turned to Wakeman. "Well?"

"Everything." Wakeman said in a wondering voice, "is ready. Chief. We've repaired Blaine's cruiser. The speedboat's done for."

Fritz Eichler leveled his gun at Carey's chest. "You see now," he said icily, "why I permitted you to waste my time here. Perhaps you also understand why Townsend made a purposely obvious attempt to set fire to the house—in order to lure you from this room and enable me to step in during your absence."

There was lust in Eichler's sultry eyes. The kind of lust that fed on murder and suffering. The kind of bestial madness, Carey thought numbly, that was responsible for the savage hordes overrunning those countries in Europe which had fallen prey to the doctrines for which Fritz Eichler had sold his rotten soul.

It was Eichler's move. For Carey Locke it would probably be a final one. Oddly, he found himself unafraid of it, calmer than he had been for some time. His gaze flicked to Paula Blaine and he shrugged his shoulders.

"And now," Fritz Eichler said, "you are about to lead me to the one man who remains dangerous to us. Ellison Pratt!"

"And if I don't?"

"You will."

"That," Carey said quietly, "is where you're wrong, Eichler. I won't."

Fritz glanced at the girl. "You and I," he murmured in that same deadly tone, "and Paula, are leaving here, Locke. With, of course, one or two of my men. We are taking the cruiser, which has been repaired since your daring stroke of an hour ago. These others here—" A flick of his hand disposed of them. "They remain locked in this room under guard until we return."

He nodded to Wakeman, gripped Paula's arm and drew her to the door. By a sound of footsteps, Carey knew that other men were approaching along the hall.

Carey Locke could not face the plea in the girl's eyes. Averting his gaze he allowed himself to be herded out of the room, offered no resistance when Eichler's men took hold of him. Wakeman locked the door.

THEN began a slow, grim, heart-rending parade down the staircase, along the lower hall, out into the night.

He knew what to expect. If he refused to take them to Pratt, they would work on him. If he

persisted in refusing, they would turn their attention to Paula.

And after he *had* led them to Ellison Pratt, the final curtain would fall.

The Fatherland had ordered it. Fritz Eichler might be the leader of this group of cold-blooded killers who worked under his command in the States, but in the larger scheme of things he was a pawn, obeying instructions from above.

One life, a dozen—of what consequence were they, with men dying by the thousands on bloody European battlefields?

"Well, Locke?"

The cruiser lay at the pier, gently rocking in deep water. Carey turned, shrugged "He's on an island "

"What island?"

"I don't know its name. It probably doesn't have a name. I'll take you there."

"Now," Fritz Eichler murmured, "you are being sensible."

"I suppose I am."

They pushed Paula into the boat, and with drooping shoulders Carey stepped down beside her, stood staring into the dark as the others came aboard. His gaze swept the sea in search of something as the motor's staccato blast ripped the island's silence to shreds.

"Take the wheel," Eichler ordered. "And I warn you, Locke—"

"I know. No tricks."

"Heaven help you if you try any!"

Carey swung the cruiser's nose slightly to starboard as the boat sliced away from the pier. There were lights now on the island from which Paula had rescued him—the same twin beacons which had come to be a symbol of their love and their hopes.

Hunched over the wheel, he pointed the speeding boat at a point of darkness directly between the lights, and stared straight ahead.

Fritz Eichler laughed softly, far back in his throat. "You seem to be in a hurry, my friend."

Carey made no comment

"Those lights," Eichler taunted. "To you and my esteemed sister-by-marriage they have a sentimental significance, no? Perhaps you find in them a certain comfort."

"I do."

"It is to be regretted that the turmoil of the past few weeks has swept their significance into the discard, no?"

Low in the water ahead Carey saw the thing for which he was watching. "A lot of things are to be regretted," he snarled, pitching his voice to snare Eichler's attention, letting a note of madness creep into it so that the others, too, were held by his words. "Damn you, Eichler, for everything you've done! Damn you to hell! You pulled the wool over our eyes by pretending to be a victim of your own rotten game! You've sold your soul to the devil! You've smashed everything a decent man would hold sacred! You—"

Sweat poured from Carey's face as his voice rose higher and shrilled out a string of curses. "You and your bloody Fatherland!" he shrieked. "Butchers, the lot of you! Dealers in murder! Shameless, unscrupulous—" Even the sudden stiffening of Fritz Eichler's slack body did not stop him.

White with rage, Eichler drew his gun. And at that moment the racing cruiser struck.

CAREY LOCKE had timed the impact to the split second. As the cruiser's nose buried itself with a splintering crash in the abandoned wreck of the half-submerged speedboat, he lunged from the wheel.

His outthrust arm sent Paula Blaine stumbling over the side, where she would be out of the hell that was bound to explode.

In a flying tackle that was not to be denied, he hurled himself at the reeling Fritz Eichler.

The stricken cruiser, its bulldog bow buried for the second time this night in the hull of Eichler's speedboat, shuddered as though shaken by a giant hand. Eichler's agents had been hurled off their feet.

Like a hooked sailfish the craft reared skyward, tumbling its occupants in a heap, then floundered flat again.

Carey Locke threw himself clear of the stunned shape pinned beneath him. He rocked up to his knees. Fritz Eichler's Luger was clutched in his hand.

"Now," he gritted. "it's my turn!"

Stumbling erect, one of Eichler's agents flung himself forward to challenge that statement.

The Luger roared as he reached for it. Drunkenly he staggered back, screaming. The other one, Wakeman, produced a gun and began firing indiscriminately into the heaving darkness. With capture imminent, his leader fallen, Wakeman was a cornered beast without even a beast's intelligence.

The Luger cut Wakeman down. Carey rose, gun in hand, and stepped aside as Fritz Eichler clutched at his legs in an effort to trip him.

"Get up," Carey said then.

Eichler's twitching face was a white death's head in the dark. He obeyed. A whimpering plea for mercy began far back in his throat, came wetly, haltingly through chattering teeth "You can't shoot me in cold blood! You can't be so inhuman!"

Carey Locke faced him, and in the next few seconds the burning desire to kill this man, to smash him and everything he stood for, died with him. In its place came a realization that such things destroyed themselves, inevitably. Caught by a flood of loathing, Carey tossed the Luger aside, caught Fritz Eichler by the throat and swung him about.

He drove a blasting fist into the man's terrified face and stepped back, sick with disgust, as Eichler collapsed.

Then he leaned over the side and caught the upthrust hand of the girl he had pushed to safety. And drew her out of the sea. And took her in his arms.

"Look," he said simply.

The lights of an approaching plane winked above Randall Blaine's island. A searchlight swept down through the dark, seeking a landing place.

"The answer to that telephone call," Carey said. "Help from Key West—if we still needed it." He held the shivering girl close to him, turned then and gazed at those other two lights which meant more, much more, than they had ever meant in the past.

"Is—is this the end Carey?"

"For them it is," he said. "For us it's the beginning."

THE END



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