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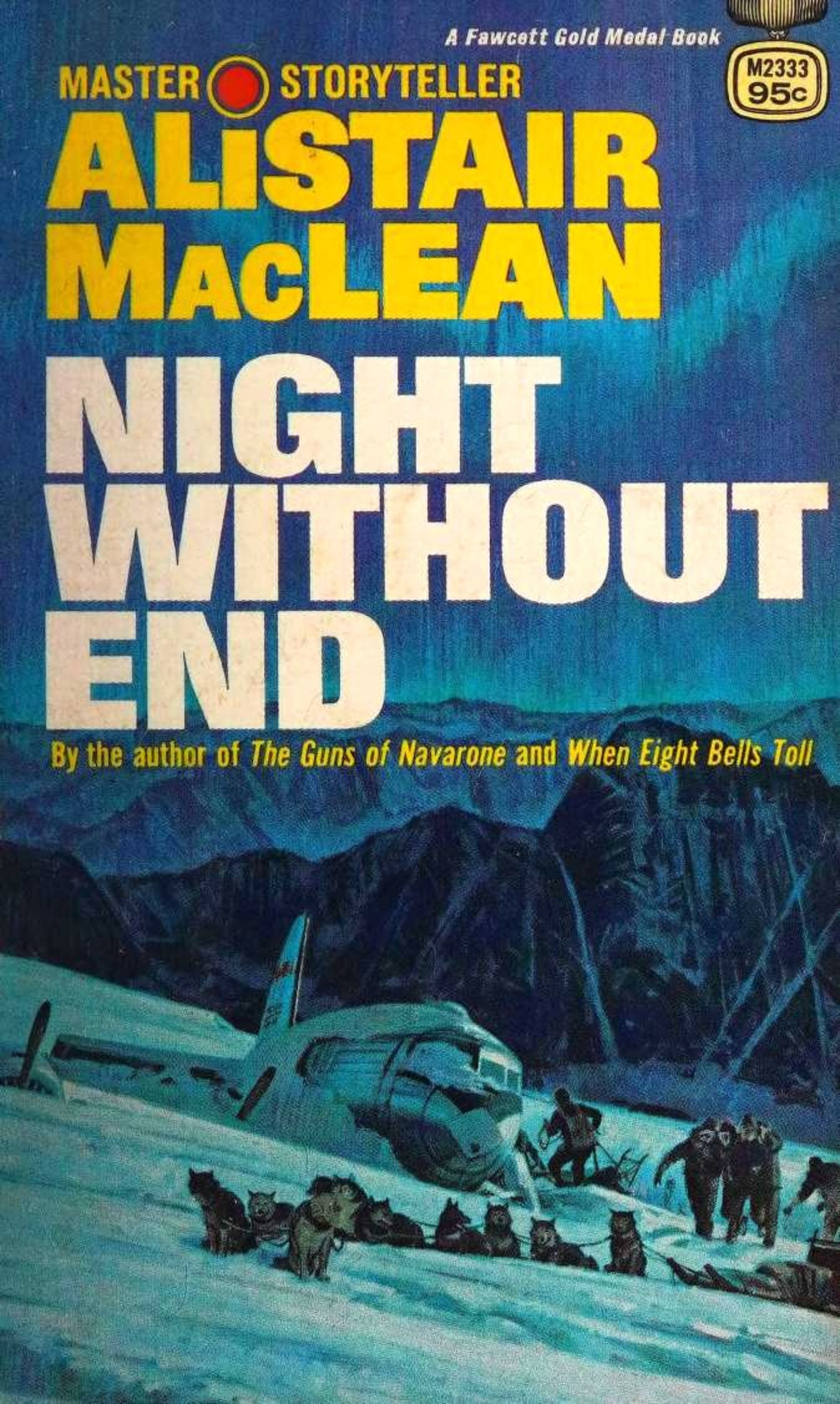
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MASTER STORYTELLER

ALISTAIR MacLEAN

NIGHT WITHOUT END

By the author of *The Guns of Navarone* and *When Eight Bells Toll*



"DROP THAT GUN!"

The voice was curt and deadly. First the rescue party saw the stewardess, no longer pretty because of her terror and horror. Then, behind her, they saw the man, completely shielded by her body.

"Drop the gun or I'll kill the girl." His voice was soft with menace, his face implacable. The two men dropped their rifles and stood very still.

"Now join your friends here, while I join mine." He nodded down the glacier where the sound of a tractor could just be heard. "I'm afraid you're not invited. You will be left behind. What becomes of you no longer concerns me."

"But that's murder," the stewardess screamed. *"Simple murder!"*

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WHEN EIGHT BELLS TOLL
WHERE EAGLES DARE
FORCE 10 FROM NAVARONE
PUPPET ON A CHAIN

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Night Without End

ALISTAIR MacLEAN

A FAWCETT GOLD MEDAL BOOK
Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, Conn.

THIS BOOK CONTAINS THE COMPLETE TEXT OF THE ORIGINAL HARDCOVER EDITION.

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Monday: Midnight

IT WAS Jackstraw who heard it first—it was always Jackstraw, whose hearing was an even match for his phenomenal eyesight, who heard things first. Tired of having my exposed hands alternately frozen, I had dropped my book, zipped my sleeping bag up to the chin, and was drowsily watching him carving figurines from a length of inferior narwhal tusk when his hands suddenly fell still and he sat quite motionless. Then, unhurriedly as always, he dropped the piece of bone into the coffeepot that simmered gently by the side of our oil-burner stove—curio collectors paid fancy prices for what they imagined to be the dark ivory of fossilised elephant tusks—rose, and put his ear to the ventilation shaft, his eyes remote in the unseeing gaze of a man lost in listening. A couple of seconds were enough.

"Airplane," he announced casually.

"Airplane!" I propped myself up on an elbow and stared at him. "Jackstraw, you've been hitting the methylated spirits again."

"Indeed, no, Dr. Mason." The blue eyes, so incongruously at variance with the swarthy face and the broad Eskimo cheekbones, crinkled into a smile: coffee was Jackstraw's strongest tipple, and we both knew it. "I can hear it plainly now. You must come and listen."

"No, thanks." It had taken me fifteen minutes to thaw out the frozen condensation in my sleeping bag, and I was just beginning to feel warm for the first time. Heaven only knew that the presence of a plane in the heart of that desolate ice plateau was singular enough—in the four months since our IGY station had been set up this was the first time we had had any contact, however indirectly, with the world and the civilization that lay so unimaginably beyond our horizons—but it wasn't going to help either the plane or myself if I got my feet frozen again. I lay back and stared up through our two plate-glass skylights; but as always they were completely opaque, covered with a thick coating of rime and dusting of snow. I

looked away from the skylights across to where Joss, our young Cockney radioman, was stirring uneasily in his sleep, then back to Jackstraw.

"Still hear it?"

"Getting louder all the time, Dr. Mason. Louder and closer."

I wondered vaguely—vaguely and a trifle irritably, for this was our world, a tightly knit, compact little world, and visitors weren't welcome—what plane could it be. A met. plane from Thule, possibly. Possibly, but unlikely: Thule was all of six hundred miles away, and our own weather reports went there three times a day. Or perhaps a Strategic Air Command bomber testing out the DEW-line —the Americans' distant early warning radar system—or even some civilian test flight on a new transpolar route. Or maybe some base plane from down by Godthaab——

"Dr. Mason!" Jackstraw's voice was quick, urgent. "It's in trouble, I think. It's circling us—lower and closer all the time. A big plane, I'm sure; many motors."

"Damn!" I said feelingly. I reached out for the silk gloves that always hung at night above my head, pulled them on, unzipped my sleeping bag, swore under my breath as the freezing air struck at my shivering skin, and grabbed for my clothes. Half an hour only since I had put them off, but already they were stiff, awkward to handle, and abominably cold—it was a rare day indeed when the temperature inside the cabin rose above freezing point. But I had them on—long underwear, woolen shirt, breeches, silk-lined woolen parka, two pairs of socks, and my felt cabin shoes—in thirty seconds flat. In latitude 72.40 north, eight thousand feet up on the Greenland ice-cap, self-preservation makes for a remarkable turn of speed. I crossed the cabin to where no more than a nose showed through a tiny gap in a sleeping bag. "Wake up, Joss." I shook him until he reached out a hand and pushed the hood off his dark tousled head. "Wake up, boy. It looks as if we might need you."

"What—what's the trouble?" He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and stared up at the chronometer above his head. "Midnight! I've been asleep only half an hour."

"I know. Sorry. But get a move on." I recrossed the cabin, passed by the big RCA transmitter and stove, and halted in front of the instrument table. The register showed the wind E.N.E., velocity 15 knots—near enough

17 miles per hour, but on a night like this, with the ice crystals and drift lifting off the ice-cap, clogging and slowing up the anemometer cups, the true speed was probably half as much again. And the pen of the alcohol thermograph was running evenly along the red circle of 40° below zero—72° of frost. I thought of the evil combination of these two factors of wind and cold and felt my skin crawl.

Already Jackstraw was silently climbing into his furs. I did the same—caribou trousers and parka with reindeer-fur-trimmed hood, all beautifully tailored by Jackstraw's wife—sealskin boots, woollen mittens, and reindeer gloves. I could hear the plane quite clearly now, and so too, I could see, did Joss. The deep even throb of its motors was plain even above the frantic rattling of the anemometer cups.

"It's—it's an airplane!" You could see that he was still trying to convince himself.

"What did you think it was—one of your precious L.C.C. double-deckers?" I slipped snow-mask and goggles round my neck and picked up a torch from the shelf beside the stove; it was kept there to keep the dry batteries from freezing. "Been circling for the past two or three minutes. Jackstraw thinks it's in trouble, and I agree."

Joss listened.

"Engines sound O.K. to me."

"And to me. But engine failure is only one of a dozen possible reasons."

"But why circle here?"

"How the devil should I know? Probably because he can see our lights—the only lights, at a guess, in fifty thousand square miles. And if he has to put down, which God forbid, he stands his only chance of survival if he puts down near some human habitation."

"Heaven help them," Joss said soberly. He added something else, but I didn't wait to hear. I wanted to get up top as quickly as possible.

To leave our cabin, we had to use a trap-door, not an ordinary door. Our cabin, a prefabricated, sectioned structure that had been hauled up from the coast on tractor sleds during the month of July, was deep-sunk in a great oblong hole that had been gouged out from the surface of the ice-cap, so that only the top few inches of its flat roof projected above ground level. The trap-door, hinged at

both ends so that it could open either upwards or downwards, was reached by a short, steep flight of steps.

I climbed the first two of these, took down the wooden mallet that hung there permanently by the wall, and pounded round the already bruised and splintered edges of the trap to loosen the ice that held it locked fast. This was an almost invariable routine: whenever the trap had previously been opened for any length of time at all, the layer of warm air that always lay under the roof seeped slowly out, melting the surrounding snow—which promptly turned to ice when the trap was closed again.

Tonight the ice cracked easily. I got my shoulder under the trap, levered upwards against the accumulated drift of snow above, and scrambled out.

I was prepared for what awaited me up top—the gasping, panic-stricken feeling of suffocation as the warm air was sucked from my lungs by that deadly, numbing cold—but even so I wasn't sufficiently prepared. The wind speed was far higher than I had feared. Bent double and coughing violently, breathing shallowly to avoid frosting my lungs, I turned my back to the wind, breathed into my reindeer gloves, slipped on my snow mask and goggles, and straightened. Jackstraw was already standing by my side.

The wind on the ice-cap never howled or shrieked. It moaned instead, a low-pitched, unutterably eerie ululation: a requiem for the damned, if ever there was one, the agony of some soul lost in torment. That same moan had driven men mad before now; less than two months previously I had had to send our tractor mechanic, a completely broken youngster who had lost all contact with the last shadow of reality, back to our Uplavnik base. The wind had done that to him.

Tonight its desolate threnody boomed and faded, boomed and faded in the lower registers of sound with an intensity which I had seldom heard, while its fingers plucked at the tightly strung guy ropes of the radio antenna and instrument shelters to provide its own whistling obbligato of unearthly music. But I was in no mood then to listen to its music, and, indeed, that sepulchral wailing was not the dominant sound on the ice-cap that night.

The throbbing roar of big engines, surging and receding, as the wind gusted and fell away, like surf on some distant shore, was very close now. The sound lay to

windward of us at that moment, and we turned to face it, but we were blind. Although the sky was overcast, there was no snow that night—at any time, heavy snowfalls, strangely enough, are all but unknown to the Greenland ice-cap—but the air was full of millions of driving, needle-pointed ice spicules that swept towards us out of the impenetrable darkness to the east, clogging up our goggles in a matter of seconds and stinging the narrow exposed area of my face between mask and goggles like a thousand infuriated hornets. A sharp, exquisite pain, a pain that vanished almost in the moment of arrival as the countless subzero spicules dug deep with their anaesthetising needles and drove all sensation from the skin. But I knew this ominous absence of feeling all too well. Once again I turned my back to the wind, kneaded the deadened flesh between my mittens till the blood came throbbing back, then pulled my snow-mask higher still.

The plane was flying in an anticlockwise direction, following, it seemed, the path of an irregular oval, for the sound of its motors faded slightly as it curved round to north and west. But within thirty seconds it was approaching again, in a swelling thunder of sound, to the southwest—to the leeward of us, that was—and I could tell from Jackstraw's explosive ejaculation of sound, muffled behind his mask, that he had seen it at the same moment as myself.

It was less than half a mile distant, no more than five hundred feet above the ice-cap, and during the five seconds it remained inside my line of vision I felt my mouth go dry and my heart begin to thud heavily in my chest. No SAC bomber this, nor a Thule met. plane, both with crews highly trained in the grim craft of arctic survival. That long row of brightly illuminated cabin windows could belong to only one thing—a transatlantic or trans-polar airliner.

"You saw it, Dr. Mason?" Jackstraw's snow-mask was close to my ear.

"I saw it." It was all I could think to say. But what I was seeing then was not the plane, now again vanished into the flying ice and drift, but the inside of the plane, with the passengers—God, how many passengers, fifty, seventy?—sitting in the cosy security of their pressurized cabin with an air-conditioned temperature of 70° F., then the crash, the tearing, jagged screeching that set the teeth

on edge as the thin metal shell ripped along its length and the tidal wave of that dreadful cold, 110° below cabin temperature, swept in and engulfed the survivors, the dazed, the injured, the unconscious, and the dying as they sat or lay crumpled in the wreckage of the seats clad only in thin suits and dresses. . . .

The plane had completed a full circuit and was coming round again. If anything, it was even closer this time, at least a hundred feet lower, and it seemed to have lost some speed. It might have been doing 120, perhaps 130 miles an hour, I was no expert in these things, but for that size of plane, so close to the ground, it seemed a dangerously low speed. I wondered just how effective the pilot's windscreen wipers would be against these flying ice spicules.

And then I forgot all about that, forgot all about everything except the desperate, urgent need for speed. Just before the plane had turned round to the east again and so out of the line of our blinded vision, it had seemed to dip and at the same instant two powerful lights stabbed out into the darkness, the one lancing straight ahead, a narrow powerful beam glittering and gleaming with millions of sparkling diamond points of flame as the ice crystals in the air flashed across its path, the other, a broader fan of light, pointing downwards and only slightly ahead, its oval outline flitting across the frozen snow like some flickering will o' the wisp. I grabbed Jackstraw's arm and put my head close to his.

"He's going to land! He's looking for a place to put down. Get the dogs, harness them up." We had a tractor, but heaven only knew how long it would have taken to start it on a night like this. "I'll give you a hand as soon as I can."

He nodded, turned, and was lost to sight in a moment. I turned too, cursed as my face collided with the slatted sides of the instrument shelter, then jumped for the hatch, sliding down to the floor of the cabin on back and arms without bothering to use the steps. Joss, already completely clad in his furs but with the hood of his parka hanging over his shoulders, was just emerging from the food and fuel tunnel which led off from the other end of the cabin, his arms loaded with equipment.

"Grab all the warm clothing you can find, Joss," I told him quickly. I was trying to think as quickly and coher-

ently as I was talking, to figure out everything that we might require, but it wasn't easy, that intense cold numbed the mind almost as much as it did the body. "Sleeping bags, blankets, spare coats, shirts, it doesn't matter whose they are. Shove them into a couple of gunny sacks."

"You think they're going to land, sir?" Curiosity, anticipation, horror—each struggled for supremacy in the thin, dark, intelligent face. "You really think so?"

"I think they're going to try. What have you got there?"

"Fire bombs, a couple of Pyrenes." He dumped them by the stove. "Hope they're not solid."

"Good boy. And a couple of the tractor extinguishers—the Nu-Swifts, G-1,000, I think." A great help these little things are going to be, I thought, if several thousand gallons of petrol decides to go up in flames. "Fireaxes, crowbars, canes, the homing spool—for heaven's sake don't forget the homing spool—and the searchlight battery. Be sure to wrap that up well."

"Bandages?"

"No need. Seventy degrees of frost will freeze blood and seal a wound quicker than any bandage. But bring the morphia kit. Any water in these two buckets?"

"Full. But more ice than water."

"Put them on the stove—and don't forget to turn out the stove and both the lights before you leave." Incongruously enough, we, who could survive in the Arctic only by virtue of fire, feared it above all else. "Pile the rest of the stuff up by the instrument shelter."

I found Jackstraw, working only by the feeble light of his torch, outside the lean-to drift-walled shelter that we had built for the dogs from empty packing cases and an old tractor tarpaulin. He appeared to be fighting a losing battle in the centre of a milling pack of snarling, yelping dogs, but the appearance was illusion only: already he had four of the dogs off the tethering cable and the sledge tracelines snapped into their harness.

"How's it coming?" I shouted.

"Easy." I could almost see the crinkling grin behind the snowmask. "I caught most of them asleep, and Balto is a great help—he's in a very bad temper at being woken up."

Balto was Jackstraw's lead dog—a huge, ninety-pound, half-wolf, half-Siberian, direct descendant of, and named for the famous dog that had trekked with Amundsen, and

who later, in the terrible winter of '25, his sledge-driver blind behind him, had led his team through driving blizzards and far subzero cold to bring the life-giving antitoxin into the diptheria-stricken town of Nome, Alaska. Jackstraw's Balto was another such: powerful, intelligent, fiercely loyal to his master—although not above baring his wolf's fangs as he made a token pass at him from time to time—and, above all, like all good lead dogs, a ruthless disciplinarian with his teammates. He was exercising that disciplinary authority now—snarling, pushing, and none too gently nipping the recalcitrant and the slow-coaches, quelling insubordination in its earliest infancy.

"I'll leave you to it, then. I'll get the searchlight." I made off towards the mound of snow that loomed high to the westward of the cabin, broke step, and listened. There was no sound to be heard, nothing but the low-pitched moan of the wind on the ice-cap, the eternal rattling of the anemometer cups. I turned back to Jackstraw, my face bent against the knifing wind.

"The plane—have you heard the plane, Jackstraw? I can't hear a thing."

Jackstraw straightened, pulled off his parka hood, and stood still, hands cupped to his ears. Then he shook his head briefly and replaced the hood.

"My God!" I looked at him. "Maybe they've crashed already."

Again the shake of the head.

"Why not?" I demanded. "On a night like this you wouldn't hear a thing if they crashed half a mile downwind."

"I'd have felt it, Dr. Mason."

I nodded slowly, said nothing. He was right, of course. The frozen surface of this frozen land transmitted vibration like a tuning fork. Last July, seventy miles inland, we had distinctly felt the vibration of the ice-cap as an iceberg had broken off from a glacier in a hanging valley and toppled into the fjord below. Maybe the pilot had lost his bearings, maybe he was flying in ever-widening circles trying to pick up our lights again, but at least there was hope yet.

I hurried across to where the tractor, sheeted in tarpaulin, lay close in to the high snow-wall that had been cut down the middle of a drift. It took me a couple of minutes to clear away the accumulated snow at one end

and wriggle in under the tarpaulin. There was no question of trying to lift it—its impregnated oils had frozen solid, and it would have cracked and torn under any pressure.

The searchlight, fixed to a couple of bolts on the tractor bonnet, was held down by two quick-release butterfly nuts. In these latitudes, quick-release was a misnomer: the nuts invariably froze after even the briefest exposure. The accepted practice was to remove one's gloves and close a mittened hand round the nuts until body heat warmed and expanded them enough to permit unscrewing. But there was no time for that tonight: I tapped the bolts with a spanner from the tool box, and the steel pins, made brittle by the intense cold, sheared as if made from the cheapest cast iron.

I crawled out at the foot of the tarpaulin, searchlight clutched under one arm, and as soon as I straightened I heard it again—the roar of engines, closing rapidly. They sounded very near, very low, but I wasted no time trying to locate the plane. Head lowered against the wind and the needle-sharp lances of the flying ice, I felt rather than saw my way back to the cabin hatch and was brought up short by Jackstraw's steadying hand. He and Joss were busy loading equipment aboard the sledge and lashing it down, and as I stopped to help them something above my head fizzled and spluttered into a blinding white glare that threw everything into a harsh black and white relief of frozen snow and impenetrable shadow. Joss, remembering what I had completely forgotten—that dousing our cabin lights would have robbed the pilot of his beacon—had ignited a magnesium flare in the slats of the instrument shelter.

We all turned as the plane came into our vision again, to the south, and it was at once apparent why we had lost all sight and sound of it. The pilot must have made a figure-of-eight turn out in the darkness, had reversed his approach circle, and was flying from east to west: less than two hundred feet up, undercarriage still retracted, it passed within a couple of hundred yards of us like some monstrous bird. Both headlights were now dipped, the twin beams a glitter of kaleidoscopic light in the ice-filled darkness of the sky, the twin oval pools of light, interlocking now and very bright, racing neck and neck across the snow. And then these pools, increasing as rapidly in size as they diminished in strength, slipped away to the left as

the plane banked sharply to the right and came curving round clockwise to the north. I knew now what the pilot was intending and my hands clenched helplessly inside mittens and gloves. But there was nothing I could do about this.

"The antenna!" I shouted. "Follow out the line of the antenna." I stooped and gave the sledge its initial shove as Jackstraw shouted at Balto. Joss was by my side, head close to mine.

"What's happening? Why are we——"

"He's coming down this time. I'm sure of it. To the north."

"The north?" Not even the snow-mask could hide the horror in his voice. "He'll kill himself. He'll kill all of them. The hummocks——"

"I know." The land to the northeast was broken and uneven, the ice raised up by some quirk of nature into a series of tiny hillocks, ten, twenty feet high, tiny but the only ones within a hundred miles. "But he's going to do it, all the same. A belly-landing with the wheels up. That's why he reversed his circle. He wants to land upwind to give himself the minimum stalling ground speed."

"He could land to the south, into the wind." Joss sounded almost desperate. "It's a billiard table there."

"He could, but he won't." I had to shout the words to make myself heard above the wind. "He's nobody's fool. He knows if he lands to windward of us, even a hundred yards to windward, the chances of finding our lights, our cabin, in this weather just don't exist. He's got to land upwind. He's just *got* to."

There was a long silence as we staggered forward, head and shoulders bent almost to waist level against the wind and ice-filled drift, then Joss moved close again.

"Maybe he'll see the hummocks in time. Maybe he can——"

"He'll never see them," I said flatly. "Flying into this stuff he can't possibly see a hundred yards in front of him."

The radio antenna, rime-coated now to almost fifty times its normal size, sagging deeply and swaying pendulum-like in the wind between each pair of fourteen-foot poles that supported it, stretched away almost 250 feet to the north. We were following the line of this, groping our way blindly from pole to pole and almost at the end of the

line, when the roar of the aircraft engines, for the last few seconds no more than a subdued murmur in the night as the wind carried the sound from us, suddenly swelled and increased to a deafening crescendo as I shouted a warning to the others and flung myself flat on the ground: the huge dark shape of the airliner swept directly over us even as I fell. I would have sworn, at the time, that I could have reached out and touched it with my hand, but it must have cleared us by at least ten feet—the antenna poles, we later discovered, were undamaged.

Like a fool, I immediately leapt to my feet to try to get a bearing on the vanishing plane and was literally blown head over heels by the tremendous slipstream from the four great propellers, slid helplessly across the frozen crust of the snow, and fetched up on my back almost twenty feet from where I had been standing. Cursing, bruised, and not a little dazed, I got to my feet again, started off in the direction where I could hear the dogs barking and howling in a paroxysm of fear and excitement, then stopped abruptly and stood quite still. The engines had died, all four of them had died in an instant, and that could mean only one thing: the airliner was about to touch down.

Even with the realization a jarring vibration, of a power and intensity far beyond anything I had expected, reached my feet through the frozen crust of the ice-cap No ordinary touchdown that, I knew, not even for a belly-landing: the pilot must have overestimated his height and set his ship down with force enough to crumple the fuselage, to wreck the plane on the spot.

But he hadn't. I was prone on the frozen snow again, ear pressed hard against it, and I could half-hear, half-feel, a kind of hissing tremor which could only have come from the fuselage, no doubt already splintered and ripped, sliding over the ice, gouging a furrowed path through it. How long this sound continued, I couldn't be sure—six seconds, perhaps eight. And then, all at once, came another earth tremor, severer by far than the first, and I heard clearly, even above the gale, the sudden sharp sound of the crash, the grinding tearing scream of metal being twisted and tortured out of shape. And then, abruptly, silence—a silence deep and still and ominous, and the sound of the wind in the darkness was no sound at all.

Shakily, I rose to my feet. It was then I realised for the

first time that I had lost my snow-mask—it must have been ripped off as I had rolled along the ground. I brought out my torch from under my parka—it was always kept there as even a dry battery could freeze and give no light at all if the temperature fell low enough—and probed around in the darkness. But there was no sign of it, the wind could have carried it a hundred yards away by this time. A bad business, indeed, but there was no help for it. I didn't like to think what my face would be like by the time I arrived back at the cabin.

Joss and Jackstraw were still trying to quieten the dogs when I rejoined them.

"You all right, sir?" Joss asked. He took a step closer. "Good lord, you've lost your mask!"

"I know. It doesn't matter." It did matter, for already I could feel the burning sensation in my throat and lungs every time I breathed. "Did you get a bearing on that plane?"

"Roughly. Due east, I should say."

"Jackstraw?"

"A little north of east, I think." He stretched out his hand, pointing straight into the eye of the wind.

"We'll go east." Somebody had to make the decision, somebody had to be wrong, and it might as well be me. "We'll go east—Joss, how long is that spool?"

"Four hundred yards. More or less."

"So. Four hundred yards, then due north. That plane is bound to have left tracks in the snow: with luck, we'll cut across them. Let's hope to heaven it did touch down less than four hundred yards from here."

I took the end of the line from the spool, went to the nearest antenna pole, broke off the four-foot long flatlike frost feathers—weird growths of the crystal aggregates of rime that streamed out almost horizontally to leeward—and made fast the end of the line round the pole. I really made it fast—our lives depended on that line, and without it we could never find our way back to the antenna, and so eventually to the cabin, through the pitch-dark confusion of that gale-ridden arctic night. There was no possibility of retracing steps through the snow: in that intense cold, the rime-crusted snow was compacted into a frozen névé that was but one degree removed from ice, of an iron-hand consistency that would show nothing less than the crimp marks of a five-ton tractor.

We started off at once, with the wind almost in our faces, but slightly to the left. I was in the lead, Jackstraw came behind with the dogs, and Joss brought up the rear, unreeling the line from the homing spool against the pressure of the return winding spring.

Without my mask, that blinding suffocating drift was a nightmare, a cruel refinement of contrasting torture where the burning in my throat contrasted with the pain of my freezing face for dominance in my mind. I was coughing constantly in the superchilled air, no matter how I tried to cover mouth and nose with a gloved hand, no matter how shallowly I breathed to avoid frosting my lungs.

The devil of it was, shallow breathing was impossible. We were running now, running as fast as the ice-glazed slipperiness of the surface and our bulky furs would allow, for to unprotected people exposed to these temperatures, to that murderous drift-filled gale, life or death was simply a factor of speed, of the duration of exposure. Maybe the plane had ripped open or broken in half, catapulting the survivors out onto the ice-cap—if there were any survivors: for them, either immediate death as the heart failed in the near impossible task of adjusting the body to an instantaneous change of over 100° F., or death by exposure within five minutes. Or maybe they were all trapped inside, slowly freezing. How to get at them? How to transport them all back to the cabin? But only the first few to be taken could have any hope. And even if we did get them all back, how to feed them—for our own supplies were already dangerously low? And where, in heaven's name, were we going to put them all?

Jackstraw's shout checked me so suddenly that I stumbled and all but fell. I turned back, and Joss came running up.

"The end of the line?" I asked.

He nodded, flashed a torch in my face. "Your nose and cheek—both gone. They look bad."

Gloves off, I kneaded my face vigorously with my mittened hands until I felt the blood pounding painfully back, then took the old jersey which Jackstraw dug out from a gunny sack and wrapped it round my face. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

We struck off to the north, with the wind on our right cheeks—I had no option but to gamble on the hope that the wind had neither backed nor veered—our torches

probing the ground in front of us, stopping every fifteen or twenty feet to drive a pointed bamboo marker into the frozen ground. We had covered fifty yards without sighting anything, and I was just beginning to become convinced that we must still be well to the west of the plane's touchdown point and wondering what in the world we should do next when we almost literally stumbled into an eighteen-inch deep, ten-foot wide depression in the snow-crust of the ice-cap.

This was it, no question about that. By a one in a hundred chance we had hit on the very spot where the plane had touched down—or crashed down, if the size of the depression in that frozen snow were anything to go by. To the left, the west, the ground was virginal, unmarked—ten feet to that side and we should have missed it altogether. To the east, the deep depression shelved rapidly upwards, its smooth convexity now marred by two large gouge marks, one in the centre and one to the right of the track, as if a pair of gigantic ploughs had furrowed through the ground: part of the under fuselage must have been ripped open by the impact—it would have been a wonder had it not been. Some way further to the east, and well to the right of the main track, two other grooves, parallel and of a shallow bowl shape, had been torn in the snow. The gouge marks, plainly, of the still-racing propellers: the plane must have tilted over on its right wing just after the moment of landing.

To see all this took no longer than to sweep a torch through a swift semicircle. I shouted to Joss to take another bundle of canes and prop up the homing spool line that led back to the antenna—if this weren't done it would drift over and be lost to sight in ten minutes—and then rejoin us: then I turned and ran after Jackstraw, who had already urged his team forwards and eastwards along the track of the crashed plane.

The wind was worse than ever, the drift an almost solid wall that reduced our speed to a lurching stumble and forced us to lean far into it to maintain our balance. Two hundred yards, three hundred, and then, almost a quarter of a mile from where it had touched down, we found the airliner simply by walking straight into it. It had slewed almost 90° as it had come to a halt, and was lying square across its own path, still resting on even keel.

In the feeble light of my torch the airliner, even al-

though its fuselage rested on the ground, seemed immensely high and to stretch away for a vast distance on either side, but for all its great size, however, there was something peculiarly pathetic and forlorn about it. But this, of course, was purely subjective, the knowledge in my own mind that this crippled giant would never leave here again.

I could hear no movement, see no movement. High above my head a faint blue light seemed to glow behind some of the cabin windows, but apart from that there was no sign of life at all.

2

Monday: 1 a.m.—2 a.m.

MY GREATEST fear had already proved groundless—there was no sign of fire anywhere, no flickering red to see, no hidden crackling to hear. It was still possible that some small tongue of flame was creeping along inside the fuselage or wings looking for the petrol or oil that would help it blaze into destructive life—and with that wind to fan the flames, destruction would have been complete—but it hardly seemed worth worrying about and it was unlikely that any pilot cool-headed enough to turn off the ignition would have forgotten to shut down the petrol lines.

Already Jackstraw had plugged our searchlight into the dry battery and handed me the lamp. I pressed the switch, and it worked: a narrow but powerful beam good for six hundred yards in normal conditions. I swung the beam to my right, then brought it slowly forward.

Whatever colours the plane may have had originally, it was impossible to distinguish any of them now. The entire fuselage was already shrouded in a sheet of thin rimed ice, dazzling to the eye, reflecting the light with the intensity, almost, of a chromed mirror. The tail unit was intact. So, too, was the fuselage for half its length, then crumpled and torn underneath, directly opposite the spot where we stood. The left wing was tilted upwards at an angle of about five degrees above the normal—the plane wasn't on such an even keel as I had first thought. From where I stood this wing blocked off my view of the front, but just above and beyond it I saw something that made me temporarily forget the urgency of my concern for those

inside and stand there, stock-still, the beam trained unwaveringly on that spot.

Even under the coating of ice the big bold lettering "MYTH" was clearly visible. MYTH! What on earth was a MYTH airliner doing in this part of the world? The SAS and KLM, I knew, operated transarctic flights from Copenhagen and Amsterdam to Winnipeg, Los Angeles, and Vancouver via Söndre Störmfjord about an hour and a half's flying time away to the southwest on the west coast of Greenland, just on the Arctic Circle, and I was pretty sure that Pan American and Trans World operated reciprocal services on the same route. It was just barely possible that freak weather conditions had forced one of these planes far enough off course to account for its presence here, but if I was right about the MYTH, it just wasn't possible——

"I've found the door, Dr. Mason." Jackstraw had taken my arm, jerking me out of my reverie, and was pointing to a big oval door with its lowest point just at our eye level. "We will try these, perhaps?"

I heard the metallic clang as he lifted a couple of crowbars off the sledge, and nodded. We could only try. I set the searchlight on the snow, adjusted it on its gimbals so as to illuminate the door, took one of the crowbars and thrust it beneath the foot of the oval, the flattened end sliding easily between door and fuselage. Jackstraw did the same. We heaved together, but nothing happened. Again we heaved, and again, our feet coming clear of the ground, but the door remained immovable. To localize pressure, we concentrated on one bar, and this time we felt something giving: but it was the lever, not the door. With a pistol-shot crack, the cold-weakened crowbar snapped six inches from the end and we both landed on our backs.

Even the urgency of the moment, my almost complete lack of knowledge about planes, was no excuse. I cursed my stupidity in wasting valuable time trying to force open a massive door locked on the inside by heavy clips designed to withstand an internal pressure of many thousands of pounds, grabbed searchlight and battery, ducked round under the towering tail assembly into the full force of the wind and flying drift, and moved forward till I came to the right wing.

Its tip was buried deep under the frozen snow, the

airscrew blades bent back at right angles to their normal line. I thought perhaps I might try to scramble up the wing towards the fuselage and smash in one of the cabin windows, but after a couple of seconds' wild slithering on the ice-sheeted wing in that gusting gale wind I gave up the idea. To maintain a foothold was quite impossible: besides, it was doubtful whether I could have smashed in a window anyway. Like the door, the windows were designed to withstand great pressures.

Stumbling, slipping, we ran round the buried tip of the wing, and clear in sight now was the ice hummock that had brought the big airliner to its sudden halt. About fifteen feet high and twenty wide at the base, it lay in the right angle formed by the front of the fuselage and the leading edge of the wing. But it wasn't the root of the wing that had absorbed the initial impact, a glance at the nose of the aircraft was enough to show that. The plane must have crashed into the ice-mound just to right of center of the control cabin: the windscreens were smashed, the fuselage ripped open and crushed back for six or seven feet. What had happened to the pilot sitting on that side at the moment of the telescopic impact just didn't bear thinking about; but at least we had found our way in.

I set the searchlight so that its beam illuminated the wrecked control cabin, gauged the distance to the lower sill of the windscreen—it must have been fully nine feet—and jumped. My gloved hands hooked on firmly but slipped almost at once on the ice-rimed surface. I grabbed for a purchase grip on one of the windscreen pillars, felt my fingers striking against solid glass on both sides—the windscreen hadn't been as completely shattered as I had imagined—and was on the point of losing my hold altogether when Jackstraw moved forward swiftly and took my weight.

With my knees on his shoulders and a fireaxe in my hand it took me no more than two minutes to smash away the glass that clung to the pillars and the upper and lower edges. I hadn't realized that aircraft glass—toughened perspex—could be so tough, nor, when it came to clambering through into the control cabin in my bulky furs, that windscreens could be so narrow.

I landed on top of a dead man. Even in the darkness I knew he was dead. I fumbled under my parka, brought out the torch, switched it on for a couple of seconds, then

put it out. It was the copilot, the man who had taken the full impact of the crash. He was pinned, crushed between his seat and the twisted, fractured wreckage of what had been control columns, levers, and dashboard instruments: not since I had once been called out to the scene of a head-on collision between a racing motorcyclist and a heavy truck had I seen such dreadful injuries on any man. Whatever any of the survivors, the shocked and injured survivors in the plane, must see, it mustn't be this. It was ghastly beyond description.

I turned and leaned out the windscreen. Jackstraw was directly below, cupped gloved hands shielding his eyes against the flying ice spicules as he stared upwards.

"Bring a blanket," I shouted. "Better, bring a full gunny sack. And the morphia kit. Then come up yourself."

He was back in twenty seconds. I caught both sack and morphia box, placed them on the twisted cabin floor behind me, then reached out a hand to help Jackstraw, but it wasn't necessary. Athleticism wasn't the forte of the short and stocky Greenlanders, but Jackstraw was the fittest and most agile man I had ever met. He sprang, caught the lower sill of the left windscreen in his left hand, the central pillar in the other, and swung legs and body through the centre screen as if he had been doing this sort of thing all his life.

I gave him my torch to hold, rummaged in the gunny sack and dragged out a blanket. I spread it over the dead copilot, tucking the corners down among twisted and broken ends of metal, so that it shouldn't blow free in the icy wind that swirled and gusted through the wrecked control cabin.

"Waste of a good blanket, I suppose," I muttered. "But—well, it isn't pretty."

"It isn't pretty," Jackstraw agreed. His voice was quite steady, devoid of all inflection. "How about this one?"

I looked across at the left hand side of the cabin. It was almost completely undamaged and the chief pilot, still strapped in his seat and slumped against his side-screens, seemed quite unmarked. I stripped fur glove, mitten, and silk glove off my right hand, reached out and touched the forehead. We had been out of doors now for over fifteen minutes in that ferocious cold, and I would have sworn that my hand was about as cold as the human flesh could get. But I was wrong. I pulled the gloves back on and

turned away, without touching him further. I wasn't carrying out any autopsies that night.

A few feet further back we found the radio operator in his compartment. He was half-sitting, half-lying against the for'ard bulkhead of his shack where he must have been catapulted by the crash. His right hand was still clutched firmly round the handgrip of the front panel of his radio set—it must have been ripped clear off the transmitter, which didn't look as if it would ever transmit anything again.

On the bulkhead, behind his head, blood gleamed dully in the torchlight. I bent over the unconscious man—I could see that he was still breathing—removed my gloves once more and gently slid my fingers behind his head. Just as gently I withdrew them. How the hell, I thought, part hopelessly, part savagely, am I to carry out a head operation on a person with a telescoped occiput: the state he was in, I wouldn't have given a fig for his chance in the finest operating theatre in London. At the very least he would be blind for life, the sight centre must have been completely destroyed. I reached for his pulse: racing, faint, erratic to a degree. The thought came to me, a thought compounded as much of cowardice as of regret, that in all likelihood the possibility of my having to operate on him was remote, very remote. If he were to survive the inevitably rough handling that would be needed to get him out of that aircraft and then the journey back to the cabin through that ice-laden sub-zero gale, it would be a miracle indeed.

It seemed unlikely that he would ever wake again. But he might, he just conceivably might, so I broached the morphia kit. Then we eased his head and neck into a more comfortable position, covered him with a blanket, and left him.

Immediately behind the radio compartment was a long narrow room which extended across two-thirds of the width of the plane. A quick glance at the two chairs and collapsible bunk was enough to show that this must be the crew's rest room, and someone had been resting there at the moment of the crash. That crumpled shirt-sleeved figure on the floor must have been taken completely unawares, before he had the slightest knowledge of what was happening; and he would never know now.

We found the stewardess in the pantry, lying on her lef

side on the floor, the outspread black hair fallen forward over her face. She was moaning softly to herself, but it wasn't the moan of one in pain. Her pulse was steady enough, but fast. Jackstraw stooped down beside me.

"Shall we lift her, Dr. Mason?"

"No." I shook my head. "She's coming to, I think, and she can tell us far quicker than we can find out whether there's anything broken. Another blanket, and we'll let her be. Almost certainly someone much more in need of our attention."

The door leading into the main passenger compartment was locked. At least, it appeared to be, but I was pretty certain it would never be locked under normal circumstances. Perhaps it had been warped by the impact of landing. It was no time for half-measures. Together, we took a step back, then flung all the weight of our shoulders against it. It gave suddenly, three or four inches, and at the same time we heard a sharp exclamation of pain from the other side.

"Careful!" I warned, but Jackstraw had already eased his weight. I raised my voice. "Get back from that door, will you? We want to come in."

We heard a meaningless mutter from the other side, followed by a low groan and the slipping shuffle of someone trying to haul himself to his feet. Then the door opened and we passed quickly inside.

The blast of hot air struck me in the face like an almost physical blow. I gasped, fought off a passing moment of weakness when my legs threatened to give under me, then recovered sufficiently to bang the door shut behind me. With the motors dead and the arctic chill striking through the thin steel of the fuselage, this warmth, no matter how efficient the cabin insulation, wouldn't last long; but while it did, it might be the saving of all those who still lived. A thought struck me and, ignoring the man who stood swaying before me, one hand clutching a seat grip for support, the other rubbing at a blood-masked forehead, I turned to Jackstraw.

"Carry the stewardess in here. We'll take a chance—and it's not all that much of a chance either. There's a damned sight more hope for her in here with a broken leg than out there with only a bump on the head. Throw her blanket over the wireless operator—but whatever you do don't touch him."

Jackstraw nodded and went out, closing the door quickly behind him. I turned to the man who still stood shakily in the aisle, still dazedly rubbing his hand, a big brown square hand matted on the back with black hair, across a bleeding forehead. He looked at me for a moment, then stared down uncomprehendingly at the blood dripping onto the bright red tie and blue shirt that contrasted so oddly with the light grey gabardine suit. He closed his eyes tightly, then shook his head to clear it.

"Sorry to ask the inevitable question." The voice was quiet, deep, well under control. "But—what happened?"

"You crashed," I said shortly. "What do you remember?"

"Nothing. Well, that is, just a bump, then a loud screeching tearing noise——"

"Then you hit the door." I gestured at the bloodstains behind me. "Sit down for a moment. You'll be all right." I'd lost interest in him and was staring down the length of the cabin. I'd expected to see most of the seats wrenched off their bases, but instead they were all there exactly as they should have been, three wide to the left of me, two to the right, the seats in the front half facing aft, those to the rear facing forward. More than that, I had expected to see people, injured, broken, and moaning people, flung all over the seats and aisles: but the big passenger compartment seemed almost empty, and there wasn't a sound to be heard.

But it wasn't empty, not quite. Apart from the man by my side there were, I found, nine others altogether. Two men lay in the front part of the aisle. One, a big broad-shouldered man with curly dark hair, was propped up on an elbow, staring around him with a puzzled frown on his face; near him, lying on his side, was a smaller, much older man, but all I could see of him was a few wisps of black hair plastered across a bald head, a Glenurquhart plaid jacket that seemed a couple of sizes too big for him, and the loudest check tie it had ever been my misfortune to see. It seemed obvious that they had been sitting together in the left-hand seat adjacent to them and had been flung out when the plane crashed into the ice-mound and slewed violently to one side.

In the seat beyond that, also on the left, a man sat by himself. My first reaction was surprise that he, too, hadn't been hurled into the aisle, but then I saw that he was

awake and fully conscious. He was sitting rigidly in his seat, pressed in hard against the window, legs braced on the floor, holding on with both hands to the table fixed to the seat in front: tautened tendons ridged the back of his thin white hands, and his knuckles gleamed in the torchlight. I lifted the beam higher, saw that he was wearing a close-fitting clerical collar.

"Relax, Reverend," I said soothingly. "Terra firma once more, and this is as far as you are going." He said nothing, just stared at me through rimless glasses, so I left him. He seemed unhurt.

Four people sat in the right-hand side of the front part of the plane, each one in a window seat: two women, two men. One of the women was fairly elderly, but so heavily made-up and with her hair so expensively dyed and marcelled that I couldn't have guessed her age within ten years: her face, somehow, seemed vaguely familiar. She was awake, and looking slowly about her, her eyes empty of understanding. So, too, was the woman in the next seat, an even more expensive-looking creature with a mink coat flung cape-wise over her shoulders to show a simple green jersey dress that I suspected cost a small fortune: she was about twenty-five, I guessed, and with her blond hair, grey eyes, and perfect features would have been one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen, if it weren't for the overfull and rather sulky mouth. Maybe, I thought uncharitably, she remembered to do something about that mouth when she was fully awake. But right then, she wasn't fully awake: none of them was, they all behaved as if they were being dragged up from the depths of an exhausting sleep.

Still more asleep than awake were the other two men in the front, one a big, burly, high-coloured man of about fifty-five, with the gleaming thick white hair and moustache of the caricature of a Dixie colonel: the other was a thin elderly man, his face heavily lined, unmistakably Jewish.

Not bad going so far, I thought with relief. Eight people, and only one cut forehead among the lot of them—the perfect argument, if ever there was one, for having all the seats in a plane face towards the rear. No question but that they all owed, if not their lives, at least their immunity to injury to the fact that their high-backed seats had

almost completely cushioned and absorbed the shock of impact.

And the two passengers in the rear end of the cabin were the perfect argument for not having the seats face forward. The first I came to—a brown-haired young girl of about eighteen or nineteen, wearing a belted raincoat—was lying on the floor between two seats. She was stirring, and as I put my hands under her arms to help her up, she screamed in sudden pain. I changed my grip and lifted her gently onto the seat.

"My shoulder." Her voice was low and husky. "It is very sore."

"I'm not surprised." I'd eased back the blouse at the neck and closed it again. "Your clavicle—the collarbone—is gone. Just sit there and hold your left arm in your right hand . . . yes, so. I'll strap you up later. You won't feel a thing, I promise you."

She smiled at me, half-timidly, half-gratefully, and said nothing. I left her, went to the very rear seat in the plane, stooped to examine the man there, then straightened in almost the same instant: the weirdly unnatural angle of the head on the shoulders made any examination superfluous.

I turned and walked forward. Everybody was awake now, sitting upright or struggling dazedly to their feet, their half-formed questions as dazed as the expressions on their faces. I ignored them for the moment, looked questioningly at Jackstraw as he came through the forward door, closely followed by Joss.

"She won't come." Jackstraw jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "She's awake, but she won't leave the wireless operator."

"She's all right?"

"Her back hurts, I think. She wouldn't say."

I made no answer and moved across to the main door—the one we'd failed to open from the outside. I supposed it was no business of mine if the stewardess chose to devote her attention to a member of the crew instead of to the passengers who were her charges. But it was damned queer all the same—almost as queer as the fact that, though the inevitability of the crash must have been known for at least fifteen minutes before the actual event, not one of the ten passengers in the cabin had been wearing a seat-belt—and the stewardess, wireless operator,

and the crew member in the rest room appeared to have been caught completely unprepared.

The circular door handle refused to budge. I called Jackstraw, but even the extra weight made not the slightest impression on it. Obviously, it was immovably jammed—there must have been a slight telescoping effect along the entire length of the fuselage as the plane had crashed into the ice-mound. If the door I had noticed behind the control cabin was as badly warped as this one—and, being nearer the point of impact, it almost inevitably would be—then they'd all have to leave via the windscreens of the control cabin. I thought of the wireless operator with his dreadful head wound and wondered bleakly whether even trying to move him out could be more than a futile gesture, anyway.

A figure barred my way as I turned from the door. It was the white-haired, white-moustached Dixie colonel. His face was dark red, his eyes light blue, choleric and protuberant. It only required someone to get this man good and mad and he would be no more than a debit entry in the account book of some life insurance company. And he seemed good and mad now.

"What's happened? What in the devil *is* all this?" He had a voice like a Dixie colonel too, the Mason-Dixon line lay far to the north of wherever he had been born. "We've landed. Why? What are we doing here? What's the noise outside? And—and who in the name of heaven are you?"

A big business tycoon, I thought wryly, with money enough and power enough to indulge an obviously overgenerous capacity for righteous indignation: if I was going to meet any trouble, it wasn't hard to guess the direction it was going to come from. But, right then, there was some excuse for his attitude: I wondered how I would have felt if I had gone to sleep in a transatlantic airliner and woken up to find myself landed in the freezing middle of nowhere with three fur-clad people, complete with snow-goggles and snow-masks, waddling about the aisle of the plane.

"You've crash-landed," I said briefly. "I don't know why—how the hell should I? The noise outside is an ice blizzard rattling against the fuselage. As for us, we are scientists manning an International Geophysical Year station half a mile from here. We saw and heard you just before you crashed."

I made to push past him, but he barred my way.

"Just a minute, if you don't mind." The voice was more authoritative than ever and there was a surprising amount of muscle in that arm across my chest. "I think we have a right to know——"

"Later." I knocked his arm away and Jackstraw completed the job by pushing him down into his seat. "Don't make a damned nuisance of yourself. There's a critically injured man who has to have attention, and at once. We'll take him to safety and then come back for you. Keep the door shut." I was addressing all of them now, but the white-haired man's wrathful spluttering attracted my attention again. "And if you don't shut up and co-operate, you can stay here. If it weren't for us you'd be dead, stiff as a board, in a couple of hours. Maybe you will be yet."

I moved up the aisle, followed by Jackstraw. The young man who had been lying on the floor pulled himself onto a seat, and he grinned at me as I passed.

"How to win friends and influence people." He had a slow cultured drawl. "I fear you have offended our worthy friend."

"I fear I have." I smiled, passed by, then turned. These wide shoulders and large, capable hands could be more than useful to us. "How are you feeling?"

"Recoverin' rapidly."

"You are indeed. You didn't look so good a minute ago."

"Just taking a long count," he said easily. "Can I help?"

"That's why I asked," I nodded.

"Glad to oblige." He heaved himself to his feet, towering inches above me. The little man in the loud tie and the Glenurquhart jacket gave an anguished sound, like the yelp of an injured puppy.

"Careful, Johnny, careful!" The voice, the rich, nasal and rather grating twang, was pure Bowery. "We got our responsibilities, boy, big commitments. We might strain a ligament——"

"Relax, Solly." The big man patted him soothingly on his bald head. "Just takin' a little walk to clear my head."

"Not till you put this parka and pants on first." I'd no time to bother about the eccentricities of little men in loud jackets and louder ties. "You'll need them."

"Cold doesn't bother me, friend."

"This cold will. Outside that door it's 110° below the temperature of this cabin."

I heard a murmur of astonishment from some of the passengers, and the large young man, suddenly thoughtful, took the clothes from Jackstraw. I didn't wait until he had put them on, but went out with Joss.

The stewardess was bent low over the injured wireless operator. I pulled her gently to her feet. She offered no resistance, just looked wordlessly at me, the deep brown eyes huge in a face dead-white and strained with shock. She was shivering violently. Her hands were like ice.

"You want to die of cold, miss?" This was no time for soft and sympathetic words, and I knew these girls were trained how to behave in emergencies. "Haven't you got a hat, coat, boots, anything like that?"

"Yes." Her voice was dull, almost devoid of life. She was standing alone by the door now, and I could hear the violent rat-a-tat of her elbow as it shook uncontrollably and knocked against the door. "I'll go and get them."

Joss scrambled out through the windscreen to get the collapsible stretcher. While we were waiting I went to the exit door behind the flight deck and tried to open it, swinging at it with the back of my fireaxe. But it was locked solid.

We had the stretcher up and were lashing the wireless operator inside as carefully as we could in these cramped conditions, when the stewardess reappeared. She was wearing her uniform heavy coat now, and high boots. I tossed her a pair of caribou trousers.

"Better, but not enough. Put these on." She hesitated, and I added roughly, "We won't look."

"I—I must go and see the passengers."

"They're all right. Bit late in thinking about it, aren't you?"

"I know. I'm sorry. I couldn't leave him." She looked down at the young man at her feet. "Do you—I mean——" She broke off, then it came out with a rush. "Is he going to die?"

"Probably," I said, and she flinched away as if I had struck her across the face. I hadn't meant to be brutal, just clinical. "We'll do what we can for him. It's not much, I'm afraid."

Finally we had him securely lashed to the stretcher, his

head cushioned against the shock as best we could. When I got to my feet, the stewardess was just pulling her coat down over the caribou pants.

"We're taking him back to our cabin," I said. "We have a sledge below. There's room for another. You could protect his head. Want to come?"

"The passengers——" she began uncertainly.

"They'll be all right."

I went back inside the main cabin, closing the door behind me, and handed my torch to the man with the cut brow. The two feeble night or emergency lights that burned inside were poor enough for illumination, worse still for morale.

"We're taking the wireless operator and stewardess with us," I explained. "Back in twenty minutes. And if you want to live, just keep this door tight shut."

"What an extraordinary brusque young man," the elderly lady murmured. Her voice was low-pitched, resonant, with an extraordinary carrying power.

"Only from necessity, madam," I said dryly. "Would you really prefer long-winded and flowery speeches the while you were freezing to death?"

"Well, do you know, I really don't think I would," she answered mock-seriously, and I could hear her chuckling —there was no other word for it—as I closed the door behind me.

Working in the cramped confines of that wrecked control cabin, in almost pitch darkness and with that ice-laden bitter gale whistling through the shattered windscreens, we had the devil's own time of it trying to get the injured wireless operator down to that waiting sledge below. Without the help of the big young stranger I don't think we would ever have managed it, but manage it we eventually did: he and I lowered and slid the stretcher down to Jackstraw and Joss, who took and strapped it on the sledge. Then we eased the stewardess down: I thought I heard her cry out as she hung supported only by a hand round either wrist, and remembered that Jackstraw had said something about her back being injured. But there was no time for such things now.

I jumped down and a couple of seconds later the big young man joined me. I hadn't intended that he should come, but there was no harm in it; he had to go sometime,

and there was no question of his having to ride on the sledge.

The wind had eased a little, perhaps, but the cold was crueller than ever. Even the dogs cowered miserably in the lee of the plane; now and again one of them stretched out a neck in protest and gave its long, mournful wolf call, a sound eerie beyond description. But their misery was all to the good: as Jackstraw said, they were mad to run.

And, with the wind and ice-drift behind them, run they did. At first I led the way with the torch, but Balto, the big lead dog, brushed me aside and raced on into the darkness: I had sense enough to let him have his head. He followed the twisting route of the plane's snow furrow, the bamboos, homing spool, and antenna line as swiftly and unerringly as if it had been broad daylight, and the polished steel runners of the sledge fairly hissed across the snow. The frozen ground was smooth and flat as river ice; no ambulance could have carried the wireless operator as comfortably as our sledge did that night.

It took us no more than five minutes to reach the cabin, and in three more minutes we were on our way again. They were a busy three minutes. Jackstraw lit the oil stove, oil lamp, and Colman pressure lamp, while Joss and I put the injured man on a collapsible cot before the stove, worked him into my sleeping bag, slid in half a dozen heat pads—waterproof pads containing a chemical which gave off heat when water was added—placed a rolled-up blanket under his neck to keep the back of his head off the cot, and zipped the sleeping bag shut. I had surgical instruments enough to do what had to be done, but it had to wait; not so much because we had others still to rescue, urgent enough though that was, but the man lying at our feet, so still, so ashen-faced, was suffering so severely from shock and exposure that to touch him would have been to kill him: I was astonished that he had managed to survive even this long.

I told the stewardess to make some coffee, gave her the necessary instructions, and then we left her and the big young man together: the girl heating a pan over a pile of meta tablets, the young man staring incredulously into a mirror as he kneaded a frostbitten cheek and chin with one hand, and with the other held a cold compress to a frozen ear. We took with us the warm clothes we had lent them, some rolls of bandages, and left.

Ten minutes later we were back inside the plane. Despite its insulation, the temperature inside the main cabin had already dropped at least 30° and almost everyone was shivering with the cold, one or two beating their arms to keep themselves warm. Even the Dixie colonel was looking very subdued. The elderly lady, fur coat tightly wrapped round her, looked at her watch and smiled.

"Twenty minutes, exactly. You are very prompt, young man."

"We try to be of service." I dumped the pile of clothes I was carrying on a seat, nodded at them and the contents of a gunny sack Joss and Jackstraw were emptying. "Share these out between you and be as quick as you can. I want you to get out at once—my two friends here will take you back. Perhaps one of you could be kind enough to remain behind." I looked to where the young girl still sat alone in her back seat, still holding her left forearm in her hand. "I'll need some help to fix this young lady up."

"Fix her up?" It was the expensive young woman in the expensive furs speaking for the first time. Her voice was expensive as the rest of her and made me want to reach for a hairbrush. "Why? What on earth is the matter with her?"

"Her collarbone is broken," I said shortly.

"Collarbone broken?" The elderly lady was on her feet, her face a nice mixture of concern and indignation. "And she's been sitting there alone all this time—why didn't you *tell* us, you silly man?"

"I forgot," I replied mildly. "Besides, what good would it have done?" I looked down at the girl in the mink coat. Goodness only knew that I didn't particularly want her, but the injured girl had struck me as being almost painfully shy, and I was sure she'd prefer to have one of her own sex around. "Would you like to give me a hand?"

She stared at me, a cold surprised stare that would have been normal enough had I made some outrageous or improper request, but before she could answer the elderly lady broke in again.

"I'll stay behind. I'd love to help."

"Well——" I began doubtfully, but she interrupted immediately.

"Well, yourself. What's the matter? Think I'm too old, hey?"

"No, no, of course not," I protested.

"A fluent liar, but a gallant one." She grinned. "Come on, we're wasting this valuable time you're always so concerned about."

We brought the girl into the first of the rear seats, where there was plenty of space between that and the first of the rearward-facing front seats, and had just worked her coat off when Joss called me.

"We're off now, sir. Back in twenty minutes."

As the door closed behind the last of them and I broke open a roll of bandage, the old lady looked quizzically at me.

"Know what you're doing, young man?"

"More or less. I'm a doctor."

"Doctor, hey?" She looked at me with open suspicion, and what with my bulky oil-streaked and smelly furs, not to mention the fact that I hadn't shaved for three days, I suppose there was justification enough for it. "You sure?"

"Sure I'm sure," I said irritably. "What do you expect me to do—whip my medical degree out from under this parka or just wear round my neck a brass plate giving my consulting hours?"

"We'll get along, young man," she chuckled. She patted my arm, then turned to the young girl. "What's your name, my dear?"

"Helene." We could hardly catch it, the voice was so low; her embarrassment was positively painful.

"Helene? A lovely name." And, indeed, the way she said it made it sound so. "You're not British, are you? Or American?"

"I'm from Germany, madam."

"Don't call me 'madam.' You know, you speak English beautifully. Germany, hey? Bavaria, for a guess?"

"Yes." The rather plain face was transfigured in a smile, and I mentally saluted the old lady for the ease with which she was distracting the young girl's thoughts from the pain. "Munich. Perhaps you know it?"

"Like the back of my hand," she said complacently. "And not just the Hofbrauhaus either. You're still very young, aren't you?"

"I'm seventeen."

"Seventeen." A nostalgic sigh. "Ah, my dear, I remember when I was seventeen. A different world. There was no transatlantic airliner in those days, I can tell you."

"In fact," I murmured, "the Wright brothers were hardly airborne." The face had been more than familiar to me, and I was annoyed that I should have taken so long in placing it: I suppose it was because her normal setting was so utterly different from this bleak and frozen world.

"Being insulting, young man?" she queried. But there was no offence in her face.

"I can't imagine anyone ever insulting you. The world was at your feet even in the Edwardian days, Miss LeGarde."

"You know me, then?" She seemed genuinely pleased.

"It would be difficult to find anyone who doesn't know the name of Marie LeGarde." I nodded at the young girl. "See, Helene knows it too." And it was clear from the awe-struck expression on the young German girl's face that the name meant as much to her as to me. Twenty years queen of the music-hall, thirty years queen of the musical-comedy stage, beloved wherever she was known less for her genius than for the innate kindliness and goodness which she tried to conceal from the world with a waspish tongue, for the half-dozen orphanages she maintained in Britain and Europe, Marie LeGarde was one of the few truly international names in the world of entertainment.

"Yes, yes, I see you know my name." Marie LeGarde smiled at me. "But how did you know *me?*"

"From your photograph, naturally. I saw it in *Life* the other week, Miss LeGarde."

" 'Marie,' to my friends."

"I don't know you," I protested.

"I paid a small fortune to have that photograph retouched and made barely presentable," she answered obliquely. "It was a splendid photograph, inasmuch as it bore precious little resemblance to the face that I carry about with me. Anyone who recognizes me from that is my friend for life. Besides," she smiled, "I bear nothing but the most amicable feelings towards people who save my life."

I said nothing, just concentrated on finishing the job of strapping up Helene's arm and shoulders as quickly as possible; she was blue with cold, and shivering uncontrollably. But she hadn't uttered a murmur throughout, and smiled gratefully at me when I was finished. Marie LeGarde regarded my handiwork approvingly.

"I really do believe you have picked up some smattering of your trade along the way, Dr.—ah——"

"Mason. Peter Mason. Peter, to my friends."

" 'Peter' it shall be. Come on, Helene, into your clothes as fast as you like."

Fifteen minutes later we were back in the cabin. Jackstraw went to unharness the dogs and secure them to the tethering cable, while Joss and I helped the two women down the ice-coated steps from the trap-door. But I had no sooner reached the foot of the steps than I had forgotten all about Marie LeGarde and Helene and was staring unbelievingly at the tableau before me. I was just vaguely aware of Joss by my shoulder, the anger and dismay on his face giving slowly way to a kind of reluctant horror. For what we saw, though it vitally concerned us all, concerned him most of all.

The injured wireless operator still lay where we had left him. All the others were there too, grouped in a rough semicircle round him and round a cleared space to the left of the stove. By their feet in the centre of this space, upside down and with one corner completely stove in on the wooden floor, lay the big metal RCA radio transmitter and receiver, our sole source of contact with, our only means of summoning help from the outer world. I knew next to nothing about radios, but it was chillingly obvious to me—as it was, I could see, to the semicircle of fascinated onlookers—that the RCA was smashed beyond recovery.

3

Monday: 2 a.m.—3 a.m.

HALF A minute passed in complete silence, half a minute before I could trust myself to speak, even bring myself to speak. When at last I did, my voice was unnaturally low in the unnatural hush that was broken only by the interminable clacking of the anemometer cups above.

"Splendid. Really splendid The perfect end to the perfect day." I looked round them slowly, one by one, then gestured at the smashed transmitter. "What bloody idiot was responsible for this—this stroke of genius?"

"How dare you, sir!" The white-haired man whom I had mentally labelled as the Dixie colonel took a step

forward, face flushed with anger. "Mind your tongue. We're not children to be——"

"Shut up!" I said, quietly enough, but there must have been something in my voice rather less than reassuring, for he fell silent, though his fists still remained clenched. I looked at them all again. "Well?"

"I'm afraid—I'm afraid I did it," the stewardess faltered. Her brown eyes were as unnaturally large, her face as white and strained as when I had first seen her. "It's all my fault."

"You! The one person here who should know just how vital radio really is. I don't believe it."

"You must, I'm afraid." The quiet controlled voice belonged to the man with the cut brow. "No one else was anywhere near it at the time."

"What happened to you?" I could see he was nursing a bruised and bleeding hand.

"I dived for it when I saw it toppling." He smiled wryly. "I should have saved myself the trouble. That damned thing's heavy."

"It's all that. Thanks for trying anyway. I'll fix your hand up later." I turned to the stewardess again, and not even that pale and exhausted face, the contrition in the eyes, could quieten my anger—and, to be honest, my fear. "I suppose it just came to pieces in your hand?"

"I've told you I'm sorry. I—I was just kneeling beside Jimmy here—"

"Who?"

"Jimmy Waterman—the second officer. I——"

"Second officer?" I interrupted. "That's the radio operator, I take it?"

"No, Jimmy is a pilot. We've three pilots—we don't carry a radio operator."

"You don't——" I broke off my surprised question, asked another instead. "Who's the man in the crew rest room? Navigator?"

"We don't carry a navigator either. Harry Williamson is—was—the flight engineer."

No wireless operator, no navigator. There had been changes indeed since I'd flown the Atlantic some years previously in a Stratocruiser. I gave it up, returned to my original question, and nodded at the smashed RCA.

"Well, how *did* it happen?"

"I brushed the table as I rose and—well, it just fell." Her voice trailed off uncertainly.

"It just fell," I echoed incredulously. "One hundred and fifty pounds of transmitter and you flicked it off the table just like that?"

"I didn't knock it off. The legs collapsed."

"It's got no legs to collapse," I said shortly. "Hinges."

"Well, hinges, then."

I looked at Joss, who had been responsible for the erection of the table as well as the radio. "Is it possible?"

"No." His voice was flat, definite.

Again the silence in the cabin, the hush, the tension that grew from the merely uncomfortable to the all but unbearable. But I was beginning to see that there was nothing to be gained now by further questioning, much to be lost. The radio was wrecked. Finished.

I turned away without a word, hung up my caribou furs on nails on the walls, took off goggles and gloves, and turned to the man with the cut brow.

"Let's have a look at your head and your hand—it's a pretty nasty gash on your forehead. Forget the radio for the moment, Joss—let's have coffee first, lots of it." I turned to Jackstraw, who had just come down the steps from the hatch and was staring at the smashed radio. "I know, Jackstraw, I know. I'll explain later—not that I know anything about it. Bring some empty cases for seats out of the food tunnel, will you? And a bottle of brandy. We all need it."

I'd just started to wash the cut forehead—a nasty gash, as I had said, but surprisingly little signs of bruising—when the big amiable young man who had helped us lower the second officer from the wrecked plane came across to us. I looked up at him, and saw that I could be wrong about the amiability: his face wasn't exactly hostile, but his eyes had the cool measuring look of one who knew from experience that he could cope with most of the situations, pleasant and unpleasant, that he was ever likely to come up against.

"Look," he began without preamble, "I don't know who you are or what your name is, but I'm sure we are all most grateful to you for what you have done for us. It's more than probable that we owe our lives to you. We acknowledge that. Also, we know you're a field scientist,

and we realize that your equipment is of paramount importance to you. Agreed?"

"Agreed." I dabbed iodine fairly liberally on the injured man's head—he was tough, all right, he didn't even wince—and looked at the speaker. Not at all a man to ignore, I thought. Behind that strong intelligent face lay a hardness, a tenacity of purpose that hadn't been acquired along with the cultured relaxed voice at the Ivy League college I was pretty certain he had attended. "You'd something else to say?"

"Yes. We think—correction, I think—that you were unnecessarily rough on our air hostess. You can see the state the poor kid's in. OK., so your radio's busted, so you're hoppin' mad about it—but there's no need for all this song and dance." His voice was calm, conversational all the time. "Radios aren't irreplaceable. This one will be replaced, I promise you. You'll have a new one inside a week, ten days at the most."

"Kind," I said dryly. I finished tying the head bandage and straightened up. "The offer is appreciated, but there's one thing you haven't taken into account. You may be dead inside that ten days. You may all be dead in ten days."

"We may all—" He broke off and stared at me, his expression perceptibly hardening. "What are you talking about?"

"What I'm talking about is that without this radio you dismiss so lightly your chances—our chances—of survival aren't all that good. In fact, they're no good at all. I don't give a tuppenny damn about the radio, as such." I eyed him curiously, and a preposterous thought struck me: at least, it was preposterous for all of a couple of seconds, before the truth hit me. "Have you—have *any* of you *any* idea just where you are, right here, at the present moment?"

"Sure we have." The young man lifted his shoulders fractionally. "Just can't say how far to the nearest drugstore or bar——"

"I told them," the stewardess interrupted. "They were asking me—just before you came in. I thought Captain Johnson had overshot the landing field at Reykjavik in a snowstorm. This is Langjökull, isn't it?" She saw the expression on my face and went on hastily. "Or Hofsjökull? I mean, we were flying more or less northeast

from Gander, and these are the only two snowfields or glaciers or whatever you call them in Iceland in that direction from——"

"Iceland?" I suppose there is a bit of the ham actor in all of us, and I really couldn't pass it up. "Did you say Iceland?"

She nodded, dumbly. Everybody was looking at her, and when she didn't answer they all transferred their gazes to me, as at the touch of a switch.

"Iceland," I repeated. "My dear girl, at the present moment you're at an altitude of 8,500 feet, right slam bang in the middle of the Greenland ice-cap."

The effect was all that anybody could ever have wished for. I doubt whether even Marie LeGarde had ever had a better reaction from an audience. "Stunned" is an inadequate word to describe their mental state immediately after this announcement: paralysis was nearer it, especially where the power of speech was concerned. And when the power of thought and speech did return, it expressed itself, as I might have expected, in the most violent disbelief. Everybody seemed to start talking at once, but it was the stewardess who took my attention, by coming forward and catching me by the lapels. I noticed the glitter of a diamond ring on her hand, and remember having some vague idea that this was against airline regulations.

"What kind of joke is this? It can't be, it can't be! Greenland—it just can't be." She saw by the expression on my face that I wasn't joking, and her grip tightened even more. I had just time to be conscious of two conflicting thoughts—that, wide with fear and dismay though they might be, she had the most extraordinarily beautiful brown eyes and, secondly, that the MYTH were slipping in their selection of stewardesses whose calmness in emergency was supposed to match the trimness of their appearance—when she rushed on wildly.

"How—how can it be? We were on a Gander-Reykjavik flight. Greenland—we don't go anywhere near it. And there's the automatic pilot, and radio beams and—and radio base checks every half-hour. Oh, it's impossible, it's impossible! Why do you tell us this?" She was shaking now, whether from nervous strain or cold I had no idea; the big young man with the Ivy League accent put an arm awkwardly round her shoulder, and I saw her wince.

Something indeed seemed to be hurting her—but again it could wait.

"Joss," I called. He looked up from the stove, where he was pouring coffee into mugs. "Tell our friends where we are."

"Latitude 72.40 north, longitude 40.10 east," Joss said unemotionally. His voice cut clearly through the hubbub of incredulous conversation. "Three hundred miles from the nearest human habitation. Four hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle. Near enough eight hundred miles from Reykjavik, one thousand from Cape Farewell, the southernmost point of Greenland, and just a little further distant from the North Pole. And if anyone doesn't believe us, sir, I suggest they just take a walk—in any direction—and they'll find out who's right."

Joss's calm, matter-of-fact statement was worth half an hour of argument and explanation. In a moment, conviction was complete—and there were more problems than ever to be answered. I held up my hand in mock-protest and protection against the waves of questions that surged against me from every side.

"All in good time, please—although I really don't know anything more than yourselves—with the exception, perhaps, of one thing. But first, coffee and brandy all round."

"Brandy?" The expensive young woman had been the first, I'd noticed, to appropriate one of the empty wooden cases that Jackstraw had brought in in lieu of seats, and now she looked up under the curve of exquisitely modelled eyebrows. "Are you sure that's wise?" The tone of her voice left little room for doubt as to her opinion.

"Of course." I forced myself to be civil: bickering could reach intolerable proportions in a rigidly closed, mutually interdependent group such as we were likely to be for some time to come. "Why ever not?"

"Opens the pores, dear man," she said sweetly. "I thought everyone knew that—how dangerous it is when you're exposed to cold afterwards. Or had you forgotten? Our cases, our night things in the plane—somebody has to get these."

"Don't talk such utter rubbish." My short-lived attempt at civility perished miserably. "Nobody's leaving here tonight. You sleep in your clothes—this isn't the Dorches-

ter. If the blizzard dies down, we may try to get your things tomorrow morning."

"But—"

"If you're all that desperate, you're welcome to get them yourself. Want to try?" It was boorish of me, but that was the effect she had. I turned away to see the minister or priest hold up his hand against the offered brandy.

"Go on, take it," I said impatiently.

"I don't really think I should." The voice was high-pitched, but the enunciation clear and precise, and I found it vaguely irritating that it should so perfectly match his appearance, be so exactly what I should have expected. He laughed, a nervous deprecating laugh. "My parishioners, you know. . . ."

I was tired, worried, and felt like telling him what he could do with his parishioners. But it wasn't his fault.

"There's precedent in plenty in your Bible, Reverend. You know that better than I. It'll do you good, really."

"Oh well, if you think so." He took the glass gingerly, as if Beelzebub himself were on the offering end, but I noticed that there was nothing so hesitant about his method and speed of disposal of the contents: his subsequent expression could properly be described as beatific. I caught Marie LeGarde's eye, and smiled at the twinkle I caught there.

The Reverend wasn't the only one who found the coffee—and brandy—welcome. With the exception of the stewardess, who sipped at her drink in a distraught fashion, the others had also emptied their glasses, and I decided that the broaching of another Martell's was justified. In the respite from the talk, I bent over the injured man on the floor. His pulse was slower, steadier, and his breathing not quite so shallow: I slipped in a few more heat pads and zipped up the sleeping bag.

"Is he—is he any better, do you think?" The stewardess was so close to me that I brushed against her as I straightened. "He—he seems a bit better, doesn't he?"

"He is a bit, I think. But nothing like over the shock from the wound and the exposure, though." I looked at her speculatively and suddenly felt almost sorry for her. Almost, but not quite: I didn't at all like the direction my thoughts were leading me. "You've flown together quite a bit, haven't you?"

"Yes." She didn't offer anything more. "His head—do you think——"

"Later. Let me have a quick look at that back of yours."

"Look at *what?*"

"Your back," I said patiently. "Your shoulders. They seem to give you some pain. I'll rig a screen."

"No, no, I'm all right." She moved away from me.

"Don't be silly, my dear." I wondered what trick of voice production made Marie LeGarde's voice so clear and carrying. "He *is* a doctor, you know."

"No!"

I shrugged and reached for my brandy glass. Bearers of bad news were ever unpopular; I supposed her reaction was the modern equivalent of the classical despot's unsheathing his dagger. Probably only bruises, anyhow, I told myself, and turned to look at the company.

An odd-looking bunch, to say the least, but then any group of people dressed in lounge suits and dresses, trilby hats and nylon stockings, would have looked odd against the strange and uncompromising background of that cabin where every suggestion of anything that even remotely suggested gracious living had been crushed and ruthlessly made subservient to the all-exclusive purpose of survival.

Here there were no armchairs—no chairs, even—no carpets, wallpaper, bookshelves, beds, curtains—or even windows for the curtains. It was a bleak utilitarian box of a room, eighteen feet by fourteen. The floor was made of un-finished yellow pine. The walls were made of spaced sheets of bonded ply, with kapok insulation between: the lower part of the walls was covered with green-painted asbestos, the upper part and entire roof sheeted with glittering aluminium to reflect the maximum possible heat and light. A thin, ever-present film of ice climbed at least halfway up all four walls, reaching almost to the ceiling in the four corners, the parts of the room most remote from the stove and therefore the coldest. On very cold nights, such as this, the ice reached the ceiling and started to creep across it to the layers of opaque ice that permanently framed the undersides of our rimed and opaque skylights.

The two exits from the cabin were let into the fourteen-foot sides: one led to the trap, the other to the snow and

ice tunnel where we kept our food, petrol, oil, batteries, radio generators, explosives for seismological and glacial investigations, and a hundred and one other items. Halfway along, a secondary tunnel led off at right angles—a tunnel which steadily increased in length as we cut out the blocks of snow which were melted to give us our water supply. At the far end of the main tunnel lay our primitive toilet system.

One eighteen-foot wall and half of the wall that gave access to the trap-door were lined with twin rows of bunks—eight in all. The other eighteen-foot wall was given over entirely to our stove, workbench, radio table, and housings for the meteorological instruments. The remaining wall by the tunnel was piled high with tins and cases of food, now mostly empties, that had been brought in from the tunnel to begin the lengthy process of defrosting.

Slowly I surveyed all this, then as slowly surveyed the company. The incongruity of the contrast reached the point where one all but disbelieved the evidence of one's own eyes. But they were there all right, and I was stuck with them. Everyone had stopped talking now and was looking at me, waiting for me to speak: sitting in a tight semicircle round the stove, they were huddled together and shivering in the freezing cold. The only sounds in the room were the clacking of the anemometer cups, clearly audible down the ventilation pipe, the faint moaning of the wind on the ice-cap, and the hissing of our pressure Colman lamp. I sighed to myself, and put down my empty glass.

"Well, it looks as if you are going to be our guests for some little time, so we'd better introduce ourselves. Us first." I nodded to where Joss and Jackstraw were working on the shattered RCA, which they had lifted back on the table. "On the left, Joseph London, of the city of London, our radio operator."

"Unemployed," Joss muttered.

"On the right, Nils Nielsen. Take a good look at him, ladies and gentlemen. At this very moment the guardian angels of your respective insurance companies are probably putting up a prayer for his continued well-being. If you all live to come home again, the chances are that you will owe it to him." I was to remember my own words

later. "He probably knows more than any man living about survival on the Greenland ice-cap."

"I thought you called him 'Jackstraw,'" Marie LeGarde murmured.

"My Eskimo name." Jackstraw had turned and smiled at her, his parka hood off for the first time; I could see her polite astonishment as she looked at the fair hair, the blue eyes, and it was as if Jackstraw read her thoughts. "Two of my grandparents were Danish—most of us Greenlanders have as much Danish blood as Eskimo in us nowadays." I was surprised to hear him talk like this, and it was a tribute to Marie LeGarde's personality: his pride in his Eskimo background was equalled only by his touchiness on the subject.

"Well, well, how interesting." The expensive young lady was sitting back on her box, hands clasped round an expensively nyloned knee, her expression reflecting accurately the well-bred condescension of her tone. "My very first Eskimo."

"Don't be afraid, lady." Jackstraw's smile was wider than ever, and I felt more than vaguely uneasy; his almost invariable Eskimo cheerfulness and good nature concealed an explosive temper which he'd probably inherited from some far-distant Viking forebear. "It doesn't rub off."

The silence that followed could hardly be described as companionable, and I rushed in quickly.

"My own name is Mason, Peter Mason, and I'm in charge of this IGY station. You all know roughly what we're doing stuck out here on the plateau—meteorology, glaciology, the study of the earth's magnetism, the boreal-is, airglow, ionosphere, cosmic rays, magnetic storms, and a dozen other things which I suppose are equally uninteresting to you." I waved my arm. "We don't, as you can see, normally live here alone. Five others are away to the north on a field expedition. They're due back in about three weeks, after which we all pack up and abandon this place before the winter sets in and the ice-pack freezes on the coast."

"Before the winter sets in?" The little man in the Glenurquhart jacket stared at me. "You mean to tell me it gets colder than this?"

"It certainly does. An explorer called Alfred Wegener wintered not fifty miles from here in 1930-31, and the temperature dropped to 85° below zero—117° of frost.

And that may have been a warm winter, for all we know."

I gave some time to allow this cheering item of information to sink in, then continued.

"Well, that's us. Miss LeGarde—Marie LeGarde—needs no introduction from anyone." A slight murmur of surprise and turning of heads showed that I wasn't altogether right. "But that's all I know, I'm afraid."

"Corazzini," the man with the cut brow offered. The white bandage, just staining with blood, was in striking contrast to the receding dark hair. "Nick Corazzini. Bound for Bonnie Scotland, as the travel posters put it."

"Holiday?"

"No luck." He grinned. "Taking over the new Global Tractor Company outside Glasgow. Know it?"

"I've heard of it. Tractors, eh? Mr. Corazzini, you may be worth your weight in gold to us yet. We have a broken-down elderly tractor outside that can usually only be started by repeated oaths and assaults by a four-pound hammer."

"Well." He seemed taken aback. "Of course, I can try——"

"I don't suppose you've actually laid a finger on a tractor for many years," Marie LeGarde interrupted shrewdly. "Isn't that it, Mr. Corazzini?"

"Afraid it is," he admitted ruefully. "But in a situation like this I'd gladly lay my hands on another one."

"You'll have your chance," I promised him. I looked at the man beside him.

"Smallwood," the minister announced. He rubbed his thin white hands constantly to drive the cold away. "The Reverend Joseph Smallwood. I'm the Vermont delegate to the International General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free United Churches in London. You may have heard of it—our biggest conference in many years?"

"Sorry." I shook my head. "But don't let that disturb you. Our paper boy misses out occasionally. And you, sir?"

"Solly Levin. Of New York City," the little man in the check jacket added unnecessarily. He reached up and laid a proprietary arm along the broad shoulders of the young man beside him. "And this is my boy, Johnny."

"Your boy? Your son?" I fancied I could see a slight resemblance.

"Perish the thought," the younger man drawled. "My name is Johnny Zagero. Solly is my manager. Sorry to introduce a discordant note into company such as this"—his eyes swept over us, dwelt significantly longer on the expensive young lady by his side—"but I'm sort of a common or garden pugilist. That means 'boxer,' Solly."

"Would you listen to him?" Solly Levin implored. He stretched his clenched fists heavenwards. "Would you just listen to him? Apologizin'. Johnny Zagero, future heavyweight champion, apologizin' for being a boxer. The white hope of the world, that's all. Rated number three challenger to the champ. A household name in all——"

"Ask Dr. Mason if he's ever heard of me," Zagero suggested.

"That means nothing." I smiled. "You don't look like a boxer to me, Mr. Zagero. Or sound like one. I didn't know it was included in the curriculum at Yale. Or was it Harvard?"

"Princeton," he grinned. "And what's so funny about that? Look at Tunney and his Shakespeare. Roland La Starza was a college boy when he fought for the world title. Why not me?"

"Exactly." Solly Levin tried to thunder the word, but he hadn't the voice for it. "Why not? And when we've carved up this British champ of yours—a beat-up old character rated number two challenger by one of the biggest injustices ever perpetrated in the long and glorious history of boxin'—when we've massacred this ancient has-been, I say——"

"All right, Solly," Zagero interrupted. "Desist. There's not a press man within a thousand miles. Save the golden words for later."

"Just keepin' in practice, boy. Words are ten a penny. I've got thousands to spare——"

"T'ousands, Solly, t'ousands. You're slippin'. Now shut up."

Solly shut up, and I turned to the girl beside Zagero.

"Well, miss?"

"Mrs. Mrs. Dansby-Gregg. You may have heard of me?"

"No." I wrinkled my brow. "I'm afraid I haven't." I'd heard of her all right, and I knew now that I'd seen her name and picture a score of times among those of other wealthy unemployed and unemployable built up by the

tongue-in-the-cheek gossip columnists of the great national dailies into an ersatz London society whose frenetic, frequently moronic, and utterly unimportant activities were a source of endless interest to millions. Mrs. Dansby-Gregg, I seemed to recall, had been particularly active in the field of charitable activities, although perhaps less so in the production of the balance sheets.

She smiled sweetly at me.

"Well, perhaps it's not so surprising after all. You *are* a bit distant from the centre of things, aren't you?" She looked across to where the youngster with the broken collarbone was sitting. "And this is Fleming."

"Fleming?" This time the wrinkling of my brow was genuine. "You mean Helene?"

"Fleming. My personal maid."

"Your personal maid," I said slowly. I could feel the incredulous anger stirring inside me. "Your own maid? And you didn't even bother to volunteer to stay while I fixed her shoulder up?"

"Miss LeGarde did it first," she said coolly. "Why should I?"

"Quite right, Mrs. Dansby-Gregg, why should you?" Johnny Zagero said approvingly. He looked at her long and consideringly. "You might have got your hands dirty."

For the first time the carefully cultivated façade cracked, the smile stiffened mechanically and her colour deepened. Mrs. Dansby-Gregg made no reply, maybe she had none to make. People like Johnny Zagero never got close enough even to the fringes of her money-sheltered world for her to know how to deal with them.

"Well, that leaves just the two of you," I said hastily. The large Dixie colonel with the florid face and white hair was sitting next to the thin wispy-haired little Jew. They made an incongruous pair.

"Theodore Mahler," the old man said quietly. I waited, but he added nothing. A communicative character.

"Brewster," the other announced. He made a significant pause. "Senator Hoffman Brewster. Glad to help in any way I can, Dr. Mason."

"Thank you, Senator. At least I know who you are." Indeed, thanks to his magnificent flair for self-publicity, half the Western world knew who this outspoken, bitterly

—but fairly—anti-Communist, near-isolationist Senator from the Southwest was. "On a European tour?"

"You might say that." He had the politician's gift for investing even the most insignificant words with a statesmanlike consideration. "As chairman of one of our appropriation committees, I—well, let's call it a fact-finding tour."

"Wife and secretaries gone ahead by humble passenger steamer, I take it," Zagero said mildly. He shook his head. "That was a fearful stink your Congressional investigation boys raised recently about the expenses of U. S. Senators abroad."

"That was quite unnecessary, young man," Brewster said coldly. "And insulting."

"I believe it was," Zagero apologized. "Not really intended as such. Sorry, Senator." He meant it.

What a bunch, I thought despairingly, what a crowd to be stuck with in the middle of the Greenland ice plateau. A business executive, a musical-comedy star, a minister of religion, a boxer with an uninhibited if cultured tongue, his zany manager, a London society playgirl and her young German maid, a Senator, a taciturn old man, and and a near-hysterical hostess—or one apparently so. And a gravely injured pilot who might live or die. But willy-nilly I was stuck with them, stuck with the responsibility of doing my damnedest to get these people to safety, and the prospect appalled me. How on earth was I even to start to go about it, go about it with people with no arctic clothing to ward off the razor-edged winds and inhuman cold, people lacking in all knowledge and experience of arctic travel, even lacking, with two or three exceptions, the endurance and sheer muscular strength to cope with the savagery of the Greenland ice-cap? I couldn't even begin to guess.

But whatever else they were lacking in at that moment, it wasn't volubility: the life-giving warmth of the brandy had had the unfortunate side effect of loosening their tongues. Unfortunate, that is, from my point of view; they had a hundred and one questions to ask, and they seemed to think that I should have the answer to all of them.

More accurately, they had only half a dozen questions to ask, with a hundred and one variations of these. How was it possible for a pilot to veer so many hundreds of miles off course? Could the compasses have gone wrong?

Could the pilot have had a brain-storm? But then surely both the copilot and second pilot would have known something was wrong? Could the radio have been damaged? It had been a bitterly cold afternoon even when they had left Gander, was it possible that some of the flaps and controls had iced up, forcing them off course? But if this were the case, why hadn't someone come to warn them of the possibility of a crash?

I answered all of their questions as best I could but these answers were all to the same effect, that I didn't really know anything more about it than they did.

"But you said some time ago that you did, perhaps, know one thing more than we did." It was Corazzini who put the question, and he was looking at me shrewdly. "What was that, Dr. Mason?"

"What? Ah, yes, I remember now." I hadn't forgotten, but the way things were shaping up in my mind I'd had second thoughts about mentioning it, and had time to think up a plausible alternative. "I need hardly tell you that it's nothing that I actually *know*, Mr. Corazzini—how could I, *I* wasn't in the plane—just a reasonably informed guess in the absence of all other solutions. It's based on the scientific observations made here and in other IGY stations in Greenland, some of them over the past eighteen months.

"For over a year now, we have been experiencing a period of intense sunspot activity—that's one of the main interests of the IGY year—the most intense of this century. As you may know, sunspots, or, rather, the emission of solar particles from these sunspots, are directly responsible for the formation of the aurora borealis and magnetic storms, both of these being related to disturbances in the ionosphere. These disturbances can and, actually, almost invariably do interfere with radio transmission and reception, and when severe enough can completely disrupt all normal radio communications: and they can also produce temporary alterations of the earth's magnetism which knock magnetic compasses completely out of kilter." All of which was true enough as far as it went. "It would, of course, require extreme conditions to produce these effects; but we have been experiencing these lately, and I'm pretty sure that that's what happened with your plane. Where astral navigation—by the stars, that is—is impossible, as it was on a night like this, you are dependent on

radio and compasses as your two main navigational aids; if these are knocked out, what have you left?"

A fresh hubbub of talk arose at this, and, though it was quite obvious that most of them had only a vague idea what I was talking about, I could see that this idea was finding a fair degree of ready acceptance, satisfying them and fitting the facts as they knew them. I saw Joss gazing at me with an expressionless face, looked him in the eye for a couple of seconds, then turned away. As a radio operator, Joss knew even better than I that, though there was still some sunspot activity, it had reached its maximum in the previous year: and as an ex-aircraft radio operator, he knew that airliners flew on gyrocompasses, which neither sunspots nor magnetic storms could ever affect in the slightest.

"We'll have something to eat now." I cut through the buzz of conversation. "Any volunteers to give Jackstraw a hand?"

"Certainly." Marie LeGarde, as I might have guessed, was first on her feet. "I'm what you might call a mean cook. Lead me to it, Mr. Nielsen."

"Thanks. Joss, you might give me a hand to rig a screen." I nodded at the injured pilot. "We'll see what we can do for this boy here." The stewardess, unbidden, moved forward to help me also. I was on the point of objecting—I knew that this wasn't going to be nice—but I didn't want trouble with her, not yet. I shrugged my shoulders and let her stay.

Half an hour later, I had done all I could. It indeed hadn't been nice, but both the patient and the stewardess had stood it far better than I had expected. I was fixing and binding on a stiff leather helmet to protect the back of his head and Joss was strapping him down, inside the sleeping bag, to the stretcher, so that he couldn't toss around and hurt himself, when the stewardess touched my arm.

"What—what do you think now, Dr. Mason?"

"It's hard to be sure. I'm not a specialist in brain or head injuries, and even a specialist would hesitate to say. The damage may have penetrated deeper than we think. There may be haemorrhaging—it's often delayed in these cases."

"But if there's no haemorrhaging?" she persisted. "If

the damage is no worse than what you think, what do you see?"

"Fifty-fifty. I wouldn't have said so a couple of hours ago, but he seems to have quite astonishing powers of resistance and recuperation. Better than an even chance, I would say—if he had the warmth, the food, the skilled nursing he would have in a first-class hospital. As it is—well, let's leave it at that, shall we?"

"Yes," she murmured. "Thank you."

I looked at her, looked at the washed-out face, the faint blue circles forming under her eyes, and almost felt touched with pity. Almost. She was exhausted, and shivering with cold.

"Bed," I said. "You're dying for sleep and warmth, Miss—I'm so sorry, I forgot to ask your name."

"Ross. Margaret Ross."

"Scots?"

"Irish. Southern Irish."

"I won't hold it against you." I smiled. There was no answering smile from her. "Tell me, Miss Ross, why was the plane so empty?"

"We were an 'X' flight—an extra or duplicate charter for an overflow of passengers—out from London yesterday. Day before yesterday it is now, I suppose. We just stayed the night in Idlewild and had to return after we'd slept. The office phoned up people who had booked out on the evening plane, giving the chance of an earlier flight: ten of them accepted."

"I see. By the way, isn't it a bit unusual to have only one stewardess aboard? On a transatlantic flight, I mean?"

"I know. There's usually two or three—a steward and two stewardesses—or two stewards and a stewardess. But not for ten people."

"Of course. Hardly worth stewarding, you might say. Still," I went on smoothly, "it at least gives you time for the forty odd winks on these long night flights."

"That wasn't fair!" I hadn't been as clever as I thought, and her white cheeks were stained with red. "That's never happened to me before. Never!"

"Sorry, Miss Ross—it wasn't really meant as a dig. It doesn't matter anyhow."

"It does so matter!" Her extraordinary brown eyes were bright with unshed tears. "If I hadn't been asleep, I would have known what was going to happen. I could have

warned the passengers. I could have moved Colonel Harrison to a front seat facing the rear——"

"Colonel Harrison?" I interrupted sharply.

"Yes. The man in the back seat—the dead man."

"But he hadn't a uniform on when——"

"I don't care. That was his name on the passenger list. . . . If I'd known, he wouldn't be dead now—and Miss Fleming wouldn't have had her collarbone broken."

So that's what has been worrying her, I thought. That accounts for her strange distraught behaviour. And then a moment later I realised that it didn't account for it all—she had been behaving like that before she had known what had happened to any of the passengers. My slowly forming suspicions came back with renewed force: the lady would bear watching.

"You've nothing to reproach yourself with, Miss Ross. The captain must have been flying blind in the storm—and we're more than eight thousand feet up here. Probably he'd no knowledge of what was going to happen until the actual moment of crashing." In my mind's eye I saw again the doomed airliner, landing lights on, circling our cabin for at least ten minutes, but if Miss Ross had any such thing in *her* mind's eye, it was impossible for me to detect it. She had no idea at all—or she was an extraordinarily good actress.

"Probably," she murmured dully, "I don't know."

We had a hot and satisfying meal of soup, corned meat, potatoes, and vegetables—everything out of cans, but passable enough for all that. It was the last satisfying meal that our guests—or ourselves, for that matter—were likely to have for some considerable time to come, but I felt the moment unpropitious for breaking that sort of news. Time enough for that tomorrow—or later in the day, rather, for it was now already after three o'clock in the morning.

I suggested that the four women sleep in the top bunks—not from any delicacy of sentiment but because it was at least 25° warmer there than it was at ground level, and the proportional difference would increase as the night wore on after the stove had been put out. There were some halfhearted protests when they learnt that I intended to shut down the fire, but I didn't even bother arguing with them. Like all people who have lived for any length of time in the Arctic, I had an almost pathological dread of fire.

Margaret Ross, the stewardess, refused the offer of a bunk, and said she would sleep by the injured pilot, lest he should wake and want anything during the night. I had intended doing that myself, but I saw her mind was set on it, and, though I felt unaccountably uneasy about the idea, I raised no objection.

That left five empty bunks among six men—Jackstraw, Joss, and I could sleep reasonably enough in our furs. Inevitably, there was some magnanimous argument over the allocation of these bunks, but Corazzini settled the argument by producing a coin and beginning to toss for it. He himself lost in the end, but accepted defeat and the prospect of a cold uncomfortable night on the floor with amiable grace.

When they were all settled down, I picked up a torch and our weather log book, glanced at Joss, and made for the trap. Zagero turned in his bunk to look at me.

"What gives, Dr. Mason? Especially at this hour of night, what gives?"

"Weather reports, Mr. Zagero. That's why we're here, remember? And I'm already three hours late with these."

"Even tonight?"

"Even tonight. Continuity is the most important thing in weather observation."

"Sooner you than me." He shivered. "If it's only half as cold outside as it is in here . . ."

He turned his back, and Joss rose to his feet. He'd correctly interpreted my look, and I knew he was consumed with curiosity.

"I'll come with you, sir. Better have a last look at the dogs."

We didn't bother looking at either the dogs or the weather instruments. We went straight towards the tractor and huddled under the tarpaulin for what miserable shelter it could afford. True, the wind had eased, but it was colder than ever: the long winter night was beginning to close down on the ice-cap.

"It stinks," Joss said flatly. "The whole setup stinks."

"To high heaven," I agreed. "But it's finding out where the smell comes from that the trouble lies."

"This fairy tale of yours about magnetic storms and compasses and radios," he went on. "What was the idea?"

"I'd previously said I knew something they didn't. I

did. But when it came to the bit I knew I'd better keep it to myself. You know how this damnable cold slows up your mind—I should have realized it sooner."

"Realized what?"

"That I should keep it to myself."

"Keep what, for heaven's sake?"

"Sorry, Joss. Not trying to build up suspense. The reason none of them knew anything about the crash until after it had happened is that they were all doped. As far as I could see, all of them, or nearly all, were under the influence of some sleeping drug or narcotic."

In the darkness I could almost feel him staring at me. After a long time he said softly, "You wouldn't say this unless you were sure of it."

"I am sure of it. Their reactions, their dazed fumbling back to reality—and, above all, the pupils of their eyes. Unmistakable. Some kind of. sleeping tablet mixtures, of the fast-acting kind. What is known to the trade, I believe, as Mickey Finns."

"But——" Joss broke off. He was still trying to orientate his mind to this new line of thought. "But—they would be bound to know of it, to be aware that they had been doped, when they came to."

"In normal circumstances, yes. But they came to in what was, to say the least, most abnormal circumstances. I'm not saying that they didn't experience any symptoms of weakness, dizziness, and lassitude—they must have done—and what more natural than that they should ascribe any such unusual physical or mental symptoms to the effects of the crash. And what more natural, too, than that they should conceal these symptoms as best they could—and refrain from mentioning them? They would be ashamed to admit or discuss weaknesses—it's a very human trait to show to your neighbors the very best face you can put on in times of emergency or danger."

Joss didn't reply at once. The implications of all this, as I'd found out for myself, took no little time for digestion, so I let him take his time and waited, listening to the lost and mournful wailing of the wind, the rustling hiss of millions of ice spicules scudding across the frozen snow of the ice-cap, and my own thoughts were in keeping with the bleak misery of the night.

"It's not possible," Joss muttered at length. I could hear his teeth chattering with the cold. "You can't have some

maniac rushing around an aircraft cabin with a hypo needle or dropping fizz-balls into their gin and tonics. You think they were *all* doped?"

"Just about."

"But how could anyone——"

"A moment, Joss," I interrupted. "What happened to the RCA?"

"What?" The sudden switch caught him momentarily off-balance. "What happened—you mean, how did it go for a burton? I've no idea at all, sir. All I know is that these hinges couldn't have been knocked into the wall accidentally—not with radio and equipment weighing about 180 pounds sitting on top of them. Someone shoved them in. Deliberately."

"And the only person anywhere near it at the time was the stewardess, Margaret Ross. Everyone agreed on that."

"Yes, but why in the name of heaven should anyone want to do a crazy thing like that?"

"I don't know," I said wearily. "There's a hundred things I don't know. But I do know she did it. . . . And who's in the best position to spike the drinks of aircraft passengers?"

"Good God!" I could hear the sharp hissing intake of breath. "Of course. Drinks—or maybe the sweets they hand out at takeoff."

"No." I shook my head definitely in the darkness. "Barley sugar is too weak a covering-up agent to disguise the taste of a drug. Coffee, more likely."

"It must have been her," Joss said slowly. "It must have been. But—but she acted as dazed and abnormal as any of the others. More so, if anything."

"Maybe she'd reason to," I said grimly. "Come on, let's get back or we'll freeze to death. Tell Jackstraw when you get him by himself."

Inside the cabin, I propped the hatch open a couple of inches—with fourteen people inside, extra ventilation was essential. Then I glanced at the thermograph; it showed 48° below zero—80° of frost.

I lay down on the floor, pulled my parka hood tight to keep my ears from freezing, and was asleep in a minute.

4

Monday: 6 a.m.—6 p.m.

FOR THE first time in four months I had forgotten to set the alarm clock before I went to sleep, and it was late when I awoke, cold and stiff and sore all over from the uneven hardness of the wooden floor. It was still dark as midnight—two or three weeks had passed since the rim of the sun had shown above the horizon for the last time that year, and all the light we had each day was two or three hours' dim twilight round noon—but a glance at the luminous face of my watch showed me that it was nine-thirty.

I pulled the torch out from my parka, located the oil lamp, and lit it. The light was dim, scarcely reaching the far corners of the cabin, but sufficient to show the mummy-like figures lying huddled on the bunks and sprawled grotesquely across the floor, their frozen breath clouding before their faces and above their heads, then condensing on the cabin walls. The walls themselves were sheeted with ice which had extended far out across the roof, in places reaching the skylights, a condition largely brought about by the cold heavy air that had flooded down the opened hatchway during the night: the outside temperature registered on the drum at 54° below zero.

Not everyone was asleep, I could see that: most of them, I suspected, had slept but little, the numbing cold had seen to that: but they were as warm in their bunks as they would be anywhere else, and nobody showed any inclination to move. Things would be better when the cabin heated up a little.

I had trouble starting the stove—even though it was gravity fed from a tank above and to one side of it, the oil fuel had thickened up in the cold—but when it did catch it went with a roar. I turned both burners up to maximum, put on the water bucket that had lain on the floor all night and was now nearly a solid mass of ice, pulled on snow-mask and goggles and clambered up the hatchway to have a look at the weather.

The wind had died away almost completely—I'd known that from the slow and dispirited clacking of the anemometer cups—and the ice-drift, which at times could

reach up several hundred feet into the sky, was no more than gentle puffs of dust stirring lazily and spectrally, through the feeble beam of my torch, across the glittering surface of the ice-cap. The wind, such as it was, still held out of the east. The cold, too, was still intense, but more bearable than it had been on the previous night. In terms of the effect of cold on human beings in the Arctic, absolute temperature is far from being the deciding factor: wind is just as important—every extra mile per hour is equivalent to a one-degree drop in temperature—and humidity far more so. Where the relative humidity is high, even a few degrees below zero can become intolerable. But today the wind was light and the air dry. Perhaps it was a good omen. . . . After that morning, I never believed in omens again.

When I got below, Jackstraw was on his feet, presiding over the coffeepot. He smiled at me, and his face was as fresh and rested as if he'd had nine hours on a feather bed behind him. But then Jackstraw never showed fatigue or distress under any circumstances; his tolerance to sleeplessness and the most exhausting toil was phenomenal.

He was the only one on his feet, but far from the only one awake: of those in the bunks, only Senator Brewster was still asleep. The others were facing into the centre of the room, a few propped up on their elbows; all of them were shivering, and shivering violently, their faces blue and white and pinched with the cold. Some were looking at Jackstraw, wrinkling their noses in anticipation of the coffee, the pungent smell of which already filled the cabin; others were staring in fascination at the sight of the ice on the roof melting as the temperature rose, melting, dripping down to the floor in a dozen different places and there beginning to form tiny stalagmites of ice, building up perceptibly before their eyes; the temperature on the cabin floor must have been almost 40° lower than that at the roof.

"Good morning, Dr. Mason." Marie LeGarde tried to smile at me, but it was a pathetic effort, and she looked ten years older than she had on the previous night; she was one of the few with a sleeping bag, but even so she must have passed a miserable six hours, and there is nothing so exhausting to the human body as uncontrollable nightlong shivering, a vicious circle in which the more

one shivers the tireder one becomes, and the tireder the less resistance to cold and hence the more shivering. For the first time, I knew that Marie LeGarde was an old woman.

"Good morning." I smiled. "How did you enjoy your first night in your new home?"

"First night!" Even in the sleeping bag her movements of clasping her arms together and huddling her head down between her shoulders were unmistakable. "I hope to heaven that it's the last night. You run a very chilly establishment here, Dr. Mason."

"I'm sorry. Next time we'll keep watches and have the stove on all night." I pointed to the water splashing down to the floor. "The place is heating up already. You'll feel better when you have some hot coffee inside you."

"I'll never feel better again," she declared vigorously, but the twinkle was back in her eye. She turned to the young German girl in the next bunk. "And how do you feel this morning, my dear?"

"Better, thank you, Miss LaGarde." She seemed absurdly grateful that anyone should even bother to ask. "I don't feel a thing now."

"Means nothing," Miss LeGarde assured her cheerfully. "Neither do I. It's just that we're both frozen stiff. . . . And how did you survive the night, Mrs. Dansby-Gregg?"

"As you say, I survived." Mrs. Dansby-Gregg smiled thinly. "As Dr. Mason observed last night, this is not the Ritz. . . . That coffee smells delicious. Bring me a cup over, Fleming, will you?"

I picked up one of the cups Jackstraw had poured out and took it across to the young German girl who was struggling to unzip her sleeping bag with her one good arm. Her embarrassment and discomfort were obvious, but I knew I'd no option, the time to stop this nonsense was before ever it had a chance to start.

"You stay where you are, young lady, and drink this." She took the cup reluctantly, and I turned away. "You've surely forgotten, Mrs. Dansby-Gregg, that Helene has a broken collarbone?"

The expression on her face made it quite obvious that she hadn't forgotten, but she was no fool. The gossip columnists would murder her for this, if they got hold of it. In her circle, an outward if meaningless conformity to

the accepted mores and virtues of the day was a *sine qua non:* the knife between the ribs was permitted, but only to the accompaniment of the well-bred smile.

"I'm so sorry," she said sweetly. "I'd quite forgotten, of course." Her eyes were cold and hard, and I knew I had an enemy. That didn't worry me, but I found the very triviality of the whole thing irritating beyond measure when there were so many other and vastly more important things to talk about. But less than thirty seconds later we had forgotten all about it, even, I am sure, Mrs. Dansby-Gregg herself.

I was just handing Marie LeGarde a cup when someone screamed. It wasn't really loud, I suppose, but in that confined space it had a peculiarly piercing and startling quality. Marie LeGarde's arm jerked violently and the scalding contents of the coffee cup were emptied over my bare hand.

I hardly noticed the pain. It was Margaret Ross, the young stewardess, who had screamed, and she was now kneeling, half in and half out of her sleeping bag, one rigidly spread-fingered hand stretched out at arm's length before her, the other clasped over her mouth as she stared down at the figure lying near her on the floor. I pushed her to one side and sank onto my own knees.

In that bitter cold it was impossible to be any way sure, but I felt reasonably certain that the young pilot had been dead for several hours. I knelt there for a long time, just looking down at him, and when I finally rose to my feet I did so like an old man, a defeated old man, and I felt as cold, almost, as the dead man lying there. Everyone was wide awake now, everyone staring at me, the eyes of nearly all of them reflecting the superstitious horror which the presence of sudden and unexpected death brings to those who are unaccustomed to it. It was Johnny Zagero who broke the silence.

"He's dead, isn't he, Dr. Mason?" His low voice sounded a little husky. "That head injury——" His voice trailed off.

"Cerebral haemorrhage," I said quietly. "At least, as far as I can tell."

I lied to him. There was no shadow of doubt in my mind as to the cause of death. Murder. The young boy had been ruthlessly, cold-bloodedly murdered: lying there unconscious, gravely injured and with his hands strapped

helplessly to his sides, he had been smothered as easily, as surely, as one might smother a very little child.

We buried him out on the ice-cap, not fifty yards from the place where he had died. Bringing his stiffened body out of the hatch was a grisly job, but we managed it and laid him on the snow while we sawed out a shallow grave for him in the light of one of our torches. It was impossible to dig it out: that frozen ringing surface turned shovel blades as would a bar of iron: even at eighteen inches, the impacted nerve of snow and ice defied the serrated spearpoints of our special snow saws. But it was deep enough, and within a few hours the eternal icedrift would have smoothed its blanket across the grave, and we would never be able to find it again. The Rev. Joseph Smallwood murmured some sort of burial service over the grave, but his teeth chattered so violently in the cold and his voice was so low and indistinct and hurried that I could hardly catch a word of it. I thought wryly that heavenly forgiveness for this indecent haste was unlikely to be withheld; by all odds it must have been by far the coldest funeral service that Mr. Smallwood had ever conducted.

Back in the cabin, breakfast was a sketchy and silent affair. Even in the steadily rising warmth, the melancholy gloom was an almost palpable blanket under the dripping ceiling. Hardly anybody said anything, hardly anybody ate anything. Margaret Ross ate nothing, and when she finally set down her coffee cup, the contents had hardly been touched.

You're overdoing it, my dear, I thought viciously, you're carrying the grief-stricken act just a little too far: a little longer, and even the others will start wondering—and they have no suspicions at all, you damned inhuman little murderess.

For I had no suspicions either—only certainty. There was no doubt in my mind at all but that she had smothered the young pilot. She was only slightly built—but then it would have required only slight strength. Lashed to the cot as he had been, he wouldn't even have been able to drum his heels as he had died. I could feel my flesh crawl at the very thought.

She had killed him, just as she had broken the radio and doped the passengers. He had been killed, obviously, to keep him from talking—about what, I couldn't even begin to guess, any more than I could guess the reason for

the destruction of the radio, except that she clearly did not want the news of the crash broadcast to the outer world. But why in the world destroy the radio in the first place, surely she must have known how essential it was for survival? But then, after all, how was she even to have guessed that: she might well have thought that we had big fast tractors that could have whipped them down to the coast in a matter of a couple of days. For that matter, she might have thought she was a great deal nearer the coast than we really were—it was impossible, surely, that she had genuinely imagined that we were in Iceland. Or was it?

My thoughts were spinning now in an unbreakable circle. I knew I was getting nowhere, couldn't possibly get anywhere without some fresh information. As it was, I was only confusing myself the more with the passing of every moment. I gave it up then, promising myself that from now on I would watch her every possible minute of the day. I looked at her again, covertly, and she was staring vacantly at one of the glowing embers of the stove. Planning her next move, no doubt, planning it as cleverly as the last: asking me last night about the pilot's chances of survival, doubtless to decide whether he would have to be killed or could safely be left to die, had been clever enough, but insisting on sleeping next to the man she had meant to kill had been nothing short of brilliant. On that account alone no one would ever suspect her, even if the fact that it had been murder became known. And it wouldn't: I intended keeping that to myself. Or did she suspect I suspected? Heaven only knew. All I knew was that she must be playing for tremendous stakes. Or that she was mad.

It was just after eleven o'clock. Joss and Jackstraw were in a corner by themselves, stripping down the smashed transmitter, while the rest were grouped in a large semicircle round the stove. They looked wan and sickly and were sitting very still indeed. They looked unwell because the first greyness of the noon twilight was stealing through our rimed skylights and it did unflattering things to any complexion: and they sat so still because I had just explained to them in detail exactly what their situation was, and they didn't like it one little bit. Neither did I.

"Let's get this straight, Dr. Mason." Corazzini leant forward, his lean brown face intent and serious. He was

worried all right, but he wasn't scared. Corazzini didn't look as if he would scare easily: I had the idea that he would be a pretty good man to have around. "The others left here three weeks ago in a big modern Sno-Cat, and aren't expected back for another three weeks. You've overstayed your welcome on the ice-cap, you say, and things have been cut a trifle too fine—you had already started rationing yourselves to make your food spin out until they returned. With thirteen of us here, we have food for less than five days. Therefore we may be a couple of weeks without food before they return." He smiled, but there was no humor in it. "My arithmetic is correct, Dr. Mason?"

"It is. Unfortunately."

"How long would the tractor you have take to get to the coast?"

"There's no guarantee that it ever would. I told you, it's falling to pieces. I'll show you later. Maybe a week—given the right conditions. Any bad weather would stop it in its tracks."

"You doctors are all the same," Zagero drawled. "Always spreadin' sweet cheerfulness and light. Why don't we wait for the other machine to get back?"

"Indeed?" Senator Brewster said heavily. "And how do you propose to live in the meanwhile, Mr. Zagero?"

"People can live for longer than fourteen days without food, Senator," Zagero said cheerfully. "Think what it would do for that figure of yours. Tush, Senator, you surprise me. Too gloomy by half."

"Not in this case," I said flatly. "The Senator is right. Sure you can live a long time without food in normal conditions. You might even do it here—if you had proper day clothes and night coverings. You haven't—and how many of you have stopped shivering since you came here? Cold burns up your energy and depletes your reserves at a fantastic pace. Do you want me to list all the Arctic and Antarctic explorers—and Himalayan climbers—who have died within forty-eight hours of their food running out? And don't kid yourselves about the life-giving warmth of this cabin. The floor temperature is about zero now—and that's as hot as it is ever likely to get."

"You said there was a radio on your old tractor," Corazzini said abruptly. "What range does it have? Couldn't

you possibly reach your friends—or your Uplavnik base—with that?"

I nodded in Joss's direction. "There's the man to ask."

"I heard," Joss said without enthusiasm. "Do you think I'd be trying to salvage this wreckage, Mr. Corazzini, if there was any chance? It's an eight-watt transmitter with hand-cranked generator and battery receiver, it came out of the ark and was never meant for anything more than walkie-talkie use."

"But what is its range?" Corazzini persisted.

"Impossible to say." Joss shrugged. "You know how it is with transmission and reception. One day you can hardly pick up the B.B.C. a hundred miles away, another you can pick up a taxi-cab at twice the distance, if you have the right receiver. All depends on conditions. This one? Hundred miles, maybe—hundred fifty in perfect conditions. In the present conditions, you'd be better with a megaphone. I'll have a go with it this afternoon, perhaps. Might as well waste my time that way as any other." Joss turned away, and it was obvious that, as far as he was concerned, the subject was closed.

"Perhaps your friends will move within transmission range?" Corazzini suggested. "After all, you said they're not much more than a couple of hundred miles away."

"And I said they'll be staying there. They've set up their equipment and instruments and they won't move until they have to. They're too short of petrol for that."

"They can refuel here, of course?"

"That's no worry." I jerked a thumb towards the tunnel. "There's eight hundred gallons out there."

"I see." Corazzini looked thoughtful for a moment, then went on. "Please don't think I'm being annoyingly persistent. I just want to eliminate possibilities. I believe you have—or have had—a radio schedule with your friends. Won't they worry if they fail to hear from you?"

"Hillcrest—that's the scientist in charge—never worries about anything. And unfortunately, their own radio, a big one-range job, is giving trouble—they said a couple of days ago that the generator brushes were beginning to give out—and the nearest spares are here. If they can't raise us, they'll probably blame themselves. Anyway, they know we're safe as houses here. Why on earth should they worry?"

"So what do we do?" Solly Levin asked querulously. "Starve to death or start hikin'?"

"Succinctly and admirably put," Senator Brewster boomed. "In a nutshell, one might say. I propose we set up a small committee to investigate the possibilities——"

"This isn't Washington, Senator," I said mildly. "Besides, we already have a committee—Mr. London, Mr. Nielson, and myself."

"Indeed?" It seemed to be the Senator's favorite word, and long years of practice had matched it perfectly to the lift of his eyebrows. "You will remember, perhaps, that we have rather a personal stake in this also?"

"I'm unlikely to forget it," I said dryly. "Look, Senator, if you were adrift in a hurricane and were picked up by a ship, would you presume to advise the captain and his officers of the course they should adopt to survive the hurricane?"

"That's not the point." Senator Brewster puffed out his cheeks. "This is not a ship——"

"Shut up!" It was Corazzini who spoke, his voice quiet and hard, and I could suddenly understand why he had reached the top in his own particularly tough and competitive business. "Dr. Mason is absolutely right. This is their own back yard, and our lives should be left in the hands of experts. I take it you have already reached a decision, Dr. Mason?"

"I reached it last night. Joss—Mr. London—stays here to contact the others when they return. He will be left enough food for three weeks. We take the remainder, and we leave tomorrow."

"Why not today?"

"Because the tractor is at present unfit for winter travel, especially travel with ten passengers. It's still got the canvas hood on it that it had when we hauled stuff up from the coast. We have the prefabricated wooden sides and top that we need to arcticize it, plus the bunks and portable stove, but it will take several hours."

"We start on that now?"

"Soon. But first your luggage. We'll go out to the plane now, and bring that back."

"Thank goodness for that," Mrs. Dansby-Gregg said stiffly. "I was beginning to think I'd never see my stuff again."

"Oh, you will," I said. "Briefly."

"Just what do you mean by that?" she asked suspiciously.

"I mean that you'll all put on as many clothes as you're able to stagger about in," I said. "Then you have a small attaché case for your valuables, if you have any. The rest of the stuff we'll have to abandon. This is no Cook's tour. We'll have no room on the tractor."

"But—but I have clothes worth hundreds of pounds," she protested angrily. "Hundreds? Thousands would be nearer it. I have a Balenciaga alone that cost over five hundred pounds, not to mention——"

"How much do you reckon your own life is worth?" Zagero said shortly. He grinned. "Or maybe we should abandon you and save the Balenciaga. Better still, wear it on top of everything—you know, how the well-dressed woman leaves the ice-cap."

"Excruciatingly funny." She stared at him icily.

"Frequently fracture myself," Zagero agreed. "Can I give you a hand with the stuff, Doc?"

"You stay here, Johnny Zagero!" Solly Levin jumped up in agitation. "One little slip on that ice——"

"Calm yourself, calm yourself." Zagero patted his shoulder. "Merely goin' in a supervisory capacity, Solly. How about it, Doc?"

"Thanks. You want to come, Mr. Corazzini?" I could see he was already shrugging into a parka.

"I'd be glad to. Can't sit here all day."

"These cuts on your head and hands aren't sealed yet. They'll sting like the devil when you get out into this cold."

"Got to get used to it, haven't I? Lead the way."

The airliner, crouching in the snow like some great wounded bird, was faintly visible in the twilight now, seven or eight hundred yards away to the northeast, port wing-tip facing us, lying at exactly right angles to our line of sight. There was no saying how often we might have to go out there, the quasi daylight would be gone in another hour or so, and it seemed pointless to follow in darkness the zigzag route we had been compelled to make the previous night, so with help from Zagero and Corazzini I staked out a route, with bamboo markers about five yards apart, straight out to the plane. Some of the bamboos I fetched from the tunnel, but most of them were trans-

planted from the positions where they had been stuck the previous night.

Inside the plane itself it was as cold as the tomb and as dark as the tomb. One side of the plane was already thickly sheeted in drift ice, and all the windows were completely blanked off, made opaque, by rime frost. In the light of a couple of torches we ourselves moved around like spectres, our heads enveloped in the clouds of our frozen breath, clouds that remained hanging almost stationary above our heads. In the silence we could faintly hear the crackling of our breath in the superchilled air, followed by the curious wheezing noise that men make in very low temperatures when they are trying not to breathe too deeply.

"God, this is a ghastly place," Zagero said. He shivered, whether or not from cold it was impossible to say, and flashed his torch at the dead man sitting in the back seat. "Are we—are we going to leave them there, Doc?"

"Leave them?" I dumped a couple of attaché cases onto the pile we were making in the front seat. "What on earth do you mean?"

"I don't know, I thought—well, we buried the second officer this morning, and——"

"Bury them? The ice-cap will bury them soon enough. In six months' time this plane will have drifted over and be vanished forever. But I agree—let's get out of here. Give anyone the creeps."

As I made my way to the front I saw Corazzini, a doleful look on his face, shaking an ebonite and metal portable radio and listening to the rattling that came from inside.

"Another casualty?" I enquired.

"Afraid so." He twiddled some dials, without result. "Battery and mains model. A goner, Doc. Valves, I think. Still, I'll tote it along—cost me two hundred dollars two days ago."

"Two hundred?" I whistled. "You should have bought two. Maybe Joss can give you some valves. He's got dozens of spares."

"No good." Corazzini shook his head. "Latest transistor model—that's why it was so damn expensive."

"Take it with you," I advised. "It'll only cost you another two hundred to get it repaired in Glasgow. Listen, there's Jackstraw now."

We could hear the barking of dogs, and we lost no time in lowering the odds and ends down to Jackstraw, who loaded them on the sledge. In the forward hold we found about twenty-five suitcases of various sizes. We had to make two trips to bring all the stuff back, and on the second trip the rising wind was in our faces, already lifting the drift off the ice-cap. The climate on the Greenland plateau is one of the most unstable in the world, and the wind, which had all but stopped for a few hours, had now veered suddenly to the south. I didn't know what it presaged, but I suspected it wasn't anything good.

We were all chilled to the bone by the time the luggage had been lowered down into the cabin, and Corazzini looked at me, his eyes sober and speculative. He was shaking with cold, and his nose and one of his cheeks were white with frostbite, and when he pulled off one of his gloves the hand, too, was limp and white and dead.

"Is this what it's like to be exposed to this stuff for half an hour, Dr. Mason?"

"I'm afraid it is."

"And we're going to be out in this for maybe seven days and seven nights! Good God, man, we'll never make it! And the women, old Miss LeGarde, and Brewster and Mahler, they're no chickens either——" He broke off, wincing—and I was beginning to suspect that it would take a great deal to make this man wince—as the circulation returned under the influence of vigorous rubbing. "It's nothing short of suicide."

"It's a gamble," I corrected. "Staying here and starving to death is suicide."

"You put the alternative so nicely." He smiled, a smile that never touched the cold and determined eyes. "But I guess you're right at that."

Lunch that day was a bowl of soup and crackers, poor fare at any time, shockingly insufficient to stay and warm men who would have to work for the next few hours in these bitter subzero temperatures above. But there was no help for it: if it would take us a week to reach the coast, and in all optimism I couldn't count on less, rationing would have to start now.

In a matter of a couple of hours the thermometer reading had risen with astonishing speed—these dramatic temperature variations were commonplace on the ice-cap—and it was beginning to snow when we emerged from the

hatch and moved across to where the tractor lay. The rise in temperature flattered only to deceive: the south wind brought with it not only snow but a rapidly climbing humidity, and the air was almost unbearably chill.

We ripped off the covering tarpaulin—it cracked and tore, but I was no longer concerned with preserving it—and our guests saw for the first time the vehicle upon which all their lives were to depend. Slowly I played my torch over it—the dark shroud of the arctic night had already fallen across the ice-cap—and I heard the quick indrawn hiss of breath beside me.

"Drove it out when the museum attendant wasn't looking, I suppose." Corazzini kept his voice carefully expressionless. "Or did you just find it here—left over from the last ice age?"

"It is a bit old," I admitted. "Prewar. But all we can afford. The British government isn't quite so lavish with its IGY expenditure as the Russians and your people. Know it? It's the prototype, the ancestor of the modern arctic tractor."

"Never seen it before. What is it?"

"French. A 10-20 Citroën. Underpowered, narrow-tracked as you can see, and far too short for its weight. Lethal in crevasse country. Plods along fairly well on the frozen ice-cap, but you'd be better with a bicycle when there's any depth at all of new-fallen snow. But it's all we have."

Corazzini said no more. As the managing director of a factory producing some of the finest tractors in the world, I suppose his heart was too full to say any more. But his disappointment made no difference to his drive, his sheer unflagging determination. For the next few hours he worked like a demon. So, too, did Zagero.

Less than five minutes after we had started work we had to stop again to rig up a canvas screen, lashed to aluminium poles brought up from the tunnel, round three sides of the tractor: work had been impossible in that snow and knifelike wind that lanced through even the bulkiest layers of clothing—and most of them were now wearing so many that they could move only with difficulty—as if they were tissue paper. Behind this screen we placed a portable oil stove—the very illusion of warmth was better than nothing—two storm lanterns and the blowtorches without which we could have made no progress at all.

Even with this shelter, practically everyone had to go below from time to time to rub and pound life back into his freezing body; only Jackstraw and I, in our caribou furs, could stay up almost indefinitely. Joss was below all the afternoon: after spending a couple of hours trying to raise our field party on the tractor's emergency radio he gave it up and went doggedly back to work on the RCA.

Our first job, the removal of the hooped canvas hood, gave us some measure of the difficulty of the task that lay before us. The hood was secured by only seven bolts and nuts, but these had been in position for over four months now, were frozen solid, and took over an hour to remove: each set had to be frozen out separately by blowtorch before the heavy wrenches could get the nuts to turn.

Then came the assembly of the wooden body. This was in fifteen prefabricated pieces, three each for the floor, sides, roof, and front—the back was only a canvas screen. Each set of three pieces had to be brought out singly through the narrow hatchway before assembly, and it was the devil's own job, in that numbing cold and flickering semidarkness, to locate and line up the bolt holes in the wood with the matching holes in the connecting iron crosspieces. It took us well over an hour to assemble and fit the floor section alone, and it was beginning to look as if we would be there until midnight when Corazzini had the idea—and a brilliant one it seemed at the time—of assembling the various sections in the comparative warmth and brightness of the cabin, sliding the completed piece out vertically into the food and fuel tunnel, sawing a long narrow slit through the snow roof, which was no more than a foot thick in the middle, and hauling the sections up from below.

After this we made rapid progress. By five o'clock the entire body shell was completed and, with the end in sight less than a couple of hours away, everyone worked more furiously than ever. Most of them were unskilled, ham-handed, and completely unused to any physical work at all, far less work of this cruel, exacting nature, but my opinion of them was rising all the time. Corazzini and Zagero, especially, were tireless, and Theodore Mahler, the silent little man whose entire conversational range so far had been limited to "Yes," "No," "Please," and "Thank you," was indefatigable, completely selfless and

uncomplaining, driving his slight body to lengths of which I would never have believed it capable. Even the Senator, the Reverend Smallwood, and Solly Levin did what they could, as best they could, trying their best to hide their misery and their pain. By this time everyone, even Jackstraw and myself, were shaking almost uncontrollably with the cold so that our hands and elbows rat-tat-tatted like machine guns against the wooden sides of the tractor: and our hands themselves, through constant contact with metal, were in a shocking state, puffed and bleeding and blistered, the mittens continuously filled with lumps and slivers of ice that never melted.

We had just installed the four collapsible bunks and were fitting the stovepipe through its circular hole in the roof when someone called me. I jumped down and all but knocked over Marie LeGarde.

"You shouldn't be out here," I scolded. "It's far too cold for you, Miss LaGarde."

"Don't be silly, Peter." I could never bring myself to call her 'Marie,' though she had asked me to several times. "I have to get used to it, don't I? Would you come below for a moment or two, please?"

"Why? I'm busy."

"But not indispensable," she retorted. "I want you to have a look at Margaret."

"Margaret—oh, the stewardess. What does she want?"

"Nothing. It's I who want it. Why are you so hostile towards her?" she asked curiously. "It's not like you—at least, I don't think it is. She's a fine girl."

"What does the fine girl want?"

"What in the world's got into you? Why—oh, forget it. I'm not going to fight with you. Her back hurts—she's in considerable pain. Come and see it, please."

"I offered to see it last night. If she wants me now, why doesn't she come and ask me?"

"Because she's scared of you, that's why," she said angrily. She stamped a foot in the frozen snow. "Will you go or not?"

I went. Below, I stripped off my gloves, emptied the ice out of them, and washed my blistered, bleeding hands in disinfectant. I saw Marie LeGarde's eyes widen at the sight of my hands, but she said nothing; maybe she knew I wasn't in the mood for condolences.

I rigged up a screen in the corner of the room remote

from the table where the women had been gathering and dividing out the remaining food supplies, and had a look at Margaret Ross's back. It was a mess, all right, a great ugly blue and purpling bruise from the spine to the left shoulder: in the centre, just below the shoulder blade, was a deep jagged cut, which looked as if it had been caused by a heavy blow from some triangular piece of sharp metal. Whatever had caused it had passed clean through her tunic and blouse.

"Why didn't you show me this yesterday?" I asked coldly.

"I—I didn't want to bother you," she faltered.

Didn't want to bother me, I thought grimly. Didn't want to give yourself away, you mean. In my mind's eye I had a picture of the pantry where we had found her, and I was almost certain now that I could get the proof that I needed. Almost, but not quite. I'd have to go to check.

"Is it very bad?" She twisted round, and I could see there were tears in the brown eyes from the pain of the disinfectant I was rubbing on none too gently.

"Bad enough," I said shortly. "How did you get this?"

"I've no idea," she said helplessly. "I just don't know, Dr. Mason."

"Perhaps we can find out."

"Find out? Why? What does it matter?" She shook her head wearily. "I don't understand, I really don't. What *have* I done, Dr. Mason?"

It was magnificent, I had to admit. I could have hit her, but it was magnificent.

"Nothing, Miss Ross. Just nothing at all." By the time I had pulled on my parka, gloves, goggles, and mask she was fully dressed, staring at me as I climbed up the steps and out through the hatch.

The snow was falling quite heavily now, gusting in swirling ghostly flurries through the pale beam of my torch: it seemed to vanish as it hit the ground, freezing as it touched, or scudding smokelike over the frozen surface with a thin rustling sound. But the wind was at my back, the bamboo markers stretched out in a dead straight line ahead, never less than two of them in the beam of my torch, and I had reached the crashed plane in five or six minutes.

I jumped for the windscreen, hooked my fingers over

the sill, hauled myself up with some difficulty, and wriggled my way into the control cabin. A moment later I was in the stewardess's pantry, flashing my torch around.

On the after bulkhead was a big refrigerator, with a small hinged table in front of it, and at the far end, under the window, a hinged box cover over what might have been a heating unit or sink or both. I didn't bother investigating, I wasn't interested. What I was interested in was the for'ard bulkhead, and I examined it carefully. It was given up entirely to the small closed doors of little metal lockers let in flush to the wall—food containers, probably—and there wasn't a single metal projection in the entire wall, nothing that could possibly account for the wound in the stewardess's back. And if she had been here at the moment of impact, that was the wall she must have been flung against. The inference was inescapable—she must have been elsewhere at the time of the crash. I remembered now, with chagrin, that I hadn't even bothered to see whether or not she was conscious when we'd first found her lying on the floor.

Across the passage in the radio compartment I found what I was looking for almost immediately—I'd a pretty good idea where to look. The thin sheet metal at the top left-hand corner of the radio cabinet was bent almost half an inch out of true: and it didn't require any microscope to locate or forensic expert to guess at the significance of the small dark stain and the fibres of navy-blue cloth clinging to the corner of the smashed set. I looked inside the set itself, and now that I had time to spare it more than a fleeting glance it was abundantly clear to me that the wrenching away of the face-plate didn't even begin to account for the damage that had been done to the set: it had been systematically and thoroughly wrecked.

If ever there was a time when my thoughts should have been racing it was then, but the plain truth is that they weren't. It was abominably cold inside the chilled metal of that dead plane, and my mind was sluggish, but even so I knew that this time I couldn't be wrong about what had happened. I could see now why the second officer had sent out no distress messages. I could see now why he had almost certainly been sending out his regular "on route—on time" checks to base. Poor devil, he hadn't had much option—not with the stewardess sitting there with a gun

on him. It must have been a gun. It was no consolation at all that the crash had caught her unprepared.

A gun! Gradually, ever so gradually, in infuriating slow-motion process, thoughts were beginning to click into place in my numbed mind. Whoever had landed that plane, landed it so skillfully into the blinding maelstrom of last night's blizzard, it hadn't been a dead man. I straightened, walked forward into the control cabin, and shone my torch on the dead captain of the plane. As I'd noticed when I'd first seen him, he appeared to be completely unmarked, and I don't know whether it was some unconscious process of logical reasoning or some strange instinct that made me right away lift up the crackling ice-stiffened tunic jacket far enough to see the black powder-ringed bullet hole in the middle of the spine. I had been expecting it, I had been uncannily certain that I would find such a hole, and find it just there: but my mouth was suddenly dry, dry as if I had drunk nothing for days, and my heart was thudding heavily in my chest.

I lowered the jacket, pulled it down into position, turned away, and walked slowly towards the rear of the plane. The man the stewardess had called Colonel Harrison was still sitting as I had left him, propped up stiffly in a corner, as stiffly as he would remain there for heaven only knew how many frozen centuries to come.

The jacket was fastened by a central button. I undid it, saw nothing except a curious thin leather strap running across the chest, undid a shirt button, another, and there it was, the same deadly little hole, the same powder-ringed evidence of point-blank firing staining the whiteness of the singlet. But in this case the powder marks were concentrated on the upper part of the ring, showing that the pistol had been directed in a slightly downwards angle. On a hunch, but still like a man in a dream, I eased him forward, and there, less like a bullet hole in the jacket than an inconsequential rip one might easily overlook, was the point of exit, matched by an equally tiny tear in the padding of the upholstered seat behind. At the time, that carried no special significance for me. Heaven knows that I was in no mental frame of mind at the moment, anyway, to figure anything out. I was like an automaton, the movements of which were controlled by something outside me. I felt nothing at the time, not even horror at the

hideous thought that the man's neck might well have been cold-bloodedly broken after death to conceal its true cause.

The leather strap across the man's chest led to a felt-covered holster under the arm. I took out the little dark snub-nosed automatic, pressed the release switch, and shook the magazine out from the base of the grip. It was an eight-shot clip, full. I replaced it and shoved the gun into the inside pocket of my parka.

There were two inside breast pockets in the jacket. The lefthand one held another clip of ammunition, in a thin leather case. This, too, I pocketed. The right-hand pocket held only passport and wallet. The picture on the passport matched the face, and it was made out in the name of Lieutenant Colonel Robert Harrison. The wallet contained little of interest—a couple of letters with an Oxford post-mark, obviously from his wife; British and American currency notes; and a long cutting that had been torn from the top half of a page of the New York *Herald Tribune*, with a mid-September datemark, just over two months previously.

For a brief moment I studied this in the light of my torch. There was a small, indistinct picture of a railway smash of some kind, showing carriages on a bridge that ended abruptly over a stretch of water, with boats beneath and I realized that it was some kind of follow-up story on the shocking train disaster of about that time when a loaded commuters' train at Elizabeth, New Jersey, had plunged out over an opened span of the bridge into the waters of Newark Bay. I was in no mood for reading it then but I had the obscure, unreasonable idea that it might be in some way important.

I folded it carefully, lifted up my parka, and thrust the paper into my inside pocket, along with the gun and the spare ammo clip. It was just at that moment that I heard the sharp metallic sound coming from the front of the dark and deserted plane.

5

Monday: 6 p.m.—7 p.m.

FOR MAYBE five seconds, maybe ten, I sat there without moving, as rigid and motionless as the dead man by my

side, bent right arm frozen in the act of folding the newspaper cutting into my parka pocket. Looking back on it, I can only think that my brain had been half-numbed from too long exposure to the cold, that the shock of discovery of the savagely murdered men had upset me more than I would admit even to myself, and that the morguelike atmosphere of that chill metal tomb had affected my normally unimaginative mind to a degree quite unprecedented in my experience. Or maybe it was a combination of all three that triggered open the floodgates to the atavistic racial superstitions that lurk deep in the minds of all of us, the nameless dreads that can in a moment destroy the tissue veneer of our civilization as if it had never been, and send the adrenalin pumping crazily into the bloodstream. However it was, I had only one thought in mind at that moment, no thought, rather, but an unreasoning blood-freezing certainty that one of the dead pilots or the flight engineer had somehow risen from his seat and was walking back towards me. Even yet I can remember the frenzy of my wild, frantic hope that it wasn't the copilot, the man who had been sitting in the right-hand pilot's seat when the telescoping nose of the airliner had folded back on him, mangling him out of all human recognition.

Heaven only knows how long I might have sat there, petrified in this superstitious horror, had the sound from the control cabin not repeated itself. But again I heard it, the same metallic scraping sound as someone moved around in the darkness among the tangled wreckage of the flight deck, and as the torch of an electric switch can turn a room from pitch darkness to the brightness of daylight, so this second sound served to recall me, in an instant, from the thrall of superstition and panic to the world of reality and reason, and I dropped swiftly to my knees behind the high padded back of the seat in front of me, for what little shelter it offered. My heart was still pounding, the hairs still stiff on the back of my neck, but I was a going concern again, my mind beginning to race under the impetus invariably provided by the need for self-preservation.

And that self-preservation entered very acutely into it I did not for a moment doubt. A person who had killed three times to achieve her ends—I had no doubt at all as to the identity of the person in the control cabin, only the

stewardess had seen me leave for the plane—and protect her secret wouldn't hesitate to kill a fourth. And she knew her secret was no longer a secret, not while I lived. I had stupidly made my suspicions plain to her. And not only was she ready to kill, but she had the means to kill—of the fact that she carried a gun and was murderously ready to use it I'd had grisly evidence in the past few minutes. Nor need she hesitate to use it: apart from the fact that falling snow had a peculiarly blanketing effect on all sound, the south wind would carry the crack of a pistol shot away from the cabin.

Then something snapped inside my mind and I was all of a sudden fighting mad. Perhaps it was the thought of the four dead men—five, including the copilot—perhaps it was the inevitable reaction from my panic-stricken fear of a moment ago, and perhaps, too, it had no little to do with the realization that I, too, had a gun. I brought it out from my pocket, transferred the torch to my left hand, jumped up, pressed the torch button, and started running down the aisle.

It was proof enough of my utter inexperience in this murderous game of hide and seek that it was not until I was almost at the door at the forward end of the cabin that I remembered how easy it would have been for anyone to crouch down behind the backs of one of the rearward-facing front seats and shoot me at point-blank range as I passed. But there was no one there and as I plunged through the door I caught a fleeting glimpse of a dark muffled figure, no more than a featureless silhouette in the none too powerful beam of my torch, wriggling out through the smashed windscreen of the control cabin.

I brought up my automatic—the thought that I could be indicted on a murder charge for killing a fleeing person, no matter how criminal a person, never entered my mind—and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. I squeezed the trigger again, and before I remembered the existence of such a thing as a safety catch the windscreen was no more than an empty frame for the thickening snow that swirled greyly in the darkness beyond, and I plainly heard the thud of feet hitting the ground.

Cursing my stupidity, and again oblivious of the perfect target I was presenting, I leaned far out of the window. Again I was lucky, again I had another brief sight of the

figure, this time scurrying round the tip of the left wing before vanishing into the snow and the dark.

Three seconds later I was on the ground myself. I landed awkwardly but picked myself up at once and skirted round the wing, pounding after the fleeting figure with all the speed I could muster in the hampering bulkiness of my furs.

She was running straight back to the cabin, following the line of the bamboo sticks, and I could hear the thudding of feet in the frozen snow and see the wildly erratic swinging of a torch, the beam one moment pooling whitely on the ground beside the flying feet, the next reaching ahead to light up the bamboo line. She was moving swiftly, much more so than I would have thought her capable of doing, but nevertheless I was steadily overhauling her when suddenly the torch beam ahead curved away in a new direction, as the runner angled off into the darkness, about 45° to the left. I turned after her, still following both my sight of the torch and sound of the feet. Thirty yards, forty, fifty—then I stopped and stood very still indeed. The torch ahead had gone out and I could hear nothing at all.

For the second time that night I cursed my unthinking folly. What I should have done, of course, was to carry straight on back to the cabin and await the moment she turned up there, as she inevitably must: no person could hope to survive for any great length of time, without shelter of some kind, in the deadly cold of that arctic night.

But it wasn't too late yet. The wind had been blowing almost directly in my face as I had been running: all I had to do was walk back, keeping it on my left cheek, and I would be bound to hit the line of bamboos at right angles, and the chances of my passing unwittingly between two of them, with the light of my torch to help me, did not exist. I turned, took one step, then two, then halted in my tracks.

Why had I been lured out here away from the bamboo line? Not so that she could thereby escape me—she couldn't do it that way. As long as we both lived, we were both utterly dependent on the cabin and would have to meet there sooner or later.

As long as we both lived! God, what a fool I was, what a veriest amateur at this game. The only way she could

escape me, really and permanently escape me, was if I no longer lived. I could be shot down here and no one would ever know. And as she had stopped running before I had and been first to switch out her torch, she must have a much better idea of my position than I of hers. And these two rash, incautious steps I had taken had given her a new and even more accurate bearing on my position. Perhaps she was only feet away now, lining her gun up for the kill.

I switched on my torch and whirled round in a complete circle. Nobody there, nothing to be seen at all. Only the frozen feathers of the snow brushing my cheeks in the blackness of the night, the low moaning lament of the soughing south wind, and the faint rustle of ice spicules brushing their blind way across the iron-hard surface of the ice-cap.

Swiftly, softly, I moved half a dozen long steps to my left. My torch was out now, I'd been crazy ever to switch it on in the first place. Nothing could have been better calculated to betray my position—the light of a torch, seen head on, can be seen at twenty times the furthest distance that its beam will reach. I prayed that a flurry of snow had hidden it.

Where would the attack come from—downwind, so that I could see nothing in that blinding snow, or upwind, so that I could hear nothing? Downwind, I decided—on the ice-cap one could move as silently as on a tar-macadam road. The better to hear, I pulled the parka hood off my head: the better to see, I slipped up my goggles and stared out unwinkingly under my visored hands.

Five minutes passed, and nothing happened—if, that is, the freezing of my ears and forehead could be called nothing. Still no sound, still no sight of anything: the strain, the nerve-wracking expectancy could not be borne for much longer. Slowly, with infinite care, I moved off in a circle of about twenty yards' diameter, but I saw nothing, heard nothing, and so well adjusted now were my eyes to the darkness, so well attuned my ears to the ice-cap's mournful symphony of sound, that I would have sworn that had there been anyone there to be seen or heard, I would have seen or heard them. It was as if I were alone on the ice-cap.

And then the appalling truth struck me—I was alone. I

was alone, I realized in a belated and chilling flash of understanding, because shooting me would have been a stupid way of disposing of both myself and my dangerous knowledge—the discovery of a bullet-riddled body on the ice-cap during the brief hours of daylight would have provoked a hundred questions and suspicions. Much more desirable, from the killer's point of view, would be my dead body without a trace of violence. Even the most experienced man can get lost in a snowstorm on the ice-cap.

And I was lost. I knew I was lost, I was convinced of it even before I got the wind on my left and walked back to the line of bamboo poles. The bamboos were no longer there. I made a wide circle, but still I found nothing. For at least twenty yards back in the direction of the plane, and probably all the way towards the cabin, the poles had been removed, that slender series of markers, which alone meant all the difference between safety and being irrecoverably lost on the ice-cap, were no longer there. I was lost, really and truly lost.

For once, that night, I didn't panic. It wasn't just that I knew that panic would be the end of me. I was consumed by a cold fury that I should have been so ignominiously tricked, so callously left to die. But I wasn't going to die. I couldn't even begin to guess what the tremendously high stakes must be in the murderous game that this incredibly ruthless, wickedly deceptive gentle-faced stewardess was playing, but I swore to myself that I wasn't going to be one of the pawns that were going to be brushed off the table. I stood still, and took stock.

The snow was increasing now, thickening by the minute, building up into a blizzard with visibility cut down to a few feet: the yearly precipitation on the ice-cap was no more than seven or eight inches, and it was just my evil luck that it should fall so heavily that night. The wind was southerly, or had been, but in that fickle Greenland climate there was no knowing what minute it might back or veer. My torch was failing: continual use plus the cold had left it with a pale yellowish beam that reached not much more than a few yards; but that was the limit of visibility anyway, even downwind. The plane, I calculated, was not much more than a hundred yards away, the cabin six hundred. My chances of stumbling upon the latter, flush as it almost was with the surface of the ice-cap, were no

better than one in a hundred. But my chances of finding the plane, or what came to the same thing, the great quarter-mile trench that it had gouged out in the frozen snow when it had crash-landed, were far better than even: it was impossible that it could have already been filled in with drift. I turned until I had the wind over my left shoulder and started walking.

I reached the deep furrow in the snow inside a minute—I'd switched off my torch to conserve the battery but my stumble and heavy fall as I went over the edge was intimation enough—turned right and reached the plane in thirty seconds. I suppose I might possibly have lasted out the night inside the wrecked fuselage but such was my singleness of purpose at the moment that the thought never even occurred to me. I walked round the wing, picked up the first of the bamboos in the dim beam of my torch, and started to follow them.

There were only five altogether. After that, nothing. Every one of the others had been removed. These five, I knew, pointed straight towards the cabin and all I had to do was to keep shifting the last of the five to the front, lining it up straight with the others in the light of my torch, and it would be bound to bring me out to the cabin. Or so I thought, for perhaps ten seconds. But it was a task that really required two people to achieve anything like accuracy: what with that, the feebleness of my rapidly dying torch, and the hopeless visibility, I couldn't be accurate within two or three degrees at the least. That seemed a trifle, but when I stopped and worked it out I discovered that, over the distance, even one degree out would have put me almost forty feet off course. On a night like that, I could pass by the cabin ten feet away and never see it. There were less laborious means of committing suicide.

I picked up the five sticks, returned to the plane, and walked along the furrowed trench till I came to the depression where the plane had touched down. The 250-foot line of the antenna, I knew, was roughly four hundred yards away, just a little bit south of west—slightly to my left, that was, as I stood with my back to the plane. I didn't hesitate. I strode out into the darkness, counting my steps, concentrating on keeping the wind a little more than on my left cheek but not quite full-face. After four hundred long paces I stopped and pulled out my torch.

It was quite dead—the dull red glow from the filament didn't even register on my glove six inches away, and the darkness was as absolute as it can ever become on the ice-cap. I was a blind man moving in a blind world, and all I had left to me was the sense of touch. For the first time fear came to me, and I all but gave way to an almost overpowering instinct to run. But there was no place to run to.

I pulled the drawstring from my hood and with numbed and clumsy hands lashed together two of the bamboos to give me a stick seven feet in length. A third bamboo I thrust into the snow, then lay down flat, the sole of my boot touching it while I described a complete circle, flailing out with my long stick into the darkness. Nothing. At the full stretch of my body and the stick I stuck the last two bamboos into the snow, one upwind, the other downwind from the central bamboo, and described horizontal flailing circles round both of these. Again, nothing.

I gathered up the bamboos, walked ten paces more, and repeated the performance. I had the same luck again—and again and again. Five minutes and seventy paces after I had stopped for the first time I knew I had completely missed the antenna line and was utterly lost. The wind must have backed or veered, and I had wandered far off my course: and then came the chilling realization that if that were so I had no idea now where the plane lay and could never regain it. Even had I known the direction where it lay, I doubted now whether I could have made my way back anyway, not because I was tired but because my only means of gauging direction was the wind in my face, and my face was now so completely numbed that I could no longer feel anything. I could hear the wind, but I couldn't feel it.

Ten more paces, I told myself, ten more and then I must turn back. Turn back where, a mocking voice seemed to ask me, but I ignored it and stumbled on with leaden-foot steps, doggedly counting. And on the seventh step I walked straight into one of the big antenna poles, staggered with the shock, all but fell, recovered, grabbed the pole, and hugged it as if I would never let it go. I knew at that moment what it must be like to be condemned to death and then live again, it was the most wonderful feeling I have ever experienced. And then the

relief and the exultation gradually faded and anger returned to take its place, a cold, vicious, all-consuming anger of which I would never have believed myself capable.

With my stick stretched up and running along the rimed antenna cable to guide me, I ran all the way back to the cabin. I was vaguely surprised to see shadows still moving in the lamplit screen that surrounded the tractor—it was almost impossible for me to realize that I had been gone no more than thirty minutes—but I passed by, opened the hatch, and dropped down into the cabin.

Joss was still in the far corner, working on the big radio, and the four women were huddled close round the stove. The stewardess, I noticed, wore a parka—one she had borrowed from Joss—and was rubbing her hands above the flame.

"Cold, Miss Ross?" I enquired solicitously. At least, I had meant it to sound that way, but even to myself my voice sounded hoarse and strained.

"And why shouldn't she be, Dr. Mason?" Marie LeGarde snapped. "Dr. Mason," I noted. "She's just spent the last fifteen minutes or so with the men on the tractor."

"Doing what?"

"I was giving them coffee." For the first time the stewardess showed some spirit. "What's so wrong with that?"

"Nothing," I said shortly. Takes you a damned long time to pour a cup of coffee, I thought savagely. "Most kind, I'm sure." Massaging my frozen face, I walked away into the food tunnel, nodding to Joss. He joined me immediately.

"Somebody just tried to murder me out there," I said without preamble.

"Murder you!" Joss stared at me for a long moment, then his eyes narrowed. "I'll believe anything of this lot."

"Meaning?"

"I was looking for some of the radio spares a moment ago—a few of them seem to be missing, but that's not the point. The spares, as you know, are next to the explosives. Someone's been tampering with them."

"The explosives!" I had a momentary vision of some maniac placing a stick of gelignite under the tractor. "What's missing?"

"Nothing, that's what so damned funny. I checked. All

the explosives are there. But they're scattered everywhere, all mixed up with the fuses and detonators."

"Who's been in here this afternoon?"

He shrugged. "Who hasn't?"

It was true enough. Everyone had been coming and going there all afternoon and evening, the men for a hundred and one pieces of equipment for the tractor body, the women for food and stores. And, of course, our primitive toilet lay at the furthest end of the tunnel.

"What happened to you, sir?" Joss asked quietly.

I told him, and watched his face tighten till the mouth was a thin white line in the dark face. Joss knew what it meant to be lost on the ice-cap.

"The murderous, cold-blooded she-devil," he said softly. "We'll have to nail her, sir, we'll have to, or God only knows who's next on her list. But—but won't we have to have proof or confession or something? We can't just——"

"I'm going to get both," I said. The bitter anger still dominated my mind to the exclusion of all else. "Right now."

I walked out of the tunnel and across the cabin to where the stewardess was sitting.

"We've overlooked something, Miss Ross," I said abruptly. "The food in your galley on the plane. It might make all the difference between life and death. How much is there?"

"In the galley? Not very much, I'm afraid. Only odds and ends for snacks, if anyone was hungry. It was a night flight, Dr. Mason, and they had already had their evening meal."

Followed by a very special brand of coffee, I thought grimly. "Doesn't matter how little it is," I said. "It might be invaluable. I'd like you to come and show me where it is."

"Can't it wait?" The protest came from Marie LeGarde. "Can't you see that the poor girl is chilled to death?"

"Can't you see that I am too?" I snapped. It was a measure of the mood I was in when I could bring myself to speak like that to Marie LeGarde. "Coming, Miss Ross?"

She came. I was taking no chances this time, so I carried with me the big searchlight with its portable battery and another torch, and gave the stewardess an armful

of bamboos. When we had reached the top of the hatchway steps she waited for me to lead the way, but I told her to walk in front. I wanted to watch her hands.

The snow was easing now, the wind dropping and visibility just a little improved. We walked the length of the antenna line, angled off a little way north of east, setting down an occasional bamboo, and were at the plane within ten minutes of leaving the cabin.

"Right," I said. "You first, Miss Ross. Up you go."

"Up?" She turned towards me, and, though the big searchlight lying on the ground was no help in letting me see the expression on her face, the puzzled tone of her voice was exactly right. "How?"

"Same way as you did before," I said harshly. My anger was almost out of control now, I couldn't have restrained myself any longer. "Jump for it."

"The same way——" She stopped in mid-sentence and stared at me. "What do you mean?" Her voice was only a whisper.

"Jump for it," I said implacably.

She turned away slowly, and jumped. Her fingers didn't come within six inches of the sill. She tried again, got no nearer, and on her third attempt I boosted her so that her hands hooked over the sill. She hung there for a moment, pulled herself up a few inches, cried out, and fell heavily to the ground. Slowly, dazedly, she picked herself up and looked at me. A splendid performance.

"I can't do it," she said huskily. "You can see I can't. What are you trying to do to me? What's wrong?" I didn't answer, and she rushed on. "I—I'm not staying here. I'm going back to the cabin."

"Later." I caught her arm roughly as she made to move away. "Stand there where I can watch you." I jumped up, wriggled inside the control cabin, reached down and pulled her up after me, none too gently, and without a word I led her straight into the galley.

"The Mickey Finn dispensary," I observed. "An ideal quiet spot it is, too." She had her mask off now, and I held up my hand to forestall her as she opened her mouth to speak. "Dope, Miss Ross. But of course you wouldn't know what I'm talking about."

She stared at me unblinkingly, made no answer.

"You were sitting here when the plane crashed," I went on. "Possibly on this little stool here? Right?"

She nodded, again without speaking.

"And, of course, were flung against this front bulkhead here. Tell me, Miss Ross, where's the metal projection that tore this hole in your back?"

She stared at the lockers, then looked slowly back at me.

"Is—is that why you've brought me here——"

"Where is it?" I demanded.

"I don't know." She shook her head from side to side and took a backward step. "What does it matter. And—and dope—what *is* the matter? *Please.*"

I took her arm without a word and led her through to the radio cabin. I trained the torch beam onto the top of the radio cabinet.

"Blood, Miss Ross. And some navy-blue fibres. The blood from the cut on your back, the fibres from your tunic. Here's where you were sitting—or standing—when the plane crashed. Pity it caught you off balance. But at least you managed to retain your hold on your gun." She was gazing at me now with sick eyes, and her face was a mask carved from white papier-mâché. "Missed your cue, Miss Ross—your next line of dialogue was 'What gun?' I'll tell you—the one you had lined up on the second officer. Pity you hadn't killed him then, isn't it? But you made a good job of it later. Smothering makes such a much less messy job, doesn't it?"

"Smothering?" She had to try three times before she got the word out.

"On cue, on time," I approved. "Smothering. When you murdered the second officer in the cabin last night."

"You're mad," she whispered. Her lips, startlingly red against the ashen face, were parted and the brown eyes enormous with fear and sick despair. "You're mad," she repeated unsteadily.

"Crazy as a loon," I agreed. Again I caught her arm, pulled her out onto the flight deck, and trained my flashlight on the captain's back. "You wouldn't, of course, know anything about this either." I leaned forward, jerked up the jacket to expose the bullet hole in the back, then stumbled and all but fell as she gave a long sigh and crumpled against me. Instinctively I caught her, lowered her to the floor, cursed myself for having fallen for the fainting routine even for a second, and ruthlessly stabbed

a stiff couple of fingers into the solar plexus, just below the breastbone.

There was no reaction, just no reaction at all. The faint had been as genuine as ever a faint can be and she was completely unconscious.

The next few minutes, while I sat beside her on the front seat of the plane waiting for her to recover consciousness, were some of the worst I have ever gone through. Self-reproach is a hopeless word to describe the way I swore at myself for my folly, my utter stupidity, and unforgiveable blindness, above all for the brutality, the calculated cruelty with which I'd treated this poor, crumpled young girl by my side. Especially the cruelty in the past few minutes. Perhaps there had been excuse enough for my earlier suspicions, but there was none for my latest actions: if I hadn't been so consumed by anger, so utterly sure of myself so that the possibility of doubt never had a chance to enter my mind, if my mind hadn't been concentrated, to the exclusion of all else, on the exposure of her guilt, I should have known at least that it couldn't have been she who had jumped down from the control cabin half an hour ago when I had rushed up the aisle, for the simple but sufficient reason that she had been incapable of getting up there in the first place. Quite apart from her injury, I should have been doctor enough to know that the arms and shoulders I had seen while attending to her back that evening weren't built for the acrobatic performance necessary to swing one's self up and through that smashed windscreen. That had been no act she had put on when she had fallen back into the snow, I could see that clearly now; but I should have seen it then.

I still hadn't got beyond the stage of calling myself by every name I could think of when she stirred, sighed, and straightened in the crook of the arm with which I was supporting her. Her eyes opened slowly, focussed themselves on me, and I could feel the pressure on my forearm as she shrank away.

"It's all right, Miss Ross," I urged her. "Please don't be afraid. I'm not mad—really I'm not—just the biggest blundering half-witted idiot you're ever likely to meet in all the rest of your days. I'm sorry, I'm most terribly sorry

for all I've said, for all I've done. Do you think you can ever forgive me?"

I don't think she heard a word I said. Maybe the tone of my voice gave her some reassurance, but it was impossible to tell. She shuddered, violently, and twisted her head to look in the direction of the flight deck.

"Murder!" The word was so low that I could hardly catch it. Suddenly her voice became high-pitched, unsteady. "He's been murdered! Who—who killed him?"

"Now take it easy, Miss Ross." My heavens, I thought, of all the fatuous advice. "I don't know. All I know is that you had nothing to do with it."

"No." She shook her head tiredly. "I don't believe it. I can't believe it. Captain Johnson. Why should anyone—he hadn't an enemy in the world, Dr. Mason!"

"Maybe Colonel Harrison hadn't an enemy either." I nodded towards the rear of the plane. "But they got him too."

She stared down the plane, her eyes wide with horror, her lips moving as if to speak, but no sound came.

"They got him too," I repeated. "Just as they got the captain. Just as they got the second officer—and the flight engineer."

"They?" she whispered. "They?"

"Whoever it was. I only know it wasn't you."

"No," she whispered. Again she shuddered, even more uncontrollably than before, and I tightened my arm round her. "I'm frightened, Dr. Mason. I'm frightened."

"There's nothing——" I'd started off to say there was nothing to be frightened of, before I realized the idiocy of the words. With a ruthless and unknown murderer among us, there was everything in the world to be frightened of. I was scared myself; but admitting that to this youngster wasn't likely to help her morale any. So I started talking, telling her of all the things we had found out, of the suspicions we had and of what had happened to me, and when I finished she looked at me and said, "But why was I taken into the wireless cabin? I must have been, mustn't I?"

"You must have been," I agreed. "Why? Probably so that someone could turn a gun on you and threaten to kill you if the second officer—Jimmy Waterman, you called him, wasn't it?—didn't play ball. Why else?"

"Why else?" she echoed. She gazed at me, the wide

brown eyes never leaving mine, and then I could see the slow fear touching them again and she whispered, "And who else?"

"How do mean 'Who else'?"

"Can't you see? If someone had a gun on Jimmy Waterman, someone else must have had one on the pilots. You can see yourself that no one could cover both places at the same time. But Captain Johnson must have been doing exactly as he was told, just as Jimmy was."

It was so glaringly obvious that a child could have seen it: it was so glaringly obvious that I'd missed it altogether. Of course there must have been two of them, how else would it have been possible to force the entire crew to do as they were ordered. Good heavens, this was twice as bad, ten times as bad as it had been previously. Nine men and women back there in the cabin, and two of them killers, ruthless merciless killers who would surely kill again, at the drop of the hat, as the needs of the moment demanded. And I couldn't even begin to guess the identity of either of them. . . .

"You're right, of course, Miss Ross." I forced myself to speak calmly, matter-of-factly. "It was blind of me, I should have known." I remembered how the bullet had passed clear through the man in the back seat. "I *did* know, but I couldn't add one and one. Colonel Harrison and Captain Johnson were killed by different guns—the one by a heavy carrying weapon, like a Colt or a Luger, the other by a less powerful, a lighter weapon, like something a woman might have used."

I broke off abruptly. A woman's gun! Why not a woman using it? Why not even this girl by my side? It could have been her accomplice that had followed me out to the plane earlier in the evening, and it would fit in beautifully with the facts. . . . No, it wouldn't, faints couldn't be faked. But perhaps——

"A woman's gun?" I might have spoken my thoughts aloud, so perfectly had she understood. "Perhaps even me—or should I say perhaps still me?" Her voice was unnaturally calm. "Goodness only knows I can't blame you. If I were you, I'd suspect everyone too."

She pulled glove and mitten off her left hand, took the gleaming ring off the third finger, and passed it across to me. I examined it blankly in the light of my torch, then bent forward as I caught sight of the tiny inscription on

the inside of the gold band: "J.W.—M.R. Sept. 28, 1958." I looked up at her and she nodded, her face numb and stricken.

"Jimmy and I got engaged two months ago. This was my last flight as a stewardess—we were being married at Christmas." She snatched the ring from me, thrust it back on her finger with a shaking hand, and when she turned to me again the tears were brimming over in her eyes. "Now do you trust me?" she sobbed. "Now do you trust me?"

For the first time in almost twenty-four hours I acted sensibly- -I closed my mouth tightly and kept it that way. I didn't even bother reviewing her strange behavior after the crash and in the cabin. I knew instinctively that this accounted for everything: I just sat there silently watching her staring straight ahead, her fists clenched and tears rolling down her cheeks, and when she suddenly crumpled and buried her face in her hands and I reached out and pulled her towards me she made no resistance, just turned, crushed her face into the caribou fur of my parka, and cried as if her heart was breaking: and I suppose it was.

I suppose, too, that the moment when a man hears that a girl's fiancé has died only that day is the last moment that that man should ever begin to fall in love with her, but I'm afraid that's just how it was. The emotions are no respecters of the niceties, the proprieties, and decencies of this life, and, just then, I was clearly aware that mine were stirred as they hadn't been since that dreadful day, four years ago, when my wife, a bride of only three months, had been killed in a car smash and I had given up medicine, returned to my first great love, geology, completed the B.Sc. course that had been interrupted by the outbreak of World War II, and taken to wandering wherever work, new surroundings, and an opportunity to forget the past had presented themselves. Why, when I gazed down at that small dark head pressed so deeply into the fur of my coat, I should have felt my heart turn over I didn't know. For all her wonderful brown eyes she had no pretensions to beauty and I knew nothing whatsoever about her. Perhaps it was just a natural reaction from my earlier antipathy: perhaps it was pity for her loss, for what I had so cruelly done to her, for having so exposed her to danger- whoever knew that I knew too much would soon know that she knew it also: or perhaps it was just because

ne was so defenseless and vulnerable, so ridiculously nall and lost in Joss's big parka. And then I caught nyself trying to work out the reasons and I gave it up: I adn't been married long, but long enough to know that the eart has its own reasons which even the acutest mind ouldn't begin to suspect.

By and by the sobbing subsided and she straightened, iding from me what must have been a very badly tear-tained face.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "And thank you very nuch."

"My crying shoulder." I patted it with my right hand. For my friends. The other one's for my patients."

"For that, too, but I didn't mean that. Just for not aying how sorry you were for me, or patting me or saying Now, now' or anything like that. I—I couldn't have stood ." She finished wiping her face with the palm of her nitten, looked up at me with brown eyes still swimming in ears, and I felt my heart turn over again. "Where do we o from here, Dr. Mason?"

"Back to the cabin."

"I didn't mean that."

"I know. What am I to say? I'm completely at a loss. A undred questions, and never an answer to one of nem."

"And I don't even know all the questions, yet," she nurmured. "It's only five minutes since I even knew that wasn't an accident." She shook her head incredulously. Who ever heard of a civilian airliner being forced down t pistol point?"

"I did. On the radio, just over a month ago. In Cuba—ome of Fidel Castro's soldiers forced a Viscount to crash-and. Only they picked an even worse spot than this—I hink there were only one or two survivors. Maybe that's where our friends back in the cabin got the idea from. I houldn't be surprised."

She wasn't even listening, her mind was already off on nother track.

"Why—why did they kill Colonel Harrison?"

I shrugged. "Maybe he had a high resistance to Mickey Finns. Maybe he saw too much, or knew too much. Or oth."

"But—but now they know *you've* seen too much and now too much." I wished she wouldn't look at me when

she was talking, these eyes would have made even the Reverend Smallwood forget himself in the middle of his most thundering denunciations.

"A disquieting thought," I admitted, "and one that has occurred to me several times during the past half-hour. About five hundred times, I would say."

"Oh, stop it! You're probably as scared as I am." She shivered. "Let's get out of here, please. It's—it's ghastly, it's horrible. What—what was that?" Her voice finished on a sharp high note.

"What was what?" I tried to speak calmly, but that didn't stop me from glancing around nervously. Maybe she was right, maybe I was as scared as she was.

"A noise outside." Her voice was a whisper and her fingers were digging deep into the fur of my parka. "Like someone tapping the wing or the fuselage."

"Nonsense." My voice was rough, but I was on razor-edge. "You're beginning to——"

I stopped in mid-sentence. This time I could have sworn I had heard something, and it was plain that Margaret Ross had too. She twisted her head over her shoulder, looking in the direction of the noise, then slowly turned back to me, her face tense, her eyes wide and staring.

I pushed her hands away, reached for gun and torch, jumped up, and started running. In the control cabin I checked abruptly—God, what a fool I'd been to leave that searchlight burning and lined up on the windscreens, blinding me with its glare, making me a perfect target for anyone crouching outside with a gun in hand—but the hesitation was momentary only. It was then or never—I could be trapped in there all night, or until the searchlight battery died. I dived headfirst through the windscreen, caught a pillar at the very last moment, and was lying flat on the ground below in less time than I would have believed possible.

I waited five seconds, just listening, but all I could hear was the moan of the wind, the hiss of the ice spicules rustling along over the frozen snow—I'd never before heard that hissing so plainly, but then I'd never before lain with my uncovered ear on the ice-cap itself—and the thudding of my heart. And then I was on my feet, the probing torch cutting a bright swathe in the darkness before me as I ran round the plane, slipping and stum-

bling in my haste. Twice I made the circuit, the second time in the opposite direction, but there was no one there at all.

I stopped before the control cabin and called softly to Margaret Ross. She appeared at the window, and I said, "It's all right, there's no one here. We've both been imagining things. Come on down." I reached up my hands, caught her, and lowered her to the ground.

"Why did you leave me up there, why did you leave me up there?" The words came rushing out, tumbling frantically one over the other, the anger drowned in the terror. "It was—it was horrible! The dead men. . . . Why did you leave me?"

"I'm sorry." There was a time and a place for comment on feminine injustice, unreasonableness, and downright illogicality, but this wasn't it. In the way of grief and heartbreak, shock and ill-treatment, she had already had far more than she could stand. "I'm sorry," I repeated. "I shouldn't have done it. I just didn't stop to think."

She was trembling violently, so I put my arms round her and held her tightly until she had calmed down, took the searchlight and battery in one hand and her hand in my other, and we walked back to the cabin together.

6

Monday: 7 p.m.—Tuesday: 7 a.m.

JACKSTRAW AND the others had just completed the assembly of the tractor body when we arrived back at the cabin, and some of the men were already going below. I didn't bother to check the tractor: when Jackstraw made anything, he made a perfect job of it.

I knew he must have missed me in the past hour, but I knew, too, that he wasn't the man to question me while the others were around. I waited till the last of these had gone below, then took him by the arm and walked out into the darkness, far enough to talk in complete privacy, but not so far as to lose sight of the yellow glow from our skylights—twice lost in the one night was twice too many.

He heard me out in silence, and at the end he said, "What are we going to do, Dr. Mason?"

"Depends. Spoken to Joss recently?"

"Fifteen minutes ago. In the tunnel."

"How about the radio?"

"I'm afraid not, Dr. Mason. He's missing some condensers and spare valves. He's looked for them everywhere—says they've been stolen."

"Maybe they'll turn up?" I didn't believe it myself.

"Two of the valves already have. Crushed little bits of glass lying in the bottom of the snow tunnel."

"Our little friends think of everything." I swore softly. "That settles it, Jackstraw. We can't wait any longer, we'll leave as soon as possible. But first a night's sleep—that we must have."

"Uplavnik?" That was our expedition base, near the mouth of the Strömsund glacier. "Do you think we will ever get there?"

He wasn't thinking, just as I wasn't, about the rigours and dangers of arctic winter travel, daunting enough though these were when they had to be faced with a superannuated tractor like the Citroën, but of the company we would be keeping en route. If any fact was ever so glaringly obvious that it didn't need mention, it was that the killers, whoever they were, could only escape justice, or, at least, the mass arrest and interrogation of all the passengers, by ensuring that they were the only ones to emerge alive from the ice-cap.

"I wouldn't like to bet on it," I said dryly. "But I'd bet even less on our chances if we stay here. Death by starvation is kind of final."

"Yes, indeed." He paused for a moment, then switched to a fresh line of thought. "You say they tried to kill you tonight. Is that not surprising? I would have thought that you and I would have been very safe, for a few days at least."

I knew what he meant. Apart from Jackstraw and myself, there probably wasn't a handful of people in all Greenland who could start that damned Citroën, far less drive it, only Jackstraw could handle the dogs, and it was long odds indeed against any of the passengers knowing anything at all about astral or magnetic compass navigation—the latter very tricky indeed in these high latitudes. These special skills should have been guarantee enough of our immediate survival.

"True enough," I agreed. "But I suspect they haven't given any thought to these things simply because they

haven't realized the importance of them. We'll make it our business to point out that importance very plain. Then we're both insured. Meantime, we'll have one last effort to clear this business up before we get started. It's not going to make us very popular, but we can't help that." I explained what I had in mind, and he nodded thoughtful agreement.

After he had gone below, I waited a couple of minutes and then followed him. All nine of the passengers were sitting in the cabin now—eight, rather, watching Marie LeGarde presiding over a soup pan—and I took a long, long look at all of them. It was the first time I had ever examined a group of my fellow-men with the object of trying to decide which among them were murderers, and I found it a strange and unsettling experience.

In the first place, every one of them looked to me like a potential or actual murderer—or murderess—but even with that thought came the realization that this was purely because I associated murder with abnormality, and in these wildly unlikely surroundings, clad in the layered bulkiness of these wildly unlikely clothes, every one of them seemed far removed from normality. But on a second and closer look, when one ignored the irrelevancies of surroundings and clothes, there remained only a group of shivering, feet-stamping, miserable, and very ordinary people indeed.

Or were they so ordinary? Zagero, for instance, was he ordinary? He had the build, the strength, and, no doubt, also the speed and temperament for a top-ranking heavyweight, but he was the most unlikely-looking boxer I had ever seen. It wasn't just that he was obviously a well-educated and cultured man—there had been such boxers before: it was chiefly because his face was absolutely unmarked, without even that almost invariable thickening of skin above the eyes. Moreover, I had never heard of him, although that, admittedly, didn't go for much: as a doctor, I took a poor view of Homo sapiens wreaking gratuitous physical and mental injury on Homo sapiens, and took little interest in the sport.

Or take his manager, Solly Levin, or, for that matter of it, the Reverend Joseph Smallwood. Solly wasn't a New York boxing manager, he was a caricature of all I had ever heard or read about these Runyonesque characters, and he was just too good to be true: so, also, was the

Reverend Smallwood, who was so exactly the meek, mild, slightly nervous, slightly anaemic man of God that preachers are so frequently represented to be—and almost invariably never are—that his movements, reactions, comments, and opinions were predictable to the nth degree. But, against that, I had to set the fact that the killers were clever calculating men who would have carefully avoided assuming the guise of any character so patently cut from cardboard: on the other hand, they might have been astute enough to do just that.

There was a question mark, too, about Corazzini. America specialized in producing shrewd, intelligent, tough business leaders and executives, and Corazzini was undoubtedly one such. But the toughness of the average businessman was purely mental: Corazzini had physical toughness as well, a ruthlessness I felt he wouldn't hesitate to apply to matters lying far outside the immediate sphere of business. And then I realized, wryly, that I was prepared to suspect Corazzini for reasons diametrically opposed to those for which I was prepared to suspect Levin and the Reverend Smallwood: Corazzini didn't fit into any pattern, any prefabricated mental image of the American businessman.

Of the two remaining men, Theodore Mahler and Senator Brewster, I would have taken the former any time as the more likely suspect. But when I asked myself why, I could adduce no more damaging reasons than that he was thin, dark, rather embittered looking, and had told us absolutely nothing about himself: and if that weren't prejudice on my part, I couldn't guess what was. As for Senator Brewster, he was surely above suspicion: and then the startling thought struck me that if one wished to be above suspicion surely there were no better means of achieving that than by assuming the identity of someone who *was* above suspicion. How did I know he was Senator Brewster? A couple of forged papers, a white moustache, and white hair on top of a naturally florid complexion, and anyone could have been Senator Brewster. True, it would be an impersonation impossible to sustain indefinitely: but the whole point was that any such impersonation didn't have to be sustained indefinitely.

I was getting nowhere, and I knew it: I was more confused, more uncertain, and infinitely more suspicious than ever. I was even suspicious of the women. The young

German girl, Helene—Munich was her home town, near enough Central Europe and the skulduggery that went on in the neighborhood of the iron curtain for anything to be possible: but on the other hand the idea of a seventeen-year-old master criminal—we certainly weren't dealing with apprentices—was ridiculously farfetched, and the fact that she had fractured her collarbone, almost sure proof that the crash had been unexpected, was a strong point in her favour. Mrs. Dansby-Gregg? She belonged to a world I knew little about, except for what slight information I had gleaned from my psychiatric brethren who found rich fishing in the troubled waters of what passed for the younger London society: but instability and neuroses—not to mention the more than occasional financial embarrassment—were not criminal in themselves, and, in particular, that world lacked what people like Zagero and Corazzini had in full measure—the physical and mental toughness required for a job like this. But particularizing from the general could be every bit as dangerous and misleading as generalizing from the particular: of Mrs. Dansby-Gregg, as a person, I knew nothing.

That left only Marie LeGarde. She was the touchstone, the one rock I could cling to in this sea of uncertainty, and if I were wrong about her so too had been a million others. There are some things that cannot be because they are unthinkable, and this was one of them. It was as simple as that. Marie LeGarde was above suspicion.

I became gradually aware of the muted clack of the anemometer cups turning sluggishly in the dying wind above and that the hiss of the Colman lamp had become abnormally loud: a total silence had fallen over the cabin and everyone was staring at me with mingled puzzlement and curiosity. So much for my impassive features, my casual negligent ease: so clearly had I betrayed the fact that something was far wrong that not one of the nine had missed it. But to be the center of attraction at the moment suited me well enough: Jackstraw had just made his entry unobserved, a Winchester repeater cradled under his arm, his finger ready through the trigger guard.

"Sorry," I apologized. "Rude to stare, I know. However, now it's your turn." I nodded in Jackstraw's direction. "Every expedition carries a gun or two—for coast use against prowling bears and wolves and to get seal meat for the dogs. I never thought that it would come in so handy

right in the middle of the ice-cap—and against far more dangerous game than we ever find on the coast. Mr. Neilsen is a remarkably accurate shot. Don't try anything—just clasp your hands above your heads. All of you."

As if controlled by a master switch, all the eyes had now swivelled back to me. I'd had time and to spare to pull out the automatic—a 9 mm. butt-loading Beretta—that I'd taken off Colonel Harrison: and this time I didn't forget to slide off the safety catch. The click was abnormally loud in the frozen silence of the room. But the silence didn't last long.

"What damnable outrage is this?" Senator Brewster shouted out the words, his face purpling in rage. He leapt to his feet, started to move forwards towards me, then stopped as if he had run into a brick wall. The crash of Jackstraw's Winchester was a deafening, eardrum-shattering thunderclap of sound in that confined space: and when the last reverberations of the rifle shot had faded and the smoke cleared away, Senator Brewster was staring down whitely at the splintered hole in the floor boards, almost literally underneath his feet; Jackstraw must have miscalculated the Senator's rate of movement, for the bullet had sliced through the edge of the sole of Brewster's boot. However it was, the effect couldn't have been bettered: the Senator reached back blindly for the support of the bunk behind him and lowered himself shakily to his seat, so terrified that he even forgot to clasp his hands above his head. But I didn't care about that; there would be no more trouble from the Senator.

"O.K., so you mean business. Now we're convinced." It was Zagero who drawled out the words, but his hands were tightly enough clasped above his head. "We know you wouldn't do this for nothin', Doc. What gives?"

"This gives," I said tightly. "Two of you people are murderers—or a murderer and murderess. Both have guns. I want those guns."

"Succinctly put, dear boy," Marie LeGarde said slowly. "Very concise. Have you gone crazy?"

"Unclasp your hands, Miss LeGarde, you're not included in this little lot. No, I'm not crazy. I'm as sane as you are, and if you want evidence of my sanity you'll find it out on the plane there—or buried out on the ice-cap: the captain of the plane with a bullet through his spine, the passenger in the rear with a bullet through his heart, and

the second officer smothered to death. Yes, smothered. No cerebral haemorrhage, as I said: he was murdered in his sleep. Believe me, Miss LeGarde? Or would it take a personal tour of the plane to convince you?"

She didn't speak at once. Nobody spoke. Everyone was too stunned, too busy fighting incredulity and trying to assimilate the meaning of the shocking news I'd given them—everyone, that is, except two. But though I scanned eight faces with an intensity with which I had never before examined people I saw nothing—not the slightest offbeat gesture, the tiniest guilty reaction. As for what I'd secretly hoped for—a guilty interchange of glances—well, the idea now seemed hopelessly, laughably improbable. Whoever the killers were, they were in perfect control of themselves. I felt despair touch me, a sure knowledge of defeat.

"I must believe you." Marie LeGarde spoke as slowly as before, but her voice was unsteady and her face drained of colour. She looked at Margaret Ross. "You knew of this, my dear?"

"Half an hour ago, Miss LeGarde. Dr. Mason thought I had done it."

"Good God! How—how utterly ghastly! How horrible! Two of us murderers." From her position by the stove, Marie LeGarde glanced round the eight seated people, then looked quickly away. "Suppose—suppose you tell us everything. Dr. Mason?"

I told them everything. On the way back from the plane with Miss Ross I had debated this with myself—the question of secrecy or not. The no secrecy decision had won hands down: keeping quiet wouldn't fool the killers—they knew I knew: no secrecy would mean each and every one of the passengers watching the others like hawks, making my task of constant vigilance all that much easier, the killers' chance of making further mischief all that more difficult.

"You will stand up one at a time," I said when I'd finished. "Mr. London will search you for your guns. And please don't forget—I know I'm dealing with desperate men. I'm prepared to act accordingly. When your turn comes stand very still indeed and make no suspicious move, not the slightest. I'm not very good with a pistol, and I shall have to aim at the middle of your bodies to make certain."

"I believe you would at that," Corazzini said thoughtfully.

"It doesn't matter what you believe," I said coldly. "Just don't be the one to find out."

Joss started on Zagero. He searched him thoroughly—I could see the anger in Zagero's face, but his eyes didn't leave my gun—and found nothing. He moved on to Solly Levin.

"Might I ask why I'm being excused?" Marie LeGarde asked suddenly.

"You?" I said shortly. My eyes didn't move from Solly. "Marie LeGarde? Don't be so damned silly!"

"The choice of words and tone of voice leave a lot to be desired." Her voice was soft and warm, though still shaky. "But I've never had a greater compliment. All the same, I insist on being searched: I don't want to be the one under a cloud if the guns don't turn up."

And the guns didn't turn up. Joss finished searching the men, Margaret Ross the women—Mrs. Dansby-Gregg under icy protest—and neither found anything. Joss looked at me, his face empty of all expression.

"Get their luggage," I said harshly. "The small cases they're taking with them. We'll try these."

"You're wasting your time, Dr. Mason," Nick Corazzini said quietly. "To any characters smart enough to guess that you were going to frisk them, the next move would stick out a mile. A child could guess it. You might find those guns you talk about hidden on the tractor or the sledges or buried under a couple of inches of snow, ready to be picked up whenever required, but you won't find them in our bags. A thousand to one, in dollars, that you don't."

"Maybe you're right," I said slowly. "On the other hand, if I were one of the killers and did have a gun in my case—well, that's exactly the way I'd talk too."

"As you said to Miss LeGarde just now, don't be so damned silly!" He jumped to his feet, walked over to a corner of the cabin under the watchful eyes of Jackstraw and myself, picked up a handful of small cases, and dumped them on the floor before me, his own nearest me. "Where are you going to start? There's mine, that's the Reverend's robe case, this"—he picked it up and looked at the initials—"this is the Senator's brief case. I don't know whose the last is."

"Mine," Mrs. Dansby-Gregg said coldly.

Corazzini grinned. "Ah, the Balenciaga. Well, Doc, who——" He broke off, straightened slowly, and gazed up through the skylight. "What—what the devil is happening up there?"

"Don't try to pull any fast stuff, Corazzini," I said quickly. "Jackstraw's gun——"

"The hell with Jackstraw's gun!" he snapped impatiently. "Have a look for yourself."

I motioned him out of the way and had a look. Two seconds later I had thrust my automatic into Joss's hand and was on my way up top.

The airliner was a blazing torch in the darkness of the night. Even at that distance of half a mile and against the light wind, I could clearly hear the fierce roaring and crackling of the flames—not flames, rather, but one great solid column of fire that seemed to spring from the wings and center of the fuselage and reach up clear and smokeless and sparkless two hundred feet into the night sky, brushing its blood-red stain across the snow for hundreds of yards around, transforming the rest of the still ice-sheathed fuselage into a vast effulgent diamond, a million constantly shifting points of refracted white and red and blue and green that glittered and gleamed with an eye-dazzling scintillating brilliance that no jewels on earth could have matched. It was a fantastically beautiful spectacle, but I'd had time to watch it for barely ten seconds when the dazzling coloured irradiation turned to a blaze of white, the central flame leapt up to twice, almost three times its original height, and, two or three seconds later, the roar of the exploding petrol tanks came at me across the frozen stillness of the ice-cap.

Almost at once the flames seemed to collapse in upon themselves and the perimeter of the blood-red circle of snow shrank almost to vanishing point, but I waited to see no more. I dropped down into the cabin, pulling the hatch shut behind me, and looked at Jackstraw.

"Any chance at all of accounting for the presence of our various friends here during the past half-hour?"

"I'm afraid not, Dr. Mason. Everyone was on the move all the time, finishing off the tractor body or bringing up the stores and petrol drums and lashing them on the sledge." He glanced up through the skylight. "The plane, wasn't it?"

" 'Was' is right." I glanced at the stewardess. "My apologies, Miss Ross. You did hear somebody out there."

"You mean—you mean it wasn't an accident?" Zagero asked.

There's a fair chance that you know damned well that it wasn't, I thought. Aloud, I said, "It was no accident."

"So there goes your evidence, eh?" Corazzini asked. "The pilot and Colonel Harrison, I mean."

"No. The nose and tail of the plane are still intact. I don't know what the reason could be—but I'm sure there's a damned good one. And you can put these bags away, Mr. Corazzini. We're not, as you say, playing with children or amateurs."

There was silence while Corazzini returned the bags, then Joss looked at me quizzically.

"Well, that explains one thing at least."

"The messed-up explosives?" I remembered with chagrin how I had listened to the abnormally loud hissing out by the plane, but had ignored it. Someone who had known very clearly what he was doing had led a fuse into petrol lines or tanks or carburetors. "It certainly does."

"What's all this about explosives and fuses?" Senator Brewster demanded. It was the first word he had spoken since Jackstraw had scared the wits out of him, and even yet the colour wasn't all back in his face.

"Somebody stole the fuses to set fire to the plane. For all I knew it may have been you." I held up my hand to still his outraged spluttering and went on wearily, "It may equally well have been one of the other seven of you. I don't know. All I know is that the person or persons responsible for the murders were responsible for the theft of the fuses. And for the smashing of the radio valves. And for the theft of the condensers."

"And for the theft of the sugar," Joss put in. "Though heaven only knows why they should want to steal that."

"Sugar!" I exclaimed, and then the question died in my throat. I happened to be looking straight at the little old man. Theodore Mahler, and the nervous start he gave, the quick flicker of his eyes in Joss's direction, was unmistakable. I knew I couldn't have imagined it. But I looked away quickly, before he could see my face.

"Our last bag," Joss explained. "Maybe thirty pounds. It's gone. I found what little was left of it—just a handful

lying on the floor of the tunnel—mixed up with the smashed valves."

I shook my head and said nothing. The reason for this last theft I couldn't even begin to imagine.

Supper that night was a sketchy affair—soup, coffee, and a couple of biscuits each as the only solids. The soup was thin, the biscuits no more than a bite, and the coffee, for me at any rate, all but undrinkable without sugar.

And the meal was as silent as it was miserable, conversation being limited to what was absolutely necessary. Time and again I would see someone turn to his neighbor and make to say something, then his lips would clamp tightly shut, the expression drain out of his face as he turned away without a word: with almost everyone thinking that his or her neighbor might be a murderer, or, what was almost as bad, that his or her neighbour might be thinking that he was a murderer, the meal was by all odds the most awkward and uncomfortable that I'd ever had. Or, that is, the first part of it was: but by and by I came to the conclusion that I'd a great deal more to worry about than the niceties of social intercourse.

After the meal I rose, pulled on parka and gloves, picked up the searchlight, told Jackstraw and Joss to come with me, and headed for the trap-door. Zagero's voice stopped me.

"Where you goin', Doc?"

"That's no concern of yours. Well, Mrs. Dansby-Gregg?"

"Shouldn't you—shouldn't you take the rifle with you?"

"Don't worry." I smiled thinly. "With everyone watching everyone else like hawks, that rifle's as safe as houses."

"But—but someone could jump for it," she said nervously. "They could get you when you're coming down the hatch——"

"Mr. Neilsen and I are the last two persons they'd ever shoot. Without us, they couldn't get a mile from here. The most likely candidates for the next bullet are some of yourselves. You're absolutely inessential and, as far as the killers are concerned, represent nothing more than a waste of priceless rations." With this comforting thought I left them, each person trying to watch all the others at one and the same time, while doing his level best to give the appearance of watching no one.

The wind was so slight now that the anemometer cups

had stopped turning. The dying embers of the burnt-out plane were a dull smouldering glow to the northeast. The snow had gone completely, and the first faint stars were beginning to show through the thinning clouds above. It was typically Greenland, this swift change in the weather, and so, too, was the temperature inversion that would surely follow in the morning, or before morning. Twelve hours from now it was going to be very cold indeed.

With searchlight and torches we examined every inch of the tractors and sledges, above and below, and if there had been a pin there I would have sworn that we couldn't have missed it, far less anything so large as a couple of guns. We found nothing.

I straightened, and turned to look at the glow that was lightening the sky to the east, and even as I stood there with Joss and Jackstraw by my side the moon, preternaturally large and rather more than half-full, heaved itself above the distant horizon and flooded the ice-cap with its pale and ghostly light, laying down between itself and our feet a bar-straight path of glittering silver grey. We watched in silence for a full minute, then Jackstraw stirred. Even before he spoke, I knew what was in his mind.

"Uplavnik," he murmured. "Tomorrow, we set off for Uplavnik. But first, you said, a good night's sleep."

"I know," I said. "A traveller's moon."

"A traveller's moon," he echoed.

He was right, of course. Travel in the Arctic, in winter, was regulated not by daylight but by moonlight. And tonight we had that moon—and we had a clear sky, a dying wind, and no snow at all. I turned to Joss.

"You'll be all right alone?"

"I have no worries," he said sombrely. "Look, sir, can't I come too?"

"Stay here and stay healthy," I advised. "Thanks, Joss, but you know someone must remain behind. I'll call you up on the usual schedules. You might get a kick out of the RCA yet. Miracles still happen."

"Not this time, they won't." He turned away abruptly and went below. Jackstraw moved across to the tractor—we didn't say another word to each other, we didn't have to—and I followed Joss down to the cabin. No one had moved an inch, as far as I could see, but they all looked up as I came in.

"All right," I said abruptly. "Get your stuff together

and pile on every last stitch of clothes you can. We're leaving now."

We left, in fact, just over an hour later. The Citroën had been lying unused for the better part of a fortnight, and we had the devil's own job getting it to start. But start it eventually did, with a roar and a thunderous clatter that had everybody jumping in startlement then looking at it in dismay. I knew the thoughts in their minds, that they'd have to live with this cacophony, this bedlam of sound assaulting their shrinking eardrums for no one knew how many days to come, but I wasted little sympathy on them: at least they would have the protection of the wooden body while I would be sitting practically on top of the engine.

We said our good-byes to Joss. He shook hands with Jackstraw and myself, with Margaret Ross and Marie LeGarde, and, pointedly, with no one else. We left him standing there by the hatchway, a lonely figure outlined against the pale light of the steadily climbing moon, and headed west by south for Uplavnik, three hundred long and frozen miles away. I wondered, as I knew Joss was wondering, whether we would ever see each other again.

I wondered, too, what right I had in exposing Jackstraw to the dangers which must lie ahead. He was sitting beside me as I drove, but as I looked at him covertly in the moonlight, at that strong lean face that, but for the rather broad cheekbones, might have been that of any Scandinavian sea rover, I knew I was wasting my time wondering. Although nominally under my command, he had only been lent me, as other Greenlanders had been lent as an act of courtesy by the Danish government to several IGY stations, as a scientific officer—he had a geology degree from the University of Copenhagen and had forgotten more about the ice-cap than I would ever know—and in times of emergency, especially where his own pride, and he had plenty of that, was concerned would be extremely liable to do what he thought best, regardless of what I thought or said. I knew he wouldn't have remained behind even if I had ordered him to—and, if I were honest with myself, I was only too damned glad to have him along, as a friend, as an ally, and as an insurance policy against the disaster that can so easily overtake the careless or the inexperienced on the ice-cap. But even so, even though I

quieted my conscience as best I could, it was difficult to push from my mind the picture of his dark vivacious young schoolteacher wife and little daughter, the red and white brick house in which I'd lived for two weeks as a guest in the summer. What Jackstraw thought was impossible to say. He sat immobile as if carved from stone, only his eyes alive, constantly moving, constantly shifting, as probed for sudden dips in the ice-cap, for differences in the structure of the snow, for anything that might spell trouble. It was purely automatic, purely instinctive: the crevasse country lay, as yet, two hundred and fifty miles away, where the ice-cap started to slope sharply to the sea, and Jackstraw himself maintained that Balto, his big lead dog, had a surer instinct for crevasses than any human alive.

The temperature was dropping down into the –30's, but it was a perfect night for arctic travel—a moonlit, windless night under a still and starry sky. Visibility was phenomenal, the ice-cap was smooth and flat, the engine ran sweetly with never a falter: had it not been for the cold, the incessant roar and body-numbing vibration of the big engine, I think I would almost have enjoyed it.

With the wide tractor body blocking off the view behind it was impossible for me to see what was happening there; but every ten minutes or so Jackstraw would jump off and stand by the side of the trail. Behind the tractor body and its shivering occupants—because of the tractor fuel tank beneath and the spare fuel drums astern, the stove was never lit while we were in motion—came the sledge with all our stores: 120 gallons of fuel, provisions, bedding and sleeping bags, tents, ropes, axes, shovels, trail flags, cooking utensils, seal meat for the dogs, four wooden bridging battens, canvas sheets, blow lamps, lantern, medical equipment, radio-sonde balloons, magnesium flares, and a score of minor items. I had hesitated over including the radio sondes, especially the relatively heavy hydrogen cylinders for these; but they were ready crated with tents, ropes, axes, and shovels, and—this was the deciding factor—had saved lives on at least one occasion when a trail party, lost on the plateau with defective compasses, had saved themselves by releasing several balloons in the brief daylight hours thereby enabling base to see them and send accurate radio bearings.

Behind the heavy transport sled was towed the empty

dog-sled, with the dogs on loose traces running astern of it, all except Balto who always ran free, coursing tirelessly backwards and forwards all night long, one moment far ahead of us, the next ranging out to one side, the next dropping astern, like some destroyer circling a straggling convoy by night. When the last of the dogs had passed him by, Jackstraw would run forward to overtake the tractor and jump in alongside me once more. He was as tireless, as immune to fatigue, as Balto himself.

The first twenty miles were easy. On the way up from the coast, over four months previously, we had planted big marker flags at intervals of half a mile. On a night such as this, with the moonlight flooding the ice-cap, these trail flags, a bright luminous orange in colour and mounted on aluminium poles stuck in snow beacons, were visible at a great distance, with never less than two and sometimes three in sight at the same time, the long glistening frost feathers stretching out from the poles sometimes twice the length of the flags themselves. We counted twenty-eight of these flags altogether—about a dozen were missing—then, after a sudden dip in the land, completely lost them: whether they had been blown away or just drifted under it was impossible to say.

"Well, there it is, Jackstraw," I said resignedly. "This is where one of us starts getting cold. Really cold."

"We've been cold before, Dr. Mason. Me first." He slid the magnetic compass off its brackets, started to unreel a cable from a spool under the dashboard, then jumped out, still unwinding the cable, while I followed to help. Despite the fact that the magnetic north pole is nowhere near the North Pole—at that time it was almost a thousand miles south of it and lay more to the west than north of us—a magnetic compass, when proper variation allowances are made, is still useful in high latitudes; but because of the counter-acting magnetic effects of a large mass of metal, it was quite useless when mounted on the tractor itself. Our plan, therefore, was that someone should lie with the compass on the dog sled, fifty feet behind the tractor, and, by means of a switch which operated red and green lights in the tractor dashboard, guide the driver to left or right. It wasn't our original idea, it wasn't even a recent idea: it had been used in the Antarctic a quarter-century previously but, as far as I knew, had not been improved upon yet.

With Jackstraw established on the sledge, I walked back to the tractor and pushed aside the canvas screen at the back of the wooden body. What with the cases of the passengers, drawn and pinched and weirdly pale in the light of the tiny overhead bulb, the constant shivering, the chattering of teeth, and the frozen breath drifting upwards to condense and freeze on the wooden roof, it was a picture of utter and abject misery; but I was in no mood to be moved at that moment.

"Sorry for the delay," I said. "Just off again now. But I want one of you for a lookout."

Both Zagero and Corazzini volunteered almost in the same breath, but I shook my head.

"You two get what sleep or rest you can—I'm liable to need you very much later on. Perhaps you, Mr. Mahler?"

He looked pale and ill, but he nodded silently, and Zagero said in a quiet voice, "Corazzini and myself too high up on the list of suspects, huh?"

"I wouldn't put either of you at the very foot," I said shortly. I waited till Mahler had climbed down, then dropped the canvas and walked round to the driver's seat.

Theodore Mahler, strangely enough, proved only too anxious to talk—and keep on talking. It was completely out of keeping with the idea I had formed of his character that I was more than surprised. Loneliness, perhaps, I thought, or trying to forget the situation, or trying to divert my thoughts and suspicions: how wrong I was on all three counts I wasn't to find out until later.

"Well, Mr. Mahler, it looks as if the itinerary of your European trip is going to be upset a bit." I had almost to shout to make my words heard above the roar of the tractor.

"Not Europe, Dr. Mason." I could hear the machine-gunlike chatter of his teeth. "Israel."

"You live there?"

"Never been there in my life." There was a pause, and when his voice came again it was all but drowned in the sound of the engine. I thought I caught the words "my home."

"You—you're going to start a new life there, Mr. Mahler?"

"I'm sixty-nine—tomorrow," he answered obliquely.

'A new life? Let's say, rather, that I'm going to end an old one."

"And you're going to live there, make your home there —after sixty-nine years in another country?"

"Millions of Jewish people have done just that, in the past ten years. Not that I've lived in America all my life. . . ."

And then he told me his story—a story of refugee oppression that I'd heard a hundred times, with a hundred variations. He was a Russian Jew, he said, one of the millions of the largest Jewry in the world that had been "frozen" for over a century in the notorious Pale of Settlement, and in 1905 had been forced to flee with his father —leaving mother and two brothers behind—to escape the ruthless massacres carried out by the "Black Hundreds" at the behest of the last of the Romanoff Czars who was seeking scapegoats for his crushing defeat by the Japanese. His mother, he learned later, had just disappeared, while his two brothers had survived only to die in agony long years afterwards, one in the rising in the Bialystok ghetto, the other in the Treblinka gas chambers. He himself had found work in the clothing industry in New York studied in night school, worked for an oil company, married, and with the death of his wife that spring had set about fulfilling the agelong ambition of his people, the return to their holy land.

It was a touching story, pathetic and deeply moving, and I didn't believe a word of it.

Every twenty minutes I changed position with Jackstraw and so the long hours of the night dragged by as the cold deepened and the stars and the moon wheeled across the black vault of the sky. And then came moonset, the blackness of the arctic night rushed across the ice-cap, I slowed the Citroën gratefully to a stop, and the silence, breathless and hushed and infinitely sweet, came flooding in to take the place of the nightlong clamour of the deafening roar of the big engine, the metallic clanking of the treads.

Over our black sugarless coffee and biscuits I told our passengers that this would be only a brief three-hour halt, that they should try to get what sleep they could: most of them, myself included, were already red-eyed and drooping from exhaustion. Three hours, no more: not often

did Greenland offer travel weather like this, and the chance was not to be missed.

Beside me, as I drank my coffee, was Theodore Mahler. He was, for some reason, restless, ill at ease, jerky, and nervous, and his eyes and attention both wandered so much that it was easy enough for me to find out what I wanted.

When my cup was empty, I whispered in Mahler's ear that there was a little matter that I wished to discuss privately with him. He looked at me in surprise, hesitated, then nodded in agreement, rising to follow me as I moved out into the darkness.

A hundred yards away I stopped, switched on my torch so that he blinked in its beam, and slid my Beretta forward until its barrel was clearly visible, sharply outlined in the harsh white glare. I heard the catch of the breath, saw the eyes widening in fear and horror.

"Save the act for the judge, Mahler," I said bleakly. "I'm not interested in it. All I want is your gun."

7

Tuesday: 7 a.m.—Tuesday: Midnight

"MY GUN?" Mahler had slowly lifted his arms until his hands were at shoulder level, and his voice wasn't quite steady. "I—I don't understand, Dr. Mason. I have no gun."

"Naturally." I jerked the barrel of the Beretta to lend emphasis to my words. "Turn round."

"What are you going to do? You're making a——"

"Turn round!"

He turned. I took a couple of steps forward, ground the muzzle of the automatic none too gently into the small of his back, and started to search him with my free hand.

He was wearing two overcoats, a jacket, several sweaters and scarves, two pair of trousers, and layer upon layer of underclothes; searching him was easier said than done. It took me a full minute to convince myself that he wasn't carrying a weapon of any kind. I stepped back, and he came slowly round to face me.

"I hope you're quite satisfied now, Dr. Mason?"

"We'll see what we find in your case. As for the rest, I'm satisfied enough. I have all the proof I want." I

dipped the torch beam to illuminate the handful of sugar I'd taken from the pocket of his inner overcoat—there had been well over a pound in either pocket. "You might care to explain where you got this from, Mr. Mahler?"

"I don't have to tell you that, do I?" His voice was very low. "I stole it, Dr. Mason."

"You did indeed. A remarkably small-time activity for a person who operates on the scale you do. It was just your bad luck, Mahler, that I happened to be looking directly at you when the theft of the sugar was mentioned back in the cabin. It was just your bad luck that when we had our coffee just now it was dark enough for me to have a swig from your cup without your knowledge: it was so stiff with sugar that I couldn't even drink the damn stuff. Curious, isn't it, Mahler, that such a tiny thing as giving way to a momentary impulse of greed should ruin everything? But I believe it's always the way; the big slip-up never brings the big criminal to book, because he never makes any. If you'd left that sugar alone when you were smashing up the valves, I'd never have known. Incidentally, what did you do with the rest of the sugar? In your grip? Or just thrown away?"

"You're making a very grave mistake, Dr. Mason." Mahler's voice was steady now, and if it held any trace of worry or guilt I couldn't detect it. But I was now far beyond the naïve stage of expecting to detect anything of the sort. "I didn't touch those valves. And, apart from the few handfuls I took, the sugar bag was quite intact when I left it."

"Of course, of course." I waved the Beretta. "Back to the tractor, my friend, and let's have a look at this case of yours."

"No!"

"Don't be crazy," I snapped. "I have a gun, Mahler. Believe me, I won't hesitate to use it."

"I believe you. I think you would be quite ruthless if the need arose. Oh, I don't doubt you're tough, Doctor, as well as being headstrong, impulsive, and not very subtle, but because I rather respect your efficient and selfless handling of an awkward and ugly situation for which you were in no way responsible, I don't want to see you make a complete fool of yourself in public." He lifted his right hand towards the lapel of his coat. "Let me show you something."

I jerked the Beretta forward, but the gesture was quite needless. As he pushed his hand under his topcoats, Mahler's gestures were smooth and unhurried, just as smooth and unhurried when he brought his hand out again and passed over to me a leather-covered card. I stepped back a few feet, flipped open the card, and glanced down at it.

That one glance was enough—or should have been enough. I'd seen these cards scores of times before, but I stared down at this one as if I'd never seen one in my life. This was a completely new factor, it knocked all my preconceived notions on the head, and I needed time, time for reorientation, for understanding, for quelling the professional fear that came hard on the heels of that understanding. Then, slowly, I folded the card, pulled down my snow-mask, stepped close to Mahler, and pulled his down also. In the harsh glare of the torch, his face was blue and white with the cold, and I could see the jutting of the jaw muscles as he clamped his teeth together to keep them from chattering uncontrollably.

"Breathe out," I said.

He did as I asked, and there was no mistaking it, none at all: the sweet acetone breath of the advanced and untreated diabetic can't possibly be confused with anything else. Wordlessly, I handed him back the card and thrust the automatic into my parka pocket.

At last I said quietly, "How long have you had this, Mr. Mahler?"

"Thirty years."

"A pretty advanced condition?" When it came to discussing a man's illness with him, I had little time for the professional reticence of many of my colleagues: besides, the average elderly diabetic had survived to that age simply because he was intelligent about the dietary and medical treatment of his trouble, and usually knew all about it.

"My doctor would agree with you." I caught the smile on his face as he pushed his mask up, and there wasn't much humour in it. "So would I."

"Twice daily injections?"

"Twice," he nodded. "Before breakfast and in the evening."

"But don't you carry a hypo and——"

"Normally," he interrupted. "But not this time. The

Gander doctor gave me a jab and as I can usually carry on a few hours' overdue without ill-effects I thought I'd wait until we got to London." He tapped his breast pocket. "This card's good anywhere."

"Except on the Greenland ice-cap," I said bitterly. "But then I don't suppose you anticipated a stop-over here. What diet were you on?"

"High protein, high starch."

"Hence the sugar?" I looked down at the white crystals still clenched in my left mitten.

"No." He shrugged. "But I know sugar used to be used for the treatment of coma. I thought maybe if I stuffed enough into myself . . . Well, anyway, you know now why I turned criminal."

"Yes, I know now. My apologies for the gun-waving act, Mr. Mahler, but you must admit I had every justification. Why in the hell didn't you tell me before now? I *am* supposed to be a doctor, you know."

"I would have had to tell you sooner or later, I suppose. But right now you'd plenty troubles of your own without worrying about mine also. And I didn't think there would be much chance of your carrying insulin among your medical stores."

"We don't—we don't have to. Everybody gets a thorough medical before going on an IGY station, and diabetes hardly develops overnight. . . . You take it all very calmly, I must say, Mr. Mahler. Come on, let's get back to the tractor."

We reached there inside a minute. I pulled back the canvas screen, and a thick white opaque cloud formed almost immediately as the relatively warm air inside met the far sub-zero arctic air outside. I waved my hand to dispel it, and peered inside. They were all still drinking coffee—it was the one thing we had in plenty. It seemed difficult to realize that we'd been gone only a few minutes.

"Hurry up and finish off," I said abruptly. "We're on our way within five minutes. Jackstraw, would you start the engine, please, before she chills right down?"

"On our way!" The protest, almost inevitably, came from Mrs. Dansby-Gregg. "My dear man, we've hardly stopped. And you promised us three hours' sleep only a few minutes ago."

"That was a few minutes ago. That was before I found

out about Mr. Mahler here." Quickly I told them all I thought they needed to know. "It sounds brutal to say it in Mr. Mahler's presence," I went on, "but the facts themselves are brutal. Whoever crashed that plane—and, to a lesser extent, stole the sugar—put Mr. Mahler's life in the greatest danger. Only two things, normally, could save Mr. Mahler—a properly balanced high-calorie diet as a short-term measure, insulin as a long-term one. We have neither. All we can give Mr. Mahler is the chance to get one or other of these things with all speed humanly possible. Between now and the coast that tractor engine is going to stop only if it packs up completely, if we run into an impassable blizzard—or if the last of the drivers collapses over the wheel. Are there any objections?"

It was a stupid, unnecessary, gratuitously truculent question to ask, but that's just the way I felt at that moment. I suppose, really, that I was inviting protest so that I could have some victim for working off the accumulated rage inside me, the anger that could find its proper outlet only against those responsible for this fresh infliction of suffering, the anger at the near certainty that no matter what effort we made to save Mahler it would be completely nullified when the time came, as it inevitably must come, that the killers show their hand. For one wild moment I considered the idea of tying them all up, lashing them inside the tractor body so that they couldn't move, and had the conditions been right I believe I would have done just that. But the conditions couldn't have been more hopeless: a bound person wouldn't have lasted a couple of hours in that bitter cold.

There were no objections. For the most part, I suppose, they were too cold, too tired, too hungry, and too thirsty—for with the rapid evaporation of moisture from the warm, relatively humid body thirst was always a problem in dry, intensely cold air—to raise any objections. To people unaccustomed to the Arctic, it must have seemed that they had reached the nadir of their sufferings, that things could get no worse than they were: I hoped as much time as possible would elapse before they found out how wrong they were.

There were no objections, but there were two suggestions. Both came from Nick Corazzini.

"Look, Doc, about this diet Mr. Mahler must have. Maybe we can't balance it, but we can at least make sure

that he gets a fair number of calories—not that I know how you count the damn things. Why don't we double his rations—no, even that wouldn't keep a decent sparrow alive. How about if each of the rest of us docks a quarter of his rations and hands them over? That way Mr. Mahler would have about four times his normal——"

"No, no!" Mahler protested. "Thank you, Mr. Corazzini, but I cannot permit——"

"An excellent idea," I interrupted. "I was thinking along the same lines myself."

"Good." Corazzini grinned. "Carried unanimously. I also suggest we'd get along further and faster if, say, Mr. Zagero and I were to spell you two on the tractor." He held up a hand as if to forestall protest. "Either of us may be the man you want, in fact, we might be the two men you want—if it is two men. But if I'm one of the killers, and I know nothing about the Arctic, navigation, the maintenance of this damned Citroën, and wouldn't as much as recognize a crevasse if I fell down one, it's as plain as the nose on your face that I'm not going to make a break for it until I'm within shouting distance of the coast. Agreed?"

"Agreed," I said. Even as I spoke, there came a coughing clattering roar as Jackstraw coaxed the still warm Citroën back into life, and I looked up at Corazzini. "All right," I went on. "Come on down. You can have your first driving lesson now."

We left at half-past seven that morning, in driving conditions that were just about perfect. Not the slightest breath of air stirred across the ice-cap and the deep blue-black vault of the sky was unmarred by even the tiniest wisp of cloud. The stars were strangely remote, pale and shimmering and unreal through the gossamer gauze of the glittering ice needles that filled the sky and sifted soundlessly down onto the frozen snow, but even so visibility was all that could have been desired: the powerful headlights of the Citroën, striking a million sparkling diamond points of light off the ice spicules, reached a clear three hundred yards ahead into the darkness, leaving the ground to either side of the twin interlocking beams shrouded in impenetrable darkness. The cold was intense, and deepening by the hour; but the Citroën seemed to thrive on it that morning.

Luck was with us almost right away. Within fifteen

minutes of starting off, Balto, ranging free as always, appeared out of the darkness to the southwest and ran alongside the dog-sledge, barking to attract Jackstraw's attention. Jackstraw gave us the signal to stop—a rapid flickering of the red and green lights on the tractor dashboard—and two or three minutes later appeared out of the darkness, grinning, to tell us that Balto had picked up a standing trail flag. That was good news in itself, in that it meant that our navigation the previous night had been all that could have been wished for and that we were almost exactly on course: even more important, however, was the fact that if this flag was the first of a series we could dispense with the navigator on the dog-sledge and that Jackstraw and I could have some sleep—if sleep were possible in that miserably cold and lurching tractor body. And, indeed, that flag proved to be the first of an almost unbroken series that was to guide us all the length of that interminable day, so that from eight o'clock onwards Jackstraw, Zagero, Corazzini, and I took it in turns to drive, with the Senator, the Reverend Smallwood, or Solly Levin up front as lookout. Theirs was probably the coldest, certainly the most unwelcome job of all; but all three bore up uncomplainingly, even to the extent of thawing out in silent agony at the end of their hour on duty.

Shortly after eight o'clock I left an obviously competent Corazzini to his own devices, dropped back to the shelter of the tractor body, and asked the Senator to go up front. I then set about breaking the strictest rule of all, where these old tractors were concerned—that no fire should ever be lit inside when they were in motion. But even the most stringent rules are to be observed only until such time as the need for breaking them is paramount; and now both the need and the time were here. My concern was not for the warmth and comfort of the passengers, or even for the cooking of the food—we had little enough of that, heaven knew, though a constant supply of warm water would come in useful for dealing with the inevitable cases of frostbite—but purely and simply for the life of Theodore Mahler.

Even following Corazzini's suggestion we couldn't give him enough food, and what we could didn't, and wouldn't, even begin to resemble a balanced diet. His best chance of survival, and that was slender enough, lay in conserving his body reserves and his energy as far as lay within

our power. To achieve that, work, or exercise of even the lightest kind, was out: he had to remain as immobile as possible, which was why I had him climb into a sleeping bag and lie down on one of the bunks, wrapped in a pair of heavy blankets, as soon as I entered. But without work or exercise he would have no means to combat that numbing cold except by a constant shivering which would deplete his reserves just as quickly as the most violent exercise would. So he had to have heat: heat from the stove, heat from the warm fluids which I told Margaret Ross that he was to have at least every two hours. Mahler protested strongly against all these arrangements being made on his behalf, but at the same time he was sensible enough to realize that his only chance of survival depended on doing what I said; but I believe that the main factor which finally made him yield was not so much my medical explanations as the pressure of public opinion.

That all the passengers should suddenly, and so vehemently, be concerned with Theodore Mahler's welfare seemed, on the face of it, inexplicable. But only on the face of it. It did not require a great deal of thought or probing beneath the surface to discover that the true motivating factor was not selflessness—though there may been some of that, too—but selfishness. Mahler represented not so much a sufferer as a most welcome diversion from their own thoughts and suspicions, from the tension, from the never-ending constraint that had laid its chilling hand over the entire company for the past twelve hours.

This constraint, apart from its awkwardness and sheer unpleasantness, had the further effect of splitting up the passengers into tiny groups. Communal speech had ceased entirely, except where necessity and the barest demands of common politeness made it inevitable.

Marie LeGarde and Margaret Ross, each of whom knew that the other was not under suspicion, kept very much to themselves and talked only between themselves. So, too, did Zagero and Solly Levin, and also—though this would have seemed ridiculously improbable only twenty-four hours ago—Mrs. Dansby-Gregg and her maid, Helene. Improbable then, but inevitable now: whether guilty or not, both knew exactly where the other stood, and, of all the passengers, each could only fully

trust the other. They could, of course, as could all the others, trust Marie LeGarde and Margaret Ross; but the fact that they knew that Marie LeGarde and Margaret Ross couldn't trust them was enough to prohibit any attempts to establish an easier relationship. As for Corazzini, the Reverend Smallwood, the Senator, and Mahler, they kept very much to themselves.

In the circumstances, then, it was inevitable that they should welcome the introduction of an absolutely innocuous subject of interest and conversation, something that would ease, however slightly, the coldness and discomfort of the social atmosphere, something that would divert their unwelcome and suspicious thoughts into some more tolerable channel. Theodore Mahler promised to be the best looked after patient I had ever had.

I had just got the oil stove going to my satisfaction when Zagero called to me from his seat by the rear canvas screen.

"There's somethin' funny goin' on outside, Doc. Come and have a look."

I had a look. Far off to the right—the northwest, that was—and high above the horizon a great diffuse formless volume of luminosity, spreading over almost a quarter of the dark dome of the sky, was beginning to pulse and fade, pulse and fade, strengthening, deepening, climbing with the passing of every moment. At first it was no more than a lightening in the sky, but already it was beginning to take form, and faint colours beginning to establish themselves in definite patterns.

"The aurora, Mr. Zagero," I said. "The Northern Lights. First time you've seen it?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Amazin' spectacle, ain't it?"

"This? This is nothing. It's just starting up. It's going to be a curtain—you get all sorts, rays, bands, coronas, arcs, and what have you, but this is a curtain. Best of the lot."

"Get this sort of thing often, Doc?"

"Every day, for days on end, when the weather is like this—you know, cold and clear and still. Believe it or not, you can even get so used to it that you won't bother looking."

"I don't believe it. It's amazin'," he repeated, "just amazin'. Tired of it, you say—I hope we see it every day." He grinned. "You don't have to look, Doc."

"For your own sake you'd better hope for something else," I said grimly.

"Meanin'?"

"Meaning that radio reception is hopeless when the aurora is on."

"Radio reception?" He crinkled his brows. "What we gotta lose, with the radio set in the cabin smashed and your friends in the trail party gettin' further away every minute? You couldn't raise either of them anyway."

"No, but we can raise our Uplavnik base when we get a bit nearer the coast," I said, and the next moment I could have bitten my tongue off. I had never even thought of the matter until then, but as soon as the words were out I realised that I should have kept this piece of knowledge to myself. The chances of Uplavnik listening in at the right time and on the right frequency were remote enough, but it was always a chance: we could have sent out a warning, summoned help long before the killers would have thought of making a break for it. But, now, if Zagero were one of the killers, he would make good and certain that the set would be smashed long before we got within radio range of the Uplavnik base.

I cursed myself for a blundering idiot, and stole a quick glance at Zagero. In the light streaming out from the gap in the curtain and in the fainter light of the aurora, his every feature was plain, but I could tell nothing from his expression. He was playing it casual, all right, but not too stupidly casual. The slow nod, the pursing of the lips, the thoughtful lifting of the eyebrows could not have been improved upon. Not even the best professional actor could have improved on it, and hard on the heels of that came the second thought that there were a couple of extraordinarily fine actors among us. But, then, if he hadn't reacted at all, or had reacted too violently, I would have been doubly suspicious. Or would I? If Zagero were one of the guilty men, wouldn't he have known that too much or too little reaction would have been the very thing to excite suspicion, and taken due precaution against registering either? I gave it up and turned away. But in my mind there was growing a vague but steadily strengthening suspicion against Johnny Zagero: and on the basis of the success and validity of my previous suspicions, I thought bitterly, that just about guaranteed Zagero's innocence.

I turned and touched Margaret Ross on the shoulder.

"I'd like to have a few words with you, Miss Ross, if you don't mind the cold outside."

She looked at me in surprise, hesitated for a moment, then nodded. I jumped down, reached up a hand to steady her, then helped her aboard the big sled as it passed by a few seconds later. For a short time we just sat there, side by side on a petrol drum, watching the aurora while I wondered how to begin. I stared almost unseeingly at the tremendous sweep of the developing aurora, the great folded, fluted curtain of yellow-green with red-tipped feet that seemed almost to brush the surface of the ice-cap, a translucent transparent drapery—for even at its brightest the stars still shone faintly through—that waved and shimmered and pulsed and glowed, a pastel poem in insubstantiality, like the ethereal backdrop to some unimaginably beautiful fairyland. Margaret Ross sat there gazing at it like one lost in a trance. But she might have been looking at it with the same uncaring eyes as myself, lost not in wonder but in the memory of the man we had left behind in the ice-cap. And when she turned at the sound of my voice, and I saw the glow of the aurora reflected in the sad depths of the wide brown eyes, I knew I was right.

"Well, Miss Ross, what do you think of the latest development?"

"Mr. Mahler?" She'd slipped up her snow-mask—in her case just a gauze and cotton-wool pad with a central breathing aperture—and I had to lean forward to catch her soft voice against the steady roar of the tractor engine in front. "What can one say about anything so—so dreadful. What chance does the poor man have, Dr. Mason?"

"I've honestly no idea. There are far too many unpredictable factors involved. . . . Did you know that after I'd crossed you off I'd lined him up as number one on my list of suspects?"

"No!"

"But yes, I'm afraid. I fear I'm no sleuth, Miss Ross. I may be long on the empirical, trial and error method—and it at least has had the negative advantage of reducing the number of suspects by two—but I'm pretty short on the deductive." I told her what had happened between Mahler and myself during the brief stop we had made.

"And now you're as badly off as ever," she said, when I

had finished. "I suppose all we can do now is to sit and wait to see what happens?"

"Wait for the axe to fall, you mean?" I said grimly. "Not quite. I haven't much hope from it, but I thought I might try the deductive reasoning act for a change. But before we can deduce, we have to have some facts we can deduce from. And we're very short on facts. That's why I asked you out here—to see if you could help me."

"I'll do anything I can, you know that." She lifted her head as the aurora swelled and flamed to the incandescent climax of its performance, and shivered violently as its unearthly beautiful colourings struck a million sparks of coloured light, red and green and yellow and gold, off the ice spicules in the sky. "I don't know why that makes me feel colder than ever. . . . But I think I've already told you everything I know, everything I can remember, Dr. Mason."

"I'm sure you have. But you may have missed some things just because you couldn't see they mattered anyway. Now, as I see it, we have three big questions looking for an answer. How come the crash in the first place? How was the coffee spiked? How was the radio broken? If we can turn up anything that can throw a light on even one of these, we may be a long way towards finding out what we want to know."

Ten freezing minutes later we were still a long way from finding out anything. I'd taken Margaret Ross step by step from the Customs Hall, where she'd met her passengers, to the plane where she had settled them down, flown with them to Gander, watched them go through the same process again, flown with them out of Gander, watched her as she'd served their evening meal, and still I'd learnt nothing, turned up nothing suspicious, offbeat, or abnormal that could even begin to account for the crash. Then, slowly, just as she was describing the serving of the meal, her voice trailed away into silence, and she turned and stared at me.

"What's the matter, Miss Ross?"

"Of course," she said softly. "Of course! What a fool I am! Now I see. . . ."

"What do you see?" I demanded.

"The coffee. How it was tampered with. I'd just served Colonel Harrison—he was in the rear seat, so he was the last to be served—when he wrinkled his nose and asked if

I could smell something burning. I couldn't, but I made some sort of joke about something burning on the galley hotplate, and I'd just got back there when I heard the Colonel calling, and when I looked round he had the door of the starboard washroom open and smoke was coming out. Not much, just a little. I called the captain, and he hurried aft to see what it was, but it was nothing serious, just a few papers burning—somebody had been careless with a cigarette, I suppose."

"And everybody rose out of their seats and crowded to have a look?" I asked grimly.

"Yes. Captain Johnson ordered them all back to their seats—they were upsetting the trim of the plane."

"And you didn't think this worth mentioning to me," I said heavily. "No importance at all?"

"I'm sorry. It—it *did* seem unimportant, unrelated to anything. That was hours before the crash, so——"

"It doesn't matter. Who could have gone into the galley then—anybody in the front seats, I suppose?"

"Yes. They all seemed to crowd down past the middle ——"

"They? Who were 'they'?"

"I don't know. What—why do you ask?"

"Because by knowing who *was* there, we might find out who wasn't."

"I'm sorry," she repeated helplessly. "I was a little upset for a moment, then Captain Johnson was in front of me shooing everybody back to their seats and I couldn't see."

"All right." I changed my approach. "This was the men's washroom, I take it?"

"Yes. The powder-room is on the port side."

"Can you remember who went in there, say, any time up to an hour beforehand?"

"An hour? But a cigarette end——"

"Do you believe now that the fire was caused deliberately?" I asked.

"Of course." She stared at me, wide-eyed.

"Right. And we're dealing, obviously, with hardened professional criminals. The whole success of their plan depended on causing this excitement. Do you for a moment believe that they were going to let the whole thing hinge on the highly problematical off-chance of a smoul-

dering butt-end setting some papers alight—especially setting them alight at the correct moment?"

"But how——"

"Easy. You can get a little plastic tube with a central composition shield dividing it into two compartments. In one compartment you have a free acid, in the other a different acid enclosed in a glass tube. All you have to do is to crush the tube, break the glass, drop the tube in your chosen spot, walk away, and after a predetermined time the acid that was in the glass eats through the shield, meets the other acid, and starts a fire. It's been used hundreds of times, especially in wartime sabotage. If you're an arsonist looking for a cast-iron alibi and want to be five miles away when the fire starts, it's the perfect answer."

"There *was* a funny smell——" she began slowly.

"You bet there was. Well, can you remember who went there?"

"It's no good." She shook her head. "I was in the galley most of the time, getting the meal ready."

"Who were in the front two seats—those nearest the galley?"

"Miss LeGarde and Mr. Corazzini. And I'm afraid that's not much help. We know Marie LeGarde can't have had anything to do with it. And Mr. Corazzini is the one person I'm sure *didn't* leave his seat before dinner. He had a gin soon after take-off, then switched off his reading light, draped a newspaper over his head, and went to sleep."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. I always peek through the cabin door from time to time, and he was always there."

"That seems to cut him out," I said thoughtfully. "*And* reduce the number of suspects—though, I suppose, he could still have had an accomplice to plant the acid tube." Then, suddenly, I had what was, for me, an inspiration. "Tell me, Miss Ross, did anyone ask you earlier in the evening when dinner would be?"

She looked at me for a long moment before answering, and even in the fading light of the aurora I could see the understanding coming into her eyes.

"Mrs. Dansby-Gregg did, I'm sure."

"She would. Anyone else?"

"Yes. I remember now." Her voice was suddenly very

quiet. "Colonel Harrison—but he doesn't count any more —and Mr. Zagero."

"I'm at the stage where I'm afraid to think anything. I've been wrong too often. But it's a straw in the wind all right—a straw about the size of a haystack. . . . Was he anywhere near you when the radio fell? Behind you, for instance, when you rose and brushed against the radio table?"

"No, he was over by the hatch, I'm sure of that. Could he——"

"He couldn't. Joss and I worked it out. Somebody had pushed one of the table hinges right home and the other until it was at the critical point of balance. Then as you stood up he pushed the other in. From a distance. There was a long-handled brush lying there—but it had no significance for us at the time. . . . When you heard the crash you whirled round, didn't you?"

She nodded without speaking.

"And what did you see?"

"Mr. Corazzini——"

"We know he dived for it," I said impatiently. "But in the background, against the wall?"

"There *was* someone." Her voice was barely more than a whisper. "But no—no, it couldn't have been. He'd been sitting dozing on the floor, and he got the fright of his life when——"

"For heaven's sake!" I cut in harshly. "Who was it?"

"Solly Levin."

The brief twilight of noon came and went, the cold steadily deepened, and by late in the evening it seemed that we had been on board that lurching, roaring tractor all our lives.

Twice only we stopped in the course of that interminable day, for refuelling at 4 P.M. and 8 P.M. I chose these times because I had arranged with Joss that I would try to contact him every fourth hour. But though we set up the apparatus outside while Jackstraw was refuelling and Corazzini sat astride the bicycle seat and cranked the generator handle while I tapped out our call sign for almost ten unbroken minutes, no shadow of an answer came through. I had expected none. Even if by some miracle Joss had managed to fix the set, the ionosphere turbulence that had caused the aurora would have almost

certainly killed any chance of making contact. But I'd promised Joss, and I had to keep faith.

By the time I made the second try, everyone, even Jackstraw and myself, were shaking and shivering in the bitter cold. Normally, we wouldn't have felt it much—in very cold weather we wore two complete sets of furs, the inner one with the fur inside, the outer with the fur outside. But we'd given our extra pairs away to Corazzini and Zagero—furs were essential in that icebox of a tractor driving cabin—and suffered just as much as the others.

Occasionally, someone would jump down from the tractor and run alongside to try to get warm, but so exhausted were most from sleeplessness, hunger, cold, and eternally bracing themselves against the lurching of the tractor, that they were staggering from exhaustion within minutes and had to come aboard again. And when they did come aboard, the sweat from their exertions in such heavy clothes turned ice-cold on their bodies, putting them in worse case than ever, until finally I had to prohibit it altogether.

It grieved me to do what had to be done, what I saw must be done, but there was no help for it. The weariness, the cold, and the sleeplessness could be borne no longer. When I finally gave the order to stop it was ten minutes after midnight, and we had been driving continuously, except for brief fuel and radio halts, for twenty-seven hours.

8

Wednesday: 4 a.m.—8 p.m.

DESPITE OUR exhaustion, despite our almost overwhelming need for sleep, I don't think anyone slept that night, even for a moment, for to have slept would have been to freeze to death.

I had never known such cold. Even with twelve of us jam-packed inside a tiny wooden box built to hold five sleeping people at the most, even with the oil fire roaring up the chimney all night long and warmed by a couple of cups of piping hot coffee apiece, we all of us suffered agonies during these dark hours. The chattering of teeth, the St. Vitus's dance of tremor-ridden limbs knocking against the thin uninsulated wooden walls, the constant

rubbing as someone sought to restore life to a frozen face or arm or foot—these were the sounds that never ceased. How the elderly Marie LeGarde or the sick Mahler survived that night was indeed a matter for wonder.

But survive they did, for when I looked at my luminous watch, saw that it was almost four o'clock, and decided that enough was enough, both of them were wide awake when I switched on the little overhead light. Weak enough normally, that light was now no more than a feeble yellow glow—an ominous sign, it meant that even the tractor batteries were beginning to freeze up—but enough to see the crowded circle of faces, white and blue and yellowing with frostbite, the smokelike exhalations that clouded in the air before them with every breath they took, the film of slick ice that already covered the walls and all of the roof except for a few inches round the stovepipe exit. As a spectacle of suffering, of sheer unrelieved misery, I don't think I have ever seen its equal.

"Insomnia, eh, Doc?" It was Corazzini speaking, his teeth chattering between the words. "Or just forgotten to plug in your electric blanket?"

"Just an early riser, Mr. Corazzini." I glanced round the haggard and pain-filled faces. "Anybody here slept at all?"

I was answered by mute headshakes from everybody.

"Anybody likely to sleep?"

Again the headshakes.

"That settles it." I struggled to my feet. "It's only 4 A.M., but if we're going to freeze to death we might as well freeze on the move. Not only that, but another few hours in this temperature and that tractor engine will never start again. What do you think, Jackstraw?"

"I'll get the blowtorches," he said by way of answer, and pushed his way out through the canvas screen. Almost at once I heard him begin to cough violently in the deadly cold of the air outside, and, in the intervals between the coughing, we could clearly hear the dry rustling crackling of his breath as the moisture condensed, froze, and drifted away in the all but imperceptible breeze.

Corazzini and I followed, choking and gasping in turn as that glacial cold seared through throat and lungs, adjusting masks and goggles until not a millimetre of flesh was left exposed. Abreast the driving cabin I drew out my torch and glanced at the alcohol thermometer—ordinary

mercury froze solid at –38°—then looked again in disbelief. The red spirit inside the glass had sunk down to within an inch of the bulb and stood on the line of –68° —exactly 100° of frost. Still well below Wegener's –85°, further short still of the incredible –104° that the Russians had recorded at the Pole of Inaccessibility in Antarctica, but nevertheless the lowest, by almost 15°, that I had ever experienced. And that it should happen now—now, two hundred miles from the nearest human habitation, with Jackstraw and myself stuck with two murderers, a possibly dying man, seven other passengers rapidly weakening from exposure, exhaustion, and lack of food, and a superannuated tractor that was due to pack up at any moment at all.

Over an hour later I had cause to revise the last part of that estimate—it seemed that the tractor had already packed up. I had had my first intimation of trouble to come when I had switched on the ignition and pressed the horn—the faint mournful *beep* could hardly have been heard twenty yards away. The batteries were so gummed up by the cold that they couldn't even have turned over a hot engine, far less one in which the crankcase, transmission, and differential were all but locked solid in lubricating oil that had lost all power to lubricate anything and had been turned into a superviscous liquid with the consistency and intractability of some heavy animal glue. Even with two of us bringing all our weight to bear on the starting handle, it was impossible to turn even one cylinder over the top.

We made to light the paraffin blowtorches, but they, too, were frozen solid: paraffin freezes at just over –50°, and even at –40° it still flows like heavy gear-case oil. We had to thaw them out with a petrol blowtorch, then placed all five of them on wooden boxes and behind canvas aprons to retain the heat, two to thaw out the crankcase, two for the gearbox and transmission, and the last for the differential. After an hour or so when the engine had begun to turn fairly easily and we had brought out the heavy battery which had been thawing out by the stove, we tried again. But it gave no sign of life at all.

None of us, not even Corazzini whose Global tractors were all diesel-powered, was an expert in engine maintenance, and this was when we came very close to despair. But despair was the one emotion we couldn't afford, and

we knew it. We kept the blowtorches burning, returned the battery to the stove, removed and cleaned the plugs, eased the frozen brushes in the generator, stripped and removed the petrol lines, thawed them and sucked out the frozen condensation by mouth, scraped away the ice from the carburetor intake, and returned everything in place. We had to remove our gloves for most of this delicate work, the flesh stuck to metal and pulled off like the skin of an orange when we removed our hands, even the backs of our fingers became burnt and blistered from casual knocks on metal, blood oozed out from under our fingernails only to coagulate in the freezing air, and our lips, where they had touched the copper petrol feeds, were swollen and puffed and blistered. It was brutal, killing work, and in addition to the work our arms and legs and faces were almost constantly frozen, despite frequent visits to the stove to thaw ourselves out. It was murderous—but it was worth it. At six-fifteen, two and a quarter hours after we had begun, the big engine coughed and spluttered into life, missed, coughed again, caught, and settled down into a steady even roar. I felt my split lips cracking into a painful grin under my mask, thumped Jackstraw and Corazzini—for the moment quite forgetting that the latter might be one of the killers—on the back, turned, and went in for breakfast.

Or what passed for breakfast. It was little enough, heaven knew—coffee, crackers, and the contents of a couple of corned beef tins shared among the twelve of us, the lion's share going to Theodore Mahler. That left us with only four more tins of beef, four cans of vegetables, about ten pounds of dried fruit, a little frozen fish, a small tin of biscuits, three packets of cereal, and—it was the only thing apart from coffee of which we had an adequate supply—over twenty tins of Nestlé's unsweetened milk. We had, of course, seal meat for the dogs—Jackstraw thawed some out for them over the stove while we had breakfast—and the fried meat of young seal is palatable to a degree. But the dogs had first claim on that. It was more important to preserve their strength than our own: should the engine of the Citroën break down completely, our last hope lay with the dogs.

Breakfast over and the dogs fed, we started off just before moonset, Corazzini driving, with the long trailing plume of our exhaust vapour, milk-white but thick as

smoke in that bitter air, stretching out far behind us, bar-straight, almost as far as the eye could see in the waning light of the moon. I had arranged that the drivers should change over every fifteen minutes—as long a period as any person could stand in that unheated and largely unprotected cabin. I had heard of a case in the Antarctic where a driver had sat so long in an exposed tractor that his numbed and frozen fingers had locked so immovably that the steering wheel had had to be unbolted and brought inside still clutched in the driver's grasp before the hands could be thawed sufficiently to release the wheel: I didn't want anything of that kind happening to us.

As soon as we were under way I had a look at Mahler, and his appearance certainly did nothing to inspire any great confidence in his chances. Even though he was fully dressed, lying in an eiderdown sleeping bag that was zipped all the way to his chin, and covered in blankets, his pinched face was a mottled blue-white and he was shaking continuously with the cold, a handkerchief between his teeth to prevent their chattering. I reached for his wrist. The pulse was very fast, though it seemed strong enough; but I couldn't be sure, so much skin had been sloughed or burnt off in the past two or three hours that I'd lost all sensitivity in my fingertips. I gave him what I hoped was an encouraging smile.

"Well, how do you feel, Mr. Mahler?"

"No worse than anyone else, I'm sure, Dr. Mason."

"That could still be bad enough. Hungry?"

"Hungry!" he exclaimed. "Thanks to the generosity of these good people here, I couldn't eat another crumb."

It was typical of what I had come to expect of this gentle old man in the past few hours. Despite the relatively generous amount of food he'd had for his breakfast, he'd wolfed it all down like a famished man. He was hungry, all right: his body, lacking the insulin to break down the mounting sugar in his blood, was crying out for nourishment yet unable to find it no matter what his food intake was.

"Thirsty?"

He nodded. Perhaps he thought he was on safe ground there, but it was another and invariable symptom of the developing acuteness of his trouble. I was pretty certain, too, that he had already begun to weaken, and I knew it wouldn't be long before he began to lose weight rapidly.

Indeed, he already looked thinner, the cheekbones were more prominent than even thirty-six hours ago. But then that was true of all the others also, especially Marie Le-Garde; for all her uncomplaining courage, her determined cheerfulness, she now looked more than old: she looked sick, and very tired. But there was nothing I could do for her.

"Your feet?" I asked Mahler. "How are they?"

"I don't think they're there any longer." He smiled.

"Let me see them," I asked abruptly. He protested, but I overruled him. One look at that dead-white ice-cold flesh was enough.

"Miss Ross," I said. "From now on you are Mr. Mahler's personal Gunga Din. We have a couple of rubber bags in the sled. I want you to keep these alternately filled just as soon as you can get water heated—unfortunately, it takes a long time to melt that damned snow. They're for Mr. Mahler's feet." Again Mahler protested, objecting to what he called "this babying," but I ignored him. I didn't want to tell him, not yet, that frostbite in the feet of an untreated diabetic could mean only one thing: gangrene and amputation, at the least. Slowly I looked round the occupants of the tractor cabin and I think that, had I known for certain who the person responsible for all this was, I would have killed him without compunction.

Just then Corazzini came in. After only fifteen minutes at the wheel of the tractor he had just yielded to Jackstraw he was in a pretty bad way. The bluish-white bloodless face was mottled with yellow frostbite blisters, his lips were cracked, the fingernails were beginning to discolour, and his hands were a shocking mess. True, Jackstraw, Zagero, and I were little better, but Corazzini was the only one who had so far driven in that intense cold: he was shaking like a man with malarial fever, and from the way he stumbled up the steps I could tell that his legs were gone. I helped him to a vacant seat by the stove.

"Feel anything below the knees?" I asked quickly.

"Not a damned thing." He tried to smile, but the effort was too painful, the blood started to well again from the open cuts on his lips. "It's pretty vicious out there, Doc. Better rub the old feet with some snow, huh?" He stooped and fumbled uselessly at laces with his numbed and bleeding fingers, but before I could move Margaret Ross was

on her knees, easing off his boots with gentle fingers. Looking down at that slight figure lost beneath the bulky layers of clothing, I wondered for the hundredth time how I could ever have been crazy enough to believe about her all the things I had.

"In your own idiom, Mr. Corazzini," I said, "snow is strictly for the birds. Just an old wives' tale as far as these temperatures are concerned. You'd be better rubbing your skin off with emery paper." At 70° below, snow had the hard crystalline structure of sandstone, and, when rubbed, granulated into a gritty white powdery sand. I nodded at one of the snow buckets on the stove. "When the temperature there reaches 85°, stick your feet in it. Wait till the skin turns red. It won't be pleasant, but it'll work. If there are any blisters I'll puncture and sterilize them tomorrow."

He stared at me. "Is this sort of thing going to go on *all* the time, Doc?"

"I'm afraid so."

And it did go on for all the time—or for the next ten hours, at least, during which time the temperature dropped down to the low seventies, halted, and began its slow, ever so slow, upward swing again. Ten hours while the two snow buckets were never off the stove, ten hours while Mrs. Dansby-Gregg, her maid, Helene, and, later on, Solly Levin, held blowtorches against the sides of the buckets to hurry up the melting and heating process, ten hours while we drivers suffered the regularly recurring pounding agony of circulation returning to our frozen limbs, ten hours during which we began to build up an almost pathological dread of the moment when we must again plunge our feet into hot water, ten hours during which Mahler grew steadily weaker and Marie LeGarde, falling silent for the first time, slipped down and lay huddled in a corner, eyelids closed, like one already dead. Ten hours. Ten interminable, indescribable hours of suffering borrowed from purgatory. But long before these ten hours were up something happened to change the picture completely.

At noon I halted the tractor. While the women were heating up some soup and using a blowtorch to thaw out two cans of fruit, Jackstraw and I rigged up the radio transmitter, strung out an antenna, and started triggering out our GFK call-sign. Normally, on these hand-cranked eight-watt jobs, a Morse key was used for transmission

while reception was by a pair of earphones, but, thanks to a skilful improvisation by Joss who knew how hopelessly awkward Morse was for everyone in the party except himself, the set had been rigged so that the key was used only for the call-up sign. After the link was made, a hand microphone could be used for transmission: and simply by throwing the receiving switch into the antenna lead, the microphone was transformed into a small but sufficiently effective loud-speaker.

Calling up Joss was only a gesture. I'd made a promise and was keeping it, that was all. But by this time, I estimated, we were 120 miles distant from him, near enough the limit of our small set. I didn't know what effect the intense cold would have on radio transmission, but I suspected it wouldn't be anything good: there had been no aurora that morning, but the ionosphere disturbance might still be lingering on; and, of course, Joss himself had declared that his RCA was entirely beyond repair.

Ten minutes passed, ten minutes during which Jackstraw industriously cranked the handle and I sent out the call-sign, GFK three times repeated, a flick of the receiver switch, ten seconds' listening, then the switch pushed back and the call-sign made again. At the end of the ten minutes I sent out the last call, pushed over the receiving switch, listened briefly, then stood up, resignedly gesturing to Jackstraw to stop cranking. It was just then, almost in the very last instant, that the mike in my hand crackled into life.

"GFX calling GFK. GFX calling GFK. We are receiving you, faint but clear. Repeat, we are receiving you. Over."

I fumbled and nearly dropped the mike in my excitement.

"GFK calling GFX, GFK calling GFX." I almost shouted the words, saw Jackstraw pointing to the switch which was still in the receiving position, cursed my stupidity. threw it over, called out the signs again, and then, quite forgetting the procedure and etiquette of radio communication, rushed on, the words tumbling over one another: "Dr. Mason here, Dr. Mason here. Receiving you loud and clear. Is that you, Joss?" I threw the switch.

"Yes, sir. Glad to hear from you." Static lent a flat impersonality to the crackling words, robbed them of meaning. "How are you? What weather, how far out?"

"Going strong," I replied. "Cold intense—minus 70°.

Approximately 120 miles out. Joss, this is a miracle! How on earth did you fix it?"

"I didn't," he said unemotionally. There was a pause and then his voice came again. "Captain Hillcrest is waiting to speak to you, sir."

"Captain Hillcrest! What on earth is Captain Hillcrest——?" I broke off abruptly, not through astonishment, great though that was, that Hillcrest, whom I had believed to be almost 250 miles to the north of our IGY cabin, should have suddenly turned up there, but because the warning glance from Jackstraw had found an echoing answer in the back of my own mind. "Hold on," I said quickly. "Will call you back in two or three minutes."

We had set up the transmitter just to the rear of the tractor cabin, and I knew that every word said on both sides could be heard by those inside. It was just then that the curtains parted and Corazzini and Zagero peered out, but I ignored them. I never cared less about the hurt I was offering to anybody's feelings, just picked up the radio and generator while Jackstraw unstrung the antenna, and walked away from the tractor. Two hundred yards away I stopped. Those in the tractor could still see us—the brief light of noonday was flooding over the ice-cap—but they could no longer hear us.

We rigged the radio again, and I tried to tap out the call-sign, but it was hopeless, we'd been out too long in that dreadful cold and my hand was beating an uncontrollable tatoo on the key. Fortunately, they knew or guessed at the other end what was happening, for Hillcrest's voice, calm, confident, infinitely reassuring, came through as soon as I pressed the receiving switch.

"Surprise, surprise," the mike crackled mechanically. "O.K., Dr. Mason, from what Joss has said—and the recent delay—I guess you're a good way from the tractor. At 70° below you won't want to stay there too long. Suggest I do all the talking. I'll keep it brief. Receiving me?"

"Loud and clear. What on earth are you—sorry, carry on."

"Thanks. We heard Monday afternoon, on both British and American broadcasts, of the overdue airliner. Tuesday morning—yesterday, that is—we heard from the Uplavnik base. They say this hasn't been announced officially, but both the U.S. and British governments are

convinced that the plane has not been lost at sea, but that it has landed somewhere in Greenland or Baffin Island. Don't ask me why they're convinced—I've no idea. Anyway, they've mounted the biggest air-sea rescue search since the war. Merchant vessels of several nationalities have been diverted. American, British, French, and Canadian fishing trawlers are moving in to the Greenland coast—the west coast mainly, the east's already blocked with ice. A dozen U. S. Air Force search bombers are already operating from Thule and Söndre Strömfjord. U.S. coast-guard cutters are on the job, a flotilla of Canadian destroyers have been rerouted from mid-Atlantic and are steaming at full speed for the southern entrance of the Davis Strait—although it will take them at least thirty-six more hours to get there—and a British aircraft carrier, accompanied by a couple of destroyers, has already rounded Cape Farewell: we don't know yet how far north she can get, the ice is solid on the Baffin side, but it's open at least to Disko on the Greenland coast, maybe as far as Svartenhuk. All IGY stations in Greenland have been ordered to join in the search. That's why we came back non-stop to the cabin—to pick up more petrol."

I could contain myself no longer, threw over the receiving switch.

"What on earth's all the mad flap about? You'd think the President of the United States and half the Royal Family were aboard that plane. Why no more information from Uplavnik?"

I waited, and then Hillcrest's voice crackled again.

"Radio transmission impossible during preceding twenty-four hours. Will raise them now, tell them we've found the missing plane, and that you're on your way to the coast. Any fresh developments with you?"

"None. Correction. One of the passengers—Mahler—turns out to be an advanced diabetic. He's in a bad way. Radio Uplavnik to get insulin. Godthaab will have it."

"Wilco," the microphone crackled back. A long pause, during which I could faintly hear the murmur of conversation, then Hillcrest came on again. "Suggest you return to meet us. We have plenty of petrol, plenty of food. With eight of us on guard instead of two, nothing could happen. We're already forty miles out"—I glanced at Jackstraw, caught the sudden wrinkling of the eyes which I knew to be the telltale of a quick grin of astonished

delight which so accurately reflected my own feelings—"so not more than eighty miles behind you. We could meet up in five or six hours."

I felt elation wash through me like a releasing wave. This was wonderful, this was more than anything I had ever dared hope for. All our troubles were at an end. . . . And then the momentary emotion of relief and triumph ebbed, the cold dismaying processes of reason moved in inexorably to take their place, and it didn't require the slow, definite shake of Jackstraw's head to tell me that the end of our troubles was as far away as ever.

"No go," I radioed back. "Quite fatal. The minute we turned back the killers would be bound to show their hand. And even if we don't turn, they know now that we've been in contact with you and will be more desperate than ever. We must go on. Please follow at your best speed." I paused for a moment, then continued. "Emphasize to Uplavnik essential for our lives to know why crashed plane so important. Tell them to find out the passenger list, how genuine it is. This is absolutely imperative, Captain Hillcrest. Refuse to accept 'No' for an answer. We *must* know."

We talked for another minute, but we'd really said all there was to be said. Besides, even during the brief periods that I'd pushed down my snow-mask to speak, the cold had struck so cruelly at my cut and bleeding lips that I could now raise scarcely more than a mumble, so after arranging an 8 p.m. rendezvous and making a time-check I signed off.

Back in the tractor cabin curiosity had reached fever pitch, but at least three minutes elapsed—three excruciatingly uncomfortable minutes while Jackstraw and I waited for the blood to come surging back through our frozen veins—before anyone ventured to speak. The inevitable question came from the Senator—a now very much chastened Senator who had lost much of his choler and all of his color, with the heavy jowls, hanging more loosely than ever, showing unhealthily pale through the grey grizzle of beard. The very fact that he spoke showed, I suppose, that he didn't regard himself as being heavily under suspicion. He was right enough in that.

"Made contact with your friends, Dr. Mason, eh? The field party, I mean." His voice was hesitant, unsure.

"Yes," I nodded. "Joss—Mr. London—got the set

working after almost thirty hours' non-stop work. He raised Captain Hillcrest—he's in charge of the field party—and managed to establish a relay contact between us." I'd never heard of the phrase "relay contact" in my life, but it sounded scientific enough. "He's packing up immediately, and coming after us."

"Is that good?" the Senator asked hopefully. "I mean, how long——"

"Only a gesture, I'm afraid," I interrupted. "He's at least 350 miles away. His tractor's not a great deal faster than ours." It was, in fact, almost three times as fast. "Five or six days, at the least."

Brewster nodded heavily and said no more. He looked disappointed, but he looked as if he believed me. I wondered which of them didn't believe me, which of them *knew* I was lying because they knew that they had so thoroughly destroyed all the spare condensers and valves that it would have been quite impossible for Joss to repair the RCA.

The long bitter day, a day filled by nothing except that dreadful cold, an endless suffering, and the nerve-destroying thunderous roar and vibration of that big engine, crawled by like a dying man. About two-thirty in the afternoon, as the last glow of the noon-light faded and the stars began to stand clear in the cold and brittle sky, the temperature reached its nadir—a frightening 73° below zero. Then it was that strange things happened: flashlights brought from under a parka died out inside a minute; rubber became hard as wood and cracked and fractured like wood; breath was an opaque white cloud that shrouded the heads of every person who ventured outside the tractor body; the ice-cap froze to such an unprecedented degree of hardness that the tractor treads spun and slipped on flat surfaces, the crimp marks no more than half-seen hairlines on the ground; the dogs, who could with impunity stand up to howling blizzards that would kill any man, whined and wailed in their utter misery in that appalling cold; and, now and again, like some far-off intimation of doom and the end of the world, a dull rumbling sound would come echoing across the ice-cap and the ground shake beneath the treads of the tractor as some great areas of snow and ice contracted still further under the iron hand of that glacial cold.

It was then, inevitably, that the tractor started to give trouble: it was only a matter for wonder that it hadn't broken down long before that. What I feared above all was the shearing of some moving metal part, made brittle by that intense cold, that would have been the end of us: a valve-stem, a camrod, any one part of the delicate timing mechanism, even so small a thing as a crankshaft pin: it needed just one of these to go, and we would be gone also.

We were spared these lethal mishaps, but what we had was almost as bad. Carburetor ice was a constant problem. The steering box froze up and had to be thawed out by blowtorches. Generator brushes stuck and broke, but fortunately we carried spares enough of these. But the biggest trouble was the radiator. Despite the fact that we had it heavily lagged, the cold penetrated the lagging as if it were tissue paper and the subsequent metal contraction produced distortion. Soon it began to leak, and by three o'clock in the afternoon we were losing water at dismaying speed. I doled out some of our precious reserves of heat pads for Mahler's feet, with the instructions that the water from the snow buckets on the stove was to be kept solely for the radiator. But even with blowtorches assisting the heat of a stove, the melting of superchilled snow is a discouragingly slow process: soon we were reduced to pouring half-melted slush down the radiator cap, and finally to cramming snow itself down in order to keep going at all. All this was bad enough; but the frightening thing was that for every pint of radiator liquid lost and every pint of snow water used to replace it, the antifreeze became that much more diluted, and though we carried a small reserve drum of ethylene glycol its weight diminished perceptibly with every halt we made.

We had, hours before that, dispensed with a lookout, and the burden of all this work fell on Jackstraw, Zagero, Corazzini, and myself. Of the four of us, Jackstraw was the only one who escaped what I knew would be permanent injury or disfigurement in the shape of scars and destroyed tissue. Zagero might never before have borne any of the scars of his trade, but he was going to have what looked peculiarly like one now: we had been too late in getting a cold-water compress to his right ear, and these destroyed tissues would need plastic surgery; two of Corazzini's toes had also been left too long without treatment, and I knew that he, too, would finish up in a

surgical ward; and, because I was the one most in contact with the engine, my fingertips were a painful bleeding mess, the nails already blackening and beginning to rot away.

Nor were things a great deal better with those inside the tractor cabin. The first physiological effects of the cold were beginning to assert themselves, and assert themselves strongly—the almost overpowering desire for sleep, the uncaring indifference to all that went on around them. Later would come the sleeplessness, the anaemia, the digestive troubles, the nervousness that could lead to insanity—if the cold continued long enough these conditions would inevitably succeed the picture of huddled, lifeless misery that presented itself to me whenever I sought the shelter of the cabin and the agony of returning circulation after my spell at the wheel. Many times I saw the picture that afternoon, and always the picture was the same.

The Senator sat slumped in a corner, a dead man but for the fits of violent shuddering that overtook him at regularly recurring intervals. Mahler appeared to sleep. Mrs. Dansby-Gregg and Helene lay huddled in one another's arms—an incredible sight, I thought, but then, next only to death itself, the Arctic was the great leveller, an unparalleled agent in stripping away the pretensions and shoddy veneers of everyday living. I was no great believer in the sudden conversions of human nature, and was pretty certain that, with Mrs. Dansby-Gregg, the return to civilization would coincide with the return to her normal self, and that this moment of common humanity shared by herself and her maid would be no more than a fading and unwelcome memory; but, for all my dislike of Mrs. Dansby-Gregg, I was beginning to develop more than a sneaking admiration for her. The carefully cherished snobbery, the maddeningly easy and condescending assumption of an inevitable social superiority were irritating enough, heaven knew, but behind that unlovable façade seemed to lie a deep-buried streak of that selflessness which is the hallmark of the genuine aristocrat: although she complained constantly about the tiny irritations, she was silent on matters that caused her genuine suffering; she was developing a certain brusque helpfulness, as if she were half-ashamed of it, and showed a care for her maid which, though probably no more than that feudal kindness that reaches its best in adversity, never-

theless verged almost on tenderness. I had seen her take a mirror from her handbag, inspect the ravages frostbite had wreaked on her lovely face, then return the mirror to her bag with a gesture of indifference. Mrs. Dansby-Gregg, in short, was becoming for me an object lesson against the dangers of an overready classification of people into types.

Marie LeGarde, the lovable, indomitable Marie LeGarde, was a sick old woman, weakening by the hour. Her attempts at cheerfulness in her fully wakeful moments—she was asleep most of the time—were strained and almost desperate. The effort was too much. There was nothing I could do for her. Like an old watch, her time was running out, the mainspring of her life running down. A day or two more of this would surely kill her.

Solly Levin had taken over the blowtorches which played constantly against the sides of the snow buckets. Wrapped and huddled in clothes until only one eye was visible, he nevertheless achieved the near impossible of looking a picture of abject misery; but the way my thoughts had been running all day, I had no sympathy to waste on Mr. Levin. Margaret Ross dozed by the side of the stove, but I turned my eyes away quickly, even to look at that thin white face was a physical hurt.

The marvel of them all was Mr. Smallwood, yet another instance, I thought wryly, of how wrong I could get. Instead of being one of the first to go under, he showed every sign of being the last. Three hours ago, when I had been in the cabin, he had brought up his bag from the tractor sled, and as he'd opened it I'd caught a glimpse of a black gown and the red and purple of a divinity hood. He'd brought out a Bible, donned a pair of rimless steel spectacles, and, for several hours now, had been reading as best he could in the dim overhead light. He seemed composed, relaxed yet alert, fit to carry on for a long time to come. As a doctor and scientist I didn't go in much for theological speculation, but I could only suppose that Mr. Smallwood was in some way sustained by something that was denied the rest of us. I could only envy him.

During the course of the evening two blows fell. The first of these was not in any way figurative. I still have the scar on my forehead to prove it.

We stopped just before eight o'clock that evening, partly in order to keep our radio schedule with Hillcrest, partly—because I wanted to make a long halt, give Hill-

crest all the more opportunity to overtake us—on the pretext that the Citroën's engine was overheating badly in the temperature that had been rising steadily since the early afternoon. But despite the fact that it was now almost 25° warmer than in midafternoon, it was still bitterly cold—our hunger and physical exhaustion saw to it that we still suffered almost as much as ever—dark and very still. Far away to the southwest we could see the jagged sawtooth line of the Vindeby Nunataks—that hundred-mile long ridge of hills that we would have to cross the next day—the forbidding peaks a gleaming crystalline white in the light of the moon that had not yet topped our eastern horizon.

I was driving when we stopped. I switched off the motor, walked round to the back of the tractor, and told those inside that we were making a halt. I asked Margaret Ross to heat some food on the stove—soup, dried fruit, one of our four remaining tins of corned beef—asked Jackstraw to rig up the antenna for the radio then went back to the tractor, stooped, and turned the radiator drainage cap, catching the liquid in a can. The antifreeze in the water had been thinned down so much in the course of the day that I was pretty certain that, in those temperatures, it wouldn't take half an hour for the radiator water to freeze up and split open the cylinder jacket.

I suppose it was because of the gurgling of the water into the can that I didn't hear the sound behind me until the last moment, and even so I had no particular reason just then to be suspicious of anything. I half-straightened and turned round to see who was there, but I was too late. The consciousness of a vague blur in the darkness and the blinding white flash of light and pain as something solid smashed into my forehead, just above the goggles on my right eye, came in one and the same instant. I was out, completely unconscious, long before I crumpled down onto the frozen surface of the ice-cap.

Death could easily have supervened then. It would have been easy, ever so easy, for me to drift from unconsciousness into that numbed sleep from which, with almost 80° of frost in the ground, I would never have awaked. But awake I did, slowly, painfully, reluctantly, at the insistence of urgently shaking hands.

"Dr. Mason! Dr. Mason!" Dimly I realized that it was Jackstraw speaking, that he had my head and shoulders

supported in the crook of his arm. His voice was low, but with a peculiarly carrying quality. "Wake up, Dr. Mason. Ah, good, good. Easy does it now, Dr. Mason."

Groggily, Jackstraw's strong arm helping, I levered myself into an upright sitting position. A brilliant flame of pain lanced like a scalpel through my head, I felt everything blurring once more, consciously, almost violently shook off the shadows that were creeping in on me again, then looked dazedly up at Jackstraw. I couldn't see very well, I thought for one frightening moment that the vision centre had been damaged when the back of my head had struck against the iron-hard ice-cap—the ache there was almost as severe as the one in my forehead—but I soon discovered that it was only the blood seeping from the cut on my forehead that had frozen and gummed together the lids of my right eye.

"No idea who did it, Dr. Mason?" Jackstraw wasn't the man to ask stupid questions like, "What happened?"

"No idea at all." I struggled to my feet. "Have you?"

"Hopeless." I could sense rather than see the shrug in the darkness. "As soon as you stopped, three or four of them came out. I don't know where they went—I was out to the south rigging up the antenna."

"The radio, Jackstraw!" I was beginning to think again. "Where's the radio?"

"No worry, Dr. Mason, I have it with me," Jackstraw said grimly. "It's here. . . . Any idea *why?*"

"None. . . . Yes, I have." I thrust my hand into the inside pocket of my parka, then looked at Jackstraw in disbelief. "My gun—it's still there!"

"Nothing else missing?"

"No. Spare ammo clip there—wait a moment," I said slowly. I hunted around in my parka pocket, but with no success. "A paper—I took a newspaper cutting from Colonel Harrison's pocket—it's gone."

"A cutting? What was in it, Dr. Mason?"

"You're talking to one of the world's prize idiots, Jackstraw." I shook my head in self-reproach, winced as the pain struck again. "I've never even read the damn thing."

"If you had," Jackstraw murmured philosophically, "you'd probably know why it was taken from you."

"But—but what was the point in it?" I asked blankly. "For all they know I might have read it a dozen times."

"I think they know you haven't even read it once,"

Jackstraw said slowly. "If you had, they'd have known it by the fact that you would have said or done something they would have expected you to say or do. But because you haven't—well, they know they're still safe. They must have been desperate to take a chance like this. It is a great pity. I do not think, Dr. Mason, that you will ever see that paper again."

In five minutes I had washed and bandaged the cut on my forehead—I'd savagely told an enquiring Zagero that I'd walked into a lamppost and refused to answer all other questions—and set off with Jackstraw in the strengthening light of the newly risen moon. We were late for our rendezvous, but when I switched the receiver into the antenna I heard Joss's call-up sign come through straight away.

I acknowledged, then asked without preamble, "What news from Uplavnik?"

"Two things, Dr. Mason." Hillcrest had taken the microphone over from Joss, and, even through the distortion of the speaker, his voice sounded strange, with the flat controlled unemotionalism of one speaking through a suppressed anger. "Uplavnik has been in touch with H.M.S. *Triton*—the carrier coming up the Davis Strait. Triton is in constant communication with the British Admiralty and the government. Or so I gather.

"The answers to your questions are these. Firstly, the passenger list from MYTH in America is not yet through, but it is known from newspaper reports that the following three people were aboard: Marie LeGarde, the musical-comedy star, Senator Hoffman Brewster of the United States, and a Mrs. Phyllis Dansby-Gregg, who appears to be a very prominent London socialite."

I wasn't greatly excited over this item of news. Marie LeGarde had never been a suspect. Mrs. Dansby-Gregg—and, by implication, Helene Fleming—had never had more than a faint question mark against their names, and I had already come to the conclusion that it was long odds against the man who was, or purported to be, Senator Brewster being one of the killers.

"The second thing is this. The Admiralty cannot or will not say why the plane has been forced down, but I gather there must have been a most vital reason. Uplavnik suggests, on what basis I cannot say, perhaps it is officially inspired, that some person aboard the plane must have

been in possession of something of the utmost importance, so important that complete secrecy was vital. Don't ask me what it was. A microfilm, a formula, something, perhaps, only committed to memory—it sounds fanciful, but that's all we can guess at. It does seem likely that Colonel Harrison was in possession of it."

I looked at Jackstraw, and he at me. The man who had so recently knocked me out had been desperate all right. I knew then what I had subconsciously known all along, that I was dealing blindfolded against a man—or men—far cleverer than myself. They knew that Joss couldn't possibly have hoped to repair the RCA. They knew, therefore, that I must have been talking direct to Hillcrest. They knew, because I had told them, that the eight-watt radio we had with us had a range of not more than 150 miles under normal conditions, so that the chances were high that Hillcrest was actually speaking from the IGY cabin—or a point even nearer. I had also told them that Hillcrest and his four companions wouldn't be returning from their field trip for another two or three weeks, so that this premature return could only be accounted for by some unforeseen and extraordinary event. It wasn't hard to guess what that event must have been. That I should ask Hillcrest to find out the reason for the crash followed inevitably, but what was not inevitable, what pointed most clearly of all to the shrewdness of the killers, was their guess that whoever knew the reason for the crash would be most reluctant to go into specific detail: and they had robbed me of the only clue that might have helped me discover what that detail was and so also, I felt sure, the identity of the killers. But the time was far past now for crying over spilt milk.

I pressed the switch to "Transmit."

"Thank you. But please radio Uplavnik again, emphasize desperate urgency of finding out crash reasons. . . . How far behind do you estimate you are now? We have made only twenty miles since noon. Cold extreme, bad radiator trouble. Over."

"We have made only eight miles since noon. It seems——"

I threw the switch over.

"Eight miles?" I demanded harshly. "Did I hear you say eight miles?"

"You heard." Hillcrest's voice was savage. "Remember

the missing sugar? Well, it's turned up. Your fine friends dumped the whole bloody lot into the petrol. We're completely immobilized."

9

Wednesday: 8 a.m.—Thursday: 4 p.m.

WE WERE on our way again just after nine o'clock that night. It had been my original intention, by dreaming up a variety of excuses and even, if necessary, by sabotaging the engine, to stay there for several hours or at least what I reckoned to be the longest possible time before the killers became restive, suspected that I was deliberately stalling, and took over. Or tried to take over. For it had been my further intention that, after an hour or two, Jackstraw should produce his rifle—it was strapped to his shoulders night and day—and I my automatic, and hold them all at the point of the gun until Hillcrest came up. If all had gone well, he should have been with us by midnight. Our troubles would have been over.

But all had not gone well, our troubles were as bad as ever, the Sno-Cat was bogged down and, with Mahler now seriously ill and Marie LeGarde frighteningly weak and exhausted, I couldn't remain any longer. Had I been made of tougher stuff, or even had I not been a doctor, I might have brought myself to recognize that both Marie LeGarde and Theodore Mahler were expendable pawns in a game where the stakes, I was now certain were far greater than just the lives of one or two people. I might have held everybody—or the major suspects, at least—at gunpoint until such time, twenty-four hours if need be, as Hillcrest did come up. But I could not bring myself to regard our sick passengers as expendable pawns. A weakness, no doubt, but one that I was almost proud to share with Jackstraw, who felt exactly as I did.

That Hillcrest would come up eventually I felt pretty sure. The dumping of the sugar in the petrol—I bit my lips in chagrin whenever I remembered that it had been I who had told them all that Hillcrest was running short of fuel—had been a brilliant move, but nothing more, now than I had come to expect of men who thought of everything, made every possible provision against future eventualities. Still, even though furiously angry at the delay,

Hillcrest had thought he could cope with the situation. The big cabin of the Sno-Cat was equipped with a regular workshop with tools fit to deal with just about every mechanical breakdown, and already his driver-mechanic—I didn't envy him his murderous task even though he was reportedly working behind heated canvas aprons—had stripped down the engine and was cleaning pistons, cylinder walls, and valves of the unburnt carbon deposits that had finally ground the big tractor to a halt. A couple of others had rigged up a makeshift distillation unit—a petrol drum, almost full, with a thin metal tube packed in ice leading from its top to an empty drum. Petrol, Hillcrest had explained, had a lower boiling point than sugar, and when the drum was heated the evaporating gas, which would cool in the ice-packed tube, should emerge as pure petrol.

Such, at least, was the theory, although Hillcrest didn't seem absolutely sure of himself. He had asked if we had any suggestion, whether we could help him in any way at all, but I had said we couldn't. I was tragically, unforgivably wrong. I could have helped, for I knew something that no one else did, but, at the moment, I completely forgot it. And because I forgot, nothing could now avert the tragedy that was to come, or save the lives of those who were about to die.

My thoughts were black and bitter as the tractor roared and lurched and clattered its way southwest by west under the deepening darkness of a sky that was slowly beginning to fill with cloud. A dark depression filled me, and a cold rage, and there was room in my mind for both. I had a strange fey sense of impending disaster, and though I was doctor enough to know that it was almost certainly a psychologically induced reaction to the cold, exhaustion, sleeplessness, and hunger—and a physical reaction to the blow on the head—nevertheless I could not shake it off: and I was angry because I was helpless.

I was helpless to do anything to protect any of the innocent people with me, the people who had entrusted themselves to my care, the sick Mahler and Marie LeGarde, the quiet young German girl, the grave-faced Margaret Ross—above all, I had to admit to myself, Margaret Ross: I was helpless because I knew the murderers might strike at any time, for all I knew they might believe that Hillcrest had already told me all I needed to know and

that I was just waiting my chance to catch them completely off guard; on the other hand they, too, were almost certainly just biding their time, not knowing how much I knew, but just taking a calculated gamble, letting things ride as long as the tractor kept moving, kept heading in the right direction, but prepared to strike once and for all when the time came: and, above all, I was helpless because I still had no definite idea as to who the killers were.

For the hundredth time I went over everything I could remember, everything that had happened, everything that had been said, trying to dredge up from the depths of memory one single fact, one isolated word that would point the finger in one unmistakable direction. But I found nothing.

Of the ten passengers Jackstraw and I had with us, six of them, I felt certain, were almost beyond suspicion. Margaret Ross and Marie LeGarde were completely beyond it. The only things that could be said against Mrs. Dansby-Gregg and Helene was that I hadn't absolute proof of their innocence, but I was certain that such proof was quite unnecessary. United States Senators, as recent bribery and corruption cases had lamentably shown, had as many human failings—especially cupidity—as the next man; but, even so, the idea of a Senator getting mixed up with murder and criminal activities on this massive scale was too preposterous to bear further examination. As for Mahler, I was quite aware that being a diabetic didn't bar a man from criminal pursuits, and he could have been one of the guilty men—just possibly, he had thought they would force-land near some easily available insulin supplies. But that was just a little too farfetched, and even if it weren't, I wasn't seriously interested in Mahler. I was concerned only with killers who might kill again at any moment, and he most certainly wasn't included in that category: Mahler was a dying man.

That left only Zagero, Solly Levin, Corazzini, and the Reverend Smallwood, and the Reverend Smallwood was too good *not* to be true. The Bible was hardly ever out of his hands these days: there were certain lengths to which any impostor might reasonably be expected to go to convince us of his identity, but lengths such as these passed the bounds of the superfluous into the realms of the ridiculous.

I had reason to suspect Corazzini. As a tractor special-

ist, he knew precious little about tractors—although I had to be fair and admit that Citroën and Global tractors were a quarter of a century different in time and a world different in design. But he had been the only person I had found on his feet when I had opened the door of the passenger cabin in the plane. It was he who, back in the IGY cabin, had questioned me so closely about Hillcrest's movements. It was he, I had learnt, who had helped Jackstraw and Zagero bring up the petrol from the tunnel and so had the opportunity to spike the stuff left behind. Finally, I believed he could be utterly ruthless. But there was one great point in his favour: that still bandaged hand, token of his desperate attempt to save the falling radio.

I had far greater reason to suspect Zagero, and, by implication of friendship, Solly Levin. Zagero had enquired of Margaret Ross when dinner was: a damning point. Solly Levin had been nearest the radio, and in the right position for doing the damage when it had been destroyed: another damning point. Zagero had been one of those working with the petrol. And, most damning of all, Zagero bore no more resemblance to a boxer than Levin did to any boxing manager who had ever lived outside the pages of Damon Runyon. And, as a further negative mark against Zagero, I had Margaret Ross's word that Corazzini had never left his seat in the plane. That didn't, of course, necessarily exclude Corazzini, he could well have had an accomplice. But who could that accomplice be?

It was not until then that the chilling, frightening thought struck me that, because two guns had been used in the plane, I had assumed all along that there were only two criminals. There wasn't a shadow of evidence to suggest why there should not be more than two: why not three? Why not Corazzini, Zagero, and Levin all in the conspiracy together? I thought over the implications of this for some minutes, and at the end I felt more helpless than ever, more weirdly certain of ultimate tragedy to come. Forcibly, almost, I had to remind myself that all three were not necessarily working together; but it was a possibility that had to be faced.

About three o'clock in the morning, still following the flag trail that stretched out interminably before us in the long rake of the headlights, we felt the tractor slow down and Jackstraw, who was driving at the time, change gear as we entered on the first gentle slope of the long foothills

that led to the winding pass that cut the Vindeby Nunataks almost exactly in half. We could have gone round the Nunataks, but that would have wasted an entire day, perhaps two, and with the ten-mile route through the hills clearly marked, it was pointless to make a detour.

Two hours later, as the incline perceptibly steepened, the tractor treads began to slip and spin on the frozen snow, but by off-loading almost all the petrol and gear we carried on the tractor sled and stowing it inside the tractor cabin, we managed to build up enough weight to gain a purchase on the surface. Even so, progress was slow and difficult. We could only make ground by following a wide zigzag pattern, and it took us well over an hour to cover the last mile before the entrance to the pass. Here we halted, soon after seven o'clock in the morning. The pass was lined on one side by a deep crevasse in the ice that ran its entire length, and although not particularly treacherous the trail was difficult and dangerous enough to make me determined to wait for the two or three brief hours of light at the middle of the day.

While breakfast was being prepared, I looked at Mahler and Marie LeGarde. The steady rise in temperature—it was now less than –30° F—had done nothing to help either of them. Marie LeGarde looked as if she hadn't eaten in weeks, her face, pock-marked with sores and frostbite blisters, was appallingly thin and wasted, and the once sparkling eyes lack-lustre, pouched, and filled and rimmed with blood. She hadn't spoken a word in ten hours, just sat there, in her increasingly rare moments of waking, shivering and staring ahead with sightless eyes. Theodore Mahler looked in better case than she, but I knew when his defenses went down they would do so in a matter of hours. Despite all that we—or, rather, Margaret Ross—had done for him, the insidious talons of frostbite had already sunk deep into his feet, he had developed a very heavy cold—rare indeed in the Arctic, the seeds of it must have been sown before he had left New York—and he had neither the energy nor reserves to fight either that or the boils that were beginning to plague him. His breathing was difficult, the sweet ethereal odour of acetone very strong. He seemed wide awake and rational enough, superficially a much better going concern than Marie LeGarde, but I knew that the collapse, the preliminary to the true diabetic coma, might come at any time.

At eight o'clock Jackstraw and I moved out onto the hillside, and again made contact with Hillcrest. My heart sank when I heard the grim news that they'd hardly progressed a couple of miles in the previous twelve hours. In that bitter cold, it seemed—and, where they were, temperatures were all of 30° lower than they were with us—heating up an eight-gallon drum of petrol, even using stoves, blow-lamps, and every means at their disposal, to the point of boiling was a heartbreakingly slow job, and the Sno-Cat gobbled up in a minute all the pure fuel they could distil in thirty times that. Beyond that, there was no news: Uplavnik, which they had contacted less than an hour previously, had still nothing fresh to report. Without a word, Jackstraw and I packed up the equipment and made our way back to the cabin of the tractor. Jackstraw's almost invariable Eskimo cheerfulness was at the lowest ebb I had ever seen, he seldom spoke now and even more rarely smiled. As for me, I felt our last hope was gone.

We started up the tractor again at eleven o'clock and headed straight into the pass, myself at the wheel. I was the only person left in either the driving compartment or the cabin behind: Mahler and Marie LeGarde, vanished under a great mound of clothing, rode on the dog-sled while the others walked. The tractor was wide, the trail narrow and sometimes sloping outwards and downwards, and with a sideslip into the gaping crevasse that bordered our path nobody inside the cabin would have had any chance of escape.

The first part was easy. The trail, sometimes not more than eight or nine feet broad, more often than not opened out into a shelf wide enough, almost, to be called the flat floor of a valley, and we made rapid progress. At noon—I'd warned Hillcrest that we would be traversing the Vindeby Nunataks then and would have to miss our regular radio schedule—we were more than halfway through and had just entered the narrowest and most forbidding defile in the entire crossing when Corazzini came running up alongside the tractor and waved me down to a stop. I suppose he must have been shouting, but I'd heard nothing above the steady roar of the engine: and, of course, I'd seen nothing, because they had all been behind me and the width of the tractor cabin made my driving mirror useless.

"Trouble, Doc," he said swiftly, just as the engine died. "Someone's gone over the edge. Come on. Quick!"

"Who?" I jumped out of the seat, forgetting all about the gun I habitually carried in the door compartment as an insurance against surprise attack when I was driving. "How did it happen?"

"The German girl." We were running side by side round a corner in the track towards the little knot of people forty yards back, clustering round a spot on the edge of the crevasse. "Slipped, fell, I dunno. Your friend's gone over after her."

"Gone after her!" I knew that crevasse was virtually bottomless. "Good God!"

I pushed Brewster and Levin to one side, peered gingerly over the edge into the blue-green depths below, then drew in my breath sharply. To the right, as I looked, the gleaming walls of the crevasse, their top ten feet glittering with a beaded crystalline substance like icing sugar, and here not more than seven or eight feet apart, stretched down into the illimitable darkness, curving away from one another to form an immense cavern the size of which I couldn't even begin to guess at. To the left, more directly below, at a depth of perhaps twenty feet, the two walls were joined by a snow and ice bridge, maybe fifteen feet long, one of the many that dotted the crevasse through its entire length. Jackstraw was standing on this pressed closely into one edge, holding an obviously dazed Helene in the crook of his right arm.

It wasn't hard to work out Jackstraw's presence there. Normally, he was far too careful a man to venture near a crevasse without a rope, and certainly far too experienced to trust himself to the treachery of a snow-bridge. But, when Helene had stumbled over the edge, she must have fallen heavily—almost certainly in an effort to protect her broken collarbone—and when she had risen to her feet had been so dazed that Jackstraw, to prevent her staggering over the edge of the snow-bridge to her death, had taken the near-suicidal gamble of jumping after her to stop her. Even in that moment I wondered if I would have had the courage to do the same myself. I didn't think so.

"Are you all right?" I shouted.

"I think my left arm is broken," Jackstraw said conversationally. "Would you please hurry, Dr. Mason? This bridge is rotten, and I can feel it going."

His arm broken and the bridge going—and, indeed, I could see chunks of ice and snow falling off from the underside of the arch on which he was standing! The matter-of-fact unemotionalism of his voice was more compelling than the most urgent cry could possibly have been. But for the moment I was in the grip of a blind panic that inhibited all feeling, all thought except the purely destructive. Ropes—but Jackstraw couldn't tie a rope round himself, not with an arm gone, the girl couldn't help herself either, both of them were helpless, somebody would have to go down to them, and go at once. Even as I stared into the crevasse, held in this strange motionless thrall, a large chunk of névé broke off from the side of the bridge and plummeted slowly down into the depths, to vanish from sight, perhaps two hundred feet below, long before we heard it strike the floor of the crevasse.

I jumped up and raced towards the tractor sled. How to belay the man who was lowered? With only eight or nine feet between the edge of the crevasse and the cliff behind, not more than three men could get behind a rope, and, with perhaps two men dangling at the end of it what possible purchase could those three find on that ice-hard snow to support them, far less pull them up? They would be pulled over the edge themselves. Spikes—drive a spike into the ground and anchor a rope to that. But heaven only knew how long it would take to drive a spike into that icy surface with no guarantee at the end that the ice wouldn't crack and refuse to hold, and all the time that snow-bridge crumbling under the feet of the two people who were depending on me to save their lives. The tractor, I thought desperately—perhaps the tractor. That would take any weight: but by the time we'd disconnected the tractor sled, pushed it over the edge, and slowly backed the tractor along that narrow and treacherous path, it would have been far too late.

I literally stumbled upon the answer—the four big wooden bridging battens sticking out from the end of the tractor sled. God, I must have been crazy not to think of them straight away. I grabbed a coil of nylon rope, hauled out one of the battens—Zagero was already beside me pulling at another—and ran back to the spot as fast as I could. That three-inch thick, eleven-foot long batten must have weighed over a hundred pounds, but such is the supernormal strength given us in moments of desper-

ate need that I brought it sweeping over and had it in position astride the crevasse, directly above Jackstraw and Helene, as quickly and surely as if I had been handling a half-inch plank. Seconds later Zagero had laid the second batten alongside mine. I stripped off fur gloves and mittens, tied a double bowline in the end of the nylon rope, slipped my legs through the two loops, made a quick half-hitch round my waist, shouted for another rope to be brought, moved out, and tied my own rope to the middle of the planks, allowing for about twenty feet of slack, and lowered myself down hand over hand until I was standing beside Jackstraw and Helene.

I could feel the snow-bridge shake under my feet even as I touched it, but I'd no time to think about that, it would have been fatal if I had even begun to think about it. Another rope came snaking down over the edge, and in seconds I had it tied round Helene's waist so tightly that I could hear her gasp with the pain of it; but this was no time for taking chances. And whoever held the other end of the rope up above was moving even as quickly as I was, for the rope tightened just as I finished tying the knot.

I learned later that Helene owed her life to Mahler's quick thinking. The dog-sledge carrying Marie LeGarde and himself had stopped directly opposite the spot where Helene had gone over, and he had shouted to Brewster and Margaret Ross to sit on it and thread the rope through the slats on the sledge top. It had been a chance, but one that came off: even on that slippery surface their combined weights were more than enough to hold the slightly built Helene.

It was then that I made my mistake—my second mistake of that afternoon, though I did not realize that at the time. To help those above I stooped to boost her up, and as I straightened abruptly the suddenly increased pressure proved too much for the already crumbling bridge. I heard the ominous rumble, felt the snow begin to give under my feet, released my hold on Helene—she was already well clear anyway—grabbed Jackstraw by the arm, and jumped for the other side of the bridge a second before the spot where we had been standing vanished with a *whroom* and went cascading down into the gloomy depths of the crevasse. At the full extent of my rope I hit the ice on the far side of the crevasse, wrapped both arms tightly round Jackstraw—I heard his muffled exclamation

of pain and remembered his injury for the first time—and wondered how long I could hold him when that side of the bridge went too, as go it must, its support on the far side no longer existing. But, miraculously, for the moment it held.

Both of us were pressed hard in against the ice, motionless, hardly daring to breathe, when I heard a sudden cry of pain from above. It came from Helene—she must have caught her injured shoulder as she was being pulled over the edge of the crevasse. But what caught my eye was not Helene, but Corazzini. He was standing very close to the edge, and he had my gun in his hand.

I have never known such chagrin, such profound despair, such bitterness of spirit—or, to be utterly frank, such depths of fear. The one thing I had guarded against all the time, the one thing I had dreaded above all other things, that Jackstraw and I should ever both find ourselves, at the same time, completely at the mercy of the killers, had come to pass. But even in my fear there was savagery—savagery towards the man who had engineered this so beautifully, savagery towards myself for having been so easily and utterly fooled.

Even a child could see how it had been done. The series of snow-bridges had given Corazzini the idea. A little nudge to Helene Fleming at the right place—it was as plain as pikestaff that it had been no accident—and it was a foregone conclusion that either Jackstraw or myself would have to go down to fix a rope round the youngster who, with her broken collarbone, would be unable to do it herself: I suppose the possibility that she might have crashed straight through the snow-bridge must have occurred to Corazzini, but a man with a record of killings like he had wouldn't be worried unduly on that score—annoyance at the failure of his plan would probably have been his only reaction. And when one of us had gone down and the other was supervising the rescue from above—well, another little nudge would have solved all Corazzini's problems. As it was, I had played into his hands more completely than he could ever have hoped.

Mouth dry, sweat breaking out in the palms of my clenched fists, and my heart going like a trip-hammer in my chest, I was wondering desperately how he was going to administer the *coup de grâce* when I saw the Reverend Smallwood approaching Corazzini, arms outstretched and

saying something I couldn't catch. It was a brave gesture of the little minister's, but a forlorn and hopeless one: I could see Corazzini change his gun to his left hand, strike Mr. Smallwood a heavy backhanded blow across the face, and the sound of a body falling on the ice above was unmistakable. And then Corazzini was waving the others back at the point of the gun and was advancing towards the wooden battens that straddled the crevasse, and I knew with a dull certainty how he intended to dispose of us. Why waste two bullets when all he had to do was to kick the edges of these battens over the side? Whether these battens, weighing two hundred pounds between them, struck us or smashed away the last remaining buttress of the snow-bridge was quite immaterial: the point was that I was inescapably attached to them by the nylon rope round my waist, and when they plummeted down I would go with them, tearing away the bridge and carrying Jackstraw with me to our deaths in the unthinkable depths below.

Despairingly, I considered the idea of snatching at the rifle still strapped to Jackstraw's back, but dismissed it even with the thought. It would take me seconds to get it off. There was only one thing for it, and it wasn't going to do me any good at all. With a jump I could be halfway up the rope in a second, the increased weight would make the battens difficult to kick over and while Corazzini was either pushing these or pumping bullets into me as I swarmed up the rope, somebody—Zagero, say—could get him from the rear. That way there might, at least, be a faint chance for Jackstraw. I swung my arms behind me, bent my knees, then remained frozen in that ridiculous position as a rope came uncoiling down from above and struck me across the shoulder. I glanced up and saw Corazzini smiling down at me.

"You two characters fixin' on stayin' down there all day? Come on up."

It would be useless to try to describe the maelstrom of thoughts and emotions that whirled through my mind in the ninety seconds that elapsed before Jackstraw and I stood once more in incredulous safety on the trail above. They ranged from hope to bafflement to wild relief to the conviction that Corazzini was playing a cat-and-mouse game with us, and no one thought was in my mind more

than seconds at a time. Even when I was safe, I still didn't know what to think, the overwhelming relief and gladness and reaction blotted out everything. I was trembling violently, and although Corazzini must have noticed it he affected not to. He stepped forward and handed me the Beretta butt first.

"You're a mite careless about where you stow your armoury, Doc. I've known for a long time where you kept this. But I guess it may have been fairly useful these last few minutes."

"But—but why——?"

"Because I've got a damned good job and a chair behind a vice-president's desk waiting for me in Glasgow," he snapped. "I'd appreciate the chance to sit in that chair some day." Without another word, he turned away.

I knew what he meant, all right. I knew we owed him our lives. Corazzini was as convinced as I that someone had engineered the whole thing. It didn't require any thought at all to guess who that someone was.

My first thought was for Jackstraw. Jackstraw with a broken arm was going to make things very difficult for me: it might well make things quite impossible. But when I'd worked his parka off it required only one glance at the unnatural twist of the left arm to see that though Jackstraw had had every excuse for thinking his arm gone, it was, in fact, an elbow dislocation. He made no murmur and his face remained quite expressionless as I manipulated the bone back into the socket, but the wide white grin that cracked his face immediately afterwards was proof enough of his feelings.

I walked over to where Helene Fleming sat on the sledge, still shaking from the shock, Mrs. Dansby-Gregg and Margaret Ross doing their best to soothe her. The uncharitable thought struck me that it was probably the first time that Mrs. Dansby-Gregg had ever tried to soothe anyone, but I was almost ashamed of the thought as soon as it had occurred to me.

"That was a close call, young lady," I said to Helene. "But all's well. . . . Any more bones broken, eh?" I tried to speak jocularly, but it didn't sound very convincing.

"No, Dr. Mason." She gave a long shuddering sigh. "I don't know how to thank you and Mr. Neilson——"

"Don't try," I advised. "Who pushed you?"

"What?" She stared at me.

"You heard, Helene. Who did it?"

"Yes, I—I was pushed," she murmured reluctantly. "But it was an accident, I know it was."

"Who?" I persisted.

"It was me," Solly Levin put in. He was twisting his hands nervously. "Like the lady said, Doc, it was an accident. I guess I kinda stumbled. Someone tapped my heels and——"

"Who tapped your heels?"

"For cryin' out loud!" I'd made no attempt to hide the cold disbelief in my voice. "What would I want to do a thing like that for?"

"Suppose you tell me," I said, and turned away, leaving him to stare after me. Zagero stepped in my way, but I brushed roughly past him and went up towards the tractor. On the sled behind I saw the Reverend Smallwood sitting, nursing a bleeding mouth. Corazzini was apologizing to him.

"I'm sorry, Reverend, I'm really and truly sorry. I didn't for a moment think you were one of them, but I couldn't afford to take any chances back there. I hope you understand, Mr. Smallwood?"

Mr. Smallwood did, and was suitably Christian and forgiving. But I didn't wait to hear the end of it. I wanted to get through the Vindeby Nunataks, and get through with as little loss of time as possible, preferably before it became dark. There was something that I knew now that I had to do, and as soon as possible; but I didn't want to do it while we were all teetering on the edge of that damned crevasse.

We were through without further incident and at the head of that long almost imperceptible slope that fell away for thousands of feet towards the ice-bare rocks of the Greenland coast, before the last of the noon twilight had faded from the sky. I halted the tractor, spoke briefly to Jackstraw, told Margaret Ross to start thawing out some corned beef for our belated midday meal, and had just seen Mahler, now semiconscious, and Marie LeGarde once again safely ensconced in the tractor cabin, when Margaret Ross came up to me, her brown eyes troubled.

"The tins, Dr. Mason—the corned beef. I can't find them."

"What's that? The bully? They can't be far away, Margaret." It was the first time I'd called her that, but my

houghts had been fixed exclusively on something else, nd it wasn't until I saw the slight smile touching her ps—if she was displeased she was hiding it quite well—hat I realized what I had said. I didn't care, it was worth t, it was the first time I had ever seen her smile, and it ransformed her rather plain face—but I told my heart hat there was a time and a place for somersaults, and this vasn't it. "Come on, and let's have a look."

We looked, and we found nothing. The tins were gone ll right. This was the excuse, the opportunity I had been vaiting for. Jackstraw was by my side, looking at me quizzically as we bent over the sled, and I nodded. "Be-ind him," I murmured.

I moved back to where the others were grouped round he rear of the tractor cabin and took up a position where could watch them all—but especially Zagero and Levin.

"Well," I said, "you heard. Our last tins of beef have gone. They didn't just vanish. Somebody stole them. That somebody had better tell me, for I'm going to find out anyway."

There was an utter silence that was broken only occa-sionally by the stirring of the dogs on the tethering cable. No one said anything, no one as much as looked at his neighbour. The silence stretched on and on, then, as one man, they all swung round startled at the heavy metallic click from behind them. Jackstraw had just cocked the bolt of his rifle, and I could see the slow stiffening of Zagero's back and arms as he realized that the barrel was lined up on his own head.

"It's no coincidence, Zagero," I said grimly. I had my own automatic in my hand by the time he turned round. "That rifle's pointed just where it's meant to. Bring your bag here."

He stared at me, then called me an unprintable name.

"Bring it here," I repeated. I pointed the Beretta at his head. "Believe me, Zagero, I'd as soon kill you as let you live."

He believed me. He brought the bag, flung it at my feet.

"Open it," I said curtly.

"It's locked."

"Unlock it."

He looked at me without expression, then searched through his pockets. At last he stopped and said, "I can't find the keys."

"I'd expected nothing else. Jackstraw——" I changed my mind, one gun was not enough to cover a killer like Zagero. I glanced round the company, made my choice. "Mr. Smallwood, perhaps you——" . .

"No, thank you," Mr. Smallwood said hastily. He was still holding a handkerchief to his puffed mouth. He smiled wryly. "I've never realized so clearly before now how essentially a man of peace I am, Dr. Mason. Perhaps Mr. Corazzini——"

I glanced at Corazzini, and he shrugged indifferently. I understood his lack of eagerness. He must have known that I'd had him high up among my list of suspects until very recently indeed, and a certain delicacy of sentiment might well prevent him from being too forthcoming too soon. But this was no time for delicacy. I nodded, and he made for Zagero.

He missed nothing, but he found nothing. After two minutes he stepped back, looked at me, and then, thoughtfully, at Solly Levin. Again I nodded, and again he began to search. In ten seconds he brought out a bunch of keys, and held them up.

"It's a frame-up," Levin yelped. "It's a plant! Corazzini musta palmed 'em and put 'em there. I never had no keys——"

"Shut up!" I ordered contemptuously. "Yours, Zagero?"

He nodded tightly, said nothing.

"O.K., Corazzini," I said. "Let's see what we can find."

The second key opened the soft leather case. Corazzini dug under the clothes on top and brought out the three corned-beef tins.

"Thank you," I said. "Our friend's iron rations for his take-off. Miss Ross, our lunch. . . . Tell me, Zagero, can you think of any reason why I shouldn't kill you now?"

"You've made nothin' but mistakes ever since I met you," Zagero said slowly, "but, brother, this is the biggest you ever made. Do you think I would be such a damn fool as to incriminate myself that way? Do you think I would be so everlastingly obvious——"

"I think that's exactly the way you expected me to think," I said wearily. "But I'm learning, I'm learning. One more job, Corazzini, if you would. Tie their feet."

"What are you going to do?" Zagero asked tightly.

"Don't worry. The executioner will collect his fee. From now on you and Levin ride, with your feet tied, in the

front of the tractor sled—and with a gun on you all the time. . . . What is it, Miss LeGarde?"

"Are you sure, Peter?" It was the first time she had spoken for hours, and I could see that even that tiny effort tired her. "He doesn't *look* like a murderer." The tone of her voice accurately reflected the expressions of consternation and shocked disbelief on half a dozen faces: Zagero had spared no effort to make himself popular with everyone.

"Does anybody here?" I demanded. "The best murderers never do." I then explained to her—and the others—all I knew and had suspected about everything. It shook them, especially the facts of the spiking of the petrol and of Hillcrest having been, at one time, only a few hours behind us: and by the time I was finished I could see that there was as little doubt in their minds about Zagero's guilt as there was in mine.

Two hours later, well down the slope from the Vindeby Nunataks, I stopped and set up the radio gear. I reckoned that we were now less than a hundred miles from the coast, and for half an hour tried to raise our base at Uplavnik. We had no success, but I had hardly expected any: the radio shack at the base was manned by only one operator, he couldn't be expected to be on watch all the time, and obviously his call-up bell wasn't set for the frequency I was using.

At four o'clock exactly I got through to Hillcrest. This time I hadn't bothered to move the radio out of hearing range—I was actually leaning against the tractor cabin as I spoke—and every word said, both by Hillcrest and myself, could be clearly heard. But it didn't matter any more.

The first thing I did, of course, was to tell him that we had got our men. Even as I spoke, my own voice sounded curiously flat and lifeless. I should, I suppose, have been exultant and happy, but the truth was that I had suffered too much, both physically and psychologically, in the past few days, exhaustion lay over me like a smothering blanket, the reaction from the strain of those days was beginning to set in, the awareness was clearly with me that we weren't out of the wood by a long way yet, the lives of Marie LeGarde and Mahler were now the uppermost thoughts in my mind, and, to be perfectly honest, I also felt curiously deflated because I had developed a consider-

able liking for Zagero and the revelation of his true character had been more of a shock to me than I would have been prepared to admit to anyone.

Hillcrest's reactions, I must admit, were all that could have been wished for, but when I asked him about his progress the enthusiasm vanished from his voice. They were still bogged down, it seemed, and progress had been negligible. There was no word yet of passenger lists or of why the plane had been so important. The *Triton,* the aircraft carrier, had insulin aboard and would fly it up to Uplavnik. A landing barge was moving into Uplavnik through an ice-lead and was expected to arrive tomorrow and unload the tractor it was carrying, which would move straight out to meet us. Two ski-planes and two search bombers had been looking for us, but failed to locate us—we'd probably been traversing the Vindeby Nunataks at the time. . . . His voice went on and on, but I hadn't heard anything he'd said in the past minute or so. I had just remembered something I should have remembered a long time ago.

"Wait a minute," I called. "I've just thought of something."

I climbed inside the tractor cabin and shook Mahler. Fortunately, he was only asleep—from the look of him an hour or two ago I'd have said the collapse was due any minute.

"Mr. Mahler," I said quickly. "You said you worked for an oil company?"

"That's right." He looked at me in surprise. "Socony Mobil Oil Company, in New Jersey."

"As what?" There were a hundred things he could have been that were of no use to me.

"Research chemist. Why?"

I sighed in relief, and explained. When I'd finished telling him of Hillcrest's solution to his troubles—distilling the petrol—I asked him what he thought of it.

"It's as good a way as any of committing suicide," he said grimly. "What does he want to do—send himself into orbit? It only requires one weak spot in the can he's trying to heat. . . . Besides, the evaporation range of petrol is so wide—anything from 30° C. to twice the temperature of boiling water—that it may take him all day to get enough to fill a cigarette lighter."

"That seems to be more or less the trouble," I agreed. "Is there nothing he can do?"

"Only one thing he can do—wash it. What size drums does your petrol come in?"

"Ten gallon."

"Tell him to pour out a couple of gallons and replace with water. Stir well. Let it stand for ten minutes and then syphon off the top seven gallons. It'll be as near pure petrol as makes no difference."

"As easy as that!" I said incredulously. I thought of Hillcrest's taking half an hour to distill a cupful. "Are you sure, Mr. Mahler?"

"It should work," he assured me. Even the strain of a minute's speaking had been too much for him, his voice was already no more than a husky whisper. "Sugar is insoluble in petrol—it just dissolves in the small amounts of water present in petrol, small enough to be held in suspension. But if you've plenty of water, it'll sink to the bottom, carrying the sugar with it."

"If I'd the Nobel Science Prize, I'd give it to you right now, Mr. Mahler." I rose to my feet. "If you've any more suggestions to make, for heaven's sake let me know."

"I've one to make now." He smiled, but he was almost gasping for breath. "It's going to take your friend a pretty long time to melt the snow to get all the water he needs to wash the petrol." He nodded towards the tractor sled, visible through the gap in the canvas screen. "We're obviously carrying far too much fuel. Why don't you drop some off for Captain Hillcrest—why, in fact, didn't you drop some off last night, when you first heard of this?"

I stared at him for a long long moment, then turned heavily for the door.

"I'll tell you why, Mr. Mahler," I said slowly. "It's because I'm the biggest damned prize idiot in this world, that's why."

And I went out to tell Hillcrest just how idiotic I was.

10

Thursday: 4 p.m.—Friday: 6 p.m.

JACKSTRAW, CORAZZINI, and I took turns at driving the Citroën all through that evening and the following night. The engine was beginning to run rough, the exhaust was developing a peculiar note, and it was becoming increasing-

ly difficult to engage second gear. But I couldn't stop, I daren't stop. Speed was life now.

Mahler had gone into collapse shortly after nine o'clock that evening, and from the collapse had gradually moved into the true diabetic coma. I had done all I could, all anyone could, but heaven only knew it was little enough. He needed bed, heat, fluids, stimulants, sugar by mouth or injection. Both suitable stimulants and the heat were completely lacking, the lurching, narrow, hard wooden bunk was poor substitute for any bed, despite his great thirst he had found it increasingly difficult to keep down the melted snow water, and I had no means of giving an intravenous injection. For the others in the cabin it was distressing to watch him, distressing to listen to the dyspnoea—the harsh laboured breathing of coma. Unless we could get the insulin in time, I knew no power on earth could prevent death from supervening in from one to three days—in these unfavourable conditions, a day would be much more likely.

Marie LeGarde, too, was weakening with dangerous speed. It was with increasing difficulty that she could force down even the smallest mouthfuls of food, and spent most of her time in restless troubled sleep. Having seen her on the stage and marvelled at her magnificent vitality, it now seemed strange to me that she should go under so easily. But her vitality had really been a manifestation of a nervous energy: she had little of the physical resources necessary to cope with a situation like this, and I had frequently to remind myself that she was an elderly woman. Not that any such reminder was needed when one saw her face: it was haggard and lined and old.

But, worried though I was about my patients, Jackstraw was even more deeply concerned with the weather. The temperature had been steadily rising for many hours now, the moaning ululation of the ice-cap wind, which had been absent for over two days, was increasing in intensity with every hour that passed, and the skies above were dark and heavy with black drifting clouds of snow. And when, just after midnight, the wind speed passed fifteen miles an hour, the wind began to pick up the drift off the ice-cap.

I knew what Jackstraw was afraid of, though I myself had never experienced it. I had heard of the katabatic winds of Greenland, the equivalent of the feared Alaskan

williwaws. When great masses of air in the heart of the plateau were cooled, as they had been in the past forty-eight hours, by extremely low temperatures, they were set in motion by a gradient wind and cascaded—there was no other word for it—downwards from the edge of the plateau through suitable drainage channels. Set in motion through their own sheer weight of cold air, these gravity or drainage winds, slowly warmed by the friction and compression of their descent, could reach a hurricane force of destructive violence in which nothing could live.

And all the signs, all the conditions for a gravity storm were there. The recent extreme cold, the rising wind, the rising temperature, the outward-flowing direction of the wind, the dark star-obscuring clouds scudding by overhead—there could be no mistaking it, Jackstraw declared. I had never known him to be wrong about Greenland weather, I didn't believe him to be wrong now, and when Jackstraw became nervous it was time for even the most optimistic to start worrying. And I was worried all right.

We drove the tractor to its limit, and on the slight downward slope—we had changed direction by this time and were heading due southwest for Uplavnik—we were making very good time indeed. But by four o'clock in the morning, when we were, I reckoned, not more than sixty miles from Uplavnik, we ran into the *sastrugi* and were forced to slow down.

The *sastrugi*, regular undulations in the frozen snow, were the devil on tractors, especially elderly machines like the Citroën. Caused by raking winds, symmetrical as the waves in an eighteenth-century sailing print, hard on the crest and soft in the trough, they made progress possible only by slowing down to a disheartening crawl. Even so the Citroën and the sledges behind rolled and pitched like ships in a heavy seaway, the headlights one moment reaching up into the lowering darkness of the sky, the next dipping to illuminate the barred white and shadowed black of the *sastrugi* immediately ahead. Sometimes it gave way to deceptively clear patches—deceptively, for snow had obviously fallen here recently or been carried down from the plateau, and we were reduced to low gear to make any headway at all on it.

Shortly before eight o'clock in the morning Jackstraw brought the Citroën to a halt, and as the roar of the big engine died the deep moaning of the wind, a wind carry-

ing with it a riding wall of ice and snow, swept in to take its place. Jackstraw had drawn up broadside onto the wind and the slope of the hill, and I jumped down to rig up a canvas shelter extending out from the cabin: it was nothing elaborate, just a triangular sheet of proofed canvas attached to the top of the cabin and the cleat of a caterpillar track on its vertical side, with its apex stretched out to a spike hammered into the surface of the ice-cap: there was no room for us all within the cabin at mealtimes, I wanted some protection when we kept our 8 A.M. radio schedule with Hillcrest, and, in particular, it was time that Zagero and Levin had some relief from their sufferings. They had ridden all night on the tractor sled, under the guard of either Jackstraw or myself, and, though the temperature was now only a few degrees below zero and though they were sheltering under a mound of clothing, nevertheless they must have spent a miserable night.

Breakfast, such as it was, was waiting and ready to be eaten as soon as the tractor had stopped, but I had little appetite for it: it seemed to me I had forgotten what sleep was like, I had had none for almost three days, I was living now in a permanent state of physical and mental exhaustion and it was becoming almost impossible to concentrate, to think of the hundred and one things that had to be thought of all the time. More than once I caught myself nodding and dozing off over my cup of coffee, and it was only with a conscious effort of will that I forced myself to my feet to keep the radio schedule. I was going to call both Hillcrest and our base—Hillcrest had given me the frequency the previous evening. I decided to call Hillcrest first.

We got through without any difficulty, although Hillcrest said they could hear me only very faintly. I suspected some fault on the generator side, for our receiver was powered by a hundred-hour battery and we could hear Hillcrest's voice clearly.

All the men except Mahler were gathered round me during the transmission—they seemed to find a peculiar reassurance in another voice, however distant and disembodied that voice—and even Zagero and Levin were only seven or eight feet away, sitting in front of the tractor sled with their feet still bound. I was on a canvas chair, with my back to the canvas screen, and Corazzini and Brewster were sitting on the tailboard, the canvas curtains drawn

behind them to keep the heat in the cabin. The Reverend Smallwood was beside me, turning the generator handle, and Jackstraw a few feet away, watchful as ever, the cocked rifle ready in his hand.

"Receiving you loud and clear," I said to Hillcrest. My hands were cupped round the microphone and I was holding it close to my mouth to cut out as much as possible of the background noise of the wind. "What progress?" I threw the receiver switch into the antenna, and Hillcrest's voice came again.

"Great!" He sounded enthusiastic, excited. "My congratulations to your learned friend. Works like a charm and we're going like a bomb. We are approaching the Vindeby Nunataks and expect to be through by this afternoon."

This was wonderful news. With any luck he would be up with us late in the evening of that day, and we would have the moral support of his company and the even more important technical resources of everything his big modern Sno-Cat could offer. And Jackstraw and I could get some desperately needed sleep. . . . I became aware that Hillcrest was continuing, his voice still charged with the same suppressed excitement.

"The Admiralty or the government or whoever it is have loosened up at last! Brother, you're sitting on dynamite and you don't know it. You've got it right there with you and you could exchange it tomorrow for a million pounds in the right place. No wonder the governments were so cagey, no wonder they knew something fishy was going on and mounted the biggest search ever. The carrier *Triton*'s going to collect it personally——"

I threw the receiving switch.

"For heaven's sake!" I shouted in exasperation—an exasperation, I was dimly aware, shared by all the others who were leaning forward to hear Hillcrest's voice. "What are you talking about? What *was* the plane carrying? Over."

"Sorry. It's a guided missile mechanism of such advanced design and so top secret that its details, I gather, are known only to a handful of scientists in all the United States. It's the only one of its kind, and was being sent to Britain for study under the recent agreement to share knowledge on atomic weapons and guided missiles." Hillcrest's voice was calm now, measured and sober. There was a pause, then he went on, slowly, impressively. "I

understand the governments concerned are prepared to go any lengths—*any lengths*—to secure the recovery of this mechanism and prevent its falling into wrong hands."

There was another, longer pause: Hillcrest, clearly, was giving me an opportunity to say something, but I just didn't know what to say. The magnitude of the entire thing took my breath away, temporarily inhibited all thought and speech. . . . Hillcrest's voice was coming through again.

"To help you identify this mechanism, Dr. Mason. It's camouflaged, made up to look like an ebonite and metal portable radio of fairly large size, with a braided leather carrying strap. Find that portable, Dr. Mason, and you'll ——"

I never heard the end of that sentence. I was still sitting there, dazedly wondering why the words "portable radio" should have triggered off such a clangorous bell in my mind—I can only plead my extreme physical and mental exhaustion—when Zagero catapulted himself off his seat on the sled, knocking Jackstraw staggering, took one tremendous hop with his bound feet just opposite where I was sitting and hurled himself bodily towards a Corazzini who, his face twisted into a vicious and unrecognizable mask, had pushed himself off the tractor tailboard with one hand and with the other was fumbling desperately to bring something out from under his coat. He saw he couldn't make it in time, threw himself to one side, but Zagero, bound though he was, was like a cat on his feet, and I knew in that instant, that instant that was too late, that Zagero was indeed the world-class boxer that he claimed to be. If the astonishing speed of his reflexes were not proof enough, that blurring right arm of his carried with it lethal conviction. Corazzini was a very big man, six feet two and at least two hundred pounds, and he was swathed in many layers of heavy clothing, but when that fist caught him with such frightening power just under the heart he staggered back against the tailboard and slid slowly to the ground, unseeing eyes turned up to the first driving flakes of the newly fallen snow. I had never seen a blow delivered with such power: nor do I ever want to see it again.

For perhaps five seconds no one moved, no one spoke, men held in thrall. The soughing, wailing moan of the wind on the ice-cap sounded weirdly, unnaturally loud. I

was the first to break the silence. I was still sitting on my canvas stool.

"Corazzini!" I said. "Corazzini!" My voice was barely more than a whisper, but Zagero heard me.

"Sure it's Corazzini," he said levelly. "It always was." He stooped, thrust his hand under the unconscious man's coat, and brought out his gun. "You'd better keep this, Doc. Not only don't I trust our little playmate here with toys like these, but the state prosecutor or district attorney or whatever you call the guy in England will find that the riflin' on this barrel matches the riflin' marks on some very interestin' bullets."

He tossed the gun across, and automatically I caught it. It was a pistol, not an automatic, and it had a strange-looking cylinder screwed onto the front of the barrel. A silencer, I supposed, I had never seen one before. Nor had I ever seen that type of gun before. I didn't like the look of it at all, and I guessed it might be wise to have a gun in my hand when Corazzini came round. Jackstraw, I could see, already had his rifle lined up on the unconscious man. I placed the pistol on the ground beside me and pulled out the Beretta.

"You were ready for him." I was still trying to put things in order in my own mind. "You were waiting for the break. How——"

"Do I have to draw a diagram, Doc?" There was no insolence in his voice, only weariness. "I knew it wasn't me. I knew it wasn't Solly. So it had to be Corazzini."

"Yes, I see. It had to be Corazzini." The words were automatic, meaningless. My thoughts were in a state of utter confusion, as confused, no doubt, as those of Corazzini, who was now pushing himself groggily into a sitting position, but for the past fifteen seconds another bell had been ringing far back in my mind, not so loud as the first but even more desperately insistent, and all at once I had it and began to rise to my feet. "But there were two of them, two of them! Corazzini had an accomplice——" That was as far as I got when some metal object smashed across my wrist with brutal force, sending my Beretta flying, and something small and hard ground viciously into the back of my neck.

"Don't move, Dr. Mason." The voice, flat, controlled, but alive with a vibrant power that I had never heard before, was almost unrecognizable as the Reverend Joseph

Smallwood's. "Nobody is to move. Neilson, drop that rifle—now! Just one suspicious move and Dr. Mason gets his head blown off."

I stood stock-still. The man behind that voice meant every word he said. I didn't need any convincing of that. The cold certainty in his voice only reinforced the knowledge I already had that the sanctity of human life was a factor which could never enter into this man's considerations.

"All right, Corazzini?" Smallwood was speaking again, his voice empty of all concern for and interest in his accomplice: his only anxiety, if one could by any stretch of imagination call it that, lay in his desire for Corazzini's effectively continued co-operation.

"All right," Corazzini said softly. He was standing now, and that both mind and reactions were back to normal was evident from the dexterity with which he caught the gun Smallwood threw back to him. "Never thought any man could move so fast with his feet tied. But he won't catch me again. Everybody out, eh?"

"Everybody out," Smallwood nodded. No question, he was the leader of the two, ridiculously improbable though that would have seemed only two minutes ago; but it didn't seem improbable any longer, it seemed inevitable.

"Jump down! All of you," Corazzini ordered. Gun in one hand, he held back a flap of the canvas screen with the other. "Hurry it up."

"Mahler can't jump down," I protested. "He can't move—he's in coma. He——"

"Shut up!" Corazzini interrupted. "All right, Zagero, inside and get him out."

"You can't move him!" I shouted furiously. "You'll kill him if——" My last word was choked off in a grunt of pain as Smallwood's gun barrel caught me viciously across the side of the head. I fell to my hands and knees in the snow and remained there for several seconds, head down and shaking it from side to side as I tried to overcome the dizziness and the pain.

"Corazzini said 'shut up.' You must learn to listen." Smallwood's voice was chillingly devoid of all emphasis and inflection. He stood waiting quietly until the last of the passengers had descended or been carried from the tractor cabin, then waved us all into a straight line facing towards Corazzini and himself. Both of them had their

backs to the canvas screen, while we were placed just far enough clear of the shelter to be blinded by the increasingly heavy snowfall that swirled down into our eyes, but not so far off as not to be clearly seen by them. Whatever these two did, I was beginning to discover, betrayed that economy of movement and unquestioning sureness of the complete professionals who had long ago worked out the answers to and counters against any of a vast range and permutation of situations they were ever likely to encounter.

Smallwood beckoned me.

"You haven't finished your radio call, Dr. Mason. Finish it. Your friend Hillcrest must be wondering at the delay." The gun in his hand came forward a fraction of an inch, just enough for the movement to be perceptible. "For your own sake, do nothing to arouse his suspicions. Don't be clever. Keep it brief."

I kept it brief. I excused the interruption of transmission on the grounds that Mahler had taken a sudden turn for the worse—as indeed, I thought bitterly, he had—said that I'd guard the missile mechanism with my life, and apologized for cutting the call short, but said it was essential to get Mahler to Uplavnik with all speed.

"Finish it off," Smallwood said softly in my ear. I nodded.

"That's the lot then, Captain Hillcrest. Will make the noon schedule. This is Mayday signing off. Mayday, Mayday."

I switched off, and turned indifferently away. I had taken only one step when Smallwood caught my shoulder and whirled me round. For such an apparently slight man, he was phenomenally strong. I gasped as his pistol barrel dug into my stomach.

" 'Mayday,' Dr. Mason?" he asked silkily. "What is 'Mayday'?"

"Our call-sign, of course," I said irritably.

"Your call-sign is GFK."

"Our call-up is GFK. Our signing-off is 'Mayday.' "

"You're lying." I wondered how I could ever have thought this face meek and nervous and colourless. The mouth was a thin hard line, the upper eyelids bar-straight and hooded above the unwinking eyes. Flat marbled eyes of a faded light blue. A killer's eyes. "You're lying," he repeated.

"I'm not lying," I said angrily.

"Count five and die." His eyes never left mine, the pressure of the gun increased. "One . . . two . . . three ——"

"I'll tell you what it is!" The cry came from Margaret Ross. "Mayday is the international air distress signal, the S.O.S. . . . I had to tell him, Dr. Mason, I had to!" Her voice was a shaking sob. "He was going to kill you."

"I was indeed," Smallwood agreed. If he felt either anger or apprehension, no trace of either appeared in the calm conversational voice. "I should do it now—you've lost us four hours' headstart. But courage happens to be one of the few virtues I admire. . . . You are an extremely brave man, Dr. Mason. Your courage is a fair match for your—ah—lack of perspicacity, shall we say."

"You'll never get off the ice-cap, Smallwood," I said steadily. "Scores of ships and planes are searching for you, thousands of men. They'll get you and they'll hang you for these five dead men."

"We shall see." He gave a wintry smile, and now that he had removed his rimless glasses I could see that the man's smile left his eyes untouched, left them flat and empty and lifeless, like the stained glass in a church and no sun behind it. "All right, Corazzini, the box. Dr. Mason, bring one of the maps from the drivers' seat."

"In a moment. Perhaps you would care to explain——"

"Explanations are for children." The voice was level, curt, devoid of all inflection. "I'm in a hurry, Dr. Mason. Bring the map."

I brought it and when I returned Corazzini was sitting on the front of the tractor sled with a case before him. But it wasn't the leather-covered portable radio: it was Smallwood's robe case.

Corazzini snapped open the catches, pulled out Bible, robes and divinity hood, tossed them to one side then carefully brought out a metal box which looked exactly like a tape recorder: indeed, when he shone his torch on it I could clearly see the word "Grundig." But it soon became apparent that it was like no tape recorder that I had ever seen.

The twin spools he ripped off the top of the machine and sent spinning away into the darkness and the snow, the tape unwinding in a long convoluted streamer. By this time I would have taken long odds that anyone suspicious

enough to investigate would have found that tape perfectly genuine: probably, I thought bitterly, Bach's organ music, in keeping with Smallwood's late ecclesiastical nature.

Still in silence, we watched Corazzini undo and fling away the false top of the recorder, but not before I had time to notice the padded spring clips on its underside—the perfect hiding place for a couple of automatics: revealed now were controls and calibrated dials that bore no resemblance to those of a tape recorder. Corazzini straightened and erected a hinged telescopic aerial, clamped a set of headphones to his ears, made two switches, and started to turn a dial, at the same time watching a green magic eye similar to those found in tape recorders and many modern radios. Faintly, but unmistakably, I could hear a steady whine coming from the earphones, a whine which altered in pitch and intensity as Corazzini turned the dial. When it reached its maximum strength, he turned his attention to a built-in alcohol compass about three inches in diameter. A few moments later he doffed the earphones and turned round, apparently satisfied.

"Very strong, very clear," he announced to Smallwood. "But there's too heavy a deviation factor from all the metal in the tractor and sledge. Back in two minutes. Your flashlight, Dr. Mason."

He walked away for about fifty yards, taking the machine with him: it was with intense chagrin that I realized that it was perfectly in keeping with all that had gone before that Corazzini had probably forgotten more about navigation than I was ever likely to know. He returned soon, consulted a small chart—correcting for variation, no doubt—then grinned at Smallwood.

"It's them, all right. Perfect signal. Bearing 268."

"Good." If Smallwood felt relieved or gratified at the news, no shadow of his feeling touched the thin, immobile face. Their quiet certainty, their forethought, their foolproof organization was dismaying, frightening. Now that I could see what manner of men they were it was unthinkable that they should have set themselves down in a vast featureless country such as this without some means of orientating themselves: what we had just seen in operation could only be a battery-operated radio direction finder, and even to me, inexperienced though I was in such matters, it was obvious that Corazzini must have been

taking a bearing on some continous directional line-up signals transmitted by a vessel, or vessels, offshore: trawlers, probably, or some other inconspicuous type of fishing vessel. . . . I would have been less than human had I not wanted to shake this absolute confidence.

"You've miscalculated the hornets' nest you've stirred up. The Davis Strait, the coast of Greenland is alive with ships and planes. The scout planes of the carrier *Triton* will pick up every boat that's larger than a skiff. The trawlers will never get away with it; they won't get five miles."

"They don't have to." Implicit in Corazzini's words was confirmation of the accuracy of my guess about trawlers. "There are such things as submarines. In fact, there is one, not far from here."

"You still won't——"

"Be quiet," Smallwood said coldly. He turned to Corazzini. "268, eh—due west more or less. Distance?"

Corazzini shrugged, said nothing: Smallwood beckoned to me.

"We'll soon find it. That map, Dr. Mason—indicate our position, accurately."

"You can go to hell," I said briefly.

"I expected nothing else. However, I'm not blind and your clumsy attempts at concealment have done little to hide the growing attachment between yourself and the young lady here." I glanced quickly at Margaret, saw the faint colour beginning to stain the pale cheek, and looked as quickly away. "I am prepared to shoot Miss Ross."

I never doubted him. I knew he'd do it in an instant. I gave him our position, he asked for another map, asked Jackstraw to mark our position on the second, and compared the two.

"They coincide," he nodded. "Fortunately for you." He studied the map briefly, then looked at Corazzini. "The Kangalak fjord, undoubtedly, at the foot of the Kangalak glacier. Approximately——"

"The Kangalak fjord," I interrupted. My voice was bitter. "Why the hell didn't you land there in the first place and save us all this?"

"The plane captain deserved to die," Smallwood said obliquely. His smile was wintry. "I had instructed him to put down on the coast just north of the fjord where our—ah—friends had reconnoitred a section of the ice-

cap, three miles long and absolutely flat, that is the equal of the finest runway in Europe or America, and it wasn't until I saw the altimeter reading just before the crash that I realized he had deceived me." He made an impatient gesture and turned to Corazzini. "We waste time. Approximately sixty miles, you would say?"

Corazzini examined the map. "Yes, about that."

"So, come then, on our way."

"Leaving us here to starve and die of cold, I suppose?" I said bitterly.

"What becomes of you no longer concerns me," Smallwood said indifferently. Already, in a matter of minutes, it had become almost impossible to think of him, to remember him as the meek retiring minister we had known. "It is possible, however, that you might be foolish enough to take advantage of the cover of snow and darkness to run after us, waylay, and try to overcome us. You might even succeed, even though unarmed. We must immobilize you, temporarily."

"Or permanently, " Zagero said softly.

"Only fools kill wantonly and unnecessarily. Fortunately—for you—it is not necessary for my plans that you die. Corazzini, bring some rope from the sled. There's plenty of cord there. Tie their feet only. With their numbed hands it will take them an hour to undo their bonds: we will be well on our way by then." He moved his gun gently from side to side. "Sit in the snow. All of you."

There was nothing for it but to do as we were told. We sat down and watched Corazzini bring a hank of cord from the sled. He looked at Smallwood, and Smallwood nodded at me.

"Dr. Mason first."

Corazzini gave his gun to Smallwood—they missed nothing, that pair, not even the remote possibility that one of us might try to snatch Corazzini's gun—and advanced on me. He knelt and had taken a couple of turns round my ankles when the truth struck me with the suddenness, the shocking impact of a physical blow. I sent Corazzini staggering with a violent shove and leapt to my feet.

"No!" My voice was hoarse, savage. "By God, you're not going to tie me up, Smallwood!"

"Sit down, Mason!" His voice was hard, whiplike, and the light from the tractor cabin was enough for me to see

the rock-like pistol barrel centered between my eyes. I ignored it completely.

"Jackstraw!" I shouted. "Zagero, Levin, Brewster! On your feet if you want to live. He's only got one gun. If he starts firing at any of us, the rest go for him and get him—he can't possibly get us all. Margaret, Helen, Mrs. Dansby-Gregg—first shot that's fired, run off into the darkness—and stay there!"

"Have you gone crackers, Doc?" The words came from an astonished Zagero, but for all that something namelessly urgent and compelling in my voice had got him to his feet, and he was bent forward, crouched like a great cat, ready to launch himself at Smallwood. "Want to get us all killed?"

"That's just what I don't want." I could feel my spine, the back of my neck cold with a cold that was not of the Arctic, and my legs were trembling. "Going to tie us up and leave us here? Is he, hell! Why do you think he told us of the trawler, its position, the submarine, and all the rest of it? I'll tell you why—because he knew it was safe because he'd made up his mind that none of us would ever live to tell of these things." I was rattling the words out with machine-gun rapidity, desperate with the need to convince the others of what I was saying before it was too late; and my eyes never left the gun in Smallwood's hand.

"But——"

"No 'buts,' " I interrupted harshly. "Smallwood knows that Hillcrest will be coming through here this afternoon. If we're still here—and alive—first thing we'd tell him would be Smallwood's course, speed, approximate position, and destination. Within an hour the Kangalak glacier would be sealed, within an hour bombers from the *Triton* would have blasted him off the face of the glacier. Tie us up? Sure—and then he and Corazzini would shoot us at their leisure while we flopped around the ice like birds with broken wings."

Conviction was immediate and complete. I couldn't see the faces of the others, but the fractional lowering of Smallwood's gun was enough to tell me.

"I underestimated you, Dr. Mason," he admitted softly. His voice was devoid of all trace of anger. "But you almost died there."

"What's five minutes more or less?" I asked, and Small-

wood nodded absently. He was already working out an alternative solution.

"You—you inhuman monster!" Senator Brewster's voice was shaking with fear or anger or both. "You were going to tie us up and butcher us like—like——" Words failed him for a moment, then he whispered, "You must be mad, Smallwood, stark raving mad."

"He's not in the slightest," Zagero said quietly. "Not mad. Just bad. But it's kind of hard to tell the difference at times. Figured out your next jolly little scheme, Smallwood?"

"Yes. As Dr. Mason says, we can't possibly dispose of all of you inside a couple of seconds, which is all the time it would take for one—probably more—of you to reach the cover of the snow and darkness." He nodded towards the tractor sled, lifted his collar high against the snow and biting wind. "I think you had better ride a little way with us."

And ride with them we did for the thirty longest miles I have ever driven, for nine hours that had no end. A relatively short distance, but this eternity of time to cover it: partly because of the *sastrugi,* partly because of the increasingly long stretches of soft snow, but mainly because of the weather, which was deteriorating rapidly. The wind had now risen to something better than thirty miles an hour, it carried with it a blinding wall of flying ice-filled drift, and, even though it was directly behind us, it made things troublesome for the driver. For all the others except Smallwood it made the conditions intolerable; had the temperature been what it was only twenty-four hours previously, none of us, I am sure, would have survived that trip.

I would have thought that with either Smallwood or Corazzini driving and the other navigating from the dog-sledge we would have had a chance, slender though it might be, to overpower them or at least make good our escape. But Smallwood never offered even a shadow of a chance of either. Corazzini drove all the time, with the radio direction finder headphones clamped to his ears, so that compass navigation became an inaccurate superfluity. Smallwood sat alone in the back of the tractor cabin, his gun unwaveringly trained on the rest of us who were crammed aboard the big tractor sled, ten feet to the rear of him: when the snow eventually became too heavy he

stopped the tractor, detached the portable searchlight, and mounted it, facing aft, in the rear of the tractor cabin; this had the double advantage of illuminating us so that he could clearly see us even through the drift and make certain that none of us tried to drop off the sled, and of blinding us so that we were quite unable to see what he was doing, even to see whether he was watching us at all. It was frustrating, maddening. And, for good measure and to prevent any desperate attempt to escape in the occasionally blinding flurries of snow, he brought Margaret and Helene up into the cabin and bound their hands; they were the surety for our good conduct.

That left eight of us on the tractor sled, Theodore Mahler and Marie LeGarde stretched out in the middle, three of us sitting on each side. Almost immediately after we had moved off and pulled a pair of tarpaulins over us for what meagre shelter they could afford, Jackstraw leaned across and tapped me on the shoulder with something held in his hand. I reached up and took it from him.

"Corazzini's wallet," he said softly. For all the chance of his being overheard by either Smallwood or Corazzini above the roar of the engine and the voice of the gale, he could have shouted out the words. "Fell from his pocket when Zagero knocked him down. He didn't see it go, but I did—sat on top of it when Smallwood told us to squat in the snow."

I stripped off my gloves, opened the wallet, and examined its contents in the light of the torch Jackstraw had also passed across—a torch with the beam carefully hooded and screened to prevent the slightest chink of light escaping from under the tarpaulin: at this time, Smallwood had not yet switched on the searchlight.

The wallet provided us with that last proof of the thoroughness, the meticulous care with which these two men had provided themselves with false but utterly convincing identities: I knew that whatever Corazzini's name was it wasn't the one he had given himself, but, had I not known, the "N.C." stamped on the hand-tooled morocco, the visiting cards with the inscribed "Nicholas Corazzini" above the name and address of the Indiana head office of the Global Tractor Company, and the leather-backed fold of American Express cheques, each one already signed "N. R. Corazzini" in its top left-hand corner, would have carried complete conviction.

And, too late, the wallet also presented us, obliquely but beyond all doubt, with the reason for many things, ranging from the purpose of the crash-landing of the plane to the explanation of why I had been knocked on the head the night before last: inside the billfold compartment was the newspaper cutting which I had first found on the dead body of Colonel Harrison. I read it aloud, slowly, with infinite chagrin.

The account was brief. That it concerned that dreadful disaster in Elizabeth, New Jersey, where a commuters' train had plunged through an opened span of the bridge into the waters of Newark Bay, drowning dozens of the passengers aboard, I already knew from the quick glance I had had at the cutting in the plane. But, as I had also gathered in the plane, this was a follow-up story, and the reporter wasted little time on the appalling details: his interest lay in another direction entirely. It was "reliably reported," he said, that the train had been carrying an army courier; that he was one of the forty who had died; and that he had been carrying a "supersecret guided missile mechanism."

That was all the cutting said, but it was enough, and more than enough. It didn't say whether the mechanism had been lost or not, it most certainly never even suggested that there was any connection between the presence of the mechanism aboard the train and the reasons for the crash. It didn't have to, the cheek-by-jowl contiguity of the two items made the reader's own horrifying conclusions inevitable. From the silence that stretched out after I had read the last words, I knew that the others were lost in the same staggering speculations as myself. It was Jackstraw who finally broke this silence, his voice abnormally matter-of-fact.

"Well, we know now why you were knocked on the head."

"Knocked on the head?" Zagero took him up. "What do you——?"

"Night before last," I interrupted. "When I told you I'd walked into a lamppost." I told them all about the finding of the cutting and its subsequent loss.

"Would it have made all that difference even if you *had* read it?" Zagero asked. "I mean——"

"Of course it would!" My voice was harsh, savage almost, but the savagery was directed against myself, my

own stupidity. "The fact of finding a cutting about a fatal crash which occurred in strange unexplained circumstances on the person of a man who had just died in a fatal crash in equally strange and unexplained circumstances would have made even me suspicious. When I heard from Hillcrest that something highly secret was being carried aboard the plane, the parallel would have been ever more glaringly obvious, especially as the cutting was found on the man—an army officer—who was almost certainly the courier, the carrier of this secret. Anything larger than a matchbox in the luggage the passengers were carrying I'd have ripped open and examined, radio and tape recorder included. Smallwood knew it. He didn't know *what* was in the cutting, but he—or Corazzini—knew it *was* a cutting and they were taking no chances at all."

"You couldn't have known all that," Levin said soothingly. "It's not your fault——"

"Of course it's my fault," I said wearily. "All my fault. I don't even know how to start apologizing. You first, Zagero, I suppose, you and Solly Levin, for tying you——"

"Forget it." Zagero was curt but friendly. "We're just as bad—all of us. All the facts that mattered were as available to us as they were to you—and we made no better use of them; less, if anything." In the tiny glow from the torch I could see him shaking his head. "Lordy, lordy, but ain't it easy to understand everything when it's too late. Easy enough to understand now why we crashed in the middle of nowhere—the plane captain must have been in on it, he must have known that the mechanism was aboard and thought it important enough to put the passengers' lives second and crash-land in the middle of the ice plateau, where Smallwood could never reach the coast."

"Not knowing that I was there waiting to oblige Smallwood," I said bitterly. I shook my head in turn. "It's obvious now, all too obvious. How Corazzini damaged his hand in the shack—not by saving or trying to save the radio but by accelerating its fall after he'd pushed the hinges in. How and why he lost the toss and had to sleep on the floor—to give him a chance to smother the second officer."

"What you might call a good loser," Zagero said grimly. Then he gave a short laugh. "Remember when we buried the second officer? I wonder what Smallwood's

burial service would have sounded like if we'd really been close enough to hear?"

"I missed that," I nodded. "I missed the suggestion you made inside the plane that we should bury the murdered men—if you had been guilty you'd never dared have made that suggestion, for then the way these men died would almost certainly have been discovered."

"*You* missed it," Zagero said feelingly. "How about me—I said it, and I never even thought of it till now." He snorted. "Boy, am I disgusted with myself. As far as I can see the only thing I knew that you didn't was that Corazzini clouted our friend Smallwood back in the pass there simply in order to throw suspicion on me; but, then, I knew that even trying to tell you that would have been crazy."

There was a long moment's silence, while we listened to the rise and fall of the Citroën's exhaust note in the gusting, strengthening wind, then Solly Levin spoke.

"The plane," he said. "The fire—how come?"

"There was enough high-octane fuel in its tanks to take Hillcrest's Sno-Cat a couple of thousand miles," I explained. "If Hillcrest's tanks had been empty when he arrived back at base and if he'd found out right away that the spare fuel in the tunnel had been doctored—well, it wouldn't have taken him long to syphon out the stuff in the plane. So, no plane."

The silence this time was even longer, then Zagero cleared his throat, as if uncertain how to begin.

"Seeing explanations are in the air—well, I guess it's time we made one too." Zagero, to my astonishment, sounded almost embarrassed. "It's about the phony conduct of that phony character to your left, Doc, one Solly Levin. We'd plenty of time to talk about it when we were lashed to this damned sledge all of last night and——"

"Come to the point," I interrupted impatiently.

"Sorry." He leaned across to Solly Levin. "Want I should make a formal introduction, Pop?"

I stared at him in the darkness.

"Did I hear——?"

"Sure you did, Doc." He laughed softly. "Pop. The old man. The paternal parent. Says so on my birth certificate and everything." He was enjoying himself vastly. "Confirmation on the right here."

"It's perfectly true, Dr. Mason." Solly Levin smiled.

The dreadful Bowery accent was quite gone, yielding place to a crisper, more decisive version of Zagero's cultured drawl. "I'll put it briefly. I'm the owner and general manager—or was till I retired a year ago—of a plastics factory in Trenton, New Jersey, near Princeton, where Johnny managed to acquire a splendid accent and very little else. It was not, I might add, Princeton's fault; Johnny spent most of his time in the gymnasium, nursing his—ah—pugilistic ambitions, much to my annoyance, as I wanted him to take over from me."

"Alas," Zagero put in, "I was almost as stubborn as he is himself."

"A great deal more so," his father said. "So I made him a proposition. I'd give him two years—it seemed enough, he was already amateur heavyweight champion—to prove himself, and at the end of that time if he hadn't made it he was to take his place in the factory. His first manager was as corrupt as they come, and Johnny literally kicked him out at the end of a year. So I took over. I'd newly retired, I'd time on my hands, I'd a very strong vested interest in his well-being apart from the fact that he was my son—and, quite frankly, I'd begun to see that he was really going to get to the very top." He broke off there—I could see that the knowledge that Zagero was finished had hurt the father more than the son—so I took the opportunity to interrupt.

"Zagero or Levin. Which is it?"

"Zagero," the elder man answered.

"Why the Levin?"

"Some state and national boxing commissions refuse to permit a close relative to be either manager or second. Especially second. So I used an alias. A practice by no means uncommon and officially winked at. A harmless deception."

"Not so harmless," I said grimly. "It was one of the worst acting performances I've ever seen, and that was one of the primary reasons for my suspecting your son and, in turn, for Corazzini and Smallwood getting away with what they did. Had you come clean earlier on, I would have known that they were bound, even in the absence of all positive evidence, to be the guilty men. But with Solly Levin—I'll find it very difficult to think of you as Mr. Zagero, I'm afraid—with Solly Levin sticking out

as a sore thumb as an obvious phony—well, I just couldn't leave you two out of the list of suspects."

"I obviously modelled myself on the wrong person—or type of person," Levin said wryly. "Johnny ribbed me about it all the time. I'm deeply sorry for any trouble we may have caused, Dr. Mason. I honestly never looked at it from your point of view, never realized the dangers involved in maintaining the impersonation—if you could call it that. Please forgive me."

"Nothing to forgive," I said bitterly. "A hundred to one I'd have found some other way of messing things up."

Shortly after five o'clock in the evening Corazzini stopped the tractor—but he didn't stop the engine. He came down from the driver's seat and walked round to the cabin, pushing the searchlight slightly to one side. He had to shout to make himself heard above the roar of the tractor and the high ululating whine of the still strengthening blizzard.

"Halfway, boss. Thirty-two miles on the clock."

"Thank you." We couldn't see Smallwood, but we could see the tip of his gun barrel protruding menacingly into the searchlight's beam. "The end of the line, Dr. Mason. You and your friends will please get down."

There was nothing else for it. Stiffly, numbly, I climbed down, took a couple of steps towards Smallwood, stopped as the pistol steadied unwaveringly on my chest.

"You'll be with your friends in a few hours," I told Smallwood. "You could leave us a little food, a portable stove and tent. Is that too much to ask?"

"It is."

"Nothing? Nothing at all?"

"You're wasting your time, Dr. Mason. And it grieves me to see you reduced to begging."

"The dog-sledge, then. We don't even want the dogs. But neither Mahler nor Miss LeGarde can walk."

"You're wasting your time." He turned his attention to the sledge. "Everybody off, I said. Did you hear me Levin? Get down!"

"It's my legs." In the harsh glare of the searchlight we could see the lines of pain deep-etched round Levin's eyes and mouth, and I wondered how long he had been sitting there suffering, saying nothing. "I think they're frozen or sleeping or something."

"Get down!" Smallwood repeated sharply.

"In a moment." Levin swung one of his legs over the edge of the sledge, his teeth bared with the effort. "I don't seem to be able——."

"Maybe a bullet in one of your legs will help," Smallwood said unemotionally, "to get the feeling back."

I didn't know whether he meant it or not. I didn't think so—gratuitous violence wasn't in character for this man, I couldn't see him killing or wounding without sound reason. But Zagero thought differently. He advanced within six feet of Smallwood.

"Don't touch him, Smallwood," he said warningly.

"No?" The rising inflection was a challenge accepted, and Smallwood went on flatly, "I'd snuff you and him like a candle."

"No!" Zagero said, softly and savagely, the words carrying clearly in a sudden lull in the wind. "Lay a finger on my old man, Smallwood, and I'll get to you and break your neck like a rotten carrot if you empty the entire magazine into me." I looked at him as he crouched there like a great cat, toes digging into the frozen snow, fists clenched and slightly in advance of him, ready for the explosive leap that would take him across that tiny space in a split second of time, and I believed he could do exactly what he said. So, too, I suspected, did Smallwood.

"Your old man?" he enquired. "Your father?"

Zagero nodded.

"Good." Smallwood showed no surprise. "Into the tractor cabin with him, Zagero. We'll exchange him for the German girl. Nobody cares about her."

His point was clear. I couldn't see how we could offer any danger to Smallwood and Corazzini now, but Smallwood was a man who guarded even against impossibilities: Levin would be far better surety for Zagero's conduct than Helene.

Levin half-walked, was half-carried into the tractor cabin. With Corazzini and Smallwood both armed, resistance was hopeless; Smallwood had us summed up to a nicety. He knew we were desperate men, that we would fling ourselves on him and his gun in a moment of desperate emergency; but he also knew that we weren't so desperate as to commit suicide when no lives were in immediate danger.

When Levin was inside, Smallwood turned to the young

German girl seated opposite him in the cabin. "Out!"

It was then that it happened, with the stunning speed and inevitability that violent tragedy, viewed in retrospect, always seems to possess. I thought perhaps that it was some calculated plan, a last-minute desperate effort to save us that made Helene Fleming act as she did, but I found out later that she had merely been driven and goaded into a pain-filled unreasoning anger and resentment and despair by the agony she had suffered in her shoulder from having had her arms bound for so many long hours in the cruel jolting discomfort of the tractor cabin.

As she passed by Smallwood she stumbled, he put up an arm either to help her or ward her off, and before he had realized what was happening—it must have been the last quarter from which he expected any show of violence or resistance—she kicked out blindly and knocked the gun spinning out of his hand to land in the snow beneath. Smallwood sprang after it like a çat—the speed was unnecessary, the low growl of warning from an armed Corazzini put aside any ideas we might have had of taking advantage of the situation—picked up the gun, and whirled round, the gun lining up on Helene, his eyes narrowed to slits against the beam of the searchlight, his face twisted into an unrecognizable snarl, the lips drawn far back over the teeth. I'd been wrong once more about Smallwood—he could kill without reason.

"Helene!" Mrs. Dansby-Gregg was the nearest to her, and her voice was high-pitched, almost a scream. "Look out, Helene!" She plunged forward to push her maid to one side, but I don't think Smallwood even saw her: he was mad with fury, I knew he was, and nothing on earth was going to stop him from pressing that trigger. The bullet caught Mrs. Dansby-Gregg squarely in the back and pitched her headlong to fall face down in the frozen snow.

Already Smallwood's movement of uncontrollable rage was spent as if it had never been. He said not another word, just nodded to Corazzini and jumped up onto the tail of the tractor cabin to keep us covered with searchlight and gun as Corazzini gunned the motor, engaged gear, and lumbered off into the darkness to the west. We stood in a forlorn huddled little group and watched the train pass us by, the tractor, the tractor sled, the dog-sledge, and finally the huskies themselves, running on the loose traces astern.

I heard Helene murmur something to herself, and when I bent to listen she was saying in a strange, wondering voice, "Helene. She called me 'Helene.' " I stared at her as if she were mad, glanced down at the dead woman at my feet, then gazed unseeingly after the receding lights of the Citroën until both the lights and the sound had faded and vanished into the snowfilled darkness of the night.

11

Friday: 6 p.m.—Saturday: 12:15 p.m.

THE WHITE hell of that night, the agony of the bitter dreadful hours that followed—and God only knows how many hours these were—is a memory that will never die.

How many hours did we stagger and lurch after that tractor like drunk or dying men—six hours, eight, ten? We didn't know, we shall never know. Time as an independent system of measurement ceased to exist; each second was an interminable unit of suffering, of freezing, of exhausted marching, each minute an aeon where the fire in our aching leg muscles fought with the ice-cold misery of hands and feet and faces for domination in our minds, each hour an eternity which we knew could never end. Not one of us, I am sure, expected to live through that night.

The thoughts, the emotions of these hours I could never afterwards recall. Chagrin there was, the most bitter I have ever known, an overwhelming mortification and self-condemnation that I had all along been deceived with such childish ease, that I had been powerless to offer any hindrance or resistance to the endless resourcefulness of that brilliant little man. And then I would think of Mrs. Dansby-Gregg, and of Margaret bound and hostage and afraid and looking at Smallwood in the dim light of that lurching tractor cabin, looking at Smallwood and the gun in Smallwood's hand, and with that thought anger would flood in to supplant the chagrin, a consuming hatred and a fury that flamed throughout my entire being, but even that anger wasn't all exclusive; it couldn't be, not so long as fear, a fear such as I had never before known, was the dominating factor in my mind. And it was.

It was, too, I should think, in Zagero's mind. He hadn't

spoken a word since Mrs. Dansby-Gregg had died, had just flung himself uncaringly, ruthlessly, into what had to be done. Head bowed, he plodded on like an automaton. I wondered how many times he must have regretted that impetuous slip of the tongue when he had betrayed to Smallwood the fact that Solly Levin was his father.

And Jackstraw was as silent as we were, non-committal, speaking only when he had to, keeping his thoughts strictly to himself. I wondered if he were blaming me for what had happened but I didn't think so, Jackstraw's mind just didn't work that way. I could guess what he was thinking, I knew the explosive temper that slumbered under that placid exterior. Had we met an unarmed Smallwood and Corazzini then, I do not think we would have stopped short of killing them with our hands.

I suppose, too, that we were all three of us exhausted as we had never been before, frostbitten, bleeding, thirsty, and steadily weakening from lack of food. I say "suppose," because logic and reason tell me that these things must have been so. But if they were I do not think they touched the minds of any of us that night. We were no longer ourselves, we were without ourselves. Our bodies were but machines to serve the demands of our minds, and our minds so consumed with anxiety and anger that there was no place left for any further thought.

We were following the tractor. We could, I suppose, have turned back in the hope of stumbling across Hillcrest and his men. I knew Hillcrest well enough to know that he would know that those who had taken over our tractor —he had no means of knowing who they were, for all he knew Zagero might have suddenly overpowered us— would never dare make for Uplavnik but would almost certainly head for the coast. The likelihood was that Hillcrest, too, would head for the Kangalak fjord—together with a small bay beside it, the Kangalak fjord was the only break, the only likely rendezvous in a hundred miles of cliff-bound coast—and he could go there arrow-straight; on board his Sno-Cat he had a test prototype of a new, compact, and as yet unmarketed Brown gyroscope specially designed for land use which had proved to have such astonishing accuracy that navigation on the ice-cap, as a problem, had ceased to exist for him.

But, even should he be heading towards the coast, our chances of meeting him in that blizzard did not exist, and

if we once passed them by we would have been lost forever. Better by far to head for the coast, where some patrolling ship or plane might just possibly pick us up—if we ever got there. Besides, I knew that both Jackstraw and Zagero felt exactly as I did—under a pointless but overpowering compulsion to follow Smallwood and Corazzini until we dropped in our tracks.

And the truth was that we couldn't have gone any other way even had we wished to. When Smallwood had dropped us off we had been fairly into the steadily deepening depression in the ice-cap that wound down to the Kangalak glacier, and it was a perfect drainage channel for the katabatic wind that was pouring down off the plateau. Although powerful enough already when we had been abandoned, that wind was now blowing with the force of a full gale, and for the first time on the Greenland ice plateau—although we were now, admittedly, down to a level of fifteen thousand feet—I heard a wind where the deep ululating moaning was completely absent. It howled, instead, howled and shrieked like a hurricane in the upper works and rigging of a ship, and it carried with it a numbing, bruising, flying wall of snow and ice against which progress would have been utterly impossible. So we went the only way we could, with the lash of the storm ever on our bent and aching backs.

And ache our backs did. Only three people—Zagero, Jackstraw, and myself—were able to carry anything more than their own weight; and we had among us three people completely unable to walk. Mahler was still unconscious, still in coma, but I didn't think we would have him with us very much longer; Zagero carried him for hour after endless hour through that white nightmare, and for his self-sacrifice he paid the cruelest price of all, for when, some hours later, I examined the frozen, useless appendages that had once been his hands, I knew that Johnny Zagero would never step into a boxing ring again. Marie LeGarde had lost consciousness too, and as I staggered along with her in my arms I felt it to be no more than a wasted token gesture: without shelter, and shelter soon, she would never see this night out. Helene, too, had collapsed within an hour of the tractor's disappearance, her slender strength had just given out, and Jackstraw had her over his shoulder. How all three of us, exhausted, starved, numbed almost to death as we were, managed to carry

them for so long, even though with so many halts, is beyond my understanding; but Zagero had his strength, Jackstraw his superb fitness, and I still the sense of responsibility that carried me on long hours after my legs and arms had given out.

Behind us Senator Brewster blundered along in a blind world all of his own, stumbling often, falling occasionally, but always pushing himself up and staggering gamely on. And in those few hours Hoffman Brewster, for me, ceased to be a Senator and became again my earliest conception of the old Dixie colonel, not the proud, rather overbearing aristocrat but the embodiment of a bygone Southern chivalry, when courtesy and a splendid gallantry in the greatest perils and hardships were so routine as to excite no comment. Time and time again during that bitter night he insisted, forcibly insisted, on relieving one of the three of us of our burdens and would stagger along under the load until he reached the point of collapse. Despite his age, he was a powerful man; but he had no longer the heart and the lungs and the circulation to match his muscles, and his distress, as the night wore on, became pitiful to see. The bloodshot eyes were almost closed in exhaustion, his face deep-etched in grey suffering, and his breath coming in painfully whooping gasps that reached me clearly even above the thin high shriek of the wind.

No doubt but that Smallwood and Corazzini had left us to die, but they had made one mistake; they had forgotten Balto. Balto, as always, had been running loose when they had left us, and they had either failed to see him or forgotten all about him. But Balto hadn't forgotten us, he must have known something was far wrong, for all the hours we had been prisoners on the tractor sled he had never come within a quarter-mile of us. But as soon as the tractor had dumped and left us, he had come loping in out of the driving snow and settled to the task of leading us down towards the glacier. At least, we hoped he was doing that. Jackstraw declared that he was following the crimp marks of the Citroën's caterpillars, now deep-buried under the flying drift and new-fallen snow. Zagero wasn't so sure. Once, twice, a dozen times that night, I heard him muttering the same words: "I hope to hell that hound knows where it's goin'."

But Balto knew where he was going. Sometime during the night—it might have been any time between

midnight and three o'clock in the morning—he stopped suddenly, stretched out his neck, and gave his long eerie wolf call. He seemed to listen for an answer, and if he heard anything it was beyond our range; but he seemed satisfied, for he suddenly changed direction and angled off to the left into the blizzard. At Jackstraw's nod, we followed.

Three minutes later we came upon the dog-sledge, with two of the dogs curled up beside it, their backs to the wind, their muzzles to their bellies, and long brushes of tails over their faces, the drift walling high around them. They were comfortable enough—so splendid an insulation does a husky's thick coat provide that snow at 40° below zero can lie on its back indefinitely without being melted by body heat—but they preferred freedom to comfort, for they were on their feet and vanished into the swirling whiteness beyond before we could lay hands on them. That left only the sledge.

I suppose that after Smallwood had gone far enough to consider that we would never be able to reach that point, he had cut loose dogs and dog-sledge as a needless encumbrance—but not before he had severed all the traces attaching the dogs to the sledge and, I noticed grimly, removed all the wraps and the magnetic compass that had been there. He thought of everything. For a moment, admiration for the man's undoubtedly remarkable qualities came in to supplant what had become the motivating reason for my existence, a reason that, as the hours crawled by, were crowding out even the feelings I had for Margaret Ross: my hatred for Smallwood burned like a cold steady flame, an obsession with the idea of sinking my fingers into that scrawny throat and never letting go.

Within three minutes of finding the sledge we had tied together the severed remnants of the traces, changed them to the front, and were on our way again, Marie LeGarde, Mahler, and Helene propped up on the thin wooden slats. We had, of course, to pull the sledge ourselves, but that was nothing: for Jackstraw, Zagero, and myself, the relief was beyond measure. But it was only momentary.

We were running on to the smooth, slick ice of the Kangalak glacier, but our progress was no faster than it had been before we found the sledge. The wind was climbing up to its maximum now, the blizzard shrieking along horizontally to the ground and coming in great

smoking flurries that cut visibility to zero and made us stop and grab one another lest one of us be knocked flying and forever lost to sight: several times Theodore Mahler, restless in unconsciousness, rolled off the sledge until I at last made Brewster sit at the back and watch. He protested violently, but he was glad to do as I said.

I don't remember much after that, I think I must have been unconscious, eyes shut, but still plodding along in my sleep on leaden, frozen feet. My first conscious memory after installing Brewster on the back of the sledge was of someone shaking me urgently by the shoulder. It was Jackstraw.

"No more!" he shouted in my ear. "We must stop, Dr. Mason, wait till it's blown itself out. We can't live through this."

I said something that was unintelligible even to myself, but Jackstraw took it for agreement and began pulling the sledge into the sloping side of the glacier valley and to the leeward side of one of the snowdrifts piled up against some of the ridges on the side of the valley. It wasn't all that much of an improvement, but the wind and the effect of the blizzard were perceptibly less. We unloaded the three sick people on the sledge into what pitiful shelter the ridge offered; I was just about to let my knees buckle and collapse beside them when I realized that someone was missing: it was a fair indication of the toll taken by wind and cold and exhaustion that almost twenty seconds passed before I realized it was Brewster.

"Good God!" I cried in Jackstraw's ear. "The Senator—we've lost him! I'll go back and look. I won't be a minute."

"Stay here." The grip on my arm was promise enough that Jackstraw meant to detain me by force, if necessary. "You'd never come back. Balto! Balto!" He shouted a few Eskimo words which meant nothing to me, but the big Siberian seemed to understand, for he was gone in a moment, following the direction of Jackstraw's pointing hand. He was back again inside two minutes.

"He's found him?" I asked Jackstraw.

Jackstraw nodded silently.

"Let's bring him in."

Balto led us there, but we didn't bring him in. Instead we left him lying where we found him, face down in the snow, dead. The blizzard was already drawing its con-

cealing shroud over him, in an hour he would be no more than a featureless white mound in a featureless white valley. My hands were too numb to examine him, but I wouldn't have bothered anyway: the half-century of self-indulgence in food and drink and temper, all of which had been so clearly reflected in the heavy florid face when first I'd seen him, had had their inevitable way. The heart, cerebral thrombosis, it didn't matter now. But he had been a man.

How long we lay there, the six of us and Balto huddled close together for warmth, unconscious or dozing while that hurricane of a blizzard reached then passed its howling crescendo, I never knew. Probably only half an hour, perhaps not even that. When I awoke, stiff and numbed, I reached for Jackstraw's torch. It was exactly four o'clock in the morning.

I looked at the others. Jackstraw was wide awake—I was pretty sure he'd never shut an eye lest one of us slip away from sleep into that easy frozen sleep from which there would have been no wakening—and Zagero was stirring. That they—and I—would survive, I didn't doubt. Helene was a question mark. A seventeen-year-old, though short on endurance, was usually high on resilience and recuperative powers, but Helene's seemed to have deserted her. After the death of her mistress and up to the time she had collapsed she had become strangely withdrawn and unresponsive, and I guessed that the death of Mrs. Dansby-Gregg had hit her far more than any of us would have guessed. The previous forty-eight hours apart, it seemed to me that she had had little enough to thank Mrs. Dansby-Gregg for in the way of affection and warmth; but, then, she was young, Mrs. Dansby-Gregg had been the person she had known best, and, as a foreigner, she must have regarded Mrs. Dansby-Gregg as her sole anchor in an alien sea. . . . I asked Jackstraw if he would massage her hands, then turned to have a look at Mahler and Marie LeGarde.

"They don't look so hot to me." Zagero, too, was studying them. "What's their chances, Doc?"

"I just don't know," I said wearly. "I don't know at all."

"Don't take it to heart, Doc. It's no fault of yours." Zagero waved a hand towards the snow-filled emptiness and desolation of the glacier. "Your dispensary ain't all that well stocked."

"No." I smiled faintly, then nodded at Mahler. "Bend down and listen to his breathing. The end's coming pretty close. Ordinarily I'd say a couple of hours. With Mahler I don't know—he's got the will to live, sheer guts, his beliefs—the lot. . . . But in twelve hours he'll be dead."

"And how long do you give *me,* Dr. Mason?"

I twisted round and gazed down at Marie LeGarde. Her voice was no more than a weak, husky whisper; she was trying to smile, but the smile was a pitiful grimace and there was no humour in either the eyes or the voice.

"Good lord, you've come to!" I reached out, pulled off her gloves, and started to massage the frozen wasted hands. "This is wonderful. How do you feel, Miss LeGarde?"

"How do you think I feel?" she said with a flash of her old spirit. "Don't try to put me off, Peter. How long?"

"About another thousand curtain calls at the old Adelphi." The light came from the torch that had been thrust, butt uppermost, into the snow, and I bent forward so that my face was shadowed, my expression unreadable. "Seriously, the fact that you've recovered consciousness is a good sign."

"I once played a queen who recovered consciousness only to speak a few dramatic words before she died. Only, I can't think of any dramatic words." I had to strain to catch the feeble whispered words. "You're a shocking liar, Peter. Is there any hope for us at all?"

"Certainly," I lied. Anything to get away from that topic. "We'll be on the coast, with a good chance of being picked up by ship or plane, tomorrow afternoon—this afternoon, rather. It can't be more than twenty miles from here."

"Twenty miles!" Zagero interjected. "In this little lot?" He raised a cupped hand significantly to his ear, a gesture superbly superfluous in the ululating shriek of the blizzard.

"It won't last, Mr. Zagero," Jackstraw put in. "These williwaws always blow themselves out in a short time. This already has gone on longer than most and it's easing a lot. Tomorrow will be clear and calm and cold."

"The cold will be a change," Zagero said feelingly. He looked past me. "The old lady's off again, Doc."

"Yes." I stopped massaging her hands and slid the

gloves on. "Let's have a look at these paws of yours, Mr. Zagero, will you?"

" 'Johnny' to you, Doc. I've been dismissed without a stain on my character, remember?" He thrust his big hands out for inspection. "Pretty, aren't they?"

They weren't pretty, they were the worst case of frostbite I had ever seen, and I had seen all too many, in Korea and later. They were white and yellow and dead. The original skin had vanished under a mass of blister, and from the few warm spots I could detect on either hand I knew that much of the tissue had been permanently destroyed.

" 'Fraid I was a mite careless with my gloves," Zagero said apologetically. "In fact, I lost the damn things about five miles back. Didn't notice it at the time—hands were too cold, I reckon."

"Feel anything in them now?"

"Here and there." He nodded as I touched some spots where the blood still flowed, and went on conversationally, "Am I goin' to lose my hands, Doc? Amputation, I mean?"

"No." I shook my head definitely. I saw no point in mentioning that some of his fingers were beyond hope.

"Will I ever fight again?" Still the same casual careless tone.

"It's difficult to say. You never know——"

"Will I ever fight again?"

"You'll never fight again."

There was a long pause, then he said quietly, "You're sure, Doc? You're absolutely sure?"

"I'm absolutely sure, Johnny. No boxing commission doctor in the world would ever let you climb into a ring. It would cost him his listing in the Medical Register."

"O.K., so that's how it is. Consolidated Plastics of Trenton, New Jersey, have just got themselves a new factory hand; this boxin' racket was too damn strenuous anyway." There was no regret in his voice, no resignation even, but that meant nothing: like me, he had more important things to worry about. He looked away into the darkness, then twisted round. "What's the matter with that hound of yours, Jackstraw?"

"I don't know. I think I'd better find out." Twice while we had been talking Balto had left us, vanished into the

snow, and returned after a few minutes; he seemed restless, uneasy. "I won't be long."

He rose, followed Balto into the darkness, returned in a short time. "Come and see this, Dr. Mason."

"This" was a spot less than a hundred yards away, close into the side of the glacier valley. Jackstraw flashed his torch onto the snow-dusted ice. I stooped, made out a black circular patch on the ground, and, a few feet away, a smaller discoloured area where the surface snow had frozen solid.

"Oil from the gearcase or sump, water from the radiator," Jackstraw said briefly. He altered the torch-beam. "And you can still see the crimp marks of the caterpillars."

"And very recent?" I suggested. The drifting snow, the scouring effect of the flying ice particles had scarcely begun to obliterate the traces left by the treads.

"I think so. And they were stopped here a long time, Dr. Mason—look at the size of that oil patch."

"Mechanical trouble?" I hazarded. I didn't really believe it myself.

"Riding out the storm—Corazzini must have been blind," Jackstraw said definitely. "If the engine had stopped on that pair, they'd never have got it started again."

I knew he was right. Neither Smallwood nor Corazzini had shown any mechanical ability at all, and I was convinced that it had been no act.

"Perhaps they were still here when we arrived back there? My God, if we'd only carried on another hundred yards!"

"Spilt milk, as you say, Dr. Mason. Yes, I'm sure they were here then."

"We wouldn't have heard their engine?"

"Not in this wind."

"Jackstraw!" A sudden thought, a flash of hope. "Jackstraw did you sleep back there?"

"No."

"How long were we stopped?"

"Half an hour, maybe less."

"And you think they were still here. . . . Good God, man, they can't be more than a mile away! The wind's dropping right away, it's getting colder, and we'll only

freeze to death if we stay here, maybe there'll be crevasses in the glacier to hold them up——"

I was already on my way, running, slipping, stumbling, Jackstraw by my side, Balto leading the way. Zagero was standing up, waiting—and the young German girl by his side.

"Helene!" I caught her hands. "You all right? How are you feeling?"

"Better, much better." She didn't sound all that much better. "I'm sorry I was so silly, Dr. Mason. I don't know——"

"It doesn't matter," I cut in, rather brusquely. "You can walk? Fine, fine." I could feel new hope surging through me as I rapped out a brief explanation to Zagero, within a minute we had Mahler and Marie LeGarde bundled aboard the sledge and were on our way.

But the hope was short-lived. We made the best speed we could, at times breaking into a kind of staggering run, but the sledge slowed us up terribly on that uneven surface of the glacier. Once it overturned, throwing both Mahler and Marie LeGarde heavily onto the snow, and after that we were forced to slow down. Another such violent capsizing, or even too severe a jolting, and that sledge would become a bier. From time to time Jackstraw flashed his failing torch on the crimp marks we were following, and even to my inexperienced eye it was obvious that the tracks in the snow were becoming progressively fainter every time we looked at them until the time came at last when I knew we must call a halt to this pursuit, admit defeat: we had fallen so far behind now, three or four miles I was certain, that the hope and chance of overtaking them no longer existed. We were only chasing a hopeless dream, and killing ourselves doing it.

Jackstraw and Zagero agreed. We put Helene aboard the sledge to steady the two sick people, took a trace apiece over our shoulders, and plodded on slowly down the glacier, backs bent, heads bowed, each one of us lost in his own hopeless thoughts.

As Jackstraw had prophesied, the storm had blown itself out. Completely. The wind had gone so that not a breath stirred across the glacier. The snow had vanished, with the dark and heavy clouds that had carried it: the white stars stood high in a dark and frozen sky. It was cold, with a

temperature well below zero, but cold was an old friend now. By eight o'clock that morning, some three hours and six miles after we had left our resting place, the conditions for travel were perfect.

The weather conditions, that was—underfoot, they varied from the indifferent to the abominable. We were now fairly into the Kangalak glacier and the going was often difficult indeed. A glacier is seldom a smooth river of ice that flows evenly downhill, but much more frequently an irregularly surfaced, fissured, and crevassed mass descending as often as not in a series of rounded steps and ledges like a sea of petrified lava. The Kangalak was no exception. Here and there we found some straight stretches, but, for the most part, progress was possible only at the sides where the rate of flow was less and the ice smoother. It was the left-hand side that we were following, but even so it was heavy work, for our path was frequently blocked by the debris of ground moraines that had been forced out on the sides, and when these were absent we were as often as not floundering through the thick drifts that the great wind of the night just gone had piled up high against the sides. The one consolation I found was that if it was difficult for us, it was proving doubly so for the tractor whose irregularly weaving, twisting crimp marks we were so doggedly following.

I wondered how far away Hillcrest and the Sno-Cat were. I was as certain as I could be of anything that he would have headed due west as soon as he would have emerged from the Vindeby Nunataks, and he'd had time to spare to make the coast by this time—not even the blizzard of last night could have stopped the Sno-Cat, the engine was a completely enclosed unit, its great caterpillars would take it over the loosest, the most newly fallen snow. But even had he backed his hunches and headed for the coast, as I hoped, he might still be anything up to twenty miles to the north or south of us, or he might be not only north or south but fifteen miles ahead of us—we had no maps left, but I was fairly certain we were about that distance from the coast. Or was it possible that Hillcrest, a shrewd and thoughtful man, might have thought the gambit of a break for the coast too obvious a move? Could it not be that he might have indeed pressed on for Uplavnik, or even turned due north after he had come through the hills? Or, if he were coming west, would he

not perhaps be driving in a search pattern, quartering the ground between the Vindeby Nunataks and the coast in a series of wide advancing zigzags? If that were so, he might still be anything up to thirty miles behind. It was infuriating beyond measure to know that he was almost certainly within two or three hours' driving time from where we were, but without wireless or any other means of contacting him he might as well have been a thousand miles away for any hope there was of two tiny moving objects encountering each other by chance in that vast and featureless land.

Soon after eight o'clock in the morning I stopped to have a look at the two sick people on the sledge, professional instinct, I suppose, but an empty token gesture; there was nothing we could do for them, except give massage at frequent intervals. The sound of Mahler's dyspnoea, his whooping gasping breathing, was the tolling of a death-bell in our ears, and this effort to breathe was extinguishing the last embers of life in his emaciated and frozen body. In three hours' time, by noon at the latest, Mahler would be dead. Nothing could ever save him now, it was madness, an utterly wasted effort to continue to drag him along on a sledge: he was past caring or knowing or feeling now, he could die just as peacefully if we left him lying on the glacier. Or so I have thought since then. But Mahler was more than a man to us that day, he was a symbol: we would leave Mahler when he had drawn his last gasping breath but never before.

Marie LeGarde was dying too, but quietly, softly, peacefully, like a little candle flame flickering to extinction. Maybe she would go first, maybe Mahler. But both of them would die this day.

The going was becoming increasingly difficult now, not so much because of the gradually steepening slope of the glacier which made the sledge overrun us more and more frequently, but because of the fact that Jackstraw's torch had all but completely given out, and the fissures and crevasses that, earlier, had merely been nuisances to be negotiated, now became menaces to be avoided at the cost of our lives. It was now that Balto proved of his greatest value yet: as Jackstraw had said on our first day out from the IGY cabin, the big Siberian had an uncanny nose for crevasses, both open and hidden, in daytime or dark, and he made never a mistake that morning, constantly running

ahead and then back towards us to guide us in the safest direction. Even so, progress was heartbreakingly slow.

Shortly after half-past eight in the morning we came across the tractor sled lying at an angle against a moraine. Even in the near darkness it was plain to see what had happened. The steepness of the glacier, not to mention sudden unaccountable dips to left and right across its width, must have made the heavy sled a dangerous liability, for, from its tracks, we had several times seen where it had slewed wildly at an angle, pivoting round on its iron tow-bar as, brakeless, it had sought to overrun the tractor. Obviously, Smallwood and Corazzini must have feared—and with reason—that on one of these occasions it would pull round the tail of the tractor after it and topple the tractor on its side, or, worse, drag it into a crevasse: so they had unhooked the tow-bar and left the sled.

It was surprising that they hadn't done this earlier: apart from carrying their fuel and food, which reserves could easily have gone into the tractor cabin itself, it had been a useless encumbrance to them. As far as I could judge they had abandoned it with all its contents—apart, of course, from the portable radio—including the wraps we had given Zagero and Levin when they had ridden on it at the point of a gun. We took these, tucked them around Mahler and Marie LeGarde and passed on.

Three hundred yards later I stopped so abruptly that the sledge, bumping into me, made me lose my footing on the slippery ice. I stood up, laughing softly, laughing for the first time for days, and Zagero came up close and peered into my face.

"What gives, Doc?"

I laughed again and was just on the point of speaking when his hand struck me sharply across the face.

"Cut it out, Doc." His voice was harsh. "That ain't goin' to help us any."

"On the contrary, it's going to help us a very great deal." I rubbed a hand across my cheek, I couldn't blame him for what he had done. "My God, and I almost missed it!"

"Missed what?" He still wasn't sure that I wasn't hysterical.

"Come on back to the tractor sled and see. Smallwood claims he thinks of everything, but he's missed out at last. He's made his first big mistake, but oh, brother, what a

mistake! And the weather's just perfect for it!" I turned on my heel and actually ran up the glacier towards the sled.

Many items were carried as standard equipment in IGY parties both in the field and at base camps, and none more standard than the magnesium flares which first came into common use in the Antarctica over quarter of a century ago—they are indispensable as location beacons in the long polar nights—and radio-sondes. We carried more radio-sondes than any other item of equipment, for our primary purpose on the ice-cap—the garnering of information about density, pressure, temperature, humidity, and wind direction of the upper atmosphere—was impossible without them. These sondes, still crated with the tents, ropes, axes, and shovels which we had found no occasion to use on this trip, were radio-carrying balloons which wirelessed back information from heights of between 100,000 and 150,000 feet. We also carried rockoons, radio rockets fired from balloons which took them clear of the denser parts of the atmosphere before releasing them. But right then rockoons were useless to me. So, too, were balloons at their normal operating height: five thousand feet should serve our purpose admirably.

The dim glow from the torch was more than sufficient, Jackstraw and I had worked with these things a hundred times. To couple the balloon to the hydrogen cylinder, disconnect the radio, and substitute a group of three magnesium flares fused with RDX took only minutes. We lit the fuse, cut the holding cord, and had a second balloon coupled onto the cylinder before the first was five hundred feet up. Then, just as we had the third on the cylinder and were disconnecting its radio, the first flare, now at about a height of four thousand feet, burst into scintillating brilliant life.

It was all I could have wished for, indeed it was more than I'd ever hoped for, and Zagero's heavy thump on my back showed how joyfully he shared my feelings.

"Dr. Mason," he said solemnly, "I take it all back, all I ever said about you. This, Dr. Mason, is genius."

"It's not bad," I admitted, and indeed if anyone, in those perfect conditions of visibility, couldn't see the coruscating dazzlement of those flares at any distance up to thirty miles, he would have to be blind. If they were looking in the right direction, that was, but I was sure

that, with Hillcrest carrying five men and everybody almost certainly on the lookout for us, the chances of missing it were remote.

The second flare, considerably higher, burst into life just as the first went sputtering into extinction and the further thought struck me that if there were any ships patrolling out in the sea beyond, it would give them a bearing the significance of which none of them could surely overlook. And then I saw Jackstraw and Zagero looking at me and though I couldn't read their expressions in the darkness I knew from their stillness what they were both thinking, and suddenly I didn't feel so happy any more. The odds were high that Corazzini and Smallwood—they could be no more than a few miles distant—had seen the flares also. They would know what it signified, they would know it was the first tug on the drawstring of the net that might even then be starting to close round them. In addition to being dangerous, ruthless killers, they would become frightened killers; and they had Margaret and Johnny Zagero's father with them. But I knew I'd had no option, tried to thrust all thought of the hostages from my mind, turned to look at the third balloon that we had just released, then winced and closed my eyes involuntarily as the third flare, through some flaw or misjudgement in the length of the fuse, ignited not more than five hundred feet above us, the blue-white intensity mingling almost immediately with a bright orange flame as the balloon also caught fire and both started drifting slowly earthwards.

And so intently was I watching this through narrowed eyes that I all but missed something vastly more important, but Jackstraw didn't. He never missed anything. I felt his hand on my arm, turned to see the strong white teeth gleaming in the widest grin I had seen for weeks, then half-turned again to follow the direction of his pointing arm just in time to see low on the horizon in the southeast and not more than five miles away the earthward-curving red and white flare of a signal rocket.

Our feelings were impossible to describe—I know, at least, that mine were. I had never seen anything half so wonderful in all my life, not even the sight, twenty minutes later, of the powerful wavering headlight beams of the Sno-Cat as it appeared over a rise in the plateau and headed towards the spot—we had scrambled up from the

glacier to the flat land above—where we had just ignited the last of our flares and were waving it round and round our heads on the end of a long metal pole, like men demented. It seemed an age, although I don't suppose it was much more than ten minutes, before the great red and yellow Sno-Cat ground to a halt beside us and willing arms reached down to help us into the incredible warmth and comfort of that superbly equipped and insulated cabin.

Hillcrest was a great bull of a man, red-faced, black-bearded, jovial, confident, with a tremendous zest for living, a deceptive external appearance that concealed a first-class brain, and a competence of a very high order indeed. It did me good just to sit there, glass of brandy in hand, relaxed—if only for a moment—for the first time in five days and just to look at him. I could tell that it hadn't done him the same good to look at us—in the bright overhead light I could clearly see our yellowed, blistered, emaciated faces, the bleeding, nail-blackened, suppurating, all but useless hands, and I was shocked myself- -but he concealed it well, and busied himself with handing out restoratives, tucking away Mahler and Marie LeGarde in two deep, heat-pad-filled bunks, and supervising the efforts of the cook, who had a steaming hot meal ready prepared. All this he had done before he had as much as asked us a question.

"Right," he said briskly. "First things first. Where's the Citroën? I presume the missile mechanism is still aboard it. Brother, you just don't begin to have any idea how many heart attacks this thing is causing."

"That's not the first thing," I said quietly. I nodded to Theodore Mahler, whose hoarse gasping breathing filled the room. "This man is dying."

"All under control," he boomed. He jerked a thumb at Joss, who, after the first delighted greeting, had returned to his radio set in the corner. "The boy here hasn't left his set for over twenty-four hours—ever since we got your 'Mayday' call." He looked at me speculatively. "You took a chance there. I wonder you didn't stop a bullet for your pains."

"I just about did. . . . We were talking about Mahler."

"Yes. We've been in constant contact, same wave-length, with two ships in that time—the destroyer *Wykenham* and the carrier *Triton*. I had a fair idea your friend

must be heading in this direction, so the *Wykenham* has been moving up overnight and is lying off the coast. But the leads and patches in the ice aren't big enough for the *Triton* to manoeuvre to fly off planes. She's about eighty miles south, in clear water."

"Eighty miles!" I didn't bother to conceal my shock, my disappointment, I'd begun to have a faint irrational hope that we might yet save the dying man. "Eighty miles!"

"I have news for you, Doctor," Hillcrest announced jovially. "We have moved into the air age." He turned towards Joss and raised an enquiring eyebrow.

"A Scimitar jet fighter is just taking off." Joss tried to speak unemotionally, but failed. "It's airborne—now. Time-check 0933. We're to fire our first rocket at 0946—thirteen minutes from now. Then two more at intervals of thirty seconds. At 0948 we're to set off a slow-burning magnesium flare where we want the stuff dropped, at least two hundred yards from the tractor." Joss listened for another few moments and grinned. "He says we're to get the hell out of it after we've lit the flare or we're liable to collect a headache or worse."

I didn't know what to say, where to look, moments like this came all too seldom. Not until that moment did I realize how much of a symbol Theodore Mahler had become, how much his survival had meant for me. Hillcrest must have had some intuitive understanding of how I felt, for he spoke at once, his voice normal, matter-of-fact.

"Service, old boy. Sorry we couldn't have laid it on earlier, but the *Triton* refused to risk an expensive plane and an even more expensive pilot flying low over virtually unchartered territory unless they definitely knew that Mahler was alive."

"They've done all anyone could ask." A sudden thought struck me. "These planes don't usually carry ammunition in peacetime, do they?"

"Don't worry," Hillcrest said grimly. He ladled some steaming stew onto our plates. "Nobody's playing any more. There's been a flight of Scimitars standing by since midnight, and every cannon's loaded. . . . Right, Doctor. Give with the story."

I gave, as briefly and concisely as possible. At the end, he clapped his hands together.

"Maybe five miles ahead, eh? Then it's tallyho down the old glacier and after 'em." He rubbed his hands in anticipation. "We're three times as fast and we've three times as many rifles. This is the way any decent IGY expedition should be run!"

I smiled faintly, a token response to his bubbling enthusiasm. I never felt less like smiling: now that the worry of Mahler—and, in that warmth and with hot food, almost certainly also the worry of Marie LeGarde—was off my hands, my anxiety about Margaret had returned with redoubled force.

"We're not tallyho-ing down any old glacier, Captain Hillcrest. Apart from the fact that it's a rotten surface, which would bring your speed down to the same as the Citroën's, open pursuit is a pretty sure way of guaranteeing that Margaret Ross and Mr. Levin get a bullet through their heads. Incidentally, Mr. Levin is the father of Mr. Zagero."

"What?" Both Hillcrest and Joss had spoken at the same time.

"Yes. But later. Have you a map of the area?"

"Sure." Hillcrest handed it over. Like most Greenland maps it showed topographical detail for no more than the first twenty miles inland, but it was sufficient for my purpose. It showed the twisting Kangalak glacier debouching into the Kangalak fjord, the wide deep bay beyond the southern headland of the fjord, the northern headland continuing in a wide shallow smooth curve for many miles to the north.

"Where did you say the destroyer was?" I asked.

"The *Wykenham?* I'm not sure."

"Blocking the Kangalak fjord here, perhaps?" I indicated the spot on the map.

"No, that I'm certain of." He shook his head regretfully. "Captain said the pack ice was too heavy, he couldn't risk his destroyer in any of the leads in case they closed." Hillcrest snorted in disgust. "I gather its hull is made of paper."

"It's not much thicker—I've served in destroyers. I don't blame him. But I'll bet this trawler, probably a specially strengthened job, is well inside the fjord—and a submarine no great distance away. Look, this is all we can do." I traced my finger on the map. "We must parallel the glacier, maybe a mile away. With the slope of the valley

sides Smallwood won't see us, and with his own engine running he can't hear us. Down here——"

"What's to stop him from cutting his engine now and again to listen?" Hillcrest demanded.

"Because what Smallwood and Corazzini don't know about engines would fill an encyclopedia. They'd be dead scared to stop it in case they couldn't start it again. . . . Down here, at the base of the headland separating the fjord from the bay to the south—about a mile from the end of the glacier, I would say—the sides of the glacier valley fall away and level off into the plateau on either side. But there's bound to be some kind of moraine or shelter there. That's where we'll ambush them."

"Ambush?" He frowned at me. "What's the difference between that and pursuing them? It'll still come to a fight—and they can still hold pistols to the heads of Levin and the stewardess, and bargain from there."

"There'll be no fight," I said quietly. "They've been following the left-hand side of the glacier all the way down, I see no reason why they should change. They should come into sight maybe fifty yards from where we're hiding—further out on the glacier the going is impossible for tractors." I nodded at the telescopic-sighted .303 in the corner. "With that Jackstraw can hit a three-inch target at a hundred yards. A man's head at fifty yards is six times that size. First he gets Corazzini, who's probably driving, and when Smallwood sticks his head out the back, as he certainly will—well, that's it."

"But, good God, man, you can't do that!" Hillcrest was horrified. "Without a chance, without warning? It's murder, simple murder!"

"Want me to go over the number of people *they've* murdered?" I shook my head. "You just don't begin to know those two, Hillcrest."

"But—" He broke off, turned to Jackstraw. "It's you he's asking to do it. What do you say?"

"It will be a pleasure," Jackstraw said very softly.

Hillcrest stared at us both, baffled incomprehension in his eyes. I suppose he thought he knew both of us well. And he did. But he didn't know what we had been through, words couldn't even begin to make him understand. The atmosphere was uncomfortable, tense, even, and I was grateful for Joss's sudden calm words.

"0943, Captain Hillcrest. Three minutes to go."

"Good." He was, I could see, as glad of the interruption as I was. "Barclay"—this to the cook, the only other of Hillcrest's men there, the other three were in the big driving cabin to make room for us—"three Wessex rockets. Line them up on the stand, wait for the word. I'll go myself with the flare, two for safety. Give a beep on the horn, Joss, when it's time to set 'em off."

I went with him to watch, and the whole thing went off without a hitch. Dead on time, just seconds after the third rocket had been fired to curve upwards and explode into incandescent light in the star-dusted darkness above, we heard the high-pitched whine approaching out of the southwest, and in an incredibly short space of time a vague dark blur, carrying no navigation lights, screamed by five hundred feet ahead, banked in the distance, came in at us again at much reduced speed, banked a second time, and then, with a crescendoing banshee shriek of the jet engine, had vanished again into the vaguely lightening darkness to the southeast before we had realized that the pilot had made his drop. It was a measure of his complete self-confidence that he didn't even trouble to check the accuracy of his drop; but for a man skilled in landing on the handkerchief-sized flight deck of a carrier in the middle of the night, this must have been a childishly simple exercise.

There were two packages, not one, attached not to parachutes but to insignificant little drogues that seemed to let them fall much too fast for safety; they landed almost together not forty yards from the magnesium flares and with such force that I was sure that their contents must be smashed. But I had underestimated the Fleet Air Arm's skill and experience in these matters, the contents were so beautifully packed and cushioned that everything was completely intact. The packages were duplicated; two ampoules of insulin and three hypodermic syringes in each package: whoever had packed these had been taking no chances. But gratitude was the last thought in my mind at that moment; I just tucked the boxes under my arm and made for the tractor at a dead run.

For close on two hours Hillcrest's driver pushed the big Sno-Cat along at its maximum speed, and, despite the inherent stability afforded by its four wide caterpillars, the tractor swayed and lurched in terrifying fashion. This was

bad country, this was crevasse country, and we had been forced to make a wide detour that had carried us more than three miles away from the Kangalak glacier. And once again Jackstraw's big Siberian wolf proved how invaluable he was; running tirelessly ahead, he repeatedly guided the Sno-Cat away from dangerous territory, but even so our route was a necessary devious and twisted one, though the picking out of a path became considerably easier after the pale grey light of the arctic noon spread across the ice-cap.

For all of us it was a time of tension, of an ever-mounting anxiety that reached intolerable proportions. For the first half-hour or so I was busy enough in broaching the tractor's first-aid kit and doing what doctoring I could to Mahler—a Mahler whose dyspnoea was already dramatically easing—Marie LeGarde, Helene, Jackstraw, and, above all, to Zagero's shattered hands. Then I myself submitted to Hillcrest's rough and ready ministrations, but after that there was nothing for me to do, nothing for any of us to do except try to avoid the bitterness of thinking what must happen if the Citroën reached the tongue of the glacier before us.

Suddenly, exactly on noon, the tractor stopped abruptly. We jumped out to see what the matter was, and it became apparent soon enough the driver was awaiting instructions. We had abruptly rounded the humpback of the last ice-ridge that had lain between us and the glacier itself.

Even in the half-light of the arctic day the panorama suddenly unfolded before us was a breath-taking one. To the north, the ice-sheet extended all the way down to the coast, forming vertical and in some places overhanging cliffs, the well-known phenomenon of the Chinese Wall fronts: nobody, nothing, could hope to land there.

To the south and separated from the fjord by the mile-long ridgeback of the seaward-projecting southern wall of the fjord, was a wide bay, fringed by a low, ice-bare rocky coast, quilted here and there with drifts of snow blown off the ice-cap. That, if anywhere, was where we would have to leave.

In the centre, between the low walls of the fjord, the Kangalak glacier itself, here, at its tongue, about three hundred yards wide, ran down to the waters of the fjord in a great dogleg curving sharply 30° right about halfway down its length, ending abruptly with its upper surface a

hundred, perhaps 150 feet above the pack ice-strewn water beneath. For the first half of its length the tongue of the glacier sloped fairly sharply from right to left down to the *nunataks,* crescent-fringed by the debris of moraines, that thrust up through the ice at the far corner of the dogleg: the surface of the glacier was a nightmare of transverse and longitudinal fissures, some of them anything up to two hundred feet deep, great gaping chasms fanged with *seracs*—the irregular, often needle-pointed ice pinnacles that reached up between the walls of the larger crevasses. Surely Smallwood could never be so desperate, so insane as to drive the Citroën out on that: apart from the fissures, the very steepness of the slope downwards and to the left would be enough to send him into an uncontrollable slide.

And beyond everything lay the sea, the island studded, ice-filled waters of Baffin Bay. Offshore there was a mile-wide belt of loose pressure ice—the season was not yet far enough advanced for the fantastic shapes it would assume in the early spring—streaked with open, ever-changing leads and dotted at rare intervals with small icebergs—probably ones that had broken off from the east coast, drifted south round Cape Farewell, and then moved north again, the whole half-lost, unearthly, and impossibly, weirdly, continuously altered in configuration by the white drifting fog that hung miasma-like over the sea.

But two things there were that were not lost: two ships. The one to the southwest, wraithlike and blurred though its lines were through the swirling mist, was quite unmistakable, that raked and slender silhouette would have been unmistakable anywhere: it was a destroyer, it could only be the *Wykenham,* moving slowly, cautiously shorewards through the ice-filled waters of the bay to our left. A heart-warming, immensely reassuring spectacle—or it should have been; but after the first cursory identifying glance I lost interest, my attention was taken and completely held by the second ship.

I couldn't see all of it, most of its hull was hidden by the precipitous end of the glacier, but its small squat bridge, two masts, and broad, bluff, seaward-pointing bows were clearly etched against the mirror-calm waters of the head of the fjord and the sloping ice-bare rock that brushed its portside fenders. I could see no flag. It was a trawler, unmistakably so, and I thought grimly that it

must have been a very special trawler indeed to have battered that still-visible path through the ice-choked mouth of the fjord.

My gaze moved back to the trawler again, and a second later I was grabbing Hillcrest's binoculars without so much as by your leave. One glance was enough, even in that shadowed gloom of the depth of the fjord I could see all I wanted to see by the grey noonlight. I could see a great deal more than I wanted to. For a few seconds I stood stock-still listening desperately for the sound of the Citroën's engines; moments later I was in the tractor cabin, by the radio table.

"Still in contact with the *Triton,* Joss?" He nodded, and I rushed on. "Tell them there's a group of men coming ashore from a trawler in the Kangalak fjord. Ten, twelve, I'm not sure. And I'm not sure whether they're armed. I'll be damned surprised if they aren't. Tell them I'm certain they're going to move up on the glacier."

"Now?"

"Of course!" I snapped. "Send the message immediately. And——"

"No, I meant are they moving onto the glacier now?"

"Take them ten, fifteen minutes—the fjord walls are pretty steep and it's a tricky climb. . . . After that ask the *Wykenham* if they will send a landing party ashore. An armed party. And for God's sake tell them it's urgent."

"Will they get here in time, Doc?" Zagero was behind me. "By the time they lower a boat, row ashore, cross this headland—it's half a mile if it's an inch—it'll take *them* fifteen minutes, maybe more."

"I know," I said irritably—irritably, but softly, for Joss was already talking into the table microphone, in the swift, staccato yet strangely unhurried voice of the trained radioman. "If you have any better suggestions——"

"It's coming!" Hillcrest's excited face had just appeared at the door of the cabin. "Come on! We can hear it coming down the glacier."

And indeed they could. The deep throaty roar of that heavy engine was recognizable anywhere. Hurriedly we moved about a hundred yards away from the moraine-ringed depression where we had parked the tractor, Jackstraw, Hillcrest, and I each with a rifle in his hands, and crouched down behind the concealing protection of some ice-covered debris at the edge of the glacier. From where

we lay we could command a view of the glacier across its entire width and up to a point several hundred yards away, where it curved sharply out of sight.

We needn't have hurried. The Citroën was still some good way off, the sound of its engine being funnelled down through the glacier valley well ahead of it, and I had time to look around me. What I saw seemed good. I was banking everything on the hope that the Citróën would still be on the same side of the glacier as when we had last seen it, and from what I could see, the chances were high that it still would be. The entire center of the glacier was a devil's playground of crevasses ranging from hairlines to chasms twenty and more feet in width, transverse, longitudinal, and diagonal, and as far as I could see they extended clear to the other side. But here, on the left side, close in to the lining wall of moraine, was a relatively clear path, fissured only at long intervals, and not more than thirty yards broad. Thirty yards! Jackstraw could never miss at this point-blank rifle range, even with a moving target.

I stole a glance at him, but his face might have been carved from the glacier itself, it was immobile and utterly devoid of expression. Hillcrest, on the other hand, was restless, forever shifting his cramped position: he was unhappy, I knew, he didn't like this one little bit. He didn't like murder. Neither did I. But this wasn't murder, it was a long overdue execution: it wasn't life-taking, it was life-saving, the lives of Margaret and Solly Levin. . . .

There came the sudden click, abnormally loud even above the closing roar of the tractor, and Jackstraw, stretched his length on the snow, had the rifle raised to his shoulder. And then, suddenly, the Citroën had come clearly into sight and Jackstraw was gently lowering his rifle to the ground. I had gambled, and I had lost. The tractor was on the far side of the glacier, hugging the right bank as closely as possible: even at its nearest point of approach it would still be three hundred yards away.

12

Saturday 12:15 p.m.—12:30 p.m.

THE CITROËN was travelling in a most erratic fashion—one moment slowing down almost to a stop, the next jerking forward and covering perhaps twenty to thirty

yards at a rush. Although we couldn't see the glacier surface at that distance, it was obvious that the driver was picking his way round ice-mounds and threading along between fissures at the best speed he could manage. But his average speed was very low: it would probably take him almost five minutes to reach that point opposite us where the glacier fell away sharply to the left towards the outer angle of the dogleg halfway down towards the fjord.

All these things I noted mechanically, without in any way consciously thinking of them. All I could think of was that Smallwood and Corazzini had outwitted us right up to the last—almost certainly, I could understand now, they had seen and been warned by the rockets Hillcrest had fired to give the Scimitar our position, and decided to give that side of the glacier the widest possible berth.

But the reasons no longer mattered a damn. All that mattered was the accomplished fact, and the fact was that Corazzini and Smallwood could no longer be stopped, not in the way we had intended. Even yet, of course, they *could* be stopped—but I had no illusions but that that would be at the cost of the lives of the two hostages in the tractor.

Frantically I tried to work out what to do for the best. There was no chance in the world that we might approach them openly over the glacier—we would be spotted before we had covered ten yards, and a pistol at the heads of Margaret and Levin would halt us before we got halfway. If we did nothing, let them get away, I knew the hostages' chances for survival were still pretty slim—that trawler would almost certainly have a name or number or both and I couldn't see Smallwood letting them make an identification of the trawler and then come back to report to us—and to all the waiting ships and planes in the Davis Strait-Baffin Sea area. Why should he take the slightest risk when it would be so easy to shoot them, so much easier still to throw them down a crevasse or shove them over the edge of the glacier into the freezing waters of the fjord 150 feet below . . . ? Already the Citroën was not more than three minutes away from the nearest point of approach they would make to us.

"Looks like they're going to get away with it," Hillcrest whispered. It seemed as if he feared he might be overheard, though Smallwood and Corazzini couldn't have heard him had he shouted at the top of his voice.

"Well, that was what you wanted, wasn't it?" I asked bitterly.

"What I wanted! My God, man, that missile mechanism——"

"I don't give a single solitary damn about the missile mechanism." I ground the words out between clenched teeth. "Six months from now other scientists will have invented something twice as good and ten times as secret. They're welcome to it, and with pleasure."

Hillcrest was shocked, but said nothing. But someone was in agreement with me.

"Hear, hear!" Zagero had just come up, his hands swathed to the size of boxing gloves in white bandage. The words were light enough, but his face was grim and his eyes bleak as he stared out across the glacier. "My sentiments exactly, Doc. To hell with their murderous little toys. My old man's in that buggy out there. And your girl."

"His girl?" Hillcrest turned, looked sharply at me under creased brows for a long moment, then murmured, "Sorry, boy, I didn't understand."

I made no response, but twisted my head as I heard footsteps behind me. It was Joss, hatless and gloveless in his excitement.

"*Wykenham*'s anchored, sir," he panted out. "Her——"

"Get down, man! They'll see you."

"Sorry." He dropped to his hands and knees. "Her powerboat's already moving inshore. And there was a flight of four Scimitars already airborne: they should be halfway here already. In two minutes' time four or five bombers are taking off, with H.E. and incendiaries. They're slower, but——"

"Bombers?" I snapped irritably. "Bombers? What do they think this is—the Second Front?"

"No, sir. They're going to clobber the trawler if Smallwood gets away with that missile mechanism. They won't get a hundred yards."

"The hell with their missile mechanism. Do human lives mean nothing to them? What is it, Jackstraw?"

"Lights, Dr. Mason." He pointed to the spot on the fjord wall where the men from the trawler had already covered two-thirds of the horizontal and vertical distance to the end of the glacier. "Signalling, I think."

I saw it right away, a small light, but powerful, winking

irregularly. I watched it for a few moments, then heard Joss's voice.

"It's Morse, but it's not our Morse, sir."

"They're hardly likely to signal in English just for our benefit," I said dryly. I tried to speak calmly, to hide the fear, the near despair in my mind, and when I spoke again my voice, I knew, was abnormally matter-of-fact. "It's the tip-off to our friends Smallwood and Corazzini. If we can see the men from the trawler, it's a cinch the men from the trawler can see us. The point is, do Smallwood and Corazzini understand them?"

Five seconds later I had my answer in the form of a suddenly deepening roar coming to us across the glacier from the engine of the Citroën. Corazzini—Hillcrest's binoculars had shown him to be the driver—had understood the danger all right, he was casting caution to the winds and gunning the engine to its maximum. He must have been desperate, desperate to the point of madness, for no sane man would have taken the fearful risks of driving that tractor through sloping crevasse ice with the friction coefficient between treads and surface reduced almost to zero. Or could it be that he just didn't know the suicidal dangers involved?

After a few seconds I was convinced he didn't. In the first place, I couldn't see either Corazzini or Smallwood as men who would panic under pressure, no matter how severe that pressure, and in the second place suicidal risks weren't absolutely necessary, they would have stood a more than even chance of getting away with their lives and the missile mechanism if they had stopped the tractor, got out, and picked their cautious way down the glacier on foot, with their pistol barrels stuck in the backs of their hostages. Or would they—rather, did they think they would?

I tried fleetingly, frantically, to get inside their cold and criminal minds, to try to understand their conception of us. Did they think that we thought, like them, that the mechanism was all important, that human lives were cheap and readily expendable. If they did, and knowing the quality of Jackstraw's marksmanship with a rifle, would they not be convinced that they would be shot down as soon as they had stepped out onto the ice, regardless of the fate of their hostages? Or did they have a better

understanding than that of minds more normal than their own?

Even as these thoughts flashed through my mind I knew I must act now. The time for thought, had there ever been such a time, was past. If they were left to continue in the tractor, they would either kill themselves on the glacier or if, by a miracle, they reached the bottom safely, they would then kill their hostages. If they were stopped now, there was a faint chance that Margaret and Levin might survive, at least for the moment: they were Smallwood's and Corazzini's only two trump cards, and would be kept intact as long as lay within their power, for they were their only guarantee of escape. I just had to gamble on the hope that they would be desperately reluctant to kill them where they were now, still a mile from the end of the glacier. And the last time I had gambled I had lost.

"Can you stop the tractor?" I asked Jackstraw, my voice a flat lifeless monotone in my own ear.

He nodded, his eyes on me: I nodded silently in return.

"You can't do that!" Zagero shouted in urgent protest. The drawl had gone for the first time ever. "They'll kill them, they'll kill them! My God, Mason, if you're really stuck on that kid, you'd never——"

"Shut up!" I said savagely. I grabbed a coil of rope, picked up my rifle, and went on brutally, "If you think they'd ever let your father come out of this alive, you must be crazy."

A second later I was on my way, plunging out into the open across the narrow thirty-yard stretch of ice that led into the first of the fissures, wincing and ducking involuntarily as the first .303 shell from Jackstraw's rifle screamed past me, only feet to my right, and smashed through the hood of the Citroën and into the engine with all the metallic clamour, the vicious power of a sledge-hammer wielded by some giant hand. But still the Citroën came on.

I leapt across a narrow crevasse, steadied myself, glanced back for a moment, saw that Hillcrest, Joss, Zagero, and a couple of Hillcrest's men were following, then rushed on again, weaving and twisting my way through the cracks and mounds in the ice. What was Zagero doing there, I asked myself angrily. Unarmed,

with two useless hands that could hold no firearm, he was nothing but a liability, what could any man do with ruined hands like those? I was to find out just what a man with ruined hands could do. . . .

We were running straight across the narrowest neck of the glacier, making straight for the spot where the tractor would arrive if it survived Jackstraw's attempts to halt it: Jackstraw was firing in a line well above us now, but we could still hear the thin high whine of every bullet, the metallic crash as it struck the Citroën. Every bullet went home. But that engine was incredibly tough.

We were about halfway across when we heard the engine change gear, the high unmistakable whine of the tractor beginning to overrun its engine. Corazzini—I could clearly see him now, even without the aid of binoculars—must have found himself losing traction on the steepening slope and was using the engine to brake the Citroën. And then, when we were less than a hundred yards away and after a longer than usual lull in the firing—Jackstraw must have stopped to change magazines—the sixth shell smashed through the riddled hood and the engine stopped as abruptly as if the ignition had been switched off.

The tractor stopped too. On that steep slope this was surprising, the last thing I would have expected, but there was no doubt that not only had it stopped but that it had been stopped deliberately; there was no mistaking the high-pitched screech of these worn brakes.

And then I could see the reason why. There was some violent activity taking place in the driving cabin of the tractor, and as we neared—a maddeningly slow process, there were dozens of crevasses to be jumped, as many more to be skirted—we could see what it was. Corazzini and Solly Levin were struggling furiously, and, from thirty or forty yards, it seemed, incredibly enough, that Solly Levin was getting the better of it. He had flung himself completely on top of Corazzini where the latter sat behind the wheel, and was butting him savagely in the face with the top of his bald head, and Corazzini, trapped in the narrow space, could find no room to make use of his much greater strength.

Then, abruptly, the door on the driver's side burst open—we could see it clearly, having been lower down than the tractor when it had stopped we were approaching

it now almost head on—and the two men fell out fighting and struggling furiously. We could see now why Levin had been using his head—both hands were bound behind his back. It had been an act of desperate courage to attack Corazzini in the first place, but the old man wasn't to get the reward he deserved for his selflessness: even as we came up to them Corazzini got his automatic clear and fired down point-blank at Solly Levin who was lying helplessly on his back but still gamely trying to get a leg lock on the bigger man. I was a split second too late in getting there, even as I crashed into Corazzini and sent his automatic flying away to slide down the glacier. I knew I was too late, Solly Levin was a crumpled little blood-stained figure lying on the ice even before Corazzini's gun went slithering over the edge of a crevasse. And then I felt myself being pushed to one side, and Johnny Zagero was staring down at the outspread stillness of the man huddled at his feet. For what seemed an eternity, but was probably no more than three seconds, he stood there without moving, then when he turned to Corazzini his face was empty of all expression.

It might have been a flash of fear, of realization that he had come to the end of his road that I saw in Corazzini's eyes, but I could never swear to it, the turn of his head, the sudden headlong dash for the shelter of the ice-covered moraine rocks by the side of the glacier, ten yards away, were so swift that I could be certain of nothing. But swift as he was, Zagero was even swifter: he caught Corazzini before he had covered four yards and they crashed to the glacier together, clawing, punching, and kicking in the grim desperate silence of men who know that the winner's prize is his life.

"Drop that gun!" I whirled round at the sound of the voice behind me, but all I could see at first was the white strained face of Margaret Ross, the brown eyes dulled with sickness and fear. Involuntarily I brought up the rifle in my hands.

"Drop it!" Smallwood's voice was curt, deadly, his face barely visible behind Margaret's shoulder as he peered out through the canvas screen at the rear of the tractor cabin. He was completely shielded by her body—it was typical of the man's cunning, his ice-cold calculation, that he should have waited until our attention was completely

distracted before making his move. "And your friend. Quickly now!"

I hesitated, glanced at Hillcrest—the only other man with a weapon—to see how he was placed, then jerked my head back again as there came a sudden *plop* from the silenced automatic and a sharp cry of pain from Margaret. She was clutching her left arm just above the elbow.

"Quickly, I said! The next one goes through her shoulder." His voice was soft with menace, his face implacable. Not for a moment did I doubt that he would do exactly as he said: the clatter of Hillcrest's rifle and mine falling on the ice came in the same instant.

"Now kick them over the edge of that crevasse."

We did as he said and stood there powerless to do anything except watch the savage, mauling fight on the glacier. Neither man had regained his feet since the struggle had begun, the ice was too slippery for that, and still they rolled over and over, first one on top, now the other. Both were powerful men, but Zagero was severely handicapped by the exhaustion of the terrible night's march that lay behind him, by his crippled useless hands, by thickly swathed bandages over his hands that not only prevented him from catching or holding Corazzini but softened the impact of every blow he struck. For all that, there was no question how the battle was going; those broken hands I'd said would never fight again were clubbing and hammering the life out of Corazzini. I thought of the tremendous force with which I'd seen Zagero strike a blow only the previous morning and felt a momentary flash of pity for Corazzini: then I remembered he was just as Smallwood was, that Smallwood was prepared to kill Margaret with as little compunction as he would snuff out the life of a fly, I looked at the crumpled figure at my feet and every shadow of pity vanished as if it had never been.

Smallwood, his eyes unblinking, his face expressionless as ever, had his gun on them all the time, waiting for that second when the two men would break far enough apart to give him a clear sight of Zagero. But, now, Zagero was underneath nearly all the time, one arm crooked round Corazzini's neck while the other delivered a murderous series of short-arm jabs, each one drawing a grunting gasp of agony from a white-faced Corazzini: finally, goaded into supreme effort by panic and fear, Corazzini managed to break loose and hurled himself not towards Smallwood,

where safety lay, but for the shelter of the moraine rocks, where he would never know safety again. Zagero, catlike as ever, was only feet behind him, moving so fast, so unexpectedly that Smallwood's swift snapshot missed him altogether.

"Call your friend Neilsen." Smallwood must have realized how things were going behind the concealing shelter of the rocks, for his voice was suddenly savage, urgent. He spared a swift glance in Jackstraw's direction—Jackstraw, followed at some distance by two more of Hillcrest's crew, was crossing the glacier at a dead run and now less than fifty yards away. "His rifle. In a crevasse. Quickly!"

"Jackstraw!" My voice was hoarse, cracked. "Throw your rifle away! He's got a gun on Miss Ross, and he's going to kill her." Jackstraw braked, slipped on the ice, halted, and stood there for a moment irresolute, and then at my repeated desperate cry carefully, deliberately dropped his rifle into a nearby fissure and came slowly on to join us. It was at that moment that Hillcrest grabbed me by the arm.

"He's moving, Mason! He's alive!" He was pointing down to Levin, who had indeed stirred slightly. I had never thought to examine Levin, it had seemed a ludicrous idea that a professional like Corazzini could have missed at such point-blank range, but now, regardless of Smallwood's reaction, I dropped to my knees on the glacier and put my face close to Levin's. Hillcrest was right. The breathing was shallow, but breathing there undoubtedly was, and now I could see the thin red line that extended from the temple almost to the back of the head. I rose to my feet.

"Creased, concussed probably, that's all." Involuntarily I glanced over my shoulder towards the rocks. "But too late now for Corazzini."

And I needed no eyes to know that this was so. The unseen battle behind the rocks had been fought out with a dumb feral ferocity, with a silently animistic savagery that had been far more frightening than all the most maddened oaths and shouting could ever have been, but even now, as Smallwood jumped down from the tailboard of the tractor cabin, Margaret Ross still held in front of him, and started hustling her towards the rocks, a hoarse, high-pitched scream that raised the hackles on the back of my neck froze us all, even Smallwood, to immobility: and then

came a long quavering moan of agony, cut off as abruptly as it had begun. And now there was no more screaming or moaning, no more slipping of feet on ice, no more gasping or frenzied flurries bespeaking the interchange of desperate blows: there was only silence, a silence chillingly broken by regular rhythmic pounding blows like the stamping feet of a pile-driver.

Smallwood had recovered, had just reached the rocks, when Zagero came out to meet him face to face. Smallwood moved to one side, his gun covering him, as Zagero came slowly towards us, his face cut and bruised, his blood-saturated bandaged hands hanging by his sides, with two long ribbons of red-stained bandage trailing on the ice behind him.

"Finished?" I asked.

"Finished."

"Good," I said, and meant it. "Your father's still alive, Johnny. Scalp wound, that's all."

His battered face transformed, first by disbelief then by sheer joy, Zagero dropped on his knees beside Solly Levin. I saw Smallwood line his pistol up on Zagero's back.

"Don't do it, Smallwood!" I shouted. "You'll only have four shells left."

His eyes swivelled to my face, the cold flat eyes of a killer, then the meaning of my words struck home, his expression subtly altered, and he nodded as if I had made some reasonable suggestion. He turned to Jackstraw, the nearest man to him, and said, "Bring out my radio."

Jackstraw moved to obey, and while he was inside the cabin Zagero rose slowly to his feet.

"Does look like though I was a mite premature," he murmured. He glanced towards the rocks, and there was no regret in his face, only indifference. "Half a dozen witnesses, and you all saw him beatin' himself to death. . . . You're next, Smallwood."

"Corazzini was a fool," Smallwood said contemptuously. The man's cold-blooded callousness was staggering. "I can easily replace him. Just leave that radio here, Neilsen, and join your friends while I join mine." He nodded down the glacier. "Or perhaps you hadn't noticed?"

And we hadn't. But we noticed it now all right, the first of the party from the trawler climbing onto the ice at the precipitous tip of the glacier. Within seconds half a dozen of them were on the ice, running, stumbling, falling, pick-

ing themselves up again as they clawed their way up the slippery ice with all the speed they could muster.

"My—ah—reception committee." Smallwood permitted himself the shadow of a smile. "You will remain here while Miss Ross and I make our way down to meet them. You will not move. I have the girl." Victory, complete and absolute victory, was in his grasp, but his voice, his face were again devoid as ever of all shadow of expression or feeling. He stooped to pick up the portable radio, then swung round and stared up into the sky.

I had heard it too, and I knew what it was before Smallwood did because it was a factor that had never entered into his calculations. But there was no need for me to explain, within seconds of hearing the first high screaming whine from the south a flight of four lean sleek deadly Scimitar jet-fighters whistled by less than four hundred feet overhead, banked almost immediately, broke formation, and came back again, speed reduced, flying a tight circle over the tongue of the fjord. I don't like planes, and I hate the sound of jets: but I had never seen so welcome a sight, heard so wonderful a sound in all my life.

"Jet-fighters, Smallwood," I cried exultantly. "Jet-fighters from a naval carrier. We called them up by radio." He was staring at the circling planes with his thin lips drawn back wolfishly over his teeth, and I went on more softly, "They've had orders to shoot and destroy any person seen going down that glacier—any person, especially, with a case or radio in his hand." It was a lie, but Smallwood wasn't to know that, the very presence of the jets above must have seemed confirmation of the truth of my words.

"They wouldn't dare," he said slowly. "They'd kill the girl too."

"You fool!" I said contemptuously. "Not only doesn't human life matter a damn to either side compared to the recovery of this mechanism—*you* should know that better than anyone, Smallwood—but these planes have been told to watch out for and kill *two* people going down the glacier. Wrapped in these clothes, Miss Ross is indistinguishable from a man—especially from the air. They'll think it's you and Corazzini and they'll blast you both off the face of the glacier."

I knew Smallwood believed me, believed me absolutely, this was so exactly the way his own killer's mind would

have worked in its utterly callous indifference to human life that conviction could not be stayed. But he had courage, I'll grant him that, and that first-class brain of his never stopped working.

"There's no hurry," he said comfortably. He was back on balance again. "They can circle there as long as they like, they can send out relief planes to take over, it doesn't matter. As long as I'm with you here, they won't touch me. And in just over an hour or so it will be dark again, after which I can leave. Meantime, stay close to me, gentlemen: I don't think *you* would so willingly sacrifice Miss Ross's life."

"Don't listen to him," Margaret said desperately. Her voice was almost a sob, her face twisted with pain. "Go away, *please,* all of you, go away. I know he's going to kill me in the end anyway. It may as well be now." She buried her face in her hands. "I don't care any more, I don't, I don't."

"But I care," I said angrily. Soft words, sympathetic words were useless here. "We all care. Don't be such a little fool. Everything will be all right, you'll see."

"Spoken like a man," said Smallwood approvingly. "Only, my dear, I wouldn't pay much attention to the last part of his speech."

"Why don't you give up, Smallwood?" I asked him quietly. I had neither hope nor intention of persuading this fanatic, I was only talking for time, for I had seen something that had made my heart leap; moving quietly out over the right-hand side of the glacier, from the self-same spot where we had lain in ambush, was a file of about a dozen men. "Bombers have already taken off from the carrier, and, believe me, they're carrying bombs. Bombs and incendiaries. And do you know why, Smallwood?"

They were dressed in khaki, this landing party from the *Wykenham,* not navy blue. Marines, almost certainly, unless they had been carrying soldiers on some combined manoeuvres. They were heavily armed, and had that indefinable but unmistakable look of men who knew exactly what they were about. Their leader, I noticed, wasn't fooling around with the usual pistol a naval officer in charge of a landing party traditionally carried: he had a submachine gun under his arm, the barrel gripped in his left hand. Three others had similar weapons, the rest rifles.

"Because they're going to make good and sure you're never going to get off this glacier alive, Smallwood," I went on. "At least, not out of the fjord alive. Neither you nor any of your friends coming to meet you—nor any of the men waiting aboard that trawler down there."

God, how slowly they were coming! Why didn't one of their marksmen with a rifle shoot Smallwood there and then—at that moment, the thought that a rifle bullet would have gone clear through Smallwood and killed the girl held so tightly in front of him never occurred to me. But if I could hold his attention another thirty seconds, if none of the others standing by my side betrayed by the slightest flicker of expression——

"They're going to destroy that trawler, Smallwood," I rushed on quickly. The men advancing up from the foot of the glacier were waving their arms furiously now, shouting wildly in warning, and even at over three-quarters of a mile their voices were carrying clearly. I had to try to drown their voices, to make sure that Smallwood kept his eyes fixed only on me. "They're going to blow it out of the water, it and you and that damned missile mechanism. What's the use of——"

But it was too late. Smallwood had heard the shouts even as I had begun to speak, twisted his head to look down the valley, saw the direction of the pointing arms, glanced briefly over his shoulder, then turned to face me again, his face twisted in a bestial snarl, that monolithic calm shattered at last.

"Who are they?" he demanded viciously. "What are they doing? Quick—or the girl gets it!"

"It's a landing party from the destroyer in the next bay," I said steadily. "This is the end, Smallwood. Maybe you'll stand trial yet."

"I'll kill the girl!" he whispered savagely.

"They'll kill you. They've been ordered to recover that mechanism at all costs. Nobody's playing any more, Smallwood. Give up your gun."

He swore, vilely, blasphemously, the first time I had ever heard such words from him, and leapt for the driving cabin of the tractor, pushing the girl in front of him while his pistol swung in a wide arc covering all of us. I understood what he was going to do, what this last desperate suicidal gamble was going to be, and hurled myself at the door of the driving cabin.

"You madman!" My voice was a scream. "You'll kill yourself, you'll kill the girl——"

The gun coughed softly, I felt the white-hot burning pain in my upper arm and crashed backwards onto the ice just as Smallwood released the brakes of the Citroën. At once the big tractor started to move, those murderous treads passing by inches from me as Jackstraw leapt forward and dragged me to safety a second before they would have run over my face. The next moment I was on my feet, running after the tractor, Jackstraw at my heels: I suppose that wound just below my shoulder must have been hurting like hell, but the truth is that I felt nothing at all.

The tractor, with next to no adhesion left on the steepening slope of ice, accelerated with dismaying speed, soon outdistancing us. At first it seemed as if Smallwood was making some attempt to steer it, but it was obvious almost immediately that any such attempts were utterly useless: five tons of steel run amok, it was completely out of control, skidding violently first to one side and then the other, finally making a complete half-circle and sliding backwards down the glacier at terrifying speed, following the slope of the ice which led from the righthand side where we had been standing to the big *nunataks* thrusting up through the ice on the far left-hand corner of the dogleg halfway down.

How it missed all the crevasses—it went straight across some narrow ones, thanks to its treads—and all the ice-mounds on the way down and across the glacier I shall never know, but miss them it did, increasing speed with every second that passed, its treads screeching out a shrilly metallic cacophony of sound as they scored their serrated way across and through the uneven ice of the glacier. But then, I shall never know either how Jackstraw and I survived all the crazy chances we took on our mad headlong run down that glacier, unable to stop, leaping across crevasses we would never have dared attempt in our normal minds, pounding our sliding way alongside others where the slip of either foot would have been our death.

We were still two hundred yards behind the tractor when, less than fifty yards from the corner, it struck an ice-mound, spun round crazily several times, and then smashed, tail first, with horrifying force into the biggest of the *nunataks*—a fifty-foot pinnacle of rock at the very

corner. We were still over a hundred yards away when we saw Smallwood, obviously dazed, half-fall out of the still upright driving cabin, hatbox in hand, followed by the girl. Whether she flung herself at him or just stumbled against him it was impossible to say, but both of them slipped and fell together and next moment had disappeared from sight against the face of the *nunatak*.

Still fifty yards away, already trying all we could to brake ourselves, we heard the staccato roar of cannon shells seemingly directly above us, and as I flung myself flat on the ice, not to avoid the fire but to stop myself before I, too, plunged into the crevasse by the *nunatak* where I knew Margaret and Smallwood must have disappeared, I caught a glimpse of two Scimitars hurtling low across the glacier, red fire streaking from their guns. For a moment, rolling over and over, I saw no more, then I had another glimpse of the lower part of the glacier, of exploding cannon shells raking a lethal barrier of fragmenting steel across the glacier's entire width, and, about sixty to seventy yards lower down, the men from the trawler lying flat on their faces to escape the whistling flying shrapnel. Even in that brief moment I had time to see a third Scimitar screaming down out of the north, exactly following the path of the other two. They were making no attempt to kill the trawler men, obviously they were under the strictest instructions to avoid any but the most necessary bloodshed. And it wasn't necessary, if ever anything was crystal clear it was the fact that we weren't going to have any trouble at all from those trawler men. Both men and trawler could depart now, unmolested: with the missile mechanism beyond their reach, they no longer mattered.

Ten yards ahead of Jackstraw, sick to the heart and almost mad with fear, I reached the crevasse by the *nunatak*—no more than a three-foot-wide gap between ice and rock—peered down over the side, and as I peered I felt faint from the wave of relief that swept over me: the crevasse, narrowing as it went down to not much more than two feet, ended about fifteen feet down in a solid shelf of rock, a ledge sculpted by thousands of years of moving, grinding ice.

Margaret and Smallwood were still on their feet, shaky, I could see, but seemingly unharmed—it had been a short drop and they could have slowed their descent by pressing

against both sides of the crevasse as they fell. Smallwood, flattened lips drawn back over his teeth, was staring up at me, his pistol barrel pressed savagely against Margaret's temple.

"A rope, Mason!" he said softly. "Get me a rope. This crevasse is closing—the ice is moving!"

And it was, I knew it was. All glaciers moved, some of them, on this West Greenland coast, with astonishing speed—the great Upernivik glacier, further north, covered over four feet every hour. As if in confirmation of his words, the ice beneath my feet groaned and shuddered and slid forward a couple of inches.

"Hurry up!" Smallwood's incomparable nerve held to the last, his voice was urgent but completely under control, his face tight-lipped but calm. "Hurry up or I'll kill her!"

I knew he meant it absolutely.

"Very well," I said calmly. My mind felt preternaturally clear, I knew Margaret's life hung on a fraying thread but I had never felt so cool, so self-possessed in my life. I unwound the rope round my shoulders. "Here it comes."

He reached up both hands to catch the falling rope, I took a short step forward and then, stiff-legged and with my hands pressed close to my sides, fell on top of him like a plummeting stone. He saw me coming, but with the tangle of the rope and the narrowness of the crevasse he had no chance to get clear. My feet caught him on the shoulder and outstretched arm, and we crashed onto the ledge together.

He was, as I have said, phenomenally strong for his size, but he had no chance then. True, he was partially numbed by the shock of my fall, but that was more than cancelled out by my weakness, by the loss of blood from my wounded shoulder. But he still had no chance. I locked my hands round that scrawny throat, ignored his kickings, his eye-gougings, the fusillade of blows rained on my unprotected head, and squeezed and knocked his head against the blue-banded striations of the side of the crevasse until I felt him go limp in my hands. And then it was time to go, the ice-walls were no more than eighteen inches apart.

Smallwood apart, I now found myself alone on that narrowing ledge. Jackstraw had already been lowered by Hillcrest and his men, fastened a rope round Margaret,

and been pulled up himself after her: I could have sworn that I had fought with Smallwood for no more than ten seconds, but was told later that we had struggled like madmen for three or four minutes. It may well have been so, I have no memory of that time, my coolness, my detachment was something altogether outside me.

My first clear recollection was hearing Jackstraw's voice, quick and urgent, as a rope snaked down over my shoulders.

"Quickly, Dr. Mason! It'll close any second now."

"I'm coming. But another rope first, please." I pointed to the radio lying at my feet. "We've come too long a way with this, we've suffered too much for this to leave it now."

Twenty seconds later, just as I scrambled over the edge of the crevasse, the grinding ice-wall lurched another inch or two towards the rock of the *nunatak,* and, at the same moment, Smallwood's voice came to us again. He had propped himself up on his hands and knees and was staring up numbly, almost disbelievingly, at the narrowing walls above him.

"Throw me a rope." He could see death's hand reaching out to touch him, but the urgency in his voice was still under that iron control, his face an expressionless mask. "For God's sake, throw me a rope."

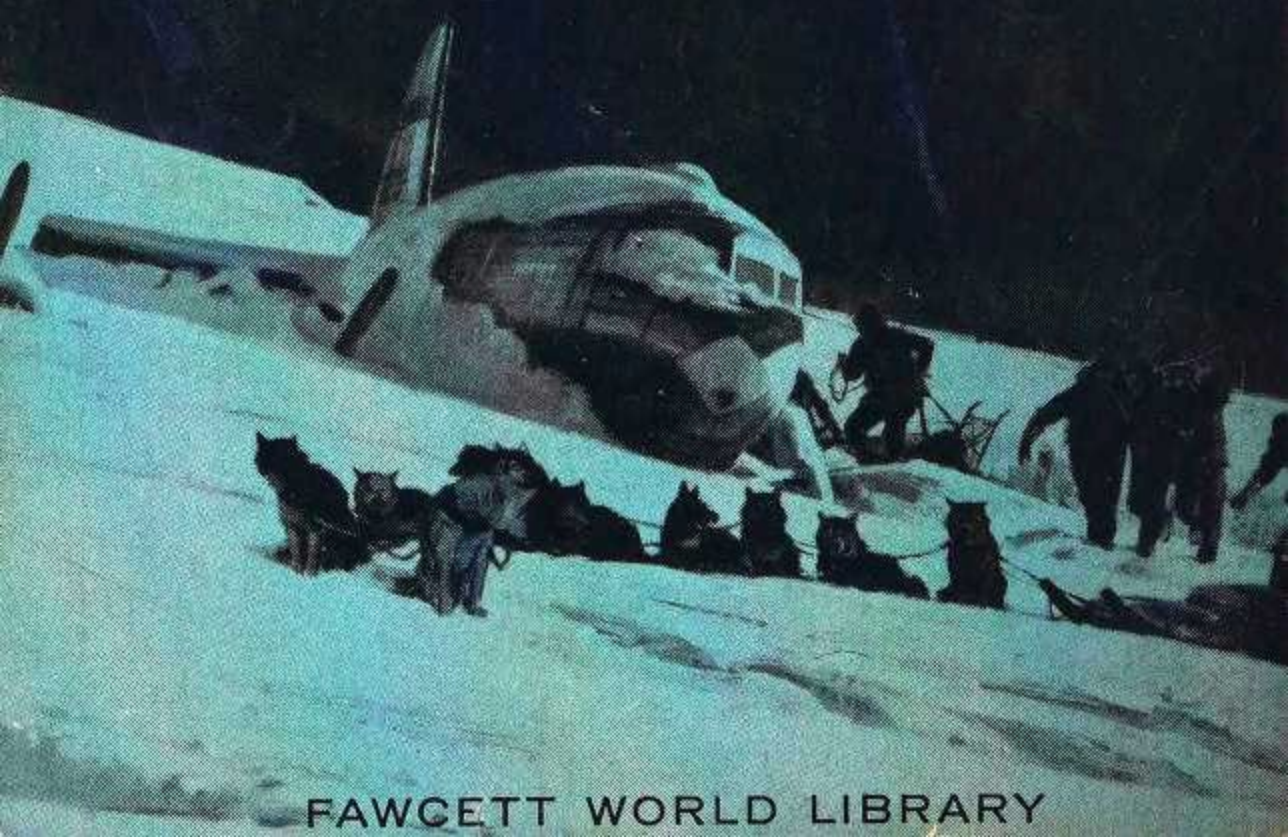
I thought of the trail of death Smallwood had left behind him, of the dead plane's captain, the three dead crew members, Colonel Harrison, Brewster, and Mrs. Dansby-Gregg, of how close to the brink of death he had brought Marie LeGarde and Mahler, of how often he had threatened death to the girl now trembling violently in the crook of my arm. I thought of these things, then I looked at Jackstraw, who carried a rope over his arm, and I saw reflected in his face the same implacability, the same bleak mercilessness that informed my own mind. And then Jackstraw moved towards the brink of the crevasse, lifted the tightly coiled rope high above his head, hurled it down on the top of the man below, and stepped back without a word.

We turned, Jackstraw and I, with Margaret Ross supported between us, and walked slowly up the glacier to meet the officer in charge of the landing party, and as we walked we could feel the glacier shiver beneath our feet as a million tons of ice lurched down towards the head of the Kangalak fjord.

Snow-White... Blood-Red

Seconds ago the passengers were sitting in the cozy security of their pressurized cabin with a controlled temperature of 70°. Then the crash, the tearing, jagged screeching as the plane ripped along the ice and snow. The tidal wave of the dreadful cold, 40° below zero, swept in and engulfed the survivors — the dazed, the injured, the unconscious and the dying — as they sat in the crumpled wreckage of their seats, wearing only thin suits and dresses.

And so began the terrible arctic night, a night without end, where the darkness would bring with it murder and betrayal and cowardice. And the chilling knowledge that among them was a ruthless agent determined to carry out his desperate mission.



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