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THE SEX WAR

A Novel By SAM MERWIN, JR.

BEACON

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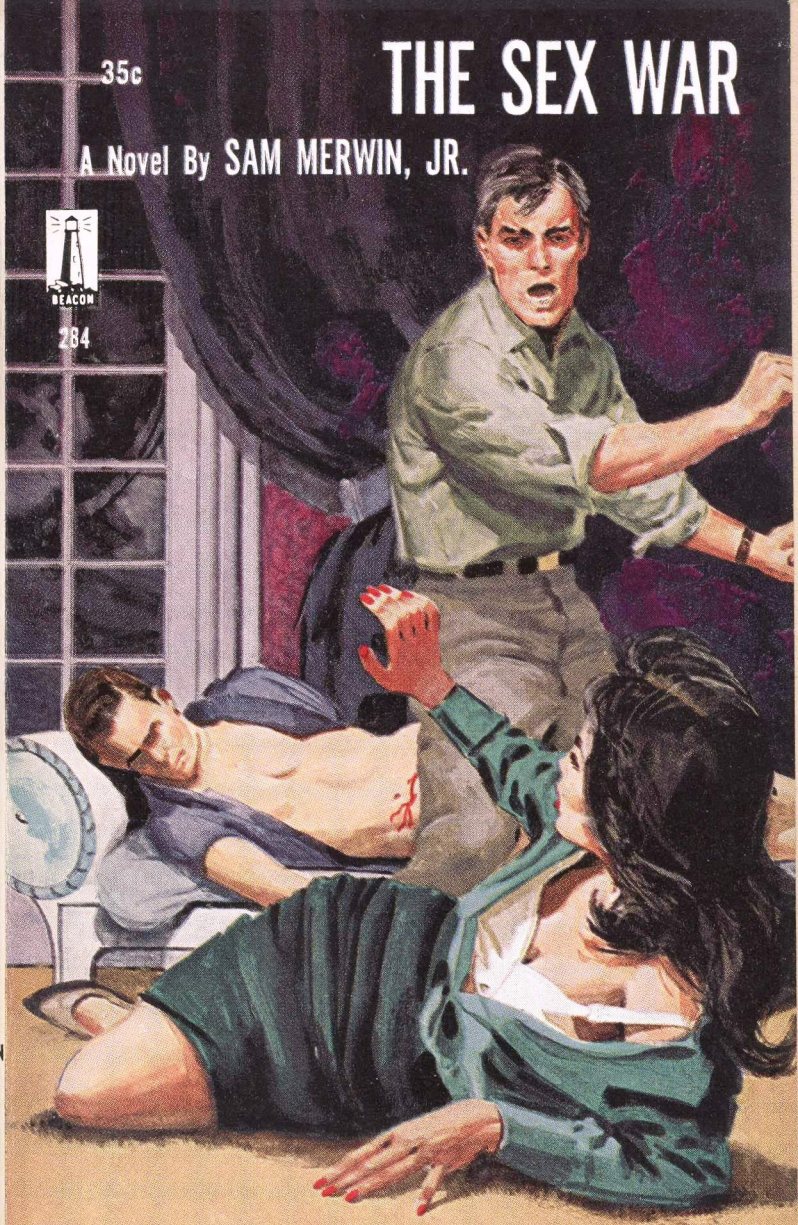
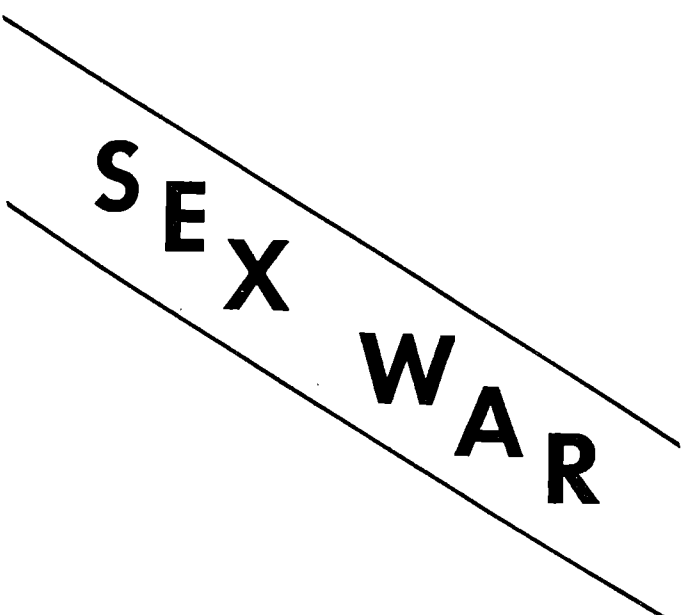


THE SILENT WAR HAD JUST ONE AIM
–TO WIPE OUT ALL SEX ON EARTH!


SEX WAR

THE SEX WAR

by

SAM MERWIN, Jr.

A Prize Novel
Selected by Galaxy Magazine
For Beacon Books

ALL CHARACTERS IN THIS WORK ARE WHOLLY FICTITIOUS AND ANY RESEMBLANCE TO PERSONS LIVING OR DEAD IS PURELY COINCIDENTAL

Formerly published as
The White Widow

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1

THE PACKAGE was waiting for him when he got home from the laboratory. It sat on the hall table of the red brick pot-bellied house in which he lived, halfway between Huntington Avenue and the Fenway. Neatly wrapped in brown paper and twine, it looked as if it might contain a volume of notebook size.

Which was the whole trouble as far as Larry Finlay was concerned—it did contain a volume of notebook size. The volume held the thesis on which he had worked for eighteen backbreaking months—and which he had sent off to the University, blessed with high hopes of acceptance toward a D.Sc., a scant two weeks earlier.

It seemed incredible to him that his thesis should have been read so quickly, much less weighed and found wanting. Numbly he picked it up and thought it unpleasantly polite of the University officials to pay out postage for its return. So confident had he been of its acceptance that he had not included this precautionary item.

The stuffed shirts had kissed him off for exactly seventy-eight cents worth of stamps!

Without any recollection of having climbed the stairs, Larry found himself in his third-floor-front apartment, still holding the package. There was a note inside, a brief impersonal typewritten message on three-by-five paper beneath the University crest.

It read:

We regret to inform you that we do not feel qualified to hold you eligible for a Doctor of Science degree from this university on the basis of the thesis you have submitted to us. Therefore, regretfully, we are returning it to you.

It was signed with an illegible scrawl beneath which the stenographer had typed the name of a faceless assistant professor in the Department of Biology. That was all—that and the seventy-eight cents in stamps, now canceled, that had brought it back to him through the U.S. mails.

He looked groggily at the leatherette cover, on which had been pasted the title—*A New Approach to the Problem of Haemophilia.* Perhaps he should have called it *Mother's Blood* or *Heritage of Death*—something more commercial. Or perhaps he should have stood in bed. With this thought he dropped the rejected thesis on the table and flung himself face down on the davenport that served as his bed at night.

He was still lying there when Mrs. Bemis, the landlady, knocked on his door and called, "Why don't you answer the phone, Mr. Finlay? I know you're there—I heard you come in. Didn't you hear me shouting my lungs out?"

It was Ned Tolman, calling from the *Gazette* city room, where he passed five out of every seven days toiling behind a typewriter in the rewrite battery. He said, "Hey, microbe hunter, how about a little forgathering this evening? You ought to have a couple of moments free since that opus of yours is finally finished."

Larry gave it to him straight. He said, "The opus just bounced, Ned."

There was silence. Then Ned said, "But you only just sent it to them. I thought they took months to make up their minds about these things."

"Not about this one, it seems," Larry told him.

"All the more reason to shake yourself loose then," said the newspaperman. "Look, I know a little place in the North End where the lasagna is out of this world. Why don't you pick up Ida and meet me there in an hour?"

"Sorry, Ned," Larry replied. "I don't feel very gay right now."

Tolman spent the next five minutes in argument, wheedling, coercion, and threatened blackmail—but finally gave up. Larry wanted to see his best friend—he wanted to see Ida, who was more than friend—but he didn't want to see them tonight.

He didn't lie down again. Instead he sat on the window seat and smoked and tried to figure out where he could have gone wrong. Perhaps, he thought, his mistake lay in having tackled an approach that was too radical, a trail too untrodden for the academic mind.

Virtually all efforts to check the bleeding of haemophiliacs to date consisted of direct study of and efforts to increase the clottability of these unfortunates' blood. However, since the disease is a "skipper"—carried only by women, immune as a sex to its ravages, and transmitted to their children, thus occurring only in every other male generation—Larry had decided to concentrate on the women who perpetuated the disease rather than the victims themselves.

Through study of some two-score actual cases and perusal of the records of hundreds more, he had come up with certain conclusions he considered at least worthy of attention by a biological board, if not of a D.Sc. But perhaps the pedagogues of science were not yet ready to approach the disease from so indirect an angle. It certainly seemed so.

Or perhaps there was some conspiracy, deeply hidden but devilishly effective, working against any promulga-

tion of this theory. Larry shook himself out of this train of thought, well aware it could lead only to paranoia.

Yet, annoyingly, it recurred. He went back mentally over the course of his friendship with Ned Tolman. Sure he had known Ned a long time—but they had never been really close until both of them turned up here in Boston, a couple of years before—Larry to work in the laboratory of a huge drug and chemical plant, Ned to hold down the assistant city editorship of the *Gazette*. They had stumbled across each other at a bar, both of them lonely and thinly acquainted in the city, and had poured out their stories to one another.

Unexpectedly, for Ned was about as scientific-minded as an amiable tomcat, the newsman had shown immediate interest in Larry's then still shadowy project for attacking haemophilia by the back door. He had said, "Listen, my microbe-hunting friend, you are on the straight path to recognition and riches—while I am on the path of a story that could get me out of this Fleet Street wallow into the air-conditioned grandeur of *Life, Time, Fortune,* or even the *Saturday Evening Post.* I hereby appoint myself your Boswell."

"Okay, Boswell, you can buy the next drink," had been Larry's reply. It had all been fun and games—or had it? From then on Ned had hung close to his figurative coattails, egging him on, encouraging him, even occasionally digging up records of another case of the dread disease from files in the *Gazette* morgue.

Why, Larry wondered, should his friend have egged him on to such stunning failure? It didn't make sense. Yet something had very definitely gone wrong.

He was still pondering such unanswerables when there was a knock on the door. Thinking it to be Mrs. Bemis, he said, "Sorry, I'm about to take a shower."

"Then turn your back so you won't see me," came the unexpected reply in cheerful feminine tones.

Larry got up in a hurry and opened the door for Ida

Stevens. She entered in a clean aura of Schiaparelli's "Shocking," clad otherwise in wide-wale blue corduroy that matched the delft of her eyes and a simple white shirtwaist whose demure looseness failed provocatively to conceal the fact that it was remarkably well filled. Ida was above medium height for a girl, her hair more than medium brown, her features more than medium generous in cut.

She placed a slim well-groomed hand against the side of Larry's face and kissed him on the lips. Then she said, "Larry, Ned just phoned and told me the bad news. He said you were about to call the corner drugstore and order a revolver."

Larry looked at her with gloomy affection. He said, "Do you have to be so goddam witty? Why don't you lie down on the floor and let me walk under you?"

"That's the old spirit, haemoglobin," she said gravely. "Let's all go out to Harvard Med. and have a real ball watching a hysterectomy."

"Stop trying to cheer me up," he replied, grinning reluctantly. "Just now I don't *want* to feel good and you're making me."

"I've only just begun to fight," she replied gravely, helping herself to a cigarette from the pack that lay open on the table. "Put on your personality and come on to my house. I'ma gonna giva you steak Ida Stevens."

"What's that?" he asked suspiciously. Ida, who was passing premarital time at Miss Greeley's Academy of Domestic Science, on Beacon Hill, had been known to come up with some eerie culinary efforts.

"Oh," she replied, "I just put a two-inch boned sirloin under the broiler, turn once, and serve in its own juices. It's a little trick I picked up from that *cordon bleu* Ned Tolman."

"You're lucky if you don't pick up leprosy from him," said Larry generously.

It was Ned again who had introduced him to Ida—

he had known her in New York earlier. In a way the girl was a problem.

Ida had money—how much, Larry had never asked nor had she volunteered. But her trim two-and-a-half-room apartment on Commonwealth Avenue, her casually costly clothes, her "studying" at Miss Greeley's—all of these spelled large blocks of gilt-edged stocks, to say nothing of five-figure accounts in the bank.

Furthermore Ida had family with a capital F though her parents were as dead as his own—it was, perhaps, the fact they were both orphans that had drawn them to one another in the first place. But she spoke casually, if infrequently, of staying with her grandmother in New York or California or the West Indies. The only traveling Larry had done was as a G.I.

While they rode in a cab to Ida's apartment, he wondered if such social and financial factors had also prevented him from engaging in a deeper relationship with Ida. Annoyingly, he had a strong idea that they had—and cursed himself for an inverted snob.

Ned Tolman separated himself reluctantly from the smooth Vermont granite façade of the apartment house where Ida lived. He was a tall lean young man with a mobile face the color of a fine new pigskin wallet.

His presence on a Boston newspaper was something of a minor mystery, for Ned had been on the verge of attaining success as a syndicated general columnist in Manhattan when, shortly before Larry turned up in Beantown, he had suddenly quit and joined the *Gazette*.

He greeted Ida with an elbow hug and, glancing at Larry, said, "I see you brought the steak on the hoof. Does it look like a happy steer? It does not—which means, since it is in your company, that it is either actually a steer or a dangerous homosexual."

"You bore me," said Larry with what aplomb he could muster.

They rode the elevator to Ida's place in an atmos-

phere of absurd bickering, carefully calculated by Ned to lift Larry's sagging morale. But, once Ida had planted them on either side of a bottle, glasses and ice, and adjourned to the kitchenette to broil the steak, Ned regarded his friend somberly and said, "Sorry if I overdid it just now, baby. But this thing has given me almost as much of a jolt as it's given you. After all, I had a hand in starting you on it."

"I still think it's an important subject for research," said Larry. "Maybe we're just too big for science." He tried a smile.

The newsman shook his head. "Let's not kid ourselves," he said thoughtfully. "After you called I did a little checking. I've got me a little friend who knows a sweet buck-toothed kid who sits on the typewriter in the dean's private office, waiting for it to hatch."

He shook his head and went on with, "All I could find out was that there was no mistake—that word came down from somewhere on high to give your chef d'oeuvre the old crow-hop to the nearest exit."

Larry said, "That's screwy—you mean there was actually someone working against me—or it."

"My grapevine made it sound something like that," said Ned.

"But why, for Chrissakes?" Larry asked. "It doesn't make—"

"Sure it makes sense—under some sets of conditions," Ned interrupted, eyeing his glass balefully. "Unfortunately our most highly regarded institutions are composed of men and women. And men and women do the damnedest things at times."

"You realize what you're saying?" Larry asked, incredulous.

"Sure I realize what I'm saying," was the reply. "Larry, my boy, there's one thing you don't seem to have pounded into that thick layer of corundum that passes for your skull—the only truly sacred cow is what Ida is

broiling a hunk of in the kitchenette. Do I make myself clear?"

"No," replied Larry promptly. "But I'm not giving up."

Ida, who had appeared in the doorway behind a gay ruffled apron, said, "Larry, dear, I hope you're not going to keep on butting your head against a stone wall. You're so gifted—there are so many other branches of science you could tackle."

"Back to your steak, woman!" Ned ordered with gestures.

"All right," she said, turning, "but I still think it's wrong."

As he tipped the bottle Ned remarked, "Women! Either they or we should be quietly strangled at birth. What a war!"

Larry sipped in silence for a moment. Usually he had a good head for liquor but this evening, perhaps because of his emotionally let-down condition, he could feel the alcohol bite into his veins almost from the first swallow. He said, more to get his mind off his capacity than to make a point, "All right—let's suppose somebody did, or does, have some reason for working against me. Why?"

"I honestly don't know, my fine unfeathered friend. But I damned well intend to find out. Remember, when a scientist bases his career on a theory, he will fight for it to the death. Think of the way Isaac Newton fought for the absurd principles of alchemy after giving us his three great laws of nature.

"Charles Fort had a lot in his favor——" he went on.

"Fort!" Larry's interruption was almost a shout. "He was a crank, a charlatan, an idiot."

"Not entirely," Ned replied. "I think his basic theory made sense. He believed that every scientific theory had three stages—one, in which it was derided as fantastic—two, when it was accepted as gospel—three, when it was discarded as absurd and disproven. His idea was that

every such theory was just as screwy while it was accepted as it was in its other two stages."

"But good Lord!" Larry objected. "A scientific theory is only valuable in relation to the knowledge of its period of acceptance. If you accept Fort's ideas on the subject—" He paused, squinted at his friend and said, "What's Fort got to do with my thesis?"

"Just this," the journalist said quietly. "Somebody at the University may have a theory about haemophilia that doesn't fit in with yours. And rather than have his theory disproved he's doing his damnedest to keep you shut up."

Larry snorted. "That doesn't make sense and you know it!" he told his friend. "Ned, I think you know something you haven't told me—and I think I have a right to know what it is."

"If I knew anything I'd tell you, you big cluck," Ned replied.

But Larry, looking at him, wondered. Ida reappeared in the kitchen door, surveyed her guests and said, "Is this a private wake? Come on, kittens, this cat is about to spawn a steak."

2

WHEN LARRY again became a more or less responsible organic whole, he found himself seated uncomfortably in a stiffly damasked armchair that reminded him of an old-fashioned Pullman chair in the unyielding hardness of its upholstery. Around him was the potted-palm and imitation pink marble of a hotel lobby reared at the beginning of the century and not modernized since.

He looked at the thick Manila envelope on his thighs —it held the thesis that had been so thoroughly bounced just the day before—and thought he must be going crazy. In spite of what Ned Tolman had told him about influence against his study, in the hotel-lobby twilight of a hung-over dawn it seemed far more likely that he had simply written a lousy thesis.

Certainly he must have been out of his mind to come to New York, merely on the chance of getting it read at Columbia. He felt a strong pressing desire to leave the lobby of the Queen's Crown and take the first train that would get him back to Boston.

While it was unlikely that he would lose his job at the laboratory, Larry decided he'd better send his boss an explanatory wire.

He got up and crossed to the desk and sent his telegram. The gilt-handed clock above the honeycomb of pigeonholes that contained keys or letters of Queen's

Crown guests informed him it was not yet 9 A.M. There was little point in his delivering his ill-starred thesis before ten.

The smell of hot coffee, toast, bacon, and other breakfast comestibles tickled his jaded nostrils pleasantly and, with his envelope under one arm, Larry crossed the lobby and entered the hotel dining room.

He ordered fruit, kippers, hot muffins, and coffee, was in the process of giving the order to an elderly servitor, when he noticed a gray little man just seating himself at a table against the opposite wall.

The gray little man wore one shoulder slightly higher than the other, which gave him a shrinking appearance—and there was a distinct leftward deviation of his septum. Larry would not have given the man more than casual notice—but he had a distinct recollection of having seen him sink into a seat across the aisle of the milk-train day coach that brought him from Boston.

For a moment he wondered if he were being followed—then dismissed it as another bit of paranoiac thinking on his part. After all, he decided, it was scarcely stretching coincidence that another Bostonian should have boarded the same late train to New York and, like himself, headed for the Queen's Crown.

Over a compote of iced figs and pineapple that looked unappetizing and tasted good, he tried to restore some sense of order to the chaos of the night. In his emotional upset, the third drink at Ida's seemed to have been the keystone, or perhaps the cornerstone, to what followed.

Ida, for once, had forgone her cooking-school trickery and the steak had been first-rate. So had been the whisky that went with it. The evening had degenerated into argument—with Ned insisting Larry continue to force the issue where his thesis was concerned and Ida as strongly insistent upon his abandoning the whole project.

She had said, "Ned, if you keep telling Larry that someone is exerting influence against his thesis, you'll

be giving him delusions of persecution. Besides, even if it's true—which I don't for a moment believe—there's no sense in his knocking himself out against it."

And Ned, for once forsaking his usual florid verbosity, had replied, "But, Ida, sweet—if there *is* some abuse of influence in the University, we want to find out who's exerting it and why."

"So you can get another story for your lousy paper?" Ida, usually serene, had spoken with unusual heat.

And Ned had smiled crookedly and said, "Of course I want a story—hell, that's my business, getting stories. But more than that I'd like to expose a potentially rotten setup."

"And what if the setup isn't rotten—what if you cause trouble for a lot of innocent people?" had been Ida's counter.

"We've still got a potential injustice against Larry here to investigate—and you know it," Ned had replied. "I had a sort of idea you were fond of this acid-stained character."

There had been tears in Ida's light blue eyes and Larry, stirring himself from demi-somnolence over a highball, had sat up and said, "Why don't you both shut up? So they don't like my thesis at the University here—so what? I'll run down to New York and get it read at Columbia. Whittaker's supposed to run a good department there."

This had set off another wave of arguments—with Ned supporting his action and Ida dead against it. Finally her evident lack of confidence in his work had nettled him to a point where he had risen on his hind legs and barked an announcement that he was going to take his thesis and hie him to Manhattan right then.

There were no planes running at that time of night and the midnight Owl had already taken its long load of sleepers out of South Station. After picking up the thesis Larry had been forced to wait a dreary ninety minutes before a milk train pulled out for New York.

He had dozed most of the way down, had not really come to until he was sitting in the lobby of the Queen's Crown, just a few blocks removed from the biology building where he hoped to deliver his opus. All in all, there had been mornings that found him feeling better.

He was also beginning to suffer from an acute case of cold feet. The brashness of his conduct appalled him. Yet there was some quality in his nature that was going to force him to go through with it—he was aware of this, in spite of his self-consciousness.

Without any especial awareness, as he munched his kipper, Larry found himself studying the gray little man at the wall table. The man had an oddly birdlike method of pecking at his food, after breaking it into tiny pieces, that went with his appearance.

At that moment the man looked up and his colorless eyes met Larry's. For an instant they widened in panic—and then returned Larry's speculative gaze with a steady glare that could only have been deliberate, a bespectacled glare that held hostility unmatched in the young biologist's experience.

It was Larry who dropped his gaze first. After all, he told himself, engaging in a contest to outstare a stranger was the height or depth of something or other. He shoveled more herring onto his fork but its flavor on his tongue was metallic and suddenly unpleasant.

For a second or two he could not recall the familiarity of that acrid taste. Then he thought of the hurriedly unconsumed meal he had tried to eat out of cans on a Korean hillside before going into action the first time. The same flavor had interfered then with his eating.

It was the taste of fear.

The malevolence of the glare the little gray man cast in his direction could mean only one thing—that he *had* followed him from Boston. There actually was some sort of conspiracy. He was not a paranoiac.

Thus reassured, Larry paid for his breakfast, tipped

the patinaed waiter and walked out of the dining room. By the lobby clock it was nine forty-two. He went on out to the sidewalk, blinking in the brightness of the morning sun, then walked slowly east toward Morningside Heights and the University.

At the corner of Broadway he paused on impulse and looked behind him. A half block down the hill the little gray man had stopped to look into the window of a shop Larry distinctly remembered as unoccupied.

"Dammit," he said silently. "What in hell is this all about?"

As he turned north toward his destination Larry risked a sidelong glance at his pursuer, was in time to see the little gray man skip quickly to avoid being run down by a speeding bus, bowling its way downtown. Unconsciously he hastened his own steps. He didn't know what the little gray man wanted but had no desire to let his pursuer catch up with him.

When the forefinger tapped his shoulder Larry jumped and all but dropped his thesis. A flat demitough voice said, "Got a match?"

Larry said, "Glub—glurg—sorry, I'm in a hurry."

"Oh no you're not, Mr. Finlay," said the other.

The use of his name by this stranger brought him up short. His interceptor, a stocky rough-hewn character with a scarred stucco-colored face and hair the hue of an Irish setter's coat, was standing squarely athwart his path.

He tried another tack, said, "I don't know how you know my name but I can't stop now. I've got a paper to deliver in there"—with a nod toward the graceless cluster of university buildings to his right—"and there's someone following me."

"That's very interesting," the stranger told him. "Where is he?"

Larry turned and saw the little gray man approaching slowly. He said, "That man in the gray suit," and the

object of his regard, seeing himself discussed, came on at a more rapid pace as if to hurry past Larry and the stranger.

The pale stranger spoke out of the corner of his mouth. He said, "Watch this, Finlay."

He stepped into the path of the little gray man, holding up a stubby muscular hand so that Larry's pursuer rammed into it. Then he said, "I been layin' for you, macushla. I warned you not to come hangin' around my sister any more."

The little gray man's eyes darted from his tormentor's to Larry's, frightened and furious. He bleated, "But I assure you there—"

"No mistake, macushla," said the pale-faced stranger ominously. "If anyone's makin' a mistake it's you, chubby. Now, git!" He gave a sudden shove that sent the little gray man staggering back. Rimless spectacles flew from his nose and the stranger, with one swift stride, brought a heavy shoe down on them, pulverizing them.

The little gray man let out a yelp at the sound of their crushing. He blinked about foolishly with watery eyes. Then, giving a little cry of despair, he turned and stumbled back to the southward, bumping into occasional irate pedestrians in his erratic progress.

"That the eggplant you mean, Mr. Finlay?" asked the mystery man. And, as Larry nodded in bewilderment, "Good, let's take a stroll toward the biology building. That's where you wanted to go, wasn't it?" His aggressively Irish brogue had been dropped completely.

"Listen," said Larry, "I'm perfectly capable of delivering my thesis myself. But I would like to know how you know so much?"

"I don't know much," was the reply. "My boss simply tells me this morning to come up here and wait for you to come along, then to make sure nothing happens to you. He shows me a picture of you."

"What's going to happen to *me*?" Larry wanted to know.

"Nothing, now," said the unknown with frightening assurance. "But you never can tell what might have happened." They were opposite the entrance of the biology building and Larry started to cross the street. But his companion pulled him back.

"Let's wait it out a little," he said. "It's safer."

"I'm beginning to think one of us is nuts," said Larry. He felt vaguely like Alice after her passage through the looking-glass. He wished he could put his finger on some key or incident that would give him a clue to what was going on.

They waited five minutes, then lit fresh cigarettes and waited five more. The situation was, Larry told himself, ridiculous. Why he let himself be detained he couldn't understand. But the pale-faced stranger had known his name, had got rid of the little gray man, spoke with the authority of a top sergeant or a chief petty officer.

Students and instructors passed, moving to and from classes and study rooms in all directions. Their pattern was leisurely, aimless, varied. And then, from the building across the campus street a tall young man came trotting. He wasn't actually running but there was about him an air of desperate haste. He took the steps two at a time and moved rapidly out of sight toward Broadway.

"Let's go," said Larry.

"Just one moment—" said the stranger, resting a steel-finger hand on his forearm. "Things are beginning to happen."

Even as he spoke two men, one of them wearing a gray campus-policeman's uniform, came bursting through the double doors of the building from which the young man had emerged moments before. A hum of excited comment, interspersed with shouts, rose around them. The pale-faced man listened, then hailed a student who

had come running from the building. "What happened?" he asked.

"Some screwball just shot one of the stenographers in the biology dean's office," he said. "Lemme go—I got a class."

The stranger released him, then turned to Larry and said, "I don't think they'll be taking in many theses today."

"I guess not," said Larry. "Damnation!" Something, it seemed to him, was always cropping up to prevent his thesis being read. He walked slowly back with the stranger toward Broadway.

At the sidewalk he turned, intending to return to the hotel and try his luck by telephone and a legitimate appointment. But his interceptor said, "Hey, I'm supposed to take you with me. My boss wants to talk to you."

"I'm sorry," Larry told him, "but if your boss wants me he can call me at the Queen's Crown."

"That," said the stranger, "ain't the way I heard it."

Larry was vaguely conscious of the long black shape of a big car pulled up to the sidewalk behind him. But he had no time to note its make or license number before one of the pale-faced man's fists seemed almost gently to caress the point of his jaw and run along it toward his ear.

Once contact was made between fist and jaw he was in no condition to take note of anything.

3

HE WAS lying in bed. Without opening his eyes Larry could tell, from the feel of the sheets against his skin, that he had simply torn off his clothes and turned in raw. Mrs. Bemis must have come up with a set of uncommonly soft sheets and pillowslip, he thought.

Luxuriating in unaccustomed comfort, he stirred slowly, keeping his lids down. His body might appreciate such luxury but his head didn't. He had been a fool to take so much whisky at Ida's—and from the ache in his jaw he decided he must have fallen down somewhere and banged himself up properly.

And there had been the dream—so realistic in every detail. Incident after incident came flooding back—the argument at Ida's, the decision to go to New York, the long dreary train ride, breakfast in the Queen's Crown, the little gray man, the rough stranger with the Irish-setter hair, the shooting in the biology building, the . . .

Strange, he decided, how melodramatic the mind could get under the stimulus of alcohol and emotional pressure. He was going to open his eyes and find himself looking at the same set of spidery cracks upon the ceiling of his room in Mrs. Bemis' Fenway lodging house.

He decided he might as well get it over with—there were going to be apologies to make to Ida and Ned and a logical course of action regarding his own future to

consider. Slowly he let his lids drift upward—and found himself gazing at a chaste white plaster ceiling whose center was ornamented by an expensive-looking floral oval in high relief.

He sat up, supporting himself stiffly on the heels of both hands. He said, "Jesus!" and looked around in bewilderment.

He was in a vast Napoleonic roll-bed of dark mahogany, decorated with the gilt bees of the First Empire. It looked, to his astonished eyes, large enough to sleep an entire platoon of the Imperial Guard, or a couple of squads of concubines. No wonder the sheets had felt soft against his skin—they were of pale purple satin.

On the walls, which were also of satin, in alternate vertical stripes of pale gold and imperial purple, were a set of charmingly lascivious mezzotints, portraying latter-day nymphs and shepherds rollicking amorously in the unmorality of the Age of Reason. Through the single bowed window Larry could see only the foliage of a tree, masking fragmentarily what looked like the gray stone façade of a Norman château.

He stepped out of bed onto a soft carpet of rose-gray that extended from dado to dado, looked at himself anxiously in a magnificent seven-foot Venetian mirror that adorned much of the opposite wall. He opened a door, found himself peering into a closet that would have served as a full room in a modern apartment. It was empty.

Moving to the right, he tried another door, which he judged to be a way out. The gilt knob turned easily in his hand but the door itself refused to open. It was locked from the outside. With panic beginning to stir inside him, Larry turned left and tried the one other door beyond the huge closet. It opened and he found himself staring into a thoroughly twentieth-century bathroom.

He mopped a suddenly beaded forehead with the inside of an elbow. For a moment he had had an uncanny feeling that he might actually have been transported back through time to the Napoleonic era. He went to the bowed window, peered around heavy damask drapes, saw that the tree was one of a row rising from the sidewalk of a Manhattan cross street, that the Norman façade across the way was strictly pseudo—probably reared at the behest of some boomtime bucket-shop operator. Tentatively he tried to open the window. It refused to budge.

He was still standing there, trying in vain to puzzle things out, when a soft grating sound behind him caused him to spin around. The door opened and a tall long-limbed dark girl, almost Spanish in her brunette vividness, entered. Over one of her arms was a dressing gown, in one hand a newspaper, in the other a lighted cigarette.

Too startled to dive for the modesty of the satin sheets, Larry stood, naked and dumb, while she tossed him the robe. He was very much aware of her amused scrutiny as he struggled into it and managed to belt it around his middle. It was a magnificent robe of purple and gold and big enough, he decided, to hold four of him.

He said, "Where in hell are my clothes?"

The tall dark girl regarded him with a sort of Gioconda smile. She said, with a faint shrug, "Don't ask me, Mr. Finlay. I guess you'll have to get along with the robe for a while. Unless you'd prefer to parade the beautiful pagan body."

"Oh, shut up!" he told her rudely. Sore jaw, befuddlement, and all, he was hardly in a mood for badinage. He added, "Who are you?"

"I'm Dolores," she replied with faint mockery. "But you may call me Miss Green if you'd rather."

"Cut it out—please!" he begged, suppressing an im-

pulse—was it to strangle her? Then, "I've got to get out of here. Where am I?"

"At least you didn't ask that old chestnut first," said Dolores Green gravely. She sat down on the edge of the bed, pulled a silver cigarette case from a pocket of her flared dark tweed skirt, offered him one. When it was lighted she told him, "You're occupying the third floor front of seven and a half East Seventy-fifth Street, Manhattan. You were brought in here yesterday morning at ten thirty-three and have been asleep ever since. Will that do?"

He regarded her levelly for a moment, then said, "You know it won't do. Why have I been asleep so long? Was I doped?"

"You might call it that," she told him with unconcern. She was, he realized, a remarkably handsome young woman. Her skin glowed almost nacreously with health, her eyes were alert with intelligence.

But he thought of Ida and his purpose in coming to Manhattan and steeled himself against such wayward normality. He said in what he hoped was a quiet controlled voice, "I suppose you know you're being a party to a kidnaping, Miss Green—that when I get out of here, if I do get out of here, I shall bring charges against you and everyone connected with this establishment that will mean prison for all of you. If you help me I might exclude you from my accusation. Are you going to be nice or not, under those circumstances?"

Her long slim fingers moved to the throat of her blouse. With utter guilelessness she said, "Do you want me to go to bed with you now or would you rather wait until after Mr. Cornaman has talked to you?"

He rumpled his short hair despairingly, said, "There was a while, just now, when I thought *I* was crazy." He left it at that.

"And now you think I am?" the girl countered, her smile of mockery lurking just behind the gravity of her

well-cut features. "What am I supposed to do when a good-looking young man asks me to be nice to him in a bedroom?"

The odd and disturbing thought lingered within him that, if he went along with the joke, she would not hesitate to perform the function she had just hinted at. What made it disturbing was the increasingly apparent beauty of Dolores Green.

He forced himself to meet her dark eyes full on and said, "I suppose yours is the way to a long and happy life but just now I want your help in getting the hell out of here. Time for play later maybe."

A dark eyebrow flickered upward a fraction of an inch, already full lips acquired the added fullness of a pout. The dark eyes gazing directly into Larry's seemed to grow mysteriously, and to fill the room. A low, sexy laugh seemed to float in the air, a sultry contralto voice followed it with, "There's only one time for play—ever. The time is now."

Soft hands, supple yet unexpectedly strong, removed the dressing gown, soft lips clung to his as a heavy, sensual brunette perfume enveloped them both in its aura. He knew he should struggle, but was humiliatingly weak, weak as a kitten or a baby. Her darting tongue took its will of his mouth, of his chest, of his stomach as she forced him back, nude and helpless, on the bed.

He became vaguely aware that she was doing something to herself, to her clothing. For a momently, he had a glimpse of her long, satin-ivory white, alluring torso as she pulled her dress over her head and flung it carelessly to the carpet.

He wanted to strike, but he could not. As his normal strength returned, once more the eyes, the great dark eyes, filled the universe, once more soft, sexy laughter sounded in his ears, this time as the girl's nude body dropped artfully upon his own. He tried to fight, and then he no longer could or wanted to fight. And then,

new humiliation gripped him, as he realized he was not even going to be able to satisfy her.

"Damn!" she exclaimed. "You must be a moral creature to have built up such a resistance." She rose, began to dress, added, "How disappointing. Perhaps you'll feel more—masculine—after you've had breakfast. But Mr. Cornaman wants you to look at this before you make up your mind to do anything rash." She handed him the paper.

Like every other young man of normal ambition Larry had dreamed at times of seeing his name in headlines. But under the circumstances the experienec was shocking rather than pleasant. He read:

COLUMBIA GIRL-KILLER IDENTIFIED
AS BOSTON BIOLOGIST
POLICE SEEK LAWRENCE FINLAY—
APPARENTLY MADDENED BY REJECTION OF D.SC.
THESIS

Horrified, he forced himself to go on reading. A Miss Arlene Crady, it appeared, one of the battery of secretary-stenographers employed by the Columbia Department of Biology, had been shot dead while sitting at her desk, minding her business, yesterday morning. The killer, described as witnessed in flight by a number of bystanders, was tall, medium-blond, definitely handsome.

Larry recalled the young man he and his kidnaper had seen emerge from the biology building just before the hue and cry began. Surely that was the murderer. He wondered how the devil they had happened to pick on himself as the killer. He read on and found out.

On the slain girl's desk had been found a thesis entitled *A New Approach to the Problem of Haemophilia* by one Lawrence Finlay. From the address on the cover they had quickly tracked Larry to Boston, had learned

of the summary rejection of the thesis by the authorities there. A few excerpts followed.

The stirrings of fear he had felt when the little gray man gave him the malevolent look in the hotel dining room and when he had so lately awakened to believe himself cast back a century and a half in time were as nothing to the panic and horror which gripped him as he stared at the newsprint before him.

Blood does not truly flow, as physicians would have us believe—except when forced by pressure through an open cut or wound it remains static, much like the deep ocean water. Corpuscles flow and float through it like sticks of wood tossed on the water's surface, impelled by current rather than flow. This is a fact all science has failed to grasp and its importance is immeasurable.

He thought he must be going crazy. Certainly whoever had written such tripe must be crazy—if the author believed in his words. Another excerpt caught his eye.

The blood of women who produce haemophiliacs is not actually blood at all as we know it—it is more like the ichor of the ancient gods and, in conjunction with normal blood, creates a weaker fluid . . .

He threw the paper away in disgust. Never in his wildest moments had he entertained such insane theories. He looked across the room at Dolores Green, who had seated herself on an Empire chair and was smoking a fresh cigarette.

She said, "Kind of woolly reading, isn't it, Mr. Finlay?"

He asked with icy anger, "Where is my real thesis? What's happened to it?"

A gleam of curiosity entered her dark eyes, a gleam

that was quickly veiled. She said, "Why, isn't this what you wrote?"

"You know damned well it isn't," he retorted, his anger growing.

She merely shrugged, as if the matter were unimportant, and told him, "How should I know? I only work here. By the way"—she paused to look at a bracelet watch on one slim wrist—"I'm supposed to deliver you downstairs for breakfast in exactly two minutes."

"Why—will it take that long to poison the eggs?" he asked.

She rose with languid grace, made a moue, said, "Really—and here we are, trying to protect you from the police and everything. I think you're behaving very badly."

"Quite probably," he replied, his anger unabated, "but what I'd like to know is who rigged things in the first place so the police are after me." He paused, rearranged his outsize robe, added grimly, "If there's anyone who can answer my questions here, lead me to him."

"Come along then," she said. At the door she flashed a look at him over her shoulder and despite the darkness of the corridor outside he got a definite impression she was laughing at him.

As they proceeded to an ornate gilded elevator cage Larry caught a glimpse or two of other rooms, all of them magnificently and expensively furnished and decorated. If he really was a prisoner, he decided, he had certainly landed in a plush jail. Riding down in the elevator he became suddenly conscious of the dark girl's femininity, of the deep slow rise of her bosom, of the smooth curve of her cheek, of the rich musky perfume within which she stood.

He felt suddenly utterly silly in the huge robe—and vulnerable.

Two stories down the elevator stopped. With a sinuous motion the dark girl opened the grille, led him across

a wide dark hall, furnished like the foyer of a European palace, to a lofty oval chamber with an oval white-clothed table beneath an immense crystal chandelier. However, the only light came from silver-mounted electric candles in twin fixtures along the blue and silver brocaded wall.

The tablecloth was topped by an immense double-decked lazy Susan, upon which silver chafing dishes and bowls and egg-shaped silver plate and platter covers picked up gleaming highlights. To the left as he was ushered in, Larry saw a man sitting in solemn state.

"This is Mr. Finlay," said the dark girl. She paused beside Larry in the doorway, vanished at the man's nod of dismissal.

"Come in and sit down—I have a place set for you," said the solitary breakfaster, pointing a silver butter knife at a table service arranged to his left. "Pardon my not rising—but in my case the ritual is a bit of a problem."

His voice was a deep ringing basso profundo, his accent and articulation impeccable, his reason for not rising self-evident. Larry's host was evidently the man for whom the outsize dressing gown had been cut and tailored. He must, Larry decided, weigh something upwards of three hundred pounds.

Hesitantly Larry seated himself, staring in awe at the vast mountain of food with which the fat man's plate was heaped. His host beamed at him and said, "I regret that we have been forced to use methods which may have struck you as rude to bring you safely here, Mr. Finlay—but when I explain I feel certain you'll understand why they were necessary. You see, we had very little time to plan, much less in which to operate. See anything you like? There are kidneys stewed in madeira —just beyond are *huevos rancheros*—if you'll spin the table, under that large cover you'll find breast of pheasant and Canadian bacon. The hashed-browned potatoes are

to your left." He accompanied this sightseeing tour with further directional jabs of his knife.

Larry studied his smiling host for a long moment. He felt as if he were being engulfed in a sea of fantasy. What had happened to him in slightly less than forty hours was a succession of events that obviously should happen to no one. He ran a tongue over suddenly dry lips and said, "Who the hell are you anyway?"

The fat man, who had been wiping his mouth, dropped his napkin to the overhung ledge of his lap. He said, eyebrows high on his forehead, "Oh, dear! Didn't Dolores tell you? I'm Mayne Cornaman."

The syllables started a succession of memory gongs ringing in Larry's somewhat fevered head. He muttered, "Miss Green did say something about a Mr. Cornaman wanting to see me but I'm afraid I didn't nail it down." Then, blurting, "But I had an idea you were——"

The fat man laughed, a deep rumbling chuckle that reminded Larry inevitably of the sounds of Hendrik Hudson's crewmen, bowling in the Catskills, whose kegling had assailed poor Rip van Winkle. He said, when his mirth had subsided, "A lot of people think I'm dead—I want them to think so. They wouldn't like what they saw if they saw me, so I try not to disappoint them."

Larry helped himself frugally from one of the covered casseroles in front of him, despite his hunger not noticing what he took. Mayne Cornaman! This was almost too much. Yet studying the mounds of flesh, peering around and beneath them, Larry was able to discern the aquiline nose, the oddly pointed jaw, the distinctive hairline of the man who had, for a time between world wars, been acclaimed the most brilliant scientific mind in America. In those days, however, Cornaman had sported a Professor Challenger beard.

He was looking at the bloated wreckage of a man who had unerringly, from the breadth of his learning

and the at times illogical accuracy of his intuitive genius, put the atom smashers on the trail. The man who had formulated a whole new theory of the quantum relationship between nuclear particles that had yet to be disproved. The man who had been refused a Nobel prize at twenty-eight solely because of his youth.

"There's too much of me to be a ghost," Cornaman told him drily, "so you don't have to look at me as if I were a spook."

Larry swallowed a mouthful without registering its taste, then gathered himself and said, "Mr. Cornaman, I don't know why you had me brought here. I don't even know if I'm sane. Apparently my poor thesis on haemophilia is the subject of some sort of a conspiracy. Would you mind telling me what it's all about?"

"Don't worry, young man," replied the erstwhile genius. "You are perfectly sane. As to your being the victim of a conspiracy because of your thesis, let's say rather that your thesis has threatened to expose a conspiracy—a conspiracy that has lasted some three thousand years."

"Now I know I'm crazy," muttered Larry, reaching for a glass of water. "By the way, what's happened to my thesis?"

"At the moment it's in my study," replied the fat man. "I have just finished reading it. I consider it to be the most important piece of theoretical scientific work since my own D.Sc. thesis. I congratulate you. But it can wait until we are through eating."

With this he helped himself to four ranch-style eggs, a hillock of potatoes, and a half-dozen more kidneys. While Larry had been wondering the fat man had emptied his plate.

4

WATCHING MAYNE CORNAMAN eat was an awesome process. Deliberately he finished his second plate, then swung the lazy Susan around and helped himself to a third heaping portion—this time of sliced pheasant and Canadian bacon. He culled four tablespoonfuls of buttered mushrooms from over a chafing dish flame, added three pieces of toast from a napkin-covered silver dish, pausing only to sip from an immense goblet at his right elbow.

He said, "If you'd care for champagne . . ."

Larry, basically a bacon-and-eggs man, gulped and shook his head. He wondered why any man, especially one with the angel-high reputation of his host, should deliberately gluttonize himself to this incredible degree. Had he not gone more than twenty-four hours without food the younger man would scarcely have been able to eat a thing. As it was he managed to partake sparingly of some kidneys and toast and a piece or two of Canadian bacon from the pheasant dish. The coffee he poured himself from a Silex on the Susan was excellent.

When at last he had finished, the fat man used a finger-bowl with bathetic daintiness, mopped his lips with his napkin, and pushed back his chair from the still-groaning board. He said, "Now, if you will follow me, young man . . . I believe we have topics to discuss."

"I believe so," said Larry, reduced to a near-shambling numbness by the rapid succession of recent fantastic events.

He followed his host from the dining room, across the hall into a study shaped like half an egg and lined with books from floor to ceiling. The fat man, who by some miracle of self-control had not waddled when he walked, lowered himself into an outsize chair behind an exquisite Empire desk, motioned Larry into a chair opposite. He folded thick fingers, studied the younger man with an odd air of Buddhistic detachment, his head cocked slightly on one side.

"Just a moment," he said, holding up a hand as Larry opened his mouth to speak. "First"—he picked a paper cutter from the gold-tooled leather top of the desk, plunged its tip into a squat bowl of flowers at his elbow. After fishing out a small odd-looking device, he used the dull edge of the paper cutter to loosen a screw. Then he returned the gadget to the flowers, cutter to the desk.

"Dolores," he said by way of explanation. "She likes to spy on my private conversations. This time I'd rather she didn't. That item I just unraveled is a bug—a microphone."

Larry frowned his bewilderment. "But if she's some sort of spy," he offered, "why don't you get rid of her?"

"Too good-looking," came the reply promptly, followed by the thunderous chuckle. "Besides, if I got rid of her they'd simply put somebody else in her place—and that somebody might not be as attractive. Logical, isn't it?"

Larry was tempted to say, "Sure, for a lunatic." But he managed to keep his mouth shut.

Mayne Cornaman chuckled again, said, "I have a fair idea of what you're thinking, young man. No, I'm not crazy. But we're wasting time. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"There is," Larry replied promptly, having had time

to marshal what passed for his thoughts at the moment. "First, I'd like my clothes back. Second, I'd like to know what in hell this is all about. Third, I'd like my thesis if I may."

"We'll take care of the thesis first, if you don't mind," said the fat man. He swung his swivel chair about until he was facing the wall with his back to Larry. For a long moment he sat perfectly still as far as Larry could tell. Then, without warning, a wall panel slid aside, revealing the door of a steel safe behind it. After another few seconds of immobility the door opened and, grunting, Mayne Cornaman half rose and extended himself to pull out the missing thesis.

"Do you mind telling me how you did that, Mr. Cornaman?" Larry asked, his more momentous worries forgotten for the moment.

"Not at all," replied the scientist, placing the thesis on the desk. "I'm quite proud of that little gadget. It opens to an encephalic key. Under certain self-induced mental stimuli my brain waves react in a certain pattern. The locks are set to respond to my reaction to two of these stimuli when I am within a distance of five feet of them."

"Good God!" exclaimed the younger man. He recalled a toy of his youth—a dog kennel from which the black-and-white tin dog would emerge when anyone called, "Fido!" close to the kennel door. Or was the name "Rover?" He wasn't sure but it was the same principle, immensely developed and refined.

"A gadget—a gizmo," said the fat scientist casually. "I have been able to support myself and this establishment quite comfortably by taking out patents on a number of similar bits of trickery."

Casual or not, trickery or not, Larry felt himself overwhelmed at this practical application of first-class inventive scientific genius. He felt a twinge of jealousy at Mayne Cornaman's talent, at the freedom it had given

him from the worldly cares that have stifled so many lesser talents. Then he considered the incredible grossness of the scientist and was jealous no longer. The fat man was imprisoned in the padded barriers of his own flesh.

Yet there had been little of the gourmand in the manner of his host's approach to his appalling breakfast. Rather, it had seemed to Larry at the time as if Cornaman were driving himself to eat against his will and appetite. Surely such a man was not one to let himself go so to pot physically merely to indulge overfondness for food.

The scientist, who had been watching him intently, seemed to divine the tenor of Larry's thoughts. He said with a faintly rueful expression, "Perhaps you realize the fact that my weight is neither a matter of glandular trouble nor voluntary gourmandizing. I eat as I do, I look as I do, because I consider it important to stay alive."

"I don't quite understand," said Larry, feeling ridiculous in his too-big dressing gown. "Has it anything to do with me?"

"I'm afraid so," was the reply. "But first I'll have to tell you why I live as I do, why I overeat as I do. You may or may not remember—but twenty years ago I was right at the top of the heap."

"I remember," said Larry. "You were a sort of idol of mine."

"Me and Babe Ruth, probably," was the fat man's reply. He smiled faintly, went on with, "I was right in the forefront of the investigations and discoveries that ultimately led us to the atomic bomb—not that any of us believed our discoveries would be put to such a use."

He paused, added, "And then I stumbled on something that seemed to me a lot more important to the human race and its survival than anything we could hope to accomplish through nuclear research. You see, I have

the misfortune in this age of specialization of being a person incapable of specialization. Like the late Stephen Leacock's knight, I like to mount my horse and charge off in all directions. Some of them have led me into curious corners indeed."

"Please go on, sir," said Larry when his host paused again.

"Hooked are you? Good!" said Cornaman with his faint smile. "Well, I'll try to be brief. I got interested in the possibility of parthenogenesis. I know laboratories are producing young rabbits and guinea pigs without the aid of male sperm these days but I was way ahead of the game. In 1936 I actually produced two litters of kittens, three of puppies, and one Shetland pony colt without any fathers being on the premises."

"I'll be damned!" said Larry almost reverently.

Cocking his head the fat man said, "You've heard nothing yet. I was keeping my experiments more or less secret—the country was still only ten years away from the Scopes trial at that time and anything smelling of virgin births was bound to kick up a hell of a fuss if the newspapers ever got hold of it.

"But there were leaks, of course—and from then on I found myself in trouble." Cornaman lit a cigarette from a silver box on his desk with a silver lighter, pushed it toward Larry, who accepted a smoke gratefully. His host resumed with, "I began to get pushed around. One by one my other lines of research were blocked. I felt as if I were being forced into parthenogenetics and nothing else.

"Well, I didn't like it. I had my process all but ready to try on human guinea pigs but I was damned if I wanted to be pushed. Besides, I was curious about who was doing the pushing. So I did a little digging of my own. I knew there had to be a hell of a lot of influence to work successfully against *me*. I had a lot of my own in those days."

"I should think so," murmured Larry, his own problems forgotten.

"Well, I ran one trail to earth. Believe it or not it was an organization of women. At the time I thought it was a lobby left over from suffragette days that was looking for a new reason for being. I found out ultimately it was a lot more than that—and a lot more elusive. While I was investigating I stopped all my experiments.

"The opposition didn't like it. They sent some thugs to beat me up but I managed to run away from them—in those days I still could run. The next day a young lady called on me—no mistake, she was a lady-plus—and suggested I get along with my work unless I wanted a repetition of such unpleasantness in my very near future.

"There was also a suggestion that if I went to the police I'd find myself locked up in a loony bin before I knew it." His laugh was short and sharp as thunder immediately overhead. "I knew they'd have little trouble making that stick. Plenty of people thought I was crazy already.

"I did some checking around and found myself fairly stymied. Lord—you have no idea how influential women can get, especially in a time of peace and depression. It scared hell out of me. So I did what you'd have done—I stalled along with my experiment while I was actually finding out something about my enemies.

"Luckily, by some freak of chance, I recognized the young lady who had called on me in spite of the alias she used—I'd seen her picture in a society rotogravure section just the Sunday before, showing a prize-winning dog at Westminster Kennels. I looked her up, also the women I learned were her closest friends."

He paused impressively, then added, "I discovered that all of them came from lines of strong feminine descent on at least one side. In checking newsclips I found that my caller's father, who had been what editors used to

like to call a 'well-known clubman and man about town,' was also a bleeder, a haemophiliac. I found haemophilia or at least some equivalent weakness in the masculine lines of all of them."

"For Pete's sake!" Larry exclaimed softly. He was all attention now. "You're bearing out the reverse corollary of my thesis."

"Or your thesis is bearing out the reverse side of my theory," countered the fat man. "Take your pick. While I didn't tie haemophilia in as conclusively as you did I was on the right track—and I scarcely needed additional proof from my angle."

"But what does it mean?" asked Larry, shaking his head. "Why should any group of men or women be so anxious for parthenogenesis or so set against my thesis being read?"

"Because they daren't risk exposure at this late date," the fat man informed him. "These are not ordinary women. They have as much contempt for their unrelated sisters as they have for men. They want parthenogenesis in order to be free of men."

Larry frowned, said slowly, "But in time, surely, that means elimination of masculine characteristics entirely from the species."

"Probably a plus point from these women's angle," replied the scientist. "Surely you can apply some of the characteristics you have noted as prevalent in the type."

Larry rested a forearm on the front of the desk and thought. There had been a number of definite characteristics, some physical, some physiological. For one thing, haemophilia carriers tended to be women of a driving dominant type, which he had termed the "Empress Type" in his thesis—their drive intensified by their ability, with or without great native beauty, to make themselves attractive to men.

They were strongly erotic, with a tendency toward lesbianism, basically heterosexual. Physically, in most

cases, they tended toward unusual length of limb, coupled to longevity and extranormal strength and speed of reflex. During the last century, a number of mediums and other sorts of spiritualists had been haemophilia carriers. All of them seemed to be strong on so-called intuition and psychic hunches.

Larry mentioned these points to the fat man, who nodded. "You were shrewd on the psychic business," he said. "I have a great deal of material on that topic. Lesbianism too—basically these women are believers in a world of one sex. Amazons if you will."

"But why so violent about exposure?" Larry asked.

"Because, young man, they stand a better chance now of achieving success than at any time since their remote ancestresses lost dominance over humanity when the worship of the Moon Goddess succumbed to the masculine Sun worship."

Larry looked at his host with disbelief—but Cornaman merely smiled and shook his head and said, "No, I'm not crazy. I have seen a few of their records, carefully kept hidden from generation to generation since the Dionysian rites were subverted to a festival dominated by men instead of women, since the Delphic Oracle was looted and destroyed. Ancient legend and modern history and science are being fitted together like the two halves of a broken coin."

"To what purpose?" asked Larry somewhat wearily.

"I should think the purpose is obvious," was the retort. "For the first time in history man actually has managed to manufacture weapons sufficiently deadly for total destruction.

"I do not think it is to the interest of our friends to have the world destroyed," the scientist went on. "Certainly, however, it *is* to their interest to have it roughed up a little—say, four fifths of the population destroyed and civilization reduced even more drastically—as long as they are equipped to ride out the storm."

Larry frowned, still larded with disbelief. He said, "Well, how do they propose to sit out an atomic attack, sir?"

"They could probably do that—some of them," replied the fat man. "However, it is my belief they do not intend to permit the development of atomic warfare on any large scale. You may have noticed the apparent unreasoning screams from the Kremlin of late about germ warfare. I believe our friends behind the Curtain have a clue of their own. Well, couple this with the superb resistance to disease of these women of what I call the Amazon strain and make four."

The younger man considered it. Taken as a hypothesis there was nothing especially illogical about the theory. Certainly the women whose records he had studied showed a remarkable resistance to plagues and all other forms of disease, just as their sons were peculiarly susceptible to everything from whooping cough to syphilis.

However, fitted into the larger picture Mayne Cornaman proposed, it failed to make the larger picture any the more credible. He said so, added, "I might be able to accept part of it—but that business about the Moon Goddess. I'm afraid I simply can't credit it, sir."

The fat man sighed but regarded him tolerantly. He said, "Very well, we'll let the background rest for the time being. But are you still convinced there is no conspiracy of widespread efficiency? How do you suppose they were able to find out about your thesis? How were they able to prevent it from being read in Boston? How were they able to set up the neat frame for you at Columbia yesterday morning? It would have worked to perfection if I hadn't sent Dan Bright to intercept you and hold you until that other poor devil walked in."

"It seems to me," said Larry thoughtfully, "that a man like yourself is in a much better position to arrange all

these things you mention than some mysterious organization of women. How do I know you aren't behind all of it, for some purpose you have not yet revealed?"

As the words crossed his lips Larry cursed himself for a fool. He might very conceivably have signed his own death warrant by speaking them. But the fat man merely put back his four chins and emitted a bellow of sheer delight. When at length it subsided, he looked at Larry with tears in his eyes and said, "There's just one good reason for not accepting your theory, Larry—I didn't do any of it."

"But you did kidnap me and bring me here and keep me unconscious," Larry said quietly. "How did you know about me and why did you do these things?"

"You're a tough one, no mistake," the fat man said benignly. "I heard about you from a source I don't intend to reveal—suffice it to say for now that there are people who do believe in the danger and who work night and day to subvert and check it. We have a spy or two in the enemy's camp, just as they have spies in ours. In neither case are these agents necessarily of a single sex. Think, Larry—how did you happen to select the subject for research in the first place?"

5

LARRY THOUGHT. Keeping in mind what Mayne Cornaman had told him about the supposed conspirators using men as well as women, he recalled how Ned Tolman had picked him up in Boston, how Ned had helped to channel his quarter-baked ideas on haemophilia along the lines that had led to his thesis. He recalled the apparent mystery of the newsman's giving up a promising career in New York merely to sit in a Boston city room.

He considered Ida, the one other person who had been close to him during the past two years. Certainly she was scarcely suspect. It was Ida who had sought all along to have him tackle some other subject, who had tried to get him to give up on his thesis after the summary rejection two days before. She hardly fitted in.

Then he found a flaw in his reasoning. He said, "If what you suggest is true, why should one of these women's agents have tried to egg me on into writing the thesis, if it is as potentially damaging to their cause as you claim?"

The fat man regarded Larry with a flicker of appreciation in his deep-set eyes. Then he replied, "There could be a number of reasons. Perhaps they hoped to learn something about themselves from your research—or perhaps it never occurred to them you might stumble on the facts that you did. I don't pretend to know all the ways

in which they are working. Or perhaps they were trying to block you all along. At the moment I'm not sure. All I know is that we were tipped off about your rebuff, got word of your plan to come down here, also that some sort of summary action was planned."

For the first time, realization of the fate he had thus far narrowly escaped sank into Larry's consciousness. He could almost feel the blood drain from his face. He said, a trifle unevenly, "You mean they actually planned to have me framed for murder—that they'd kill one of their own agents to bring this about."

"Yes—and no," was the fat man's rumbling reply. "They planned to frame you neatly enough—but you would never have burned. The faked thesis was designed to have you locked up in a loony bin. As to killing one of their own agents, I doubt it. The Grady girl had probably no idea of their existence."

"Then how did they set it up?" Larry inquired anxiously.

Cornaman gestured away the objection. He said, "In any number of ways. As you yourself noted, these women are above normal on *psi* qualities. Some of them are highly gifted hypnotically."

"But how could they get anyone to murder against his will?"

Cornaman leaned forward, resting his hands palm down on the leather desk-top, said, "It's a safe bet neither you nor the other young man fired the shot. We know *you* didn't and it is most unlikely the other young man could be induced to murder. I'd surmise both he and his supposed victim were hypnotized while a third party fired the shot. I'd also surmise the young man hasn't the slightest idea of what really did happen."

Larry recalled the bewildered expression on the tall young man's face when he emerged from the building the morning before. He nodded and said, "It seems awfully involved somehow."

"Given special talents," the fat man said, "what looks involved to us may seem remarkably simple. But back to my own story for a bit. The ladies kept hemming me in. They made themselves known in lots of most unmerry little ways. Once, when I was being driven to make a talk to a group of scientists, my lady chauffeur conveniently got us 'lost' in an isolated mountain area. I was informed I'd be left to starve unless I consented to further parthenogenetic experiments—with human beings, of course. After two days I gave in."

"Good Lord, sir!" said Larry. He had decided, for the time being, to take the entire fantastic saga as gospel. Later, when he had time to think things over, he could make up his own mind.

"Gives you a turn, doesn't it?" said Cornaman, grinning. "You can imagine what it gave me, especially when they produced a poor young creature, obviously under some sort of influence, as a guinea pig. A perfectly healthy specimen but with the mind of a zombie."

He rubbed a plump hand across his mouth and chin, went on with, "You know something about current experiments with laboratory beasts—a quick freeze of the Fallopian tubes at the moment of ovulation? I had conducted my previous tests along the same lines—with certain refinements. But I was by no means anxious to do anything so illegal to a member of my own race."

"What *did* you do?" asked Larry, appalled by the problem.

Mayne Cornaman grinned satyrically, told him, "Oh, I put her through a lot of paces—but the method I used to make her pregnant was a lot less parthenogenetic than my captors suspected. Once the young lady was definitely pregnant I never saw her or her offspring."

"I'll be damned!" said Larry, appalled as much by the fat man's ruthlessness as by the efforts of the female conspirators. "You don't even know the child was born?"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure of that, young man," was the

reply. "My captors were quite enthusiastic—for a while after that. Then they became more pressing than ever. They wanted the process."

At the self-satisfied expression which flitted across the vast moon countenance of the scientist, Larry was forced to smile. Truly, there were Jovian qualities to the jest, despite its inhuman grimness. He said, "How did you handle them then?"

"I ate," said Cornaman quietly as his voice permitted. "I ate and kept on eating. I've been eating ever since."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Larry hesitantly.

"Consider my position," Cornaman offered. "They thought I had the secret—and for all they know I may have, may have it still. But I didn't have it ready for them nor did I intend to give it to them. But, convinced I had it, they were willing to go to any lengths to get it from me.

"I knew I didn't have the peculiar type of fortitude that would enable me to stand up under bodily torture—any man who does stand up under it is a fool in my not so humble opinion. As it happens, a childhood bout with scarlet fever has left me with a slight heart murmur. It's nothing dangerous—at least not for a good many years to come—but it makes a hell of a scary show on a cardiograph.

"There was only one thing to do—get myself and keep myself in such condition they wouldn't dare subject me to physical torture. I can take any mental or psychological pressure they put on me." A gesture of contempt accompanied this statement. "So I decided to make myself so fat and keep myself so fat that they wouldn't dare subject me to bodily stress. I could think of only one way to do this without exposing myself to more discomfort than I wished. I ate."

Recalling the deliberation and determination with which Cornaman had attacked his monstrous breakfast, Larry nodded. Granted the truth of the circumstances, it

was escape of truly masterful cunning—worthy even of a mind like Mayne Cornaman's.

The scientist chuckled, added, "Result—once I had attained sufficient poundage—stalemate. They have kept me surrounded by agents, like Dolores, and I have gone ahead with my investigation of their activities. Oddly enough, I've come to enjoy being fat."

He paused and, when Larry said nothing, added, "There is something about being immensely fat that gives a man power over women. I doubt that they make such a fetish about masculine thinness because of the insurance tables. Longer life in their thin mates may be a factor, and women do like Apollo—but Hephaestus, Vulcan if you will, fascinates them the more. There is a basic truth concealed in the 'Beauty and the Beast' legend.

"A fat man to them is a challenge—as much so as a handsome male who ignores their wiles. The desire they feel should be directed toward themselves has been diverted to other channels. They deplore it, they resent it—but above all they yearn to capture it. Somewhat to my amazement I have learned that a fat man need not be a eunuch."

Fascinated, Larry nodded again. Truly here was a creature culled direct from the pages of Rabelais. He said, "What have you been able to learn about this so-called conspiracy of Amazons?"

"A great deal in some ways—not enough in others," was the answer. "I know much of their history and methods—virtually nothing of their organization and leadership."

"Granting their existence," said Larry, "how have they managed to pass down the special knowledge they require? And considering that sometimes they bear only daughters or that granddaughters and grandmothers must at times be separated by death or distance, how have they kept going?"

Cornaman nodded, accepting the validity of both

questions. He said, "Their knowledge is passed down like all other knowledge—by teaching. Here and there, where the strain is prevalent, you will find one of them teaching dancing or theater or a foreign language. Usually such teachers have pet pupils and special small classes of such pets. In these the knowledge and history is passed along.

"As to recognition, all trained members of the conspiracy have signs they are able to recognize—signs the outsider would seldom notice or understand if he did. Remember, they are strong on the *psi* qualities. The movement of some small object without apparent volition, the picking of successive winners at a race track, a telepathic greeting—these or others amount to the fraternity grip."

Larry digested this. Then he said, "But if these women have such super powers and are so well organized, how is it they haven't achieved their aim of running things here before now?"

Cornaman closed his eyes and for a moment Larry thought that the fat man had fallen asleep. Then he opened them and said, "Consider the problems they have faced since the growth of primitive male-dominated civilization put the mother goddess out of business in favor of Zeus, Odin, and the like.

"Masculine dominance must be subverted either through male weakness or technical compensations before woman can dominate. Women never had a chance in the basically homosexual male culture of Greece. In Rome, further from Asiatic influences, they nearly succeeded when the aristocracy became effete. The barbarian hordes came just in time.

"Essentially, it seems, the people of Earth are still too masculine and barbarous for domination through male weakness," Cornaman went on. "These daughters of the Amazons have striven desperately to develop a civilization in which they could rule. Something has always gone

wrong. At times, as in the case of ancient China, they have had to abet the destruction of what they had fostered but could not dominate through such an agent as Genghis Khan. They tried by marriage to rule the concert of Europe in the last century—you have recorded the spread of haemophilia through Queen Victoria's granddaughters—but failed and abetted the destruction of that order in World War I.

"Now, thanks to the snowballing of science," said the fat man slowly, "they have changed their methods. They plan to let civilization destroy itself, emasculate itself—and at the same time attain an undreamt of ambition, utter freedom from man in progeniture. They put Eva Perón in Argentina, Ana Pauker in Rumania, along with a host of less conspicuous agents, to further their aims. Perón is dead but she has worked gains for them whose extent we cannot now surmise. And Pauker has been removed only, I believe, because the Soviets are becoming aware of the threat to their masculine type of rule."

"There's a lot of surmise in this," Larry offered doubtfully.

Cornaman shrugged again. "Of course there is," he said. "Thanks to the obvious restrictions under which I must operate I am forced to proceed largely by empirical judgment. However, when my theories fail to work out, I am not so unscientific as to be unwilling to scrap them. I'm trying to fit together a jigsaw puzzle of which I have only a few pieces—and those pieces constantly altering shape and color."

"It's a problem, all right," said Larry. Then—"But I still don't see why my thesis is so important."

"In the larger picture," the fat man told him, "it isn't. But it does represent a threat, if only an indirect one. Consider—from now on, in their effort to speed victory, these Amazons must work more and more in the open, take increasing chances of discovery.

"Should your thesis be the commencement of a di-

rection of research leading to the discovery of definite lines of heredity among some females that give them super powers while weakening the men-children they bear, it might, in fact it almost certainly would, lead to discovery of how important has been their influence on history. And once the conspiracy was in the open, it would be easily checked."

"So they set out to stop me," said Larry. Then, realizing the fat man had not answered one of his questions clearly—"Tell me, sir, just how *did* you get on to what I was doing?"

Cornaman fixed him with an enigmatic stare. He said, "Young man, the less you know of our organization just now, the less you know of theirs, the safer you are. I doubt they would give you time to eat yourself into invulnerability as I have. Besides, you don't have the secret of parthenogenesis to bargain with."

Larry nodded. Then he said, "But with other scientists getting closer and closer to parthenogenesis all the time, aren't you afraid you won't be in a bargaining position much longer?"

Again the fat man closed his eyes. "I'm terrified," he said simply. "Which is why I am working night and day to expose the conspiracy before that happens. That is why I was forced to use such crude tactics on you yesterday, young man. You have made some valuable discoveries in your research—and more important, you have shown the ability and original cast of thought needed to make more."

"I understand," said Larry. "But what I don't understand is why you kept me under dope for a day after kidnaping me."

"For that I am sorry," was the reply. "However, in my opinion it was quite necessary. I still think it was necessary."

"How so?" Larry demanded.

"Consider," said Cornaman. "If you had not been un-

conscious you would have been wild at being kidnaped. You'd have made all sorts of difficulty—quite justifiably, I fear. I should not have had time to study your thesis. More important, I should have lacked time to see just what line of attack your enemies and mine had adopted. Now we can begin to make plans."

"Possibly," replied Larry without much enthusiasm. "But if Dolores is one of their spies, they must know where I am."

"Of course they do," said the fat man promptly, "but in tipping off the authorities to where you are they would be running a tremendous risk of exposing themselves. And furthermore, they aren't going to know where you will be within a few hours."

"Where is that?" Larry wanted to know.

The fat man leaned forward again. "I'll tell you a little later," he said. "And when we get you safely under way I want you to do some more work on your thesis . . ."

6

STILL WEARING the outsize dressing gown, Larry went back to his room alone. To a final request for his clothes Mayne Cornaman had replied, with a gesture of dismissal, "Dan Bright is taking care of that for you." And, when Larry had shown signs of asking further questions, "Don't worry about Dan—you have cause to know he is thoroughly efficient."

Larry had been forced to agree. He had found his way to the neo-Napoleonic chamber without difficulty, via the elevator—and the moment he had sat down on the edge of the newly made bed and lit a cigarette a small army of unanswered questions had risen to plague him. There was a lot the fat man had yet to explain.

Why, for instance, had he gone in so heavily for the Napoleonic? Larry wondered uncomfortably about this. Surely it was a symptom of prime megalomania—yet Mayne Cornaman, with his unerring logic and almost fiendish sense of humor, had impressed him as utterly sane.

And there was still the matter of why the conspiracy of Amazon or Empress type women, presupposing it actually existed, should have considered his thesis important enough for the drastic action taken to keep it out of print. Cornaman had offered explanations but Larry continued to find himself unable as yet to accept them.

Then there was the little matter of what the fat man intended to do about his own plight. There had been no suggestion of clearing him of the absurd accusations of murder that filled the papers—all he had been told was that he was to do more work on his thesis. At the moment he was much too disturbed for such detached labor.

There was the matter of what he should do about Ida—Larry had a thoroughly guilty feeling where his girl was concerned. If she *was* his girl any more. Certainly she would be justified in crossing him out of her life as a bad risk. But for that very reason Larry felt he should do something about letting her know what had actually happened since he had left her apartment—could it be less than forty-eight hours earlier?

Or was Ida a member of the conspiracy that had brought him so close to being locked up as criminally insane? Recalling her gentleness, her fineness, her loyalty to himself, he decided he was beginning to think like an ingrate. He looked around for an ashtray, spotted one on the bedside table, reached across the bed to use it.

Dolores Green was standing just inside the door, with her back against it, looking down at him with a sensual, faintly sardonic smile. She said, "Time for play now, Larry?"

He managed not to burn a hole in the damask bedspread, sat up again, said, "Depends upon the game."

She shrugged sinuously, replied, "Take your choice—checkers or chess. I can play either."

"No board," he replied, trying to analyze his own feelings as she moved across to sit beside him on the bed. He felt a sudden leap of pulses that had not disturbed him since his first real romantic date in his late teens, following a high-school basketball game—and with it a flare of fright that amounted almost to revulsion.

Dolores seemed to sense his feelings—at any rate her dark eyes glowed with mockery as she said, "You act almost as if you're afraid of little me—what on earth has Mayne been stuffing you with?"

"Canadian bacon and a couple of kidneys," he told her. "Also that you are the agent of a truly remarkable group of women dedicated to eliminating men from this planet." There could scarcely be harm, he decided, in admitting this much. Surely the girl knew it.

She laughed softly, said, "Poor Mayne!" Then, more directly, "Do I look like a girl who could be happy long in a manless world?"

"If you want the truth—which you probably don't," he replied, "you don't look like a girl who could be happy long in any world."

For a moment all trace of mockery was washed from her handsome face. She looked old, older than any woman in Larry's memory, old not in years but in being. For some reason he was reminded of what the fat man had told him about these Amazons being trapped in a society dominated by men since the mother goddess succumbed to the ancestor of Zeus in the dimness of prehistory. Here, he thought, might be one of these women in person, one who had survived through an accursed eternity.

He decided he was getting hammier than hell, said, "Sorry—I didn't mean to hurt you but I've been having myself a time. I guess perhaps I'm still a bit confused."

She replied, "Someday I'm going to wring Mayne's fat neck." She smiled as if the prospect pleased her, added, "He has the damnedest unfairest way of convincing every halfway attractive young man who comes here that I'm some sort of a witch. Should I have brought my broomstick?"

"I thought this was a vacuum cleaner age," said Larry, he hoped with at least a hint of brightness.

Apparently it was sufficient to restore Dolores' drooping spirits. She laughed—a throaty musical laugh that might have issued from the lips of a naiad in ancient Greece—and said, "I suppose I'll have to practice riding one of the new canister types." Then, more seriously, her voice scarcely more than a whisper, "Tell me—do you believe Mayne is crazy?"

Larry sighed and shook his head. "Dolores, you're doing a nice pumping job on me but you've picked the wrong guy. So many things have happened to me so fast I'm not capable of passing judgment on anything. For the time being I'm just along for the ride."

"The game's still waiting whenever you feel man enough to play it," she said, pushing blue-black hair back into sleek array with a snakelike gesture of both hands. Come to think of it, she reminded him of a snake in more ways than one. "Thank the Lord you're not typical of your gender," she added.

"I'm not proud," he told her. The gesture of putting back her hair caused a bracelet of brilliants on one of her wrists to catch his eye.

She noticed it and said, "A birthday present from my grandmother—like it?"

"It's very beautiful," he said, relieved not to have to meet her eyes as she extended the bauble toward him, rotating her wrist as she did so to make it sparkle. "Very beautiful," he repeated.

"Very beautiful," she said after him and, still rotating her wrist, brought it slowly toward his face. Larry found himself unable to stop looking at it and it seemed all at once to fill the entire room, the entire world, the entire universe. . . .

He felt an odd sensation of floating through the air to land in a cradle of soft turf in a garden of strange and colorful growths that reminded him for some reason of one of the lush Edens that compose the Mohammedan

paradise. There were beautiful houris there and they danced sinuously as they sought to arouse his passion.

But when he reached for the nearest of these transparently veiled beauties he felt pain, as if he had reached for a rose and grasped a thorn. And then his vision was torn abruptly from him by huge villainous hands that yanked him abruptly from his mossy couch. . . .

He was lying on the Empire bed and Dan Bright was standing over him, a calloused hand uplifted to slap his face once more. He said, "Don't, Dan—I'm all right," and then wondered if he were all right. Looking down he discovered himself to be once more naked. He was bleeding slightly from a shallow cut across his abdomen and a single-edged safety-razor blade lay on the spread beside him.

He tried to say something else to Dan as consciousness came slowly back to him, reached aimlessly for the robe, which had fallen to the carpet beside the big bed. As he did so he became aware of the sound of quick movement in the room around him, of a sort of growl followed by a quick feminine gasp.

He lifted his head and got into the robe and saw Dan Bright closing swiftly in on Dolores in a corner of the room. She looked more cat than snake as she crouched away from him, her olive skin almost white and her eyes blazing like twin onyx crystals within their sockets.

"Stay where you are, Dan," she said and there was an undercurrent of menace in her contralto voice as he reached for one of her wrists. "You know what I can do if I want to."

"I also know you're too smart to try to get away with anything," Dan said in his flat accents. "What's the idea of going to work on the kid here?"

"I was just having some fun," said Dolores warily. "Besides, what business is it of yours?"

"You were hoping he was a bleeder," said Dan. "Don't

try to deny it. You hypnotized him and ran that blade over his belly. You wanted him to bleed to death, you stinking little tramp!"

"You can't call me that," she snapped back at him. "You're just a muscle man for a fat pathological beast."

The crack of his hand across her face sounded like an anti-aircraft cannon inside the confines of the room. Larry, who had managed to struggle into the robe, uttered a cry of protest but neither of the others paid him any attention.

Dolores made no outcry when Dan Bright struck her. Instead she kicked at his shins with one of her pointed slippers, apparently found her mark because Dan grunted before he swung again. This time his blow sent her staggering along the wall toward the hall door. Before she could reach it he gave her a kick from behind that all but lifted her off her feet.

The dark girl gasped and saved herself from falling by a quick grab at the doorknob. There she turned and said quietly, "Dan Bright, you know what I'll do about this. You know I'm going to have to kill you as soon as I get the chance."

"You'll never get it, you bum, and you know it," Dan retorted less quietly. "Now scram out of here and *stay* out!"

He shut the door after her carefully, came over to Larry, who was close to a state of shock, said, "Never mind, kid, she didn't have time to do you any real damage. I should of warned you about that black-eyed creep but I didn't get the chance. Come on, get some clothes on"—he nodded toward a suitcase beside the door, which he had evidently brought with him—"we got places to go and things to do."

Larry shook himself out of it, realized he must have been hypnotized by Dolores, felt a sudden burst of shame, said, "Sorry, Dan. She made me look at a bracelet

and I went under, I guess. And thanks for getting here when you did. I never met a woman like that."

"You never will again," said Dan cheerfully. "But don't worry about her—she's full of fog."

7

THREE DAYS later Larry listened to the playback of a tape recorder, then clicked off the machine as his own voice stopped. He looked up at the man with the Irish-setter hair and the terra cotta face and said, "Well, Dan, I think that does it. After Mr. Cornaman okays it you can have it typed and we're on the road."

"Sounds okay to me," said the fat man's factotum. "So far the boss thinks you're riding the beam on the nose."

He crushed out a cigarette in an ashtray atop the bookcase at his elbow, then bent to unreel the tape from the recorder. He put it into a flat cylindrical container, thrust it into his pocket, turned to leave.

"Hey!" said Larry, "aren't you going to take the machine?"

"Not yet," replied Dan Bright from the doorway. "I'm leaving it here in case of revisions or something. No sense lugging it all around town. Better put those notes away though. Dolores has been looking like she's sucking a caramel lately."

"All right," said Larry. He didn't get up as Dan Bright left. He was much too tired. He was tireder than he had ever been in his life, even during the stretch on the Jap-held island during the war. In seventy-two hours he had allowed himself no more than a half-dozen hours of sleep.

But the job was finished—he hoped—and he was too keyed up to relax completely. He allowed himself to dwell briefly on what had happened since his after-breakfast conference with Mayne Cornaman. He was still reserving judgment as to whether the fat man was mad or not. Nor was he letting himself dwell on the bizarre incident with Dolores.

Using the recorder instead of a typewriter, he had enlarged the original fifty thousand words of his thesis to seventy-five—incorporating into it dozens of incidents from the fat man's own files implementing the findings of his own research. It was, he felt sure, a far stronger thesis, one which must point unerringly, if only via suggestion, at the existence of the conspiracy.

It established—and not empirically—the definite fact that women who carried in their veins and arteries the seeds of haemophilia and other inherited male weaknesses were definitely a breed stronger and more vital than the rest of the race. It also established the fact of a compensating lack of strength in their male offspring. Oddly enough, neither he nor Cornaman had been able to find a trace of paranormality in the daughters they bore.

Presented under the aegis of Mayne Cornaman, with his vast if somewhat tarnished prestige, it would do more than win Larry his coveted D.Sc.—it would make him something of a shiny new wonder-boy in biological circles. Given to the proper authorities, it would make the name Lawrence Finlay a name to be reckoned with.

At the moment that name could use some refurbishing. While it was no longer a top-headline anagram, the cognomen of Arlene Crady's supposed killer was still appearing with prominence in every edition of every New York paper as the search went on.

Larry was no longer using the name. Among other things accomplished by Mayne Cornaman and Dan Bright, while he lay under opiates in the Seventy-fifth

Street mansion, had been the establishment of a brand new identity for the fugitive biologist. He lit a cigarette and sat back in his chair, considering his new self.

He was now Raymond Deming, a young man of independent means, who had picked up a sublet apartment in the far-East Forties for an indeterminate stay in New York. His medium-length hair had been cropped in Ivy League fashion by Dan Bright, shortly after the Dolores episode.

His suit—the faithful and somewhat shiny companion that had accompanied him on the milk train from Boston—had never been returned. Evidently Dan or somebody had taken his measurements while he was unconscious and done yeoman work with a top-flight tailor.

Larry's hair cut, Dan had laid out for him clothing whose cut and material were far superior to any he had ever owned or ever wished to own. Like the majority of young men with a serious mission and slender means, Larry had never even considered the fine art of dressing.

The soft linen shirt, the quietly smart Countess Mara tie, the English bench-made shoes, the velvety angora socks, the full-lined perfectly cut gray worsted suit, the cuff links and tie clips of gold and enamel in the shape of tiny antique pistols, the incredibly light vicuña topcoat —they had given him the feeling of still lying between satin sheets while walking around fully clad.

There had been a trunkful of other clothes awaiting him at the apartment where he had become Raymond Deming. He wriggled in the Shantung silk of a new sports shirt, enjoyed the coolness of fine flannel slacks, as he lay back, smoking and trying to relax.

Verily, he thought, working stiffs like himself knew little of the creature comforts that could accompany wealth. The gold-cornered alligator-skin billfold atop the bureau in his bedroom contained some three hundred dollars in cash. Beneath it, in one of the two top drawers,

was a bankbook with a balance of more than seven thousand.

He had tried to protest being thus made a creature of charity but Dan, methodically and efficiently shepherding him into his new existence, growled, "Listen, Mr. Deming—whatever you get from the boss you'll earn. In a way you've earned this already. Didn't he have me kidnap you?"

"Thus saving me from a bum murder rap," Larry had replied. But he had decided to go along with it—there had been nothing else to do.

The apartment itself was a marvel of luxury—a two-and-a-half room palace in miniature, in one of the absurdly costly new apartment buildings recently erected close to the East River. He got out of his armchair and busied himself with stowing the notes Mayne Cornaman had given him in a steel cabinet behind a picture on one of the bedroom walls. There was no sense, he thought, in leaving them lying around. Not that he'd been bothered—but still . . .

He was suddenly intensely lonely. He looked with longing at the phone on his bedside table. All he had to do was pick it up, dial Long Distance and be talking to Ida or Ned in a matter of minutes. He wondered again what they must think of him, Ida especially, with the police after him and not having got in touch with them. He frowned as he considered Ned and his possible role in what had happened.

But, suspicious or not, he'd have given a great deal to exchange just a couple of phrases of familiar silly badinage with either of them. And he couldn't call them. No phone calls, except to the restaurant downstairs for meals, were permitted. It was one of the conditions under which he was living. He could hardly let Mayne Cornaman down, not after what the fat man had done for him, was doing for him.

Dan had been right, he decided. He was certainly

earning the favors shown him—with interest. A fugitive, unable to come forward and clear himself, living a false life, cut off from his few friends. And on top of all this, putting in almost seventy-two hours of continuous work, getting the enlarged thesis in shape.

With the notes stowed away and safely behind a combination lock, he considered pouring himself a drink—a cellarette well stocked with scotch, bourbon, cognac, and lesser liquors was part of his new environment. But he had never relished drinking alone, and the mere impulse served only to increase his loneliness.

He wandered out on the balcony that provided an external passage from bedroom to living room. On the next balcony his neighbor lay stretched out on a gaily striped beach chair, what looked like a mint julep at her elbow. She looked up and saw him and gave him a sleepy crinkly grin and said, "Ho there, Deming—how is the house hermit this evening?"

"The house hermit," he said, "is thirsty—also in a mood to come crawling out of his cave. Care to have a drink over here?"

She shook her head, causing long-bobbed dark-blond hair to frame her face like the skirt of a whirling ballerina. It was quite a face—one of those sharp-planed faces fashion photographers love, in this instance given humanity by a warmth of unexpectedly dark eyes and a fine firm full mouth. She said, "Why not come on over here?"

He said, "I'll consider it," and smiled, letting his gaze catalogue to the full her slimly opulent perfection of figure, at the moment more revealed than obscured by the knee-length blue culottes and gay blue and white halter she was wearing.

Her name was Toni Loring and they had met the first morning of his residence in his new home, two days earlier, when he had stepped out on the balcony after a night of recorder-wrestling, for a breath of fresh air.

She had been sun-bathing and had let out a squawk at sight of him and dived for the shelter of a tentlike beach poncho of biscuit white, adorned with many-hued giant seahorses.

Regarding him reproachfully she had said, "Why don't you ring gongs or rattles or something before you move into vacant apartments?"

He had smiled, apologized, introduced himself. It had seemed to him a good chance to try out his new name. She had said, "I'm Toni Loring, Mr. Deming. I live here. I'm a model. Anything else?"

"That," he had replied with what he hoped was a creditable imitation of the light touch, "would seem to be up to you."

He had seen her a couple of other times in the two days between then and now—once when he had pushed a room-service wagon back into the hall after a meal and she had emerged with a can full of garbage for the incinerator—once more on the balcony just the night before, when again he had emerged to eliminate mental cobwebs via a fresh-air treatment. Until now he had considered balconies a superfluous architectural feature for any but a dictator. But with sudden new understanding of Romeo's plight, he was wondering how anyone got along without one.

He said as much when the girl admitted him to her apartment. "Think, if Romeo had had a balcony too, Shakespeare would have had to rewrite his whole second act."

"He could have put them both in a helicopter," said the girl. She apologized for the appearance of her home, which looked perfectly neat to Larry, then produced another julep as if by magic. She turned on a large record player, which promptly began to play Cole Porter tunes softly, then led him back to the balcony and a beach chair adjoining her own.

Larry, like most mere mortals, had never before known

a New York model. When he had thought of the species, which was seldom, he felt a tendency to consider them as something rather above and beyond the rest of humanity. In short, a little frightening to such as himself.

But Toni Loring, he thought, was the most restful girl he had ever known. Sitting with her on the terrace, talking when either of them felt like talking but more often keeping silent, he felt the tensions under which he had been laboring during the five days past fade with the sunset.

He thought, I'd better watch myself or I'll give myself away. He thought also that Toni might be a spy. Then he dismissed the idea as absurd—at the moment the strange fears and fetishes of Mayne Cornaman, along with the eerie Dolores, seemed as untied to reality as the dreams of childhood. Besides, it was unlikely that the presumed conspirators would be able to plant Toni so swiftly and securely in the next apartment to Raymond Deming.

He tried to remind himself guiltily not to forget Ida—but it was hard to think of anyone else in the serene warmth of Toni Loring's company. She said, over the top of a second julep, "I'm dying of curiosity over you, Ray. I've told the girls at the agency about the dreamboat who moved in next door and they're hungry for facts. You might not think it but this town is very short on eligible hes."

"There's not much to tell," he replied, hoping she wouldn't press the matter.

She didn't, much to his relief—though somehow he had known she wouldn't. Somehow, later, he found himself, asking her to have dinner with him. She rose, smiling, and said, "Sounds wonderful—I'm horribly sick of the menu downstairs. I guess you can get sick of anything if you have it too regularly."

Larry, who had intended to ask her to dine either in his apartment or hers, thought what the hell. He wasn't

actually a prisoner and it was unlikely that he'd run into anyone he knew. Outside of Dolores, Dan Bright, Toni, Mayne Cornaman, and the little gray man, no one in the city knew him, except possibly some old Navy buddies. He considered it unlikely that any of them would recognize him in the luxurious trappings of Raymond Deming.

He thought next of the crisp green bills lurking in the alligator-skin fold atop his bureau—it seemed a shame not to put them to some sort of use. Besides, his fatigue demanded a change and he had been more or less in confinement for four days. So he finished his drink, got up and said, "I'll ring your bell in fifteen minutes."

She wrinkled her nose at him and said, "Twenty."

Having read somewhere that Manhattan models required considerable time to shellac themselves properly for an outing, he gave her twenty-five—at the end of which time his own doorbell rang and he opened it to find Toni waiting there and saying, "Slowpoke!" in smiling reproach. She looked breathtaking in a clinging brown dress with gold belt and clips, topped by a gold-embroidered bolero jacket.

He himself enjoyed the new assurance of being well dressed, in a suit of dark banker's gray that made him feel he was wearing a Rolls-Royce. He said, "Any place special you want to go?"

She hugged his arm as they walked toward the elevator and told him frankly, "If you think I'm putting you on display this early in the game you're out of your mind, Ray. Let's go somewhere quiet."

Larry, who knew even less about New York restaurants than he did about New York women, was on something of a spot. Then he recalled a place Ned Tolman had talked about, Hilary Duggan's, a restaurant much frequented by newsmen and writers and such when they had the price of a four-dollar steak or an eighty-cent

highball. He suggested it and she said "Good! It's just in the next block. Let's walk."

They strolled through the twilight and for the first time in his life Larry felt the magic of Manhattan. The city seemed aglow with friendliness, to an accompaniment of soft pleasant sounds. Even the honking horn of an outraged cabby caught behind a stalled truck seemed as unjangling as the comical outrage of Donald Duck.

They entered Hilary Duggan's, which lurked behind a forbidding bar-and-grill front, complete with smoky glass window and dog-eared beer and cigar displays, on Second Avenue. The air within was thick with cigarette smoke and conversation. Toni steered him past the bar with its complement of booths opposite, to a rear dining room full of checkered tablecloths, people, and the smell of good food.

A prematurely gray-haired man called, "Hello, Toni darling," to his companion and Larry felt sudden fierce jealousy invade him.

Noting his expression as they sat down the girl patted his forearm affectionately and said, "Ray, you're really a lamb. You mustn't mind if people know me. After all, my professional life is rather—well, public."

"Have your fun, beautiful," he replied—airily, he hoped. Actually, he told himself, he was glad she was what she appeared to be. Suspicion, planted within him by Cornaman and Dolores and Dan Bright, still gnawed at him sporadically. He glanced around at the other diners, noted with relief that they were predominantly male in gender.

He and Toni had another mint julep—almost as good as those the girl had mixed on her own terrace—and followed with the steak and french-frieds that were the house standby. Toni amused him with occasional references to neighboring diners, retailing an anecdote or two about some of them. She had, he discovered, a droll wit, which added to his sense of general well-being and

merited fatigue. He was sorry when it was time to go, somewhat surprised to discover, peering at the dim wall clock, that it was past eleven.

When the check was paid, Toni preceded him back into the bar. But at the entrance he stopped short, seized her shoulders, stopped her progress. She looked around at him, wonderingly.

For the moment she was forgotten. At the far corner of the bar, almost facing him, Ned Tolman and Ida Stevens were seated side by side on stools, drinks in front of them. Ned was talking animatedly to an Ida who looked drawn and somehow drab by comparison with the girl in front of him.

"What's the matter, Ray?" Toni asked in surprise.

He snapped out of his sudden shock, managed a grimace, told her, "I couldn't bear the thought of letting you run the gauntlet out there. My ego can't take it. Let's leave by the side door."

8

OUT ON THE SIDEWALK, with the light streaming through Duggan's window providing an oasis in the darkness about them, Toni again hugged Larry's arm, looked up at him with a merry thrusting glance, and said, "Where now, brown cow?"

He smiled, feeling suddenly bone-tired, replied, "Toni, I don't want to sound unchivalrous—I never felt less unchivalrous in my life—but I've got to get home before I keel over. I'm pooped."

She hugged his arm again, told him, "Poor boy! I've been wondering just how much of an iron man you were. Your lights have been going full blast for three nights."

"Thanks for taking it so nicely." He paused by a newsstand on the corner across the avenue from the restaurant. "Want a paper?"

"Not I," she said. "I can't afford much reading—I might get the habit and stop keeping this face and chassis of mine in shape for the photographers. After all, they're my stock in trade."

"Strictly boomtime stuff," said Larry idly. Then he stiffened as he caught sight of a black headline looming large across the top of a stack of tabloids. It said: CRADY KILLER CAUGHT—CONFESSES. He stared at it until

Toni's tugging at his elbow restored him to reality. She was looking up at him, anxiety in her dark eyes.

"Is something wrong?" she asked him, a trifle breathlessly.

He shook his head, continued to scan the story in the dim light. The self-confessed killer's name was Jonathan Morgan, a post-graduate student in biology, who had dropped in that morning to consult with one of the assistant professors on a course for the coming year.

Then, according to Morgan, an honor student, "I don't know what happened. I came through the door and the next thing I knew I was looking down at Miss Crady, dead at her desk. I never saw her before in my life. I guess I got scared then and ran away. But I couldn't let this Finlay fellow take the rap for it. I never owned a gun and I don't know what happened to the one that killed Miss Crady. . . ."

There was more—a lot more—but Larry didn't read any more. If Mayne Cornaman was correct in his theory—and certainly the story seemed to bear him out—Jonathan Morgan was as innocent of the murder as was Larry himself. And if Morgan was decent enough to come forward and confess it would only be decent for Larry to reverse the process. But would it do any good? After all, Larry hadn't killed the girl and by coming forward at this late date he would probably merely confuse the issue further. But he was going to have to do something . . .

"Hey! Remember me?" It was Toni and she was gently tugging at his coat sleeve.

Larry looked down at her and said quite honestly, "I don't quite see how I could ever forget you."

Toni smiled up at him softly and said, "That's my Ray—for a moment there I thought I'd lost you. It's enough to discourage a gal."

"Sorry," said Larry, tucking the paper under one arm, the girl under the other. "I guess I'm a little tired. Do

you mind if we go on home—I haven't had much sleep lately."

"Neither have I," replied Toni. "Your activities have been cutting into my slumber. Maybe we'd both better take it easy."

By the time they got back to Larry's apartment he had decided first to call Mayne Cornaman, then to call the police or whatever the fat man advised. But in the corridor he paused, unwilling to give up the comely comfort of Toni Loring. He didn't want to be alone just then with the confusion of his thoughts. Not after seeing Ned Tolman and Ida so unexpectedly, not after the stunning newspaper story. He said, "How about coming into my place for a nightcap?"

She said, her dark eyes briefly narrowed in speculation, "Turn about fair play and all that?" Then, grinning—"What the devil! I've been dying to look at your apartment ever since you moved in, Ray."

He said, "You may have to mix the drinks—you do it better than I do and I'm bushed," and unlocked the door and opened it.

Toni said from beside him, "You don't need a nightcap. What you need is a housekeeper."

Larry didn't answer. He was too stunned. His apartment looked as if a rogue elephant had moved in and gone berserk there since he and Toni had taken off for dinner. Pictures had been removed from the walls, furniture upholstery stripped off, books scattered about viciously after being lifted from the shelves, rugs lifted and tossed around in careless heaps. Even the heaviest pieces of furniture had been casually upended and displaced.

"It's not funny," he told Toni tonelessly. "Somebody's been giving the place a complete ransacking." He turned, glowered down at her loveliness with unconcealed suspicion.

She gave a little gasp, said, "Oh, no, Ray! I'm not the sort of girl who lures a man out to dinner so his apart-

ment can be searched. My interest in you is a lot more direct."

His accusatory bitterness slowly relaxed under the open guilelessness of her gaze. He shook his head, said, "Sorry, Toni—but this is a little unexpected."

"I understand," she told him, her eyes asparkle with excitement. "Did they get the jewels—or the documents?"

"Stop clowning," he said. "This is a mess. There aren't any jewels and the only documents they might have got went out of here this afternoon. But wait a minute . . ." He made a move toward the bedroom, thinking of the safe in quasi-concealment behind a picture on the bedroom wall, of the telephone on the table. If they had got hold of his original thesis and Mayne Cornaman's notes . . .

"Maybe you'd better call the police," Toni suggested. As a result of the ransacking she seemed to be finding him an increasingly romantic figure.

He told her, "Don't worry, I'm going to call them."

"It won't be necessary," said a short stocky weather-beaten middle-aged man emerging from the bedroom door. "I'm Lieutenant Harvey, Homicide." He unfolded unmistakable credentials under Larry's astonished gaze, asked, "Who's your friend, Deming?"

"Toni Loring—she lives next door," said Larry automatically. Then—"*Homicide!* Why—has somebody been killed here?"

"Not here," said Lieutenant Harvey in flat urban accents. "But I wanted to have a little talk with you—Deming."

Toni was tactful. Despite the curiosity that gleamed in her dark eyes she said, "We'd better have our night-cap in my place—whenever you and the lieutenant get through talking."

"Thanks, miss—it won't take long," said the detective. He waited, leaning against a wall, while Larry escorted

her to the door. Then he said, "All right, Finlay, what happened?"

Larry sat down on the side of an overturned armchair and lit a cigarette. He felt as if a couple of thousand pounds had been lifted from him. The ticklish decision of what to do about going to the police no longer hung over him. He said, "I suppose you had some reason for tearing this place apart."

Harvey drew a flat yellow tin from his pocket, extracted from it a thin miniature cigar, lit it, said around it, "You must think I'm a superman or something. I couldn't have done this if I'd tried."

"Then who did?" Larry asked bluntly.

"Search me," replied the detective. Still leaning against the wall he said, "Sure you don't know, Finlay?"

Larry shook his head. He was beginning to have some unhappy suspicions but felt hardly free to voice them to authority as represented by Lieutenant Harvey. Nor did he think they'd be believed.

Harvey studied him with relaxed intentness, then said, "Maybe you better take a look at the bedroom. Maybe then you'll believe me."

It was an even worse mess than the living room. The low-slung heavy modern bed had actually been turned upside down and the coils of myriad mattress springs protruded from it like a field of metallic glass. The bureau had been literally torn into its component parts, the closet had been messed about, the pictures were down. Even more incredible was the fact that the steel safe had been plucked right out of the wall as if by a pair of giant tweezers and lay, burst open and empty, on the floor.

"I'll be damned!" muttered Larry, feeling suddenly afraid. He recalled unhappily what Cornaman had told him of the paranormal powers of the Amazons. Certainly some sort of super-telekinesis must have been at work here. Otherwise the noise would have created a disturb-

ance that must have roused the house attendants. Surely they would have summoned the police.

Suddenly suspicious, he looked at Lieutenant Harvey, who had followed and was standing in the doorway, watching him. He found the telephone, miraculously still intact, under a pile of two-hundred-dollar suits heaped carelessly beyond the overturned bed.

"Spring seven—three—one hundred," said the detective. Larry called anyway, got Homicide, called his uninvited guest to the phone, then checked his identity. Then, satisfied, he called the desk downstairs. No, there had been no report of any unusual noises or other disturbance from his apartment while he was gone.

Larry slammed the phone back on its cradle. He looked at Harvey with some idea of apologizing for his suspicions but the detective forestalled him with, "In your place I'd a done the same thing, Finlay. Who do you think mangled this place?"

"Just one more call," said Larry. He dialed Mayne Cornaman's number. Dolores answered the phone, informed him that the fat man was out. Then she said, "How does it feel not to be a wanted man?"

"How do you mean that?" he countered, reading the mockery underlying Dolores' tone.

"Remind me to draw you a picture," she told him. "Any message?"

"Not to you, sweetheart," he said grimly and hung up. He led the way back to the living room, managed with Harvey's help to put a couple of chairs and a table in something like usable order. He said, "How'd you find out who I was, Lieutenant?"

Harvey looked at Larry with an expression of dour curiosity. He said, "The moment this Morgan character gives himself up for the Crady killing the Commissioner calls me in and gives me the dope on you. He won't tell me where he got it and gives me a hands-off sign."

"But you decided to come up on your own?" asked Larry.

"Right," Harvey nodded. "At least I wanted a look at you. And maybe a couple of answers if you're willing to give them."

"It's okay," said Larry, "but I'm beat. And there's all this mess. . . ." He gestured at the wreckage that surrounded them.

"I ought to be sore as hell at you," said Harvey ruminatively around his cigar. "I came here ready to be sore as hell at you. But when I saw this——" He jerked his head at the debris. "And you don't seem like a wrongo. What the devil *did* happen to you anyway?"

"I can't tell you all of it," said Larry. "If I could have I'd have turned myself in days ago and let you guys do your worst. There are a lot more factors involved than me or that poor girl at Columbia or this fellow Morgan who just gave up." He paused, added, "By the way, what's going to happen to *him?*"

Harvey shrugged, said, "I wish I knew—but I gotta hunch nothin' very terrible. The whole case is too screwed-up. I thought surer than hell one of you two would be an odd-ball but it don't seem to be that way. Suppose you tell me what you think you can. Maybe I can fit in a few of the missing pieces myself."

"If you can," Larry informed him, "you're going to be talking to yourself in mirrors for a long time to come. This business is a lot screwier than even you think it is. Well, as far as I'm concerned the whole business started when a university in Boston bounced my thesis." As Harvey started to say something Larry managed a tired grin and added, "No—not the one that turned up on Miss Crady's desk; the one somebody just lifted out of that bedroom safe."

Lieutenant Harvey got up as if someone had stabbed him from beneath. He said, "I thought you told the

Loring girl no documents were stolen. What was in this thesis anyway?"

"That version doesn't matter much now," Larry told him. "As to what's in it, it's a new theory about haemophiliacs—bleeders."

Harvey subsided wearily and Larry went on to tell him about his decision to bring the work to Columbia, being careful to omit the names of Ned Tolman and Ida. He told of being followed, of being taken in charge by an unknown stranger, of what had happened outside the biology building. "When I tried to go my own way my friend clouted me cold and when I came to the lid was on."

Harvey looked at him narrowly and said, with a trace of wistfulness, "I wish we could get you downtown, Finlay."

"That's one wish I won't go along with," Larry told him. "I suppose I could get you in trouble by reporting your visit here. Especially if I mentioned the shape I found the place in."

Harvey regarded him steadily for a long moment, then nodded. "Yeah," he said, "I suppose you could—a certain amount of trouble anyway. But I didn't mess this joint up."

"And I didn't kill Arlene Crady," said Larry. "What's more, I doubt like hell that Jonathan Morgan killed her. My guess is he was hypnotized the moment he set foot in that office."

Harvey looked his scorn, said, "And made to kill a girl he'd never seen before? Maybe I look dumb, Finlay—maybe most of us cops are dumb like the book says—but I'm not *that* dumb!"

"I just told you I don't think he killed her," said Larry.

"Then who did?" the detective wanted to know.

"My guess would be a woman," said Larry, wondering if he were talking too much. "Probably an attractive one.

Why don't you see if you can find any who were around at the time?"

Harvey got up slowly, not troubling to hide his disgust. "I guess," he said wearily, "I spoke somewhat previous when I said you didn't look like an odd-ball. Okay, I'm goin'. You go ahead and have your nightcap with the cutie-pie next door. Maybe she'll even put you up, seein' as your joint's a mess."

"Maybe she will," said Larry, unable to mask his resentment at the detective's tone. He waited at his own door until the official had vanished behind the sliding doors of the elevator. Then he went across the hall and rapped softly on Toni Loring's door.

She opened it at once—evidently she had been waiting right behind it. She led him in, said, "Is the minion gone?" She was wearing a swishy blue moiré housecoat, had her hair tied back with a silver ribbon. She looked enchantingly conspiratorial.

"His parting shot," said Larry, "was suggestive."

"Maybe we'd better have that nightcap," she suggested, darting a quick glance at him over her shoulder as she moved gracefully toward her kitchenette. "I can't say I'm not fascinated. You're going to have to give with the information."

They sat side by side on a low sofa and sipped good bourbon-on-the-rocks. After a while she said, "If you don't start talking I'm going to hit you over the head with a bottle or something. Who are you anyway? What are you?"

"I'm Larry Finlay," he informed her. "The so-called student who supposedly killed that girl up at Columbia last week."

"I kind of thought so," she said, her dark eyes steady on his, "when you almost dropped dead over that news story after dinner. You don't look much like your news pictures. You're much more attractive."

"I'm a doll," he said, grinning. "Funny—it seems I

have to be on the lam for a murder I didn't commit to wind up with girls like you, Toni."

"Very funny," she retorted. "And what does that plural imply?"

"Nothing for you to worry about," he said, thinking of Dolores. Then he thought of Ida and wondered how to get in touch with her. Probably through Ned, he decided—though he wasn't yet ready to trust the reporter. As Toni reached for the bottle he added quickly, "No fooling, Toni—you're the one nice thing that's happened lately."

Her smile was quick and warm, her carmine-tipped fingers came up to touch his shoulder. She smelled enchantingly fragrant as she said, "That, Larry Finlay, is more like it."

In the easy presence of Toni he began to relax and to forget about the encircling ring of problems that still beset him. Her bright red lips were close to his, and without conscious plan, he kissed their soft, clinging fragrance. His arms went around the pliancy of her waist, as her arms went about him and she shifted herself sinuously as a half-grown cat, so that their lips met a second time without effort.

His fatigue seemed to dissolve deliciously upon contact with her softness. Unlike Dolores, Toni was not electric, hard or shocking to his senses. Nor was there need of hypnotic influence to make him respond, had this blonde possessed the arcane gifts of the sinister brunette beauty. After his dismaying encounter with Dolores, four days ago, in Mayne Cornaman's mansion, after his more recent hermitlike existence, his whole body clamored for sensual release, for justification.

Toni laughed softly as he removed her clothing and stirred restlessly beneath the touch of his hands, rousing him to a pitch of high sexual excitement. Then, with her own soft hands, she began removing his own clothing, murmuring, "Hurry, darling—hurry!"

Then, somehow, they were nude together, there on the sofa, and her beautiful body was thrusting up at his. Although a soft double bed lay waiting for them in the next room, they never got around to using it. They were much too busy, much too happy, where they were, to move before sleep claimed him. Larry was astonished at the blend of joy and relief that flooded him to discover he was not impotent as Dolores had implied. He was, mercifully, anything but . . .

9

LARRY WAS AROUSED from an unpleasant dream in which he was floating downstream over vicious rapids, clinging desperately to a spongy log, while a large Amazon, clad in Dogpatch leopard skins, fired thunderous bursts at him from a submachine gun. He could see the bullets kick up little spurts of water as they came closer and closer to him. In vain he tried to work his way around the spongy log—the bullets came right on through it. . . .

He woke up and found himself on a strange sofa. For a moment he was bewildered, then in a fierce whisper Toni Loring said, "Stop shouting, Larry. They'll hear you!"

He said, "Ooomff! Sorry, darling." Then, "Hey, this *is* you, isn't it, Toni?" It was dark and the cotton wool of sleep still clouded his faculties.

She giggled softly and whispered, "How very flattering!" And, "Shut up!" A soft hand clamped over his opening mouth as a thunderous knocking sounded at the door.

Toni said, "Dammit, why don't they go away?" plaintively.

Larry, coming fully awake, shook off her restraining clasp. "It's probably for me," he said, rubbing his eyes.

Her eyes peered at him darkly through the semi-gloom. She clutched his arm anew, said, "I'd better go and tell them to go away."

But Larry was sure. He was not even surprised when Toni, looking like a disturbed sprite in her housecoat, came floating back from the door. She said, "He won't go 'way. Want me to call downstairs and have him thrown out? He wants you."

Larry got up groggily, said, "Ummm—who is it?"

"Somebody named Bright," she replied.

He sighed, said, "Okay, I'll go." Catching her forlorn regard he put an arm around her slim waist, said, "Don't worry, Toni, I'll be back."

Suddenly she kissed him fiercely, said, "I'll be waiting, darling—but don't keep me waiting too long."

He got out of there quickly, wished he'd had Toni have the house people send Dan Bright packing as she'd wanted to. For Mayne Cornaman's right bower was in a caustic rage. Back with Larry in the wreckage of his own apartment, Bright said, "When something like this happens you might let us know. Who did it?"

Larry shrugged, told him, "Don't ask me. When I got back from dinner I found it like this with Lieutenant Harvey of Homicide here. He said he didn't do it and I believe him. I called your place."

"What happened?" Dan Bright asked sharply.

"Dolores answered," said Larry. "So I hung up."

"You could of tried again," Dan Bright told him reproachfully. Then, with his anger once more on the rise—"The boss ain't gonna like it." He said, gesturing at the debris about them, "What'd they get—anything?"

"The original thesis—and Mr. Cornaman's notes," said Larry.

Bright grunted and considered this, then shrugged and said, "Well, it's too late to worry now. Come on, we got to get goin'."

"Where to?" asked Larry. "I want to take a shower first."

"Take one when you get there," was the equivocal reply. And since Dan Bright seemed in no mood to

offer further information Larry trotted along after him to the elevator. Downstairs a long sleek purple Cadillac convertible was awaiting them. Bright got behind the wheel and Larry slid into the front seat beside him. He said, "You could have given me a little more time to wake up."

Bright said, "Listen, macushla, time's something we ain't got," and tooled the car out of the apartment house entryway.

They rode in silence through the just-broken dawn over the Triboro Bridge and out along Northern Boulevard, on which the first stream of ingoing commuter traffic was just beginning to move against them. Larry calculated he must have had about six hours' sleep and wished he could get some more. But to his annoyance he was thoroughly awake. There was no sense in trying to strike up a conversation with his driver. Dan Bright was not much of a talker at the best of times—and at the moment he was disgusted with his charge.

As they rolled smoothly along Larry found himself beginning to be beset with qualms. Instead of the hospitable Toni he found himself thinking of Ida Stevens with increasing guilt. After all, they had been everything but engaged before his departure from her Commonwealth Avenue apartment to bring his thesis to Columbia.

Compared to Ida, Toni, for all her dark-blond loveliness and gaiety and clinging warmth, seemed somehow a little tawdry. His recent suspicions of Ida appeared absurd in the cold light of his awakening. Of course she hadn't wanted him to butt his head against an apparent academic stone wall. That she should be an enemy was an insult, not only to her but to his own intelligence.

He had been a coward and a fool not to have approached Ida and Ned directly when he spotted them at Hilary Duggan's bar the night before. He could hardly imagine either of them betraying him to the police. Doubtless, out of devotion to him, they had

come to New York upon hearing of his trouble, had been seeking to find and help him if possible.

He had certainly given them meager return for their integrity by ducking out on them. He felt mighty low.

He came out of his abstraction to discover Dan Bright had stopped the convertible outside a diner. "What gives?" he asked.

"We stoke up," said Bright. "I been drivin' most of the night and you look like something that just came in off the back fence."

While Dan Bright stuck to a bowl of dry cereal and coffee Larry waded into a dish of fruit salad, a stack of wheatcakes with sausages, and three cups of black coffee. He even found himself thinking regretfully of Mayne Cornaman's breakfast of kidneys in madeira, *huevos rancheros*, and pheasant with Canadian bacon.

"Come on," Dan Bright said impatiently when he had finished, "we ain't got all day—and there's still a long way to go."

So they went on east beneath the rising sun of a pleasant day. It was after nine o'clock when they left the highway to proceed along leafy Long Island byways between high hedges and white-painted paddock fences, finally to turn left and travel along a winding crushed-stone driveway that brought them at last under the porte-cochere of an immense ivy-covered, red brick mansion.

The butler who came to the door seemed to be expecting Larry. He said, "Mr. Finlay?"—and, at Larry's nod, "This way please." He led Larry over soft carpets through what seemed several hundred yards of room to a French-windowed sun porch overlooking a stretch of emerald velvet lawn that in turn overlooked the glittering blue-gray surface of Long Island Sound.

There, at a white-clothed table, Mayne Cornaman, immense in white linens that for some reason reminded Larry of Mark Twain, was stuffing himself from a platter

heaped with lamb chops and grilled tomatoes while a lean sunburned short-featured man with pale blue eyes and blue-gray hair like steel wool watched him.

"Sit down, Larry," said Cornaman, gesturing with a fork toward an empty chair. "Phil, this is Larry Finlay —Larry, Phil Whittaker."

Larry gulped and nodded and sat down. So this, he thought, was the famous Dean Whittaker of Columbia. He eyed his host with new interest and respect, noted the lines of character in the bronzed face, the casual wrinkles of humor at the corners of mouth and eyes, the square lumpy intelligence of the forehead.

Whittaker said, "I listened to your thesis last night, Finlay. A most remarkable piece of work."

"Thank you, sir," said Larry, coloring. "But in its present form it's as much Mr. Cornaman's as it is mine."

The fat man laid down his silver with a clatter, sprayed food as he tried to speak with his mouth full, wound up coughing. Recovered, he roared, "Don't you believe it, Phil—all I gave him were a few more corroborative cases from my own files. Well, what are you waiting for? Make him a D.Sc. Can't you see he isn't going to be of the slightest use to us until he's stopped worrying about *that*?"

Dean Whittaker's smile was almost shy. He said, as Cornaman got back to his eating, "Since you come so well recommended and your thesis, while not yet in proper form, shows signs of originality both of concept and research, I don't think you'll have to worry."

"Thank you, sir," said Larry gratefully. Oddly enough, now that he had accomplished what he set out to do when he first began work on haemophilia, the degree no longer seemed especially important. Yet it *was* a relief to know he had achieved, or would soon achieve, his purpose. And the prestige of a degree from Columbia was more than he had hoped to win.

Mayne Cornaman again dropped his silver. This time

he said, "For the love of God, do you both have to be so stinking polite? We've got us a job ahead and we're all in it together. Let's drop the formality, shall we, Phil? This is a good kid—I dare say he's further along than you were at his age if not as far along as I."

"All right, Mayne," said Dean Whittaker. Then, to Larry, with the ghost of a smile—"We'd better do as he says, Larry."

"I'll try—Phil," said Larry with a gulp. Then, as the silence continued unbroken save by the steady munching of the fat man's jaws, he said, "My place was broken into last night. Whoever did it got away with the original thesis and your notes, Mayne."

Cornaman's chewing went on without a break. Then he swallowed, washed down some six ounces of champagne, said, "Good—that means we're still ahead of them—if not by much. Where were you?"

Larry blushed, replied, "Taking my next-door neighbor out to dinner at Hilary Duggan's."

Mayne Cornaman's regard was unblinkingly shrewd. Then he grunted, said, "Oh, the pretty model! Dan told me about her. Watch your step, young man. We haven't had a chance to check up on her."

Cornaman went back to his eternal eating and Dean Whittaker asked Larry some questions about how he came to write his thesis and how he had gone about the research that led to his discoveries. Larry replied as best he could. He had a feeling that the fat man and his host were marking time, waiting for someone or something. Finally he asked if he could use the phone, was directed to an instrument in a book-lined study off the living room.

Since it appeared evident the enemy knew the location of his supposed hideout he saw little sense in keeping it a secret. He called Ned Tolman's old New York paper, obtained from the city editor the news that Ned was definitely still in the city and the address of his hotel, a

small place on Madison Avenue in the Fifties. He then called the hotel, discovered Ned was out, left a message asking him to call that evening at the ransacked apartment.

When he got back to the sun porch he discovered that one of the most important men in America had joined the party. Gray-haired, gray-suited, gray-faced, Leon Brett was almost a legendary figure. Born to wealth, he had been expensively educated, left a virtual pauper when his father went bankrupt in the Great Depression of 1931. By Pearl Harbor time, thanks to his all-around brilliance, Brett was probably richer, despite taxes, than his father had ever been.

Too important to be allowed in uniform, he had managed to get under fire in virtually all theaters of World War II, had played an immensely vital role not only in co-ordination of logistics but in the intricate webwork of international diplomacy. Now, still under fifty, he was a sort of unofficial adviser to the President, a latter-day Colonel House of vastly more significance.

When Larry appeared and was introduced he said, studying him, "This the boy?" And, at Mayne Cornaman's nod, "Finlay, you probably don't know it but everyone you've ever known does. We've managed a pretty complete check on you in the last few days."

"That's where the murder came in handy," rumbled the fat man. "They thought Leon's bird dogs were cops."

"How did I come out?" Larry asked, bewildered.

"All right," said Leon Brett. He turned to the older men, seemed to have brushed aside Larry's existence, told them, "This thing shows signs of getting out of hand if we don't check it immediately. Recent reports—and these are one hundred per cent reliable—seem to indicate that someone is actually inaugurating germ warfare behind the Iron Curtain. It's still on a small scale as yet but there's no reason to think Khrushchev's boys are

doing it just to stir up anti-American feeling—though that's how they're interpreting it, of course."

He spoke crisply, lucidly, seeming to have the happy faculty of plunging like a carving knife into the juiciest part of his subject and laying it bare on the platter for others to see as clearly as himself. Whittaker and Cornaman exchanged significant glances and the fat man said, "I don't suppose it'll do much good now to remind you I've been warning you of something like this for years."

"Not a bit," said Leon Brett, unabashed. "We may have been burr-heads about it but who can blame us?"

"I can," said Mayne Cornaman savagely, pushing his immense belly back from the table. "What are you going to do about it?"

"What we can," said Brett soberly. "Unfortunately the President isn't yet convinced of your version of this conspiracy. He's giving me some leeway but the military is still under wraps. I don't see how we can convince *them.*"

"I wonder," mused the fat man, "why the military seems to be a pool for the lowest I.Q.s in the nation? I fear 'twas ever thus."

"Oh, they're not so bad," replied Leon Brett. "What do you think would be the reaction of the man in the street if we laid the facts before him? He'd think all of us were nuts."

"He'd be right too," said Dean Whittaker. "However, we aren't quite as mad as these unbelievable women. All right, Leon, how *do* you propose to stop them?"

Brett got up and walked to the French windows, his hands clasped behind his back. Then, turning suddenly to face them, he said, "Gentlemen, I don't know. What we have discovered is that our female friends have a headquarters of some kind, one from which this whole world-wide campaign is being directed. I'm convinced, through a number of highly ephemeral clues, that this

headquarters is somewhere on or close to this continent, perhaps this country itself."

Cornaman grunted assent, said, "How do you propose to find it, Leon? With a dowser?"

The great man's face seemed to sink upon itself. He said, "Frankly, I haven't the ghost of an idea. I've got to the place where I even suspect the President's wife —hell, I even suspect my own. I'm leaving it to you gentlemen to come up with a clue."

Cornaman made no effort to disguise his gloat. He chuckled and said to Dean Whittaker, "Well, Phil, what shall we do—follow our original plan?"

Whittaker, unsmiling, nodded. Leon Brett said, "Let me repeat, as things shape up now we may not have much time."

"I think perhaps we can help you," said the fat man. "Tell me, Leon—have your operatives come up with an instance in which our friends actually employed murder to gain their ends?"

"No—" Brett shook his gray head doubtfully, added, "unless you except this germ warfare. Oh—and that murder at Columbia . . ."

"Exactly," said Mayne Cornaman. Larry suddenly found himself the focus of three pairs of singularly intent eyes. The fat man gave him an indulgent look, remarked, "Well, Larry, it looks as if you're it!"

10

LARRY'S DRIVE back to the city that afternoon with Dan Bright was as silent as the drive out had been—but this time he was silent not because of his chauffeur's ill humor but out of his own bewilderment. For the first time since Mayne Cornaman had stepped in and taken charge of his affairs he was actually frightened.

The great scientist, after announcing Larry was "it" had gone on to explain, as much to his colleagues as to Larry, "In some way this young man has stumbled into a soft spot, something close to the heart of this conspiracy we are trying to lick."

Dean Whittaker had then put in, "But Mayne, I don't see how this thesis of his could so upset them. After all, it's hardly likely to get much publicity or even credence where it counts—outside of ourselves. The newspaper publicity attendant upon the Arlene Crady murder has forestalled that."

"A good point, Phil," Leon Brett had said quietly.

But Mayne Cornaman had smugly outsmiled their protests, had said finally, "I have a pretty solid hunch as to why they're afraid of Larry—I'm not sure enough to tell even you but I'll lay you any odds you want he's closer to the core of this conspiracy than any of us. He's the boy who's going to find that headquarters."

"But why me?" Larry had asked. "And how am I to do it?"

He had spent the rest of his stay at Dean Whittaker's Long Island estate seeking the answers to those two questions—including a two-hour time-out while Mayne Cornaman devoured two lobsters stuffed with *pâté de foie gras,* a huge tureen of *petite marmite,* an entire turkey complete with stuffing, and a quadruple baked Alaska for dessert.

Now, riding back to town, he had not the slightest idea whether in the course of his long briefing he had been given the answers or not. At one point in the proceeding he had, with some reluctance, confessed his call to Ned Tolman's hotel. And Mayne Cornaman had simply beamed and nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world, had in fact seemed pleased.

"You must remember," had been his parting admonition, "that you are the only one of us outside of myself —and that was years ago—who has actually driven our opponents to violent action. We have agreed that the material in your thesis is not a factor—or at any rate not the main factor—in causing this violence.

"Therefore, Larry, it must be something more personal. You are or have been operating close to the viscera of this conspiracy. As I have implied, I think I know in a general way where this soft spot lies. But I'm not sure —I don't see the actual connection."

"What do you want me to do again?" Larry had asked helplessly.

"Don't go looking for them—and don't avoid them," the fat man had told him. "Be available, that's all. And be careful, young man. You're just about our only hope of a quick solution. Above all, keep your eyes open every waking minute. I have an idea the rest will take care of itself. Now good-by and good luck. I shall be back in the city tomorrow. Dan will drive you back."

What had sounded like an exciting and possibly

dangerous assignment at first had apparently dwindled to a sort of lackadaisical milk run, in which he sat around and waited for something to happen. He mulled it over and over in the convertible, finally found his thoughts were beginning to wander.

Oddly enough he dismissed Toni with only a quick reverie appreciation of her beauty, charm, and amiability of the evening before. He thought a lot more about Ida. If only he had seen the headlines announcing the confession of Jonathan Morgan *before* he took Toni to dinner, he would have felt free to approach Ida and Ned in Hilary Duggan's. With a pang of guilt it occurred to him for the first time that there had been nothing to stop him from going back there as soon as he had read the story. He must have been too numbed with fatigue —or was it more than that?

Larry wondered. Ever since Ida had set herself against his pursuing the subject of the thesis that was now to win him his degree from Columbia he had felt an element of distrust—a distrust that had been increased rather than lessened by the subsequent knowledge of an Amazonian conspiracy.

It was time, of course, that he and Ida settled a few things. He wondered if she actually were a daughter of the Amazons, decided as he had that morning such was scarcely possible. After all, not all women carried the dominant strain—very few of them in fact. Dolores Green was awash with Amazonian characteristics—he was perfectly willing to accept her as one—but Ida or Toni were both normal girls.

When it came to Ned Tolman, Larry was still undecided. After all it had been Ned who had abetted him in his course of action toward the thesis, who had egged him along. But wouldn't such behavior run directly counter-current to that of the conspiracy? He began to wonder if the whole business were not a strange

phantasm dreamed up by the food-warped brain of Mayne Cornaman.

Then he thought of the murdered girl in the biology building, of the bewildered young man who had given himself up for the crime, of Dolores' behavior, of the incredible silent violence with which his apartment had been literally torn to pieces the night before, of the presence of such men as Dean Whittaker and especially Leon Brett at the conference that day. No, it was all real enough.

One of Mayne Cornaman's theories, propounded after his tremendous lunch, had been frightening. He had suggested that the conspirators were taking action not so much because they feared world destruction via A- or H-bomb warfare as because they were approaching solution to the problem of parthenogenesis.

"After all," he had stated, "if *I* could at least get on the trail of a workable process, *they* could have found one of their own in the past twenty years. I may be something of a genius but unfortunately I'm not the only genius operating. Nor, despite popular sentiment, is genius an exclusively male property."

Larry shivered as he recalled the fat man's words. One of Mayne Cornaman's most terrifying traits was his inability or refusal to allow himself an iota of wishful thinking, even under extreme pressure. It was one of the things that made him so shocking. He voiced what he knew to be true, not what he wanted or expected others wanted to be true. Curiously enough, such candor gave him an aura almost of madness.

Yet Larry was becoming increasingly sure that the fat man might well be a lone island of sanity in a crazy world.

His thoughts went back to Ida, to her fineness and loyalty, to her near-beauty that was more than beauty, to his own intentions of making up to her for the trouble he must have caused her. He was still thinking of her

when he walked from the elevator to his apartment and found the door ajar.

This was probably the reason why he halted on the threshold and blinked stupidly at Toni Loring, who sat cross-legged on the floor resewing a piece of damaged upholstery. Finally he said, "Hey! You aren't supposed to be doing that. How'd you get in?"

"The door was open. Besides, a gal's got to do something when there's no man around the house," Toni said brightly. She rose a trifle stiffly, pirouetted, and showed him the results of her work. "How'm I doin', stranger?"

"Great!" said Larry. He kissed her and it didn't exactly come under the heading of hard work, even with his current thoughts about Ida. Actually, thanks to Toni's efforts, most of the surface damage done by the housewrecker of the night before was undone.

"I'm afraid you'll have to order a new bed though," she informed him demurely. "They said it couldn't be fixed."

He grinned. She looked up at him and pushed back her dark-blond hair and said with a trace of anxiety, "Then you don't mind my coming in and doing this on my own?"

"Toni, I love it!" he told her. Then, "Now beat it for a bit—I've got to dunk what one young lady recently called my beautiful pagan body—bowlegs and all."

"Tell me who she is—and I'll eliminate her," said Toni. Then, when Larry laughed, she asked, "Incidentally, who's Ned—is he crazy?"

Larry grinned, then straightened his face and said ponderously, "There are at least a dozen schools of thought on that. When did he call?"

"About half an hour ago," Toni said, frowning. "I let the phone ring for a while and then I thought it might be you and answered it and he said it was Ned and was I your new houri and I told him he ought to have his mouth washed out with soap and he said if I'd wash it

out for him he'd blow iridescent bubbles to amuse me and let me dance around in cheesecloth while he blew more bubbles on a pipe."

She paused for breath, then went on with "So I thought I'd better break him up and asked him what days he took in washing and he said half past six and he and someone named Ida would be at Hilary Duggan's at that time and that if I didn't bring you over they'd come over here and wreck the joint."

"Hold on," said Larry. "You mean Ned and Ida want me to bring you over there at half past six." He looked at his watch, considering the possibilities of this unexpected development, saw it was already ten to six, told Toni to beat it and dress herself while he took his shower.

She said, "Can't I hold the soap?"

"You might wash my mouth out with it," he reminded her, pushing her toward the door. She was, he thought as the water poured over him, a thoroughly delightful if not-so-little minx. Then he thought of the fix Ned had got him into by bringing the two girls together. All in all it was a typical Ned Tolman play. He grinned through the cascading water even while silently cursing the newspaperman.

He shaved and got dressed in a matter of fifteen minutes but when he opened the door of his apartment Toni was already emerging from hers. She was wearing a blue dress with brown and gold trim that added immeasurably to her already remarkable vividness. In her presence it was a little hard for him to visualize Ida.

She made a face at him, said, "And I thought *I* was a quick-change artist. Good! You're wearing the sharkskin suit."

"You seem to have even my clothing catalogued," he remarked as he took her arm in his and they moved toward the elevator.

"Why not?" She laughed up at him. "After spending

the day trying to put your apartment to rights. Did you have a nice time wherever you were?"

"Not exactly nice—but interesting," he replied. "You make me feel like a heel for letting you do the work."

"Don't be an idiot, Larry," she said. "After all, it was my own idea. And I enjoyed it. I'm really a domestic animal."

Again they walked to the restaurant. By standing back so that Toni could enter first Larry was able to disengage himself from her. He felt more than a little uncomfortable about what lay ahead. But at sight of him Ned Tolman, shaggy and unlikely as ever, broke away from the bar and grabbed Larry and, after greeting him, seized Toni by the shoulders and said, "Is this the leprechaun that stood me on my ear over the phone? Faith and she looks like a crashing colleen!"

Toni dimpled and said, "I wish I could say the same of you," and from then on was gobbled up in a Niagara of Tolman persiflage. With a grateful look at the newspaperman, Larry was able to go to Ida at least temporarily without entanglements.

She waited for him to come to her and the tasteful simplicity of her black dress, the simplicity with which her glowing brown hair was done, the lack of extravagant make-up on her face, made Toni by comparison seem a little flashy, a little cheap.

She didn't offer to kiss him, but relief and affection glowed in her eyes and she extended her hands to clasp his. She said, "Larry, I can't tell you how glad I was when Ned told me he'd found a message from you at his hotel! We've been out of our minds looking for you. It must have been awful."

He said, "It's been—well, bizarre is more the word, I'm afraid. And until I saw the papers last night I couldn't even try to get in touch with you. I'd caused you enough trouble already."

"Larry!" The word was a reproach. "Lots of people

have been asking questions about you but I didn't mind that. I've been almost sick with worry ever since that girl got killed."

Looking closely at her, even in the astutely flattering dimness of Hilary Duggan's lighting, Larry could see the signs of recent strain and sleeplessness in dark shadows under her eyes, in a certain tenseness of expression he didn't remember previously. He said, "I guess I should have taken your advice. But, darling, I just heard today that Columbia is accepting my thesis."

For a moment she looked dismayed, then said, "It's wonderful, Larry—but I don't understand how there's been time . . ."

"It's happened though," he told her. "I've just come from a session with Dean Whittaker."

"What's all this?" asked Ned, coming up with Toni on Larry's other side. "Still worrying about that thesis, Larry?"

"Not any more," he replied. "It's in."

For a moment even Ned looked dazed. Then he began to pump Larry's hand vigorously, said, "Well, into each life a little smörgasbord must fall. Chemistry's loss is biology's gain. Nice going, Larry, though I don't see how you managed it under the circumstances."

Toni looked at him with one eyebrow slightly raised, then at Ida, then back to him. They had a drink and talked things over and then the girls adjourned for a powder-room skirmish while Ned and Larry got a table. Across the board Ned looked at him and said, "Here I've been expecting to get a much-needed facial depilation by using the shine on that old suit of yours as a mirror. And I find you looking like a latter-day Beau Brummel, a twentieth-century Lucius Beebe. Man, you must have fallen right into a vatful of golden lard."

"It's all absolutely insane," Larry told him. "When I took off from Boston I seem to have started a chain reaction of events that is taking me all over the place."

"It looks like a sort of uphill primrose path to me," said Ned, shaking his head. "I've been expecting to see you in jail."

"It was swell of you and Ida to rally round this way," said Larry sincerely. "Seriously, Ned, how's Ida taking it?"

Ned made a grimace at his glass, said, "Hard—and maybe I made a mistake having this little Nesselrode pie of yours come over with you. Ida's a swell girl, Larry, a thoroughbred." He paused.

"I know it," said Larry. "Don't worry about Toni. She's just the girl who lives next door. My place got messed up by the police and she was fixing it up for me when you called. I was seeing Dean Whittaker and learning about my thesis."

"I figured it must be something like that," Ned told him after a speculative moment. "But I had to be sure. You see, Larry, there's a thing or two about Ida I don't believe you understand. Oh-oh, here they come. Get down to my place tomorrow at ten and I'll go into details then."

The girls sat down with a sort of mutual wariness. Each in her own way, Larry thought, was a stunner. He supposed he ought to consider himself a lucky man but all he could think of was the Chinese symbol for the word trouble—two women-symbols under a broken line that symbolized a single roof. If that was trouble he had it.

It was while they ordered dinner that it happened. If Larry's eyes were more watchful than usual it was not because of Mayne Cornaman's warning, rather concern lest a touchy situation get out of hand. But he was very much on the alert. And when, after the waiter had taken their orders and Toni stuck a cigarette in her mouth and looked around for a light, he saw Ida watching her, saw the lighter in Toni's handbag on the table rise to meet her groping fingers of its own volition. He saw Ida's blue

eyes narrow in concentration as the lighter moved, so slightly that Toni appeared not to notice.

It was a hammer-blow—for certainly it was an example of telekinesis, the ability to move objects by willing them to move. He recalled what Mayne Cornaman had told him of the *psi* powers of the Amazonians, of what he had discovered himself, of their secret recognition test-signs. All of his earlier suspicions of Ida came back with compound interest added.

And when Ned, to celebrate their reunion, Larry's freedom, and the acceptance of his thesis, suggested they keep the cocktails flowing, Larry set about getting drunk as quickly and thoroughly as he could.

11

BUT UNLIKE his last evening in Boston, which had launched him on his dizzy and dangerous series of adventures, this time Larry found himself unable to attain the intoxication he sought. Perhaps the reason lay in the renewal of his keyed-up condition caused by sight of the cigarette lighter that seemed to move by itself—perhaps it lay in the shortness of sleep that had been part of his last four days—perhaps it just wasn't his night to get drunk. But whatever the cause, after downing three double gibsons, he found himself perfectly sober, even a little depressed.

The steaks arrived, sizzling and accompanied by their inevitable auxiliaries—french-fried potatoes, toast, butter, side salads in round wooden bowls replete with greens tossed in thin sharp white dressing. Larry ate sparingly, watching and listening to the table conversation with an odd sense of detachment, as if he were looking on from another table.

Ida too seemed quiet and detached as if, having found him and found him clear of trouble, her mainspring had been removed. Or, in view of her trick with the lighter, perhaps considering a whole new set of moves against him now that his thesis was being accepted. At the moment Larry was not inclined to be charitable toward her.

But Ned and Toni kept the conversational ball rolling

and spinning like something in a pinball machine. It seemed they knew a few of the same New York people and could compare notes and anecdotes about them. Knowing the journalist, Larry was aware that Ned was shrewdly sounding out his new next-door neighbor, a fact of which Toni seemed blithely unaware.

They were discussing another model, a girl named Oklahoma Something, and Ned remarked, "She'd make two of you, Toni—a sort of six-bit Marilyn Monroe. What curves—like a commodities graph in a period of business uncertainty. How well did you know her?"

Toni wrinkled her nose and laughed and said, "We did a series of liquor ads together. She was the highball and I was the cocktail. They were sort of cute, if I do say so."

"Hardly the adjective to apply to Oklahoma," remarked Ned. "That big babe was about as cute as a Venus de Milo with arms. The two of you must have looked like Mutt and Jeff dressed up in female clothing on a double date."

Toni giggled. "That was part of the campaign," she replied. "Okie was paired off with Tony Marinello, the jockey, while they stuck me with Joe O'Brien, the big outfielder. We had to go everywhere together for a couple of months."

"Well, at least you two must have had a nice quiet time," said Ned, smiling faintly. "The first time Joe spoke to an umpire in his life the umpire was so surprised he tossed him out of the game. And all Joe said was, 'I think I tore my pants.'"

"He said, 'I think it's going to rain,' once when we were out together," Toni said with a mock frown as if she had to concentrate to remember her erstwhile escort's exact words.

Half listening, Larry smiled dutifully but felt his suspicions increase rather than wane. He didn't believe for a moment that Ned was chattering with Toni merely

to call her attention away from himself—or to keep the conversation rolling. He wondered why his friend was doing such a job of drawing the girl out.

From his experience of the little gray man and from what Mayne Cornaman had told him, Larry knew the Amazons employed agents of both sexes. He wished he had been able to watch Ned, as well as Ida, while Toni's cigarette lighter took its telekinetic trip to her hand.

It occurred to him that perhaps Ned was the agent rather than Ida, that her odd expression while the lighter moved had resulted from her knowledge of Ned's undercover life. Again, to think of it, it *was* Ned who had urged him to bring his thesis to New York, who had done his apparent best to send him into the trap at Columbia.

But second thoughts poked plenty of holes in this theory. In the first place, if Ned *were* an agent of the female conspiracy, he would scarcely have egged him on to develop the thesis in the first place—or would he? He might have done so in the hope that Larry would come up with something that might help the Amazons in their drive toward parthenogenetic independence of men.

Still, it didn't make sense. He decided he was going to have to talk to the journalist before tomorrow, made up his mind to seize the first opportunity that offered for a talk. Whichever side he was on, Ned knew a hell of a lot more than he had ever told.

However, such an opportunity proved hard to find. When they finished dinner Ned proposed that they make a real night of it and go on to a place he knew in the East Fifties. When they got there Larry thought his chance had come as the girls disappeared into the powder room before sitting down at their table.

They were at a table for four in the near-center of a low-ceiled pleasantly restful rectangular room. A cluster of drinkers hid the bar near the entrance and on a small bandstand, midway along one of the side walls, a shaggy-

haired young man did incredible things with an electric guitar.

Larry said, "Ned, I don't know what your part is in all this but I've been getting quite a briefing on what seems really to be going on. I think it's time you did some talking."

Ned looked at him with somber affection, said finally, "I know—but it's a hell of a long story and I don't think this is just the place for it. Better wait till tomorrow morning."

"Maybe I can save you some of it," Larry suggested. "I've got a damned good idea of the background—and some of the foreground too."

"I don't think you know the facet of it I can tell you," said Ned firmly. "But frankly I believe you ought to know certain things about Ida. She's in love with you, you know, and Ida's not the type of girl to—"

"Talking about me?" Ida stood over them for a moment, looking suspiciously from Ned to Larry and back to Ned again before sitting down. She accepted a cigarette from Larry, then said with unexpected bitterness, "I suppose Ned has a lot of things to tell you about me."

"I do." He dropped a friendly hand over one of hers and she pulled sharply clear. He shrugged and added, "It isn't like you, baby, to be this suspicious. Where's the Marie Antoinette of Commonwealth Avenue?"

"This Marie Antoinette is getting sick of waiting for her head to be chopped off," snapped the girl, speaking to both of them. "If you're going to play headsman, Ned, I wish you'd do it with me here. Then maybe I might have a chance to pick up the pieces."

"Believe me," Ned told her quietly, "I'll never say or do anything to hurt you, Ida. You may be Larry's girl but I count you among the swellest people I've ever known."

"You always did have a line that would take the pavement off a concrete road," Ida said bitterly. Then the newly harsh lines of her face softened and she looked

at them in bewilderment, added, "I'm sorry, kids—I don't know what got into me. It isn't like me to talk or even think that way. Maybe this mess of Larry's . . ." She made an aimless gesture as if to dismiss it.

Toni appeared then, smiling and amiable as usual, and said with an uplifted eyebrow, "Do I detect a faint smell of brimstone in the air? Or is it gunpowder?"

"The two," said Ned pontifically, "are virtually synonymous."

"In a Poland China's ventricle," said Toni unexpectedly.

Ned regarded her with a pained expression, then informed her, "My solicitors will call on you in the morning to charge you with rank plagiarism. Get out of my big-word act."

"Are they cute?" Toni asked brightly.

Her good humor, a perfect foil for Ned's somewhat more moribund wit, inevitably lifted the spirits of the others. Larry actually found himself laughing with Ida at some of their interchanges. Then a superb hot-jazz trio took the stand and they listened with little comment while the musicians ran through a set of standard numbers made unique and delightful through the imagination and artistry of their playing.

When they had finished Ned said, "Good Lord, there's Big Jack Watson—used to be my boss at X Syndicate."

"He's an old doll," said Toni, rising with him. "I'm going with you."

"Watch your language," Ned warned as they moved between tables. "Like most old newspapermen, Jack is very sensitive."

Larry couldn't hear Toni's reply but he saw Ned's shoulders quiver with laughter. He turned to Ida and read in her direct gaze, in the slight parting of her lips, her eagerness to be on good terms again with him. Yet, though he wanted to tell her everything was going to be fine between them, though he wanted to grip her hand

and give such physical reassurance as a public place permitted, memory of the lighter that moved by itself rose between them.

She said, "I don't know what I expected, Larry—I didn't dare hope I'd ever be with you like this again, I guess—but something's wrong. What is it, darling?"

He made a vague gesture while he tried to think of something to say. Finally he tried to smile and told her, "There's nothing, really—maybe I'm simply exhausted by all that's happened. I've been through a hell of a lot this last week."

Her expression softened again to one of sympathy. "I know you have, darling, and I'm so terribly happy you've come through it so well. It's been a perfect hell for me too. Ned and I came down here on a sort of forlorn hope—we didn't know just what we could do to help you or even to find you. But I had to come."

"I'm terribly grateful," he told her. "And I'm sorry you had to go through it."

"I don't want you to be grateful or sorry," she said with a return of the sharpness that seemed so alien to the Ida Stevens he knew. "I want the Larry Finlay I fell in love with in Boston. What's happened to him, Larry?"

"He's still around," said Larry uncomfortably. "He's sitting right here in my chair. Don't let the new clothes fool you."

"They don't," she replied. "Oh, it's not the clothes. It's—Larry, what about this girl Toni?"

He shrugged but felt his face grow hot, his sense of guilt return. He said, "Don't worry about her. She's just a neighbor."

"Are you sure?" she asked searchingly.

"Ida—you're jealous!" he countered. "Don't be. Toni is just a pretty girl who happens to live next door to the place I got stuck in. She's been nice to me, that's all."

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Ida. "Of course I'm jealous. All those months in Boston when you treated me

like somebody else's, porcelain dog—and now, overnight, and I do mean overnight, you——"

"Cut it out," said Larry almost fiercely. "You have no call to be jealous. Compared to you she's—well, almost cheap."

"Maybe that's more your type," said Ida bitterly. "Maybe you like your women a little bit cheap. She as much as claimed you in the powder room just now—asked me a couple of questions about you I couldn't answer. How do you think I felt about that?"

"Sorry," he said. Then—"But it isn't anything for you to get excited about. It was just something that happened——"

"You're rationalizing, Larry," Ida told him. "You know what *I* think? I think you're the worst kind of snob there is. You wouldn't commit yourself with me because you thought I was rich and you didn't have any money. I don't pretend to know everything that's happened since you left Boston but it's obvious you're not poor any more—so you fall for the first pretty girl who turns up. Tell me, Larry, do you think you've been fair?"

"Perhaps not," he replied, his face hot but no longer from embarrassment—he was growing angrier by the second. "Perhaps not—but do you think you've been entirely fair with me—ever?" He looked at her steadily, accusingly, thinking of how she had tried to keep him from doing more work on his thesis, of how she had sought to discourage him all along, of what she must be and know.

Her eyes fell away and she said bitterly, "Maybe some of the things I've done may seem odd to you, Larry—but I've never been with another man since I fell in love with you."

"I've stayed away from other men too," he replied.

She actually struck at his wrist on the tablecloth and said, her voice low and strained, "The very fact you can joke about it shows how little you think of me. Larry,

there are a lot of things I've got to know—that I've got a right to know."

"There are a few things I'd like to know myself," he retorted. "Until you level off with me I don't see what right you have to exert any claim on me."

It was stalemate. They were still glaring at each other in sullen silence when Toni and Ned came back. Before the journalist could sit down Ida got up, pulling her jacket around her. She said, "Take me home, Ned—now."

He glanced at Larry, who stared stubbornly at nothing, said, "Okay, Ida. The evening is still in its chrysalis stage but if you say so . . ." He gestured good night to Larry and Toni, followed the angry girl as she threaded her way through the tables toward the entry.

"Well!" Toni looked curiously after them. "What caused that little flare-up?"

"You did—partly," he told her bluntly. "You could have watched your words in the powder room a bit more carefully."

"Why, Larry!" she countered with a gurgle of soft laughter. "I never said a thing to incriminate either of us—not that we've done anything criminal. Of course, if your friend Ida chose to misinterpret my remarks . . ." She paused, looked at him with smiling slyness, added, "And you can't blame a girl for gloating just a little."

In spite of himself he grinned. Toni was such a complete woman. He said, "I got hung for a gloat, all right."

"That's my boy!" said Toni, smiling mischievously. "It's better than being hung for a sheep."

And Larry felt more relaxed than at any time during the evening. It had been an uncomfortable reunion. He wondered if Toni's presence had added to or lessened the embarrassments, decided they might have been even worse had she not been along. A soft hand captured one of his beneath the cloth and he felt pleasant warmth steal through him.

She said, "Larry, I'm no angel but I'm not a tramp

either. I'm growing fonder of you by the minute. But if you ever decide you don't want me I won't make the kind of a scene your Ida did—I'll simply go out and get me a better man."

Curiously enough, he knew she was telling the truth. She might not be quite a lady by Ida's more rigid standards—though if she made up her mind to be one he didn't doubt for a moment that she could queen it with the best of the young matrons in any society. In a way she belonged to the world's only true aristocracy—the aristocracy of beautiful young women. Her easy assurance came from the well-learned knowledge that she could do almost as she pleased with life and pay virtually none of the usual penalties.

Yet she was not arrogant about her fortune—she simply accepted it and asked others to do no more. Larry felt an odd thread of respect woven through his somewhat casual affection for her. Certainly she had been generous from the start.

She waved a hand vertically in front of his eyes, said, "Come on back from wherever you are."

He started, grinned sheepishly, said, "Sorry—as a matter of fact I was thinking some very nice things about you, Toni. And as a further matter of fact—that's getting to be a habit with me."

The pressure of her other hand on his increased beneath the table.

"A nice habit," she replied, her shoulder touching his. "One of the nicest habits I've ever known."

Despite Larry's concern over Ida, his second night with Toni was even more romantic, even more sexually delightful, than the first. If this made him a heel, he thought in one fleeting, rational moment, then he had wasted the devil of a lot of time playing things straight.

12

THE NEXT MORNING Larry awoke to Toni's knock on his door. He sat up and moaned and saw that it was late morning. He painfully dragged himself from bed, put on a dressing gown, and let her in.

"It's time you were up," she said. "I must say you look charming."

Larry groaned, said, "Holy cow, honey! I must have been drinking mule liquor last night. What a head!"

Toni smiled. "You opened fire heavily enough. Then you lay down and took it easy. It must have been those three drinks of scotch you had here with me later."

He moaned again, then laughed in spite of his discomfort. Even in the morning she was vivid and warm and lovely. He wondered, in the light of what had happened during the past week, if he could have got through it without her. A sudden surge of affection swept through him and he took her into his arms and kissed her.

When he happened to look at the clock he saw that it was ten-fifteen. All at once he recalled his date with Ned Tolman. Which brought back sharply the reason behind his sudden abortive desire to lose himself in drink the night before.

Without closing his eyes he could still see Toni's cigarette lighter leap from the table to her outstretched fingers, could see the look of intense concentration on

Ida's face. Toni hadn't been looking—it would have seemed to her that she had merely found the lighter lying on the tablecloth, had picked it up herself.

So Ned had something to tell him about Ida—well, Larry had an item or two to trade with him about his former girl. He steered Toni toward the door.

"Beat it, gal," he said. "I've got an appointment."

Toni clung to him at the door, said, "You won't be long?"

"No longer than I can help," he replied and meant it. At the moment this girl, so recently an utter stranger, was the one reality to which he could cling. And he was sorely in need of her. He gave her an affectionate pat and closed the door. Then he showered and dressed as fast as his condition would allow.

Ned's hotel was a refurbished fifty-year-old narrow-fronted structure of red and white brick that looked oddly old-fashioned beside the aggressively chaste white and chrome office buildings that flanked it. But the interior was pleasantly dim and cool and the elevator was of swift recent vintage.

Larry found Ned's door and knocked, then knocked again, harder. The door gave a little under his knuckles and he discovered it was not latched. Evidently, he thought as he went on in, Ned had gone out on an errand or for breakfast, wanted him to wait there until he returned.

Inside the door Larry stopped dead and looked numbly at the scene before him. Only half-consciously he took in the details of the room itself. It was a comfortable chamber, larger than the cubicles of more modern hostelries. The bed was made, its rust-colored brocade spread in harmony with the lighter hue of the walls. To his left was a faintly tinted print of pioneer bicyclers in Central Park, above a Palladian marble mantel beneath which was a fireplace adorned with unpainted Hessian andirons and neatly laid artificial logs.

Ned Tolman lay on his face on the floor with the back of his head bashed in. Hair and flesh and blood and bones and brains lay mixed in a ghastly pudding that had overflowed onto the pale green flowered carpet. He was in his shirt sleeves—the coat that matched the trousers he wore was draped carefully over the back of a chair.

Beside him, on its back, a gilt-bronze and marble ormolu clock lay ticking remorselessly away. Bronze horses reared on either side of the dial frame, their fore legs joining the dial frame, their hind legs rooted in the marble base. It must, Larry thought aimlessly as he looked at it, weigh all of twenty to twenty-five pounds,

That the clock had killed him was almost self-evident. One of its sharp granite corners was spread like some surrealist canapé with the same grisly mixture that had flowed from Ned's skull onto the carpet. Its hands, pointed to four minutes of eleven, clicked as the minute hand moved another notch nearer the hour.

As if drawn by a magnet Larry moved to the mantel. There, upon the marble surface, was a rectangle of dustless space where the bottom of the clock must have rested until hours, more probably minutes before. Larry wondered, appalled, at the strength of a murderer who could wield such a heavy weapon silently and expertly enough to catch Ned Tolman from behind and kill him.

Then he became aware of a faint clinging smell his consciousness had only half registered earlier. It was sweet and heavy, animal in base—yet definitely feminine. He sniffed again and found it increasingly elusive. Either his nostrils were becoming accustomed to it or it was fading while he stood there.

His stomach went into violent revolt and Larry was grateful he had not eaten breakfast. At once memory recalled a vivid picture of Mayne Cornaman indulging in one of his pantagruelian repasts and he felt cold sweat burst out all over him.

He knew he should call somebody and report Ned's

murder—for there could be no question of accident or suicide, even to his untutored eyes. Yet he did not know whether the fat man was still on Long Island or on his way back to town—and he had no wish to talk to the lubricous Dolores. If he called Lieutenant Harvey or the hotel desk—no, neither move would accomplish much at this point.

Poor Ned—at least he was certain now that his friend had been on the side of the angels. And Ned had wanted to talk to him about Ida—tell him something he ought to know. Larry had a grim idea of what sort of information the newspaperman had planned to give him. All at once he knew intuitively that Ned had been one of Cornaman's agents.

That alone would explain his traveling to Boston to take up a lesser job. It would, if Ida were an important member of the Amazonian conspiracy, explain his hanging around her. It would also explain his urging Larry to write the haemophilia thesis, his quick suspicion of counter-moves when the thesis was rejected.

Larry said, "Damn them!" under his breath and a sudden surge of hatred swept over him, almost causing his vision to blank out. They had killed him to prevent him from talking about Ida—but how had they known about his appointment of the morning?

Larry began to feel sicker. He had been drunk last night—but he and Ned had been with Ida much of the evening. Wasn't it probable that she had overheard their private talk? He turned and stumbled out of there, closing the door tightly behind him, struggled for self-control while the elevator rose to his summons. It was time he and Ida had it out.

He dug out the gold-cornered wallet, found within it the address Ida had given him early the evening before. It was on Sutton Place. He got into a cab, gave the driver the address, lit a cigarette with shaking fingers, and tried to organize his thoughts. He knew, as surely as he sat

on the leather taxi cushions, that Ned had been murdered by telekinesis.

He felt fear as he stood atop the iron-railed steps that led to Ida's front door—he felt terribly alone and vulnerable. Instinctively, before his hand went to the push-button, he glanced upward, his eyes seeking loose cornices or heavy ornamentation that might be induced to drop upon him.

He was extending his forefinger to push the button when the heavy black wooden door was opened from within. Ida stood there, looking pale and frozen as he himself felt. Wordlessly she stood aside for him to enter, closed the door behind him, led him through a spare elegant hall into a small, sparsely luxurious sitting room.

There she said, "Larry—what's happened? You look . . ." Her voice trailed off as she studied him anxiously.

He said, "You knew I was coming here—how?"

Her shoulders, unusually broad for a girl, sagged. In a small voice she told him, "I suppose I could say I saw you from a window. But I knew—I almost always know things like that."

His thoughts ranged backward over the time he had known her. There had been other incidents—the time he had forgotten to bring the beer to a South Shore picnic and Ida had smilingly produced it from the back of the car—the time he had received an unexpected day off and found her waiting at Mrs. Bemis'—the time . . . But there had been a number of them, all put down to coincidence. Unquestionably Ida was telepathic, if not clairvoyant. It meant another nail in the coffin of evidence he was building around her. She hadn't even had to overhear them to know his and Ned's plans for the morning.

He said, "Do you know Ned's been killed?"

Her face drained of color, leaving her lipstick a ghastly blotch of distortion. She said, "When, Larry—how'd it happen?"

"Not long ago—I just found him," he replied. "It was

telekinesis. But I don't know why I have to tell you."

She uttered a small wordless sound—as if he had driven a stake through her heart. She said, "Oh, Larry—I didn't dream—they weren't supposed to——" Abruptly, the back of a hand against her mouth, she shrank into a small armchair.

"Who wasn't supposed to what?" he countered grimly.

"She promised—she promised none of my friends would suffer," was the reply.

He lit a cigarette and his hands were no longer shaking. He said, "I see. None of your friends are supposed to suffer. So first my thesis is bounced, then a perfectly harmless girl is killed and a decent young fellow is in jail for killing her simply because I tried to bring the damned thing here. And now Ned's been murdered because he wanted to talk to me about you. But why should I bother telling you—you probably know it already with your damned telepathy or clairvoyance or whatever other paranormal powers you have."

"But I'm not clairvoyant," she said. "If I could have foreseen any of this I'd have—I'd have done something to stop it. Can't you see what it's doing to me?"

"You'll survive, never fear," he told her bitterly. "Arlene Crady didn't, Ned didn't, maybe I won't—but *you* will. Just who and what are you anyway, Ida? A witch—a ghoul?"

This time her cry was louder. She looked at him as if she wanted to burst into tears but no tears would come. She said, her voice low, "Give me a cigarette, will you, Larry?"

Automatically he gave her one, even held the lighter for her. He said, "I suppose you didn't foresee any of this when you tried to get me to tear up my thesis. It was *you* who got it bounced in Boston, wasn't it?"

She nodded mutely, then burst out with "But can't you see how hard I tried to make up for having to do it? Can't you see that I've loved you right along, darling?

Can't you see——?" She stopped, made a helpless gesture, added, "Oh, what's the use?"

"And you're not clairvoyant, I suppose," he told her acidly. Even in his current condition he had to fight the pull this girl exerted over him, the desire to hold her close and comfort and protect her. That, he thought, was a laugh—him protecting her!

"No, I'm not," she replied stoutly. "Sometimes I can read people's thoughts—if they're awfully close to me. I used to know most of what you were thinking, Larry. Maybe that's why I fell in love with you, why I was willing to wait until you overcame all your ridiculous scruples about loving a rich girl."

Because of his rocketing emotions he said savagely, "That still doesn't answer my question—who and what are you?"

She turned her face away as if he had struck her. Then she said unevenly, "I don't know just who or what I am, Larry. You see, I don't even know who my parents were. All I know is I was brought here by my grandmother. She's given me everything though I don't even know for certain she is my grandmother. All she asked was that I do occasional things she asked me to do——"

"Like reporting on my thesis—or that I was coming here to New York with it—or that Ned and I were to talk about you this morning," he said. "That sort of thing?"

She nodded mutely, then told him, "Grandmother's not the sort of woman you can disobey. She—well, you just can't, that's all."

"Where is she?" Larry asked. "I'd like to have about five minutes alone with her."

"It wouldn't do you any good," she stated. "Besides, Grandmother's down on the island. If she'd been here she'd never have let any of this happen. Believe me, darling, I know."

"I wonder," said Larry. "But what are you going to do about Ned—and about me."

She struck a thigh with her fist, cried, "I don't *know*, Larry! Can't you see I'm as upset as you are? I'm going to have to go to her and get it all straightened out." Then, with an impulsive gesture—"Come with me, Larry. She's got to know about us—if there still is an us."

"What makes you think she doesn't know?" Larry asked drily.

"Because she wouldn't let . . ." Ida began, then her voice faded out once more and the color, which had begun to return to her face, vanished with it. She added, her voice tiny, "Because I know she wouldn't have let any of this happen." And, rising and coming to Larry and putting her hands on his shoulders, "Even if she does know about this she doesn't know *you*. When she sees how much my happiness depends on you she'll—oh, darling, you've got to come with me. You'll love it down there. I've always wanted you there with me but I never had the courage to ask you before."

"Besides," he said drily, "it might be very convenient to have both you and me out of the country. This fabulous island of your grandmother's *is* out of the country, isn't it?"

"It's Sulla Cay, off Florida." Then, frightened—"What do you mean?" she asked almost fiercely.

"I mean, with Ned getting killed on top of the Crady murder, the police might want to ask some embarrassing questions," he said.

She struck him. Since she was a strong girl with plenty of athletic training, her open hand left a sharp sting in its wake. But Larry refused to lift his fingers to the hurt. He just looked at her until she covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

He felt like a heel. But he thought of Ned lying on the floor in a welter of his own brains in a hotel room downtown and said, "Okay, Ida, I guess this is it." He turned to walk out.

At once she seized him from behind, swung him around, said, "Darling, I'm sorry—I'd never have done that if I hadn't been counting on you so. Even after last night. I'm frightened sick and when you came here I thought I could at least count on you. I *do* love you and I'd rather be dead than have hurt you. Your poor cheek!" She put a hand against the place she had slapped.

"I don't have to tell you what I'm thinking," he told her, "since you can read my mind."

"Not now," she said bitterly. "Not when you're hating me like this. It would make me sick." She stepped back from him and seemed to gather herself together, said, "All right, maybe you can't help the things you're thinking about me. I can't blame you—it's just that they come as a shock."

"So did finding Ned," he told her somberly.

"I know!" she said. "And maybe I have no right to ask you to visit Grandmother with me. But I'll do it alone—I'll go there this afternoon. I'll be there tomorrow and we can straighten everything out, I'm sure of it." Then, after a pause, lifting downcast eyes, "You're sure you won't come along with me, darling?"

"Frankly," he told her, "I wouldn't dare."

He left her there, stricken, hands dangling at her sides as if she had forgotten how to make them obey the commands of her mind—or as if her mind lacked purpose to command. He was going to have to see the fat man as soon as possible.

Outside, as he set out for Mayne Cornaman's house, he saw a colorless little man, who wore one shoulder higher than the other and hid his eyes behind thick-lensed glasses, duck out of sight in an areaway across the street. It was the same little gray man who had followed him from Boston with the thesis, the same little gray man Dan Bright had disposed of so neatly on the sidewalk outside Columbia.

13

LARRY HAILED A CAB, told the driver to take him north under the bridge for a few blocks. Satisfied he was not followed he ordered the man to drive him to Mayne Cornaman's house, which was only a hop, skip, and jump from Sutton Place. He wondered what the odd little man had been doing there. Had he tailed Larry from Ned's hotel—or was he simply on duty outside Ida's grandmother's house to take note of arrivals and departures? Larry gave it up—but the little man's presence was an added source of uneasiness.

Dolores answered his ring of the doorbell. She looked astonishingly handsome in a clinging green woolen dress that stressed the willowy lines of her long torso. She regarded him with a sardonic flicker of long-lashed eyelids, said, "Come on in. The boss isn't back yet so what shall we play—checkers? I hear you've been getting some practice of late."

He ignored the remark and the openly carnal invitation that had prompted it, asked brusquely, "When will Mr. Cornaman be here?"

"Would you believe me if I told you?" she countered, opening the door to the fat man's study and beckoning him in with a lateral motion of her well-shaped head. "Remember—I'm a spy!"

He said rudely, "Oh, shut up!" and flopped in a chair.

Dolores shrugged shapely shoulders and sat down in another. She picked up a book from a small table beside it, settled down to read.

Although he tried with increasing desperation to apply himself to mental organization of the events of the past day and evening so that he could offer a coherent report to Mayne Cornaman when he arrived, Larry found it almost impossible to concentrate. He began to wonder if the stress and strain of the hectic week past had unhinged his balance. Never before, save in very special instances, had the mere presence of an attractive female prevented him from organizing his thoughts.

Yet, though she appeared to be paying him no attention, Dolores proved unbearably disturbing. It was the more upsetting because he very definitely didn't like this very dark, very sexy girl. There was a contemptuously half-veiled cruelty lying close below the smooth nacreous surface of her skin that actually scared him. And her hypnotic powers . . .

He tried to tell himself that he was letting his nerves run away with him like an old woman. Even if Dolores were one of the enemy, even though she possessed paranormal talents, there was neither rhyme nor reason in letting her frighten him. Yet she did.

Furthermore it was something special about her that was putting the vacuum of fear beneath his ribs. He frowned at her, seeking its source. Certainly it did not lie in her looks—seated there reading she might have been almost any above-average pretty girl. Nor was she offering him any physical threat beyond a mocking willingness.

He ground out his cigarette, lit another, telling himself it was ridiculous. And just before he touched flame to the tip of his smoke, he sniffed—and all but dropped his lighter. The fear raced all over his body like a disciplined army of insects. He knew why he was afraid now—the involuntary sniff had told the story.

In his nostrils was the same oddly heavy sweet musk that still lingered about the hotel room where Ned Tolman lay dead—or had lain dead less than an hour before. Nor was that the first time he had smelled it. He recalled now, riding in an elevator with Dolores on his way to his first breakfast with Mayne Cornaman. He had smelled the same distinctive perfume then.

He looked at her, found her eyes hard on him. He said, "And are you the one who killed Arlene Crady too?"

She shook her head, replied, "No, instantaneous hypnotism is not one of my talents. The boss will bear that out. Besides, I was here with him when that happened." She tapped the book in her lap, added, "Actually I don't think this was worth all the bother."

"Hey!" he cried, astounded. "That's my thesis—the original version."

"*And* the boss's notes," she added imperturbably. She smiled a smile of inner amusement. "It will make one for my side when I tell him about it."

"Then you're the one who wrecked my apartment!" he exclaimed.

Dolores regarded him with high mockery. She shrugged and said, "Well, it was decorated in execrable taste."

But Larry was on his feet, the anger of the past hour attaining a focus. "And it was you," he said savagely, "who killed Ned Tolman this morning so he couldn't talk to me about Ida!"

"I don't like killing," she replied. "Especially young men —not that way anyway—and especially young men I've been—fond of. But Ned was getting awfully tiresome."

Larry glared down at her and she met his glance with her infuriating Gioconda smile. He had an impulse to call the police—but what was there he could tell them? Dolores' mere presence in the hotel that morning would hardly constitute courtroom evidence. No, he was going to have to mete out justice for his

friend's murder in purely personal fashion. Involuntarily he took a step toward her.

"I wouldn't," she said quietly. "I just told you I don't like killing young men—and even more than those I've been fond of do I dislike killing those I have yet to know. Remember what happened to Ned. Remember what happened to your bedroom safe—*and* the bed. Then take a good look around you."

He paused and obeyed. The room seemed filled with objects—heavy books, lamps, glass ashtrays, statuary busts, a number of metal boxes and cabinets—any one of which could become a lethal weapon under the guidance of the girl's telekinetic talents. Overwhelmed with frustration, he sank heavily back into his chair, sat there staring at her stupidly. "You win," he said, "for now."

"I win," she replied, "for always." She studied him as if he were something under glass, mused, "I'm beginning to wonder what you are all about, Larry. You don't *look* like enough hunk of he to be causing all the uproar you're causing. You certainly didn't act it with me."

He could only stare at her, unable to speak. She shrugged again, said, "Well, some day soon I'm going to find out. Meanwhile, here comes the boss."

She rose as the front door opened and, moments later, Mayne Cornaman blotted out the doorway as he came in. He shut the door, said, "Hello, Larry, you look upset." Then he went to the bowl of flowers on his desk, swore, and looked around. Moving with unexpected speed for a man so bulky, he darted to a picture high on the wall, plucked a concealed microphone from behind it, carefully messed it up.

Finished, he plopped down behind his desk, said, "This little game of hide-and-seek is getting to be a nuisance. All right, Larry, out with it—what's wrong?"

"My friend Ned Tolman was killed this morning—

by telekinesis. I found the body," Larry told him bleakly.

Mayne Cornaman had picked up a metal paper cutter and was toying with it in his right hand. When Larry had finished, his plump fingers slowly constricted until, when he dropped it to the desk top, it was a twisted shapeless ribbon of alloy. He said, "Your friend—and mine too, Larry. Do you know why he was killed?"

"I believe because he had something to tell me about Ida—Ida Stevens, who was my girl in Boston," said Larry. "What's more, it was your girl Dolores who killed him. She admitted it—was quite apologetic about it just now. Incidentally it was she who robbed the apartment. There's the original thesis—and your notes." He nodded toward the small table, where Dolores had deposited them.

Mayne Cornaman uttered a single very expressive syllable. His cheeks, despite their plumpness, looked almost sunken as he lifted his eyes to meet Larry's. He said, "Ned was one of the ablest young men I've ever had working for me—one of the finest."

"He was my best friend," said Larry quietly.

"I know," the fat man rumbled. "He thought a whale of a lot of you, Larry. If it hadn't been for his recommendation I would never have accepted you as I have. If it hadn't been for Ned, Dan would never have been able to intercept you at Columbia last week. You'd be in jail, accused of murder, on your way to a mad house."

"I'll do anything I can," said Larry quietly. "Anything."

"I believe you, young man," Mayne Cornaman told him. Then, with the forced trace of a smile—"but now, above all times, we've got to think, not feel. What lies in back of this sudden burst of violence after years of their working without it?"

"I don't know, sir," said Larry, "unless it's because they're ready to strike and are willing to do anything rather than risk any upsetting of their schedule." He

frowned as he spoke, for it was hard for him to think with any detachment just then.

"Possibly," said the fat man, pursing his full lips. "Even probably. But I'll still stick to my guess that it's because of your being closer to the heart of the conspiracy than they like. What about this young lady of yours, this Ida Stevens? She's one of Adelaide Stevens' granddaughters, isn't she?"

"I guess so, except she told me a little while ago she isn't sure about either of her parents," said Larry. He added idly, "She wanted me to go to Sulla Cay, off Florida, to visit her grandmother and try to get things straightened out somehow. I turned her down flat."

"You *what*?" roared Mayne Cornaman, springing up from behind his desk and slamming a thick fist down hard upon it. "You refused to go south with that girl after what we told you yesterday?"

Larry gulped, felt himself grow red. He said, "I couldn't help it. She just as good as admitted it was she who tipped *them* off to Ned's meeting with me this morning."

"And how do you think poor Ned would like it if he knew he had died in vain—just because a quarter-baked young idiot he thought was his friend didn't have either sense or guts enough to see it through?"

"I—I guess he wouldn't have liked it," said Larry wretchedly.

"You're lovin' well right he wouldn't!" roared Cornaman. "What's more—what's more . . ." He ran down, slowly subsided, ran a hand through his thinning hair. "All right," he said wearily. "Perhaps this will help you understand. Adelaide Stevens, under an alias, was the young woman I told you about who had the nerve to come in here twenty-some years ago and tell me I'd better confine my scientific activities to parthenogenetic research from then on or else."

"Yes, sir," said Larry. Then, "Good God, I had no idea!"

"Of course you hadn't," the fat man told him wearily. "It was because of Ida's going to Boston that I sent Ned up there. Adelaide Stevens' granddaughters, all of 'em I know about at any rate, are all carriers of the Amazon strain. I pity any men-children they bear. The only trouble is Addy's sons, poor devils, produced quite a spawn before they died. She encouraged 'em."

"How rotten!" said Larry.

Mayne Cornaman shot him an oblique glance, said, "Son, there's always plenty of moral rottenness about anything truly cosmic—and this conspiracy is the most cosmic thing that's happened in this part of the universe since the planet between Mars and Jupiter blew up and became the asteroids. It's nature in action—like the black widow spider eating her mate after she's conceived. Only these widows are white—for the most part."

"I see," said Larry. Oddly he felt a sudden pang of sympathy for Ida, unsure of her paternity, reared in this strange festering background. He said, "What about Dolores? Aren't you going to do something about her?"

"I shall kill her some day—if she doesn't kill me first," the fat man said unemotionally. He sounded utterly matter of fact about it. Then he added, "She's another of Addy's granddaughters, by the way."

"But there's no resemblance between her and Ida," Larry protested, unwilling to accept such a relationship between the girls.

"You know Mendel's law," Cornaman said brusquely, "or at least Lysenko's. Why should there be a resemblance?" He paused, added, "You say your gal isn't sure of either of her parents?"

"That's what she told me," said Larry. "She isn't even sure about Mrs. Stevens being her grandmother."

There was a sudden speculative gleam in Mayne Cornaman's eyes. He said, "Larry—you don't have a

picture of this gal about you, do you? I'd like to take a look at her."

Larry reached for his wallet, said, "Just a snapshot—it isn't too good. Doesn't do her justice."

"Let me see it." The fat man held out his hand. Larry plucked out the snapshot he had taken of Ida on the North Shore picnic the summer before, handed it to him. It showed Ida from the hips up, clad in bathing-suit trunks and halter and squinting into the sun.

Mayne Cornaman looked at it, then held it under the light and peered at it, then grunted, and dropped it to the desk. His head fell forward into his hands and his huge shoulders began to quiver. For a moment Larry thought he had burst into tears.

But when he lifted his immense pear-shaped head Larry saw that Wayne Cornaman was laughing—laughing so hard that his eyes bulged and his face was congested and he could not even attempt to speak. Yet there was no suggestion of hysteria in his manner. Finally, as he subsided, he managed to gasp, "No offense, my boy, but this is the richest twist of the cosmic jest yet. Oh my God! It's unbelievable!" Another gust of laughter. "Yet it's unmistakable!" A pudgy forefinger nudged at the inarticulate snapshot.

"If you'd give me some idea of what it's all about . . ." said Larry with a trace of injured dignity.

"Can't, my boy," said the fat man, blowing like a whale that has stayed under water too long. "Can't possibly, even though I'm sure. Wouldn't be fair to her—or to you."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Larry unhappily, utterly baffled by his host's inexplicable burst of laughter.

For answer the fat man pushed the desk telephone toward him. Still wheezing he said, "Call her up—tell her you've reconsidered, got it? Tell her you want to go with her and visit Grandma."

"All right," said Larry doubtfully. He picked up the phone, dialed the number she had given him with her address the night before, waited while it rang. At length a strange and distant feminine voice answered and said, "Miss Ida left on the one o'clock plane."

When Larry gave this news to Mayne Cornaman, the fat man cast a quick look at the clock on his desk, said, "Quarter past two—you can still make it. Take Dan and go to your place and pack a bag and then get on out to Idlewild. It's about time Leon Brett used some of that infernal influence of his for some good. Get movin', man!" He picked up the phone, cradle and all, and made a threatening gesture at Larry. Larry got going.

While he packed he considered what he could tell Toni. Surely he owed her something. When he had sufficient clothes assembled in one of the new rawhide bags that had come with his new life, he went out on the balcony and called to her. But she was apparently out, so he sat down while Dan Bright fumed, and penned her a quick note, explaining that he had had to leave town unexpectedly and would get in touch with her as soon as he got back. Despite his commitments to Ida, he had no intention of losing the one normal girl in his life.

Traffic was heavy en route to the airport but Dan Bright, cursing steadily in a monotone, managed to tool them through it dexterously. And once he reached the field all sense of slowness was gone. Apparently Leon Brett's influence was all it was cracked up to be.

Larry found himself on a chartered plane, piloted by a lanky loquacious Southwesterner, who grumbled incessantly because his swift little ship was not jetpropelled. "It's like flyin' a turtle," he kept complaining while the speedometer hovered close to the four-hundred-mile-an-hour mark. "This ain't travelin' at all."

When they were over Virginia they got a message via radio. It informed the pilot that the one o'clock plane to Miami had been stacked up due to fog over Washington,

was running ninety minutes late. They could catch it at Charleston if they wished—there was a seat there for Lawrence Finlay, already reserved aboard in his name.

"Well, whaddya say?" the irrepressible pilot asked him.

Larry, who had been considering the difficulties of explaining his presence in Miami ahead of Ida, said, "We take it."

Hence, about an hour later, he boarded the larger plane, saw the back of Ida's familiar brown head well forward with a vacant chair alongside. Nerving himself for the most important dramatic performance of what had, until recently, been in general an undramatic life, Larry sat down and fastened his safety belt.

Ida looked around casually and then her eyes widened and her lips parted. She opened them to say something but no words emerged. He smiled at her and laid a hand over hers and said, "I couldn't let you go alone, darling. Thank Heaven for that fog over Washington or I'd never have caught up with you."

She said, "Thanks, Larry," and her eyes filled with tears.

14

IDA NEVER ASKED HIM a question—not on the rest of the way to Miami, not over dinner in a sumptuous coral-white Miami Beach hotel, not on the trim white and mahogany motor cruiser that arrived to carry them to Sulla Cay. At first this added to Larry's suspicion of her—it seemed abnormal in any woman not to inquire as to what had made him change his mind.

Then slowly he began to understand that she didn't dare. She was so grateful toward him for coming with her after all, so glad not to be alone once more, that she had no desire to say anything that would plunge them back, mentally and conversationally, in the mess up North. Not until they were half reclining, side by side, on flowered waterproofed cushions in the cruiser cockpit, did he bring it up.

Then he said, "It was one of your cousins—Dolores Green—who killed Ned this morning."

"I know." She lifted her head a trifle to let the ocean wind blow her hair clear of her face. "I think it was to get away from Dolores and some of the others that I went to school in Boston."

"Ned followed you up there, you know," he told her.

She nodded. "We used to joke about it—I got to know Ned very well. I was fond of him—I think he liked me." The implications she gave the words were utterly different from those Dolores had given them.

Looking at her—even knowing what she was—he thought that here was a truly fine girl, more than that the girl he probably should have married, might marry yet if she'd have him. He said, "Ida, just how deeply involved in this conspiracy are you?"

She was silent and he thought she had not heard his question. Then, before he could repeat it, she said, "As little as possible, considering my background. I know I've always hated it. Oh, I've done most of the things Grandmother asked me to do—but I think she knew better than to ask too much."

"Running errands and not letting yourself think what they might mean," he suggested. "Giving reports on suspected persons—like Ned and me. Is that it?"

She nodded, moved hesitantly closer to him. He extended his left arm and pulled her within its curve. He said, "You must hate your grandmother."

"If she is my grandmother," said Ida, her voice so low it could barely be heard above the steady drone of the motors. "No, darling, I don't hate her. Nobody hates her—not even you will hate her. She's—well, it's impossible. You'll understand when you meet her."

"All right—we'll pass on that," he replied. "But, Ida, how much do you know about this conspiracy—about its ultimate aims?"

Her eyes were bright and inquisitive on his as she said, "Not much—I know it's very old and that it may involve a mutant strain. I know its aim is to eliminate men. That always seemed silly."

"To you, perhaps," he replied. "But not to most of its members. Ida, if we can get clear of this mess, will you marry me? Now I've finally got my thesis accepted and I'm in line for a D.Sc., I can probably get a half-decent job somewhere. Oh, it won't pay much of anything at first—probably it never will—but I'd at least feel I could hold up my head. What do you say, honey?"

She continued to study him, finally said, "You're a

little surprised at yourself for proposing, aren't you, darling? You didn't really have any intention of doing so, did you?"

"Maybe not but I just did," he replied. "And that's another thing—you've got to stop reading my mind. Anybody else's—sure. But not what passes for mine. At least don't let me know you're doing it. Well, what about it?"

She laughed, very low and very gently, then put a soft hand against the cheek she had slapped that morning. She said, "I'm beginning to think you're a bigger fool than I am, Larry Finlay. You ought to know what my answer is."

He got his other arm around her—but not before she had put both of hers around his neck and seemed to be seeking to merge her lips permanently with his. For one wild instant he wondered if this was what she had intended all along—then he decided the moment was not one that required analysis of any kind.

There was a trim cabin below in the swift cruiser. Without a spoken suggestion, they rose and descended the companionway, as if moved by a single impulse. There, Ida turned toward him, her face melted with desire, and said, "Darling, this is crazy—but I've waited so long."

"I've been crazy," he replied softly, "to let you wait."

With that, he drew her into his arms, and she came eagerly against him with a little cry. They kissed passionately, and he began to undress her, but she whispered fiercely, "No, darling! I can't wait!"

Together, they toppled onto one of the trimly made up bunks, never for an instant untightening their grasp on one another. As he took her, Larry had an indescribable sense of rightness, of being at last where he belonged. And later, when their first wild passion was spent, and they had undressed, he stroked and fondled the body

he had denied himself for so long, and cursed the inverted snobbery that had caused his denial.

She stirred and moaned softly, and the soft moistness of her lips reached upward for his and found them—and once again desire flowed between them like an electric current. Larry found himself enjoying a woman who seemed to blend the ferocity of Dolores with the soft, live gentleness of Toni, blend them into something far, far above either component.

They took one another rapturously, to the rhythm of the waters on which they rode, until sleep at last claimed them, still in one another's arms . . .

A grinning young steward, black as ebony with teeth and eyeballs of gleaming white ivory, awakened them with the dawn. He said in bastard British West Indian accents, "I think perhaps you will both feel better for some coffee—perhaps?" He was swaying easily with the rhythm of the boat, holding a tray with two steaming cups from which he had not spilled a drop.

Ida blinked and yawned and ran sticky fingers through sticky brown hair and laughed a little in embarrassment and said, "Thank you, Dubarry—please put it down." Then, when he had laid it on the cockpit table and departed, "Mmm, Larry, what a wonderful morning!"

Larry managed to prop himself up on an elbow, sent his other hand to explore the small of his back, which felt vaguely as if an entire armored division had used it for a Bailey Bridge. He shook his head partly clear of cobwebs, said, "Yeah, I feel the way you look."

She made a crinkly face at him, said, "Here, have some coffee. Really, it *is* a wonderful morning."

"Maybe—for marlin or abalone," he told her. But when he had downed half a cup of the bitter hot liquid he began to feel almost human. He looked at Ida and she was grinning at him over her cup and all at once he grinned back at her as a gull screamed overhead. It was easy just then to forget about Amazons and Mayne

Cornaman and Dolores Green and Ned and Toni Loring and Lieutenant Harvey and Dan Bright and the little gray man. Around them the water was ridiculously blue, reflecting the orange-pink afterglow of dawn.

"Look ahead—off the port bow!" said Ida suddenly. "There's the Cay!"

And there it lay, emerald-green foliage set in white-gold sand that hugged the water closely, almost as if it were a part of the sea itself. Getting to his feet a trifle stiffly, Larry watched its proportions grow as they approached it, while Ida stood beside him, her arm linked in his, her brown hair blown free by the wind.

They entered a tiny bay embraced by low green headlands and Larry felt as if he were back in the Southwest Pacific. Here were trim twin jetties, jutting out from the almost blinding white sand, backed by low white coral buildings. On one side the dark green trees and undergrowth, save for a widely spaced border of gentle palms, had been cut away to be replaced by tilled land. Behind the cluster of buildings that backed the twin jetties could be seen a white road, winding out of sight around a forest clump. And on the left was a palm-backed stretch of lawn, upon which a powered mower was performing its function, manned by a straw-hatted black.

A competent-looking young-old woman in much-laundered shorts and shirt was awaiting them at one of the jetties, her hair bleached almost white by the sun, her skin burned almost black. She led them to a jeep parked at the foot of the jetty, saw their bags were loaded before telling them to hop in. She said to Ida, "Addy was glad to hear you were coming. I think she's been worried about you. And this, I take it, is young Finlay?"

As he shook hands with her Larry knew instinctively that here was another Amazon. He could sense the assurance given her by paranormal powers, wondered what form hers took. They drove over a gentle rise, past

a neat little village complete with church and store and populated, as far as Larry could tell, entirely by Negroes.

Then they turned from the road into a narrower lane, which wound through palm woods to a low large house that sat chaste and white in an immense brilliant burst of almost unbearably colorful tropical flowers. Ida, looking shyly at Larry, murmured, "Isn't it beautiful, darling?"

"If you say it looks like a collection of crown jewels you're a crumbun, whatever that is," said their driver from around a cigarette, which dropped from her lower lip. Her name, Larry managed to remember, was Marty Graham.

He said, "Miss Graham, I guess I'm a crumbun then."

She said, "Call me Marty—everybody does. And I guess everyone thinks the same thing when they see it. I know I did. Well, here we are." She clambered out of the jeep and began superintending the unloading of the bags by a quartet of servants. Then, to Ida—"Addy says to put you in the bay wing and give Larry the west suite."

"Where is Grandmother?" Ida asked.

"Oh—she's at the fronton," said Marty Graham. "She wants you both to come down there as soon as you've had something to eat."

"We can eat later," said Ida promptly. "Can't we, Larry?"

"Sure," said Larry. He was ravenous but his desire to meet the fabulous Adelaide Stevens outpaced his hunger for the moment. So after a brief wash-up he and Ida strolled between banks of bougainvillaea and bird-of-paradise flowers and other vari-hued growths Larry could not name to a long white shed, almost concealed in a tiny ravine, from which erratic thumping sounds, interlaced with occasional cries, were coming.

A cluster of white women, clad in bathing suits or shorts and halters, were seated along a sharp bank over-

looking a three-sided jai alai court. Most of them smiled and nodded and one or two said, "Hello, Ida," but they were intently watching the action on the court. Larry looked around for another male among the spectators, had the sudden uncomfortable sensation of being trapped at a hen tea-party.

The only other visible male was on the court—a short slim incredibly agile little man wearing a dark mustache and beret and the long curved basket of a jai alai player. As Larry sat down he leapt high up the single sidewall to catch a swift return and send it flying back some two hundred feet or so to the front wall.

"Pretty, Esteban!" someone called.

But Esteban had little time to enjoy his spectacular shot. His opponent raced forward, caught the dying rebound on the tip of a cesta, lashed it hard against the wall, so that it soared over Esteban's head and died behind him against the rear wall.

Incredibly, his opponent was a woman—a slender sun-bronzed woman with sun-streaked hair, whose figure was the figure of a girl in her early twenties and whose face suggested a longer term of existence only by lines of experience rather than of age. She said, "Well, that does it, Esteban. And I didn't cheat once."

"Grandmother's telekinetic," said Ida simply. Sometimes she makes the pelota do tricks. It makes Esteban furious."

"That's *Grandma?*" said Larry, his jaw dropping open.

"That's Grandmother," said Ida with a note of pride. And, Larry thought, she had a right to be proud. A grandmother like Addy Stevens was something! Come to think of it, he wondered, how could you hate a woman like that? He began to understand better certain facets of Mayne Cornaman's behavior that had hitherto baffled him.

They breakfasted with Adelaide Stevens in a low-roofed sun-washed half-open-air dining room at the

house. When the meal was over the incredible grandmother lit a cigarette and studied first Ida, then Larry, She was still, Larry thought, a strikingly beautiful woman—not pretty but with strength of character and an alert intelligence that combined with good features to surpass mere prettiness.

She said, "I don't have to ask you why you're here, kids. All I'm going to say is that I approve of your marriage. Larry, you've caused me considerable trouble—quite inadvertently—as you must know. As for Ida, I think she knows how I feel about her. Now, Ida, if you'll excuse us, I'd like to have a brief chat with Larry—alone."

Ida looked at her grandmother and said quietly, "Unless Larry wants me to leave I'd rather hear it with him."

Larry reached for her hand on top of the table, squeezed it. Mrs. Stevens looked at them both, then shrugged her bare bronzed shoulders slightly, and warned, "I suppose it's time you knew the truth about yourself, Ida—certainly Larry has a right to know."

"Not as much as she has," said Larry.

"You may be right—it's difficult for me to decide," Mrs. Stevens told them, tipping a long ash off the end of her cigarette into a hammered silver tray. Then, to Larry, "I presume my old friend and enemy, Mayne Cornaman, has given you a somewhat perverted idea of our purpose."

"He's given me an idea," said Larry equivocally.

"We're trying to salvage the world before it destroys itself," Mrs. Stevens said quietly. "We—women like my granddaughters and myself—have been working toward this end for centuries. Now, thanks largely to Ida, we are at last ready to act."

"Thanks to *me*?" The girl looked bewildered. "But how?"

"For some reason our particular strain demands an intermediate male generation to breed itself," said Mrs. Stevens quietly. "It is this alternate generation business

that has kept us chained for thousands of years. I'm not underrating what men have done for the world—but it is nothing compared to what they've done *to* it."

"Plundered-planet stuff," said Larry.

"Exactly," the older woman told him. "But you know something of our history. The point is that until we could prove through parthenogenesis that our paranormal qualities—our *psi* qualities if you wish—could be transmitted directly from one generation to the next without any assistance from an intermediate male, we could not really risk our move.

"Ida is that child—produced by your friend Mayne Cornaman himself, parthenogenetically, under our supervision. What he does not yet know is that his pathetic defense through overeating has proved unavailing. Our scientists are finally able to match his process, thanks largely to study of Ida here.

"Naturally I would prefer Ida not to marry—or at least not to have children by a man." Adelaide Stevens' voice was as calm as if she were discussing a movie plot. "However, I am extremely fond of her and I have no desire to condemn her to misery. Furthermore the regular offspring of your marriage might prove interesting."

Larry looked at her, appalled. And then he thought of the gargantuan laughter of Mayne Cornaman when he had shown the fat man Ida's picture the afternoon before. Of course, the scientist had recognized her perhaps from some trick of bone structure or similarity in feature to her mother.

He recalled what Mayne Cornaman had told him about his deception when the Amazons had trapped him in a mountain cabin with the human victim they had selected for parthenogenetic testing. He looked at Ida with something like awe, realized that the resemblance had not been between her mother and herself but between herself and Cornaman. It was there in the strength of bone and feature, in the way their hair fell away from

their foreheads above the ears. If Cornaman were not so obese, if he had not formerly hid his lower face behind a beard, the similarities would have been obvious.

No wonder the fat man had laughed. His deception had grown into a monstrous jape on the Amazons. Yet it had done irreparable damage to Ida. He looked at her, tried to recapture the hand she withdrew swiftly from his own—but without avail.

She said, "Grandmother, I want Larry to go back to the mainland. I don't ever want to see him again. And, Grandmother, I think you're the most inhuman person I've ever met."

Mrs. Stevens' regard was tolerant, almost kindly. She said, "I think I can understand something of how you must feel, Ida. Remember, I warned you it would be a shock. But I'm not inhuman—far from it. It might be better if I were—the trouble with the world at present is a little too much humanity all around."

She turned to Larry, made a gesture of apology, told him, "I'm sorry, Larry, but I couldn't possibly let you go now. You see, we are just about to launch our first major attack—from here. We could not risk your warning your friend and patron, Mayne Cornaman. No, Larry, in spite of Ida's rudeness, I fear you're going to be with us quite a time. Perhaps Esteban can teach you jai alai if you're bored."

With a gasping sob, Ida stumbled to her feet, sending her chair clattering to the tile floor. Larry rose to help her, but she pushed him away, cried, "I don't ever want to see you again!" and ran from the room.

Mrs. Stevens sighed and smiled sympathetically, said, "Poor girl—she'll get over it with time. I'm afraid you're going to have to be patient with her. Would you like another cup of coffee?"

Unwittingly, he realized, Ida had led him directly into the trap.

15

ADELAIDE STEVENS handed him a full cup and said with a rueful smile, "And people still like to think of youth as a happy time. I wish I could have spared Ida—but it was time she learned how important a person she is and why."

"I hardly think she feels important just now," he replied, doing his best to keep the anger out of his voice. "I doubt if she feels quite human. She's had a rotten time lately and your little speech has hardly added to her happiness."

"*Happiness!*" The fabulous grandmother's exclamation was laden with contempt. "It's perfectly all right to pursue it—but the minute anyone sits down and asks, 'Am I happy?' he is food for the psychiatrist's couch. Happiness is the chase, not the having."

"People vary," Larry said quietly.

"Not much," Adelaide Stevens commented. She studied Larry and added, "I don't suppose there's much use in asking you to join our scientific staff now—you could conceivably be valuable and it might save you a lot of boredom."

"Hardly," he told her. "I'm not exactly in agreement with what you're trying to do—or your methods."

"As to our aim—surely it is a high one," she countered. "As to our methods—we have had little choice." She shrugged.

All at once Larry's concern for Ida was supplanted by

stark panic. Something about the very casualness of Adelaide Stevens, her utter detachment from human emotions, made him realize how precarious his position was, here on the island.

He and he alone—save for Mayne Cornaman—knew the truth about Ida, that she was not the result of parthenogenesis but of a far older and more natural process of birth. And his secret was, he now knew, the one weak spot in the entire conspiracy. Thanks to the fat man's rabelaisian deception Adelaide Stevens and her small army of women believed themselves free of men.

But in all probability they were not. And if they abetted the near-destruction of the civilization they had conspired against for so long, they might find themselves in a precarious and unforeseen position. For they were still going to need men if the species were to survive more than one generation.

And the fact that he knew this put him in deadly danger, here on the island. Undoubtedly, among the women surrounding him, were some who possessed telepathic talent. He was, he realized, going to have to keep a rigid rein on his thoughts. It was highly uncomfortable not knowing at what moment he might betray himself.

Apparently Adelaide was not so gifted for she misread his silence, said, "Perhaps you'll understand us better if you read a little of our history—you might even find it interesting in its own right. Come—I'll take you to the library."

She led the way to the hall, down a stairway to an underground annex to the main house, whose flat windows, close to the ceiling, permitted the bright sunlight to make patterns on floor and stacks. It was abetted by a perfectly modern fluorescent system.

The library itself opened from a reading room, comfortably furnished with couches, chairs, and tables, most of them equipped with microfilm readers. A tall exuberantly constructed woman in culottes and a man's sport

shirt, was bent over one of these. She looked up in mild surprise at Larry, then went back to her work.

Adelaide introduced him briefly as her granddaughter Ida's fiancè, then said, "Terry won't bother you—she's boning up for a new set of test runs on an anthrax serum." Then, after a brief pause for reflection—"You'd better read our condensed history. Unless you know ancient languages you'd not make much out of the original manuscripts. Wait here."

She left him, returned in short order with a can of microfilm, which she arranged in one of the readers. "You know how to use one of these?" she asked—and, at his nod, "I think you may be in for some surprises. I'll see you at dinner."

She departed briskly and Larry bent over the microfilm reader. The brief history of the Amazons had been prepared, he quickly discovered, by one of America's most famous woman writers, a Nobel prize-winner, who was evidently also a member of the conspiracy. He wondered a little at such a woman lending herself to such a cause, then began to read and forgot his scruples.

Larry had never been a student of ancient history. He had barely squeaked through a required course in the subject during his freshman year at college, had happily forgotten it in favor of more scientific studies. Now, however, he found memories of the course returning as he brought page after page of the history into focus.

It was a fascinating compilation of excerpts from manuscripts otherwise unknown or considered lost, manuscripts that went back almost beyond the dawn of history. And the footnotes which gave the story of each document were even more interesting than the documents themselves in the drama of the tales they revealed.

If Larry retained any lingering doubts as to the fact of the Amazon conspiracy, they vanished before such thorough documentation. Here were manuscripts that had been treasured secretly by courtesans and empresses, by

slave girls and common housewives, from the depredations of the men they were forced to submit to as masters.

Here were records of Homeric Greece and Troy, with hints at still earlier history that gave light into the foggy mystery of the Aryan migrations, records written originally in Sanskrit and, in a few cases, in cuneiform.

They told of the fall of the female primogeniture with the revolt of the men of western Asia against the domination of the Moon Goddess and her priestesses and oracles, of the survival of the latter through the power of their votives to accomplish what semi-barbarian males could explain only as magic and therefore respect.

Here was the true story of the witch of Endor and the Delphic oracles, as well as of the earthier priestesses of Astarte and Diana and the still more colorful Lamia, whose wit enabled her to charm, despite her advancing years, first a Pharaoh of Egypt and more latterly Demetrius, the brilliant and dissipated great-grandson of Alexander, who once reigned over most of the eastern Mediterranean.

More widely known, of course, was the story of Cleopatra, who used her body relentlessly in vain effort to reestablish a matriarchy that would overtake the masculine power of Rome. And here was the appalling tale of the downfall of Mediterranean civilization before the barbarian hordes, just as Cleopatra's successors seemed about to establish their rule once more, the disaster to their cause that was Christianity and the Arian heresy of the Goths.

Mohammed was a major disaster, with his complete subjugation of women, Genghis Khan another savage blow although the conspiracy itself was, according to the records, partially responsible for his rise when they found themselves utterly unable to attain their ends through the sprawling and formless culture of pre-Mongul China. His sweep to the West had destroyed the

caliphates just as the women, of whom Scheherazade was a sort of symbol, had been on the verge of softening and perverting Mohammedanism to their own ends.

In a footnote he found an absorbing tale of how a small group of Alexandrian women had been able to rescue many of the ancient manuscripts from the famous library on the eve of its destruction by an Arab war lord, how they had kept their treasures concealed, of all places, in a Coptic Christian monastery until it was safe to bring them once again to the attention of a reborn conspiracy.

Here, told in new lights, were the tales of women history reviled, from Messalina and the notorious Scylla, through Theodora and Antonia, to such latterday women of notoriety among their male contemporaries as Diane de Poitiers, Madame du Barry, Bolivar's famous bastard countess, and the Dowager Empress of China.

Viewed as conspirators, dedicated to a single purpose throughout their lives, even such figures as Catherine de' Medici and Lucrezia Borgia, to say nothing of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Elizabeth I, acquired new perspective. As a willing tool in an effort to gain power, even Lola Montez, dancer-mistress of the mad King of Bavaria, gained new stature. Even the remote Queen of Sheba . . .

Larry lifted his eyes from the microfilm reader, discovered his back was aching, one of his legs asleep. The sunlight was coming through the windows on the other side of the semi-subterranean library and its patterns were high on the walls. He lit a cigarette and looked around, found that he was alone in the library. By his watch it was almost five. He had read through the entire late morning and afternoon. And he had read more than history. Much of the Amazons' actual plan of campaign was already on microfilm.

"Larry," said a soft voice from the doorway, "may I come in?"

It was Ida. She stood there hesitantly, looking at him

out of a too-composed face, added, "I've looked for you everywhere."

"Come on, darling," he told her, led her to a couch. "I want to talk to you. There's a thing or two you don't know."

"I know you don't hate me—in spite of what Grandmother said this morning about me," she told him. "I can tell by your thoughts."

He laughed and kissed her but her lips were unresponsive against his. Then she said, "I must tell you something. First, I'm sorry I was so hateful upstairs. But it's something of a shock to find you're nothing but a guinea pig, that you aren't even really born, that you're sort of a flesh-and-blood robot."

"Stop right there," he told her, placing a hand across her now-trembling lips. "That's one thing I think you should know. Certainly you have every right to—but in telling you I've got to swear you to secrecy no matter what."

Her eyes showed the faint light of curiosity as she said, "I don't know what it is but it can't make any difference."

"Shut up and listen," he said gently. "You remember what your grandmother said about your being a Mayne Cornaman production—a parthenogenetic one. Well, it's not true. You're Cornaman's daughter, all right, but he produced you in the old old-fashioned way."

"It's nothing to joke about, Larry," said Ida, her eyes filling with tears. "I don't believe you."

"Then listen," he repeated and told her in detail what the fat man had narrated during their first fabulous breakfast together. When she tried to break in he put his hand over her mouth once more and went on to explain the great scientist's reaction to her photograph the previous afternoon.

"So you see," he went on, "while your birth may have been a bit unconventional, you're just as human as I am—or anyone else."

She leaned forward on the sofa, clenching her hands and squeezing her wrists between her knees—she had changed into shorts and shirt that seemed to be the usual costume of the island women. She said, "Oh, Larry darling, thanks. But it's—I don't know—it's all sort of overwhelming. I've heard of Mayne Cornaman all my life, of course. But to know *he* is really my father—"

"He's a great man," Larry told her, "but I didn't propose to you on account of him—or on account of your grandmother."

"I know, Larry," she said simply. She responded to his kiss this time but pushed him away, panting a little, when he tried to embrace her. "Not yet, darling. I told you I'd looked for you everywhere this afternoon. Grandmother was tied up and I couldn't see her and nobody else seemed to know where you were.

"Larry, I found out some terrible things about what they're planning here. They're planning to poison the world."

"I know," he said. "So does Cornaman—and so do some others. It's not going to be quite as easy as they expect."

"There's a big plane coming tomorrow—a seaplane," she said, her eyes large and frightened. "They're going to take the cultures away in it and deliver them to their various headquarters. Once they have done this no one can stop them."

"I see." Larry was frightened at how little was actually known about the mechanics of the conspiracy. "Tomorrow?" For a moment his brain seemed to be stalled.

Ida grabbed him by both arms, said intensely, "Larry, you've got to get away from here tonight and give warning. You're the only one who can do it."

"Only if you come with me," he replied promptly. "If you think I'm going to leave you here with . . ." His voice trailed off.

"I've got to stay here—for a little while," she replied. "In the first place I'd only be a drag when you make your

break—and you can't afford to take any extra chances. In the second place—well, I may be able to do something by staying on the island."

"You little dope!" he said. "Have you any idea of what the authorities will do when they find out what's actually going on here?" He paused, added, "I don't myself but I can guess—and none of my guesses are very happy. You've *got* to come with me."

"We'll see," she said and then, melting in his arms—"Even before you told me I was—normally conceived—I wanted this, your love."

Larry didn't know what to say. There was unspoken emotional longing in the girl's prosaic love-words. There was no way of doubting her absolute sincerity. Yet, somehow, it seemed neither the time nor the place for such dalliance—though dalliance was not quite the word. He hesitated . . .

She said, and there was a catch in her voice, "Larry, don't *think!* Not for a little while. Of course, if you don't want me—"

"Shut up, darling," he said and kissed her almost savagely. Her lips met his as eagerly and she gave a little sigh of rapture.

And then, out of the corner of an eye, he saw Adelaide Stevens in the doorway at the foot of the stairs.

"Sorry to interrupt," Ida's grandmother drawled, "I merely came down here to tell you that dinner is served. Incidentally, I know you'd be both more comfortable—*and* more private—upstairs. But I think you'll be safer dining with me."

She turned and left them. After a moment Ida sat up. Tears were rolling down her cheeks and she kept muttering in a low vicious tone, "Damn her, damn her—oh, *damn* her!" in a sort of ritual chant.

Dinner that night was, for Larry, a silent and embarrassed meal. And later, when he tried the door of Ida's

bedroom, he found it locked. He lacked courage to bang upon it and announce his presence. He wondered if he and Ida were ever going to get another chance to be alone.

16

IT WAS midnight when Larry slipped out of his bedroom window, dropped to the soft surface of a flower bed beneath, prepared to make his way to the harbor. He didn't have much hope of getting to a boat at one of the jetties and making his getaway. Yet he had to try.

He had learned too much during the afternoon—of laboratories where quiet competent women worked with practiced efficiency at preparing the hideous cultures of bacteriological warfare—blueprints for organization of a world so depopulated that a few thousand well-organized and self-sufficient Amazons could easily manage it to suit themselves—an underground radio station which, through a code of apparent static, could keep in touch with agents the world over. As for Ida herself—he felt sickness within him at deserting her. Yet he could do nothing else.

He made his way slowly toward the bayside settlement, hugging the shelter offered by tree-growths alongside the road. Palm fronds, silhouetted against the moonlit sky above him, laced the ground with shadow patterns of bizarre beauty—but he was in no mood to appreciate them. The further he got the more his unease grew.

He felt like the proverbial mouse in the clutches of a cat. He knew they were giving him a short run toward freedom before extending a paw and pulling him back to

captivity. With their assembly of paranormal powers they must know what he was doing. But the effort had to be made.

When he got close to the bayside settlement he circled to his left, hoping to bypass it to the waterfront and swim silently around to a power boat moored to one of the jetties. It appeared to be his only chance—if, as seemed unlikely, he had any.

He stood motionless in the shadow of a tall palm tree as a car passed along the road behind him and he shivered as he recalled the general outline of the plans he had studied that afternoon. Already, as Mayne Cornaman and Leon Brett suspected, the campaign in Asia had begun. Inevitably, unless it were checked at once, there would be war between the East and the West. And then the germs would be spread throughout Africa, the Americas; the island continents of the Pacific. Russia, the white widows believed, would take care of Europe with its own retaliatory measures.

He wished desperately he could have seen Ida—but the unhappiness the girl was suffering as a result of the pile-up of recent events and disclosures was apparently still overwhelming. If only, he thought, he could have got to her later and forced her to flee with him—or would she have altered her determination not to endanger his escape? He doubted it. She would almost certainly think it just an effort on his part to cheer her up.

He reached the beach without molestation, stripped down to his shorts and plunged into the water, which enclosed him like a warm bath. Swimming easily to conserve his breath, he headed out for a hundred yards or so, then cut right toward the jetties, whose whiteness reflected the moonlight in an ominous deadish gray.

Twenty yards from the piers he trod water, selected a swift-looking motorboat moored furthest from the shore. If he could only get into it and get it going and

clear the twin headlands that now looked to him like the claws of some gigantic lobster about to close . . .

He took a deep breath, swam the rest of the way under water, felt an outstretched hand touch the smooth curved bottom of the boat he sought. He surfaced alongside, regained his breath, shook the water out of his eyes—and looked up into the lighted tip of a cigarette.

Marty Graham, seated in the boat he had chosen, said "Enjoying your swim, Larry? The water's nice here all year round. Better let me give you a hand overside."

He had a curious detached feeling—as if he were outside himself, looking on, a mere playgoer in an orchestra seat. He said, "I don't know—maybe I'd rather drown," and she merely laughed.

She said, "Better come on out of the bay. You may be able to think of some other way to get away from here later."

Cat and mouse with a vengeance. Perhaps, he thought, if he let her pull him out, she'd be vulnerable. Perhaps he could—

"Don't try anything rash," she said with quiet good humor. "I could kill you right now without moving a muscle. But men are going to be scarce pretty soon. . . ."

He felt sick with humiliation, lifted a hand for her to help him into the boat. She leaned forward and as she did so another female silhouette rose behind her, a slim arm was wielded briefly, there was the sound of something hard and heavy hitting Marty's head. She fell from view, to be replaced by her assailant.

"Quick, Larry!" It was Ida speaking in a strained whisper. "Get in here."

He scrambled over the side, grabbed the girl, tried to kiss her—but her lips avoided his. She whispered, "Hurry, darling. I knew when you left the house. I knew Marty would be here. You haven't much time. Use the oars until you're well out, then start the motor."

"What do you mean, *me?*" he countered. "You're coming along."

She shook her head, said, "No, Larry, you've got to do it alone. I belong here—after all, I'm one of Grandmother's experiments, aren't I? I'm not even human—not really."

"But you *are!*" he insisted, reaching for her. "I told you: Mayne Cornaman cheated. You're no more parthenogenetic than I am."

"I don't believe you, darling," she whispered softly, giving him a quick hug, "but thanks anyway for trying. I wanted to this afternoon but it's no good. Now go—I think you'll find some sort of patrol boat waiting about five miles out. Anyway, there are men in a boat, and they're armed. Go to them—due west."

He uttered a muffled, "*Hey!*" as she began with unsuspected strength to drag Marty Graham from the boat onto the jetty. He gave her a hand with the unconscious Amazon, reached for her again—but she read his purpose and eluded him, gave the boat a quick shove from the pier. She stood there proudly and said, "Good-by, Larry."

He whispered as loud as he dared, "Ida, you can't—" but already the margin of water between them was widening. He thought of the Amazon plans, of his still-slim chances of escape. He looked back at Ida. She had seated herself beside her victim and lit a cigarette. She waved to him silently. With a curse that was half a sob he reached for the oars in the bottom of the boat.

He breakfasted the following morning with Leon Brett and Mayne Cornaman, who had flown down from New York upon receipt of his message, radioed from the navy patrol boat that picked him up. The fat man grumbled at the meagerness of navy rocket base fare but approved his daughter's behavior. Stirring thick coffee with distaste he said, "You lost a good girl in that one—and so did I, Larry."

"What do you mean—'lost'?" Larry asked, a sudden shaft of panic slicing his diaphragm.

The fat man's eyes slid away from his own. He said through a mouthful of sausage and griddle cakes, "You don't think we're going to let that island survive the day, do you?"

Larry dropped his fork. He said, "But that's murder—how are you planning to get away with it?"

"It's not murder—it's war, Larry," said Leon Brett quietly. "And *they're* murdering already in Asia. You have no idea of the international situation just now." He glanced at his watch, got up, said, "We've got just about time to see them launch the rocket."

"What—what are you going to do?" he asked, feeling sick.

Come along and find out, young man," said Mayne Cornaman, wiping his lips and laying his napkin on the table.

"But your own daughter," said Larry.

Mayne Cornaman looked at him obliquely. "I know," he said. "I guess maybe my little trick on the Amazons wasn't so very funny after all, was it?"

Larry said nothing. They were driven in a navy command car to an intensively guarded and isolated stretch of level sand, trebly fenced with electrified barbed wire and backed with flak and searchlight towers, pillboxes, and patrolled by Marine sentries in pairs.

He felt numb as they were taken into a concrete bunker, with a quartz-glass vision slit, through which he could see the tall thin deadly rocket encased in the steel lattice-work of its launching tower. It looked a little, he thought, like a single Gothic spire, being raised to some unknown god in the desert, in the process of construction. So numbed was he that he paid little attention to the organized confusion around him, and officers and men of all ranks entered and left, consulted and gave orders.

He thought of Ida and all the other White Widows,

as he was beginning to label them, of Marty Graham and the dynamic Adelaide Stevens, of Esteban the Basque jai alai player, of the natives on the island. It turned his stomach to think of what was going to happen to them when that slim beautiful Gothic missile landed.

Then he hought of Arlene Crady and Ned Tolman and Dolores and of the things he knew existed in the island laboratories—and he knew there was no other way. Grimly he watched while the final seconds were counted away and then, with a hissing roar, the slender rocket rose from its tower, ever more swiftly, to vanish in the hot blue sky, leaving a twisting trail of smoke behind it.

On a huge television screen, moments later, he saw the rocket, no longer rising but flying parallel to the earth, shooting across the sky toward its destination. Then he saw the island, gray and black and white rather than green and gold on the screen, saw the flash of the dreadful guided downward glide of the missile, blinked as the atomic blast made the screen a rectangle of light, watched the hideous mushroom-shaped cloud assemble and rise higher, higher . . .

"Well," said a khaki-clad naval officer with the small single star of a commodore on the collar of his shirt, "at least we know that damned war-head works."

"Yeah," said another. "With no hills to block radiation they'll be picking up pieces for two miles around."

This time Larry could no longer hold it. He barely made the lavatory in time.

They waited until the first damage reports came in. Destruction, save for a few isolated palm trees, had been total on Sulla Cay. Not a living thing on the island had survived the blast. There was quiet jubilation around them at having stolen a jump on both Army and Air Force in achieving the first actual guided-missile A-blast against a real enemy—successfully.

"All this against a few poor women," said Larry bitterly.

Mayne Cornaman shook his head and laid a fat hand on his shoulder and said, "You mustn't think of it like that. These were no poor women, Larry. They represented one of the worst menaces the world has ever known. What's more, they've only lost one battle in this war."

"How do you mean that, Mayne?" Leon Brett asked quickly.

"Oh, they've been crushed before, plenty of times—worse than this," the fat man told him. "They've lost their leader and their headquarters. Their bacteriological campaign will be checked. But the strain is still with us—the strain and the ambition and the desire to put the rest of humanity in step with it or else. They'll be back."

"But with a carefully nursed publicity campaign . . ." said Brett.

"It may keep them quiet for a while," Cornaman told him. "We'll give Larry's thesis a play, of course. But by lying doggo, with time they'll make our campaign look silly. And they'll hide their paranormal talents as they always have. Then, when we're all dead and people have forgotten the urgency, they'll get going again."

"Cheerful prospect," said Leon Brett.

"It's life, man," Cornaman told him. "How soon can we get back to New York so I can get a decent meal?" He looked at Larry, read his expression correctly, told him, "I know, I started making a glutton of myself to save my neck—but now this belly of mine's used to it—the best food in the greatest possible quantities."

Larry said nothing—not then or when they rode north in a plane even faster than the one that had enabled him to catch the airliner the day before. He kept thinking that Ned was gone, Ida was gone, his old way of life was gone. He felt emptied, beyond emotion, like a man ex-

posed to an explosion so vast his ears are aware of no sound at all.

He went back to the apartment and found it had been repaired, that everything was in order. He got out of the khakis the Navy had given him, took a shower and couldn't feel it. He poured himself a stiff drink of scotch and downed it with none of his usual tremors, felt no lift. He got into slacks and a shirt and wandered out on the balcony.

Toni was there, reclining in her deck chair, taking the afternoon sun with a book in her lap and a cool drink by her side. Looking at her he felt a sudden intense relief that was almost pain. Here was beauty, here was generous affection, here was the normal as against the strange channels through which his life had recently been diverted.

Slowly she turned her head and saw him and her lips curved in a smile of sheer delight. "Larry darling!" she said. "I'd given up expecting you at all. You're the most unpredictable male!"

"More unpredicted against than unpredicting," he told her and actually found himself smiling. He didn't bother to go inside and use the apartment doors to reach her. Instead he scaled the low barrier that divided the balcony between them.

"I'm *glad* you're back—with me." She laughed huskily and he felt vaguely as if he were alive once more after a hiatus of some sort of non-life. "But I'll give you odds something will happen and you'll vanish as you always seem to. I'm going to wind up as a sort of turnabout Chlöe yet."

"Not a chance," Larry told her. "This time it's for keeps."

Later he was roused by the ringing of the phone on the table by his ear. He reached for it but a strong female arm blocked his movement and Toni whispered, "Oh no! Not again, darling. Let it ring."

It did—and finally he pulled himself clear of her and picked it up. Mayne Cornaman's voice sounded hoarse and strained. He said, "You'd better get on over here right away, Larry. There isn't much time. I just killed Dolores Green."

17

MAYNE CORNAMAN himself let Larry in. His coloring was unusually pasty and unhealthy and he wore the purple and gold dressing gown Larry had worn when he first met the fat man. A towel, stained brightly and ominously with crimson, was wrapped around his left wrist. He said, "Don't mind the mess here for a little—follow me."

But Larry couldn't help looking as he walked across the big hall after his host. The place was a shambles. Dan Bright was dead. He lay crushed like some sickening giant insect beneath a huge highboy that appeared to have sprung from its usual perch along the wall to land squarely on top of him.

Noting Larry's gaze Mayne Cornaman said, "Poor Dan tried to stop her but he didn't have a chance. At least I got even for him."

Larry looked upward after the fat man and was almost sick for a second time that day. Dolores Green dangled from the upper banister, swinging slowly at the end of a curtain cord, one end of which had disappeared beneath the flesh of her neck. Her face was black, her eyes staring, her tongue sticking out.

Larry said, "Good God!"

"I know," said the fat man. "But it was the only way. When she went for me Dan tried to stop her and got killed. I had to do something. Not very pretty, is it?"

"Not very," said Larry, feeling as numb as he had while observing the blast of the atomic rocket missile on Sulla Cay. "What about the police?"

Mayne Cornaman shook his head. "Let cook call them when he gets in tomorrow morning. I don't want *you* mixed up in this. You're goin' to be too damned important. But come on—there's not much time left and I've a hell of a lot to tell you."

He staggered a little and Larry saw that blood was dripping from the towel about his wrist. He cried, "You're hurt, sir!"

Mayne Cornaman avoided his supporting arms, said with an odd twitch of his thick lips, "In the words of Browning's Frenchman at Ratisbon, 'Nay, I am dead, sire!' Come *on!*"

He led the way to a first-floor bathroom off his study, of whose existence Larry had not previously been aware, stripped off the robe, flung the bloody towel to the floor and half-slid half-crumpled into the tub. Against the white tile his immense bloated body glowed a faint pink save for the steady flow of crimson from his arm. It had been sliced cleanly, as if by a razor.

"Got me with a carving knife," he told Larry absently. "The damned thing came flying at me from nowhere. She always was a vicious creature—needed Addy to keep her in line."

"Here—let me apply a tourniquet," said Larry, remembering his wartime training and making a move toward the door.

"Sit down," said the fat man peremptorily. "It's no use. You seem to have missed the cream of the jest, Larry. You see, I'm a bleeder too and this cut can't be staunched. I know—never dared shave till the electric razor came along. Used to wear a beard. Had to."

"I remember," said Larry as the implications of what Cornaman had just told him sank in. No wonder his host had waged relentless war on the White Widows—he was one of their biological victims. And no wonder poor Ida had possessed paranormal powers. In its grisly way it

was a jest—a jest of cosmic proportions. If Ida had lived to have children by him they too . . .

Cornaman said, "I make a punk Petronius, don't I? But never mind that now. Young man, I'm passing on the torch to you. You're the only one around now who knows the score and has sufficient knowledge and brains and experience to fight these damned women.

"Don't worry—they'll find you. They know about you already. They'll try to use you or destroy you if they can't. They'll keep you under observation, never fear. And you'll have to plan your own campaigns against them."

"But how?" asked Larry desperately, noting that already Mayne Cornaman's flesh was losing color. "What can I do?"

"Plenty," said Cornaman grimly. "With Whittaker's backing you'll be able to pile up a reputation where it counts. And I've already made arrangements to turn over my patents to you. You're going to be rich as sin, Larry. All I ask is you use it wisely."

"I—I don't know," said Larry, his mouth suddenly dry. "All I can promise is I'll try." He shivered a little at the prospect of the responsibility being thrust on his relatively untrained shoulders.

"That's all any of us can do," the fat man told him, closing his eyes through sheer weakness. "Remember, *they're* only trying too. They make mistakes or we'd never have stopped 'em this time." He opened his eyes and fixed Larry with them.

"If I were you, boy, I'd lie low for a while, get myself established somewhere, get my bearings. Whittaker will help you with that and there's always Leon if you need him. You'll do okay. After that—well, you'll be on your own, son."

He roused himself by a superhuman effort, looked down with a flickering half-smile at the life-blood draining from his immense bulk, said, "Our friend Harvey's

going to have one sweet time tryin' to figure this one out." Then, "But there's still a lot of details, Larry. I want to tell you what I can while I can. First, as regards my papers. You'll find the law firm of . . ."

He talked on for half an hour, giving Larry places and names, which the younger man took down on paper. As it continued Larry grew increasingly appalled by the amount of wordly wealth he was due to inherit from the fat man. It represented riches he hadn't even conceived of, much less dreamt about owning.

Then there were more details about the White Widows, such remnants of them as the fat man knew to be left. Finally he said, "That's about all, Larry." His voice was very low, very weak. "But we only got the main stem this morning. And the branches we missed are bound to take root."

He peered at Larry as if his vision were getting dim, said, "Go now, son—it isn't going to be pretty and I want to do it alone." He closed his eyes and lay there, a putty-gray mass of flesh that rose and fell only occasionally with his difficult breathing.

Larry left but waited just outside the door until the breathing had stopped. Then, averting his eyes from the grisly mess in the hall, he left and walked back to his apartment through the echoing dark city streets. More than ever before loneliness walked at his elbow. He went back to Toni.

They were married two weeks later when the uproar over Mayne Cornaman's strange death had somewhat subsided. On their honeymoon they flew to South America, then to Africa, then to Europe. When at last they returned, sunburned and healthy, Dean Whittaker had arranged for Larry an assistant professorship in organic biology at a small but renowned Eastern university. His job was research and occasional lectures, without preceptorials or classes.

Toni fitted in perfectly, employing make-up discreetly

and making a point of letting older faculty wives talk her ear off. She proved to be, as she had told him that afternoon in his apartment, a domestic animal. It took her little time to become pregnant and she bore the inconvenience charmingly.

Sometimes the whole White Widow business seemed to Larry like a dream. Walking home across the freshly green campus one evening the following spring he wondered briefly if any of it had really happened. But there were his fine old house, newly reconditioned, the two fine cars in his garage, the servants, the clothes he was wearing—all of them far beyond his salary as an assistant professor.

As he approached his house, set well back behind tall hedge and a stretch of impeccable lawn, he thought for a moment he saw a little colorless man duck out of sight around a corner—a little man who wore thick-lensed glasses and one shoulder higher than the other. It brought him up with a start. For a moment his heart stopped beating and he thought he was going to faint.

Then he grinned and shook his head and told himself he was acting like a jittery child. He supposed he would never be able to shake some of the experiences he had undergone in that one incredible stretch of less than two weeks. And he would never be able to spend the money that had resulted from it.

He went on in and nodded to the pleasant-faced trimly uniformed maid who appeared in the dining room doorway and informed him Mrs. Finlay was upstairs. He went on up and stood in the doorway, watching Toni as she lay stretched out on a chaise longue, thinking her just about the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, pregnant or no.

As he watched, she frowned to herself, looked about her and at the table beside her. Then, glancing across at a vanity table against the wall her forehead cleared and her dark eyes narrowed briefly. A compact resting

on the vanity table rose and flew easily the ten feet to her waiting palm. Opening it, she began to study her face, to ready herself for his arrival.

He had a sudden vivid recollection of sitting across a table from Toni, with Ida and Ned Tolman, in Hilary Duggan's, of Toni reaching for her lighter and having it spring upward into her fingers. At the time he had taken it for granted that Ida was responsible for the telekinesis. Now, of course, he knew better.

They had him—they had him good. He wondered what to do, what Mayne Cornaman would have done, recalled that the fat man had kept Dolores close even though he knew what she was. He was going to have to do the same with Toni, just go along as if nothing had happened. But he would never again feel safe as long as he lived.

As he helped her downstairs to dinner he recalled suddenly the way his heart had stopped beating when he had seen the little gray man with the uneven shoulders while on his way home. Come to think of it, the same thing had happened two or three times before during the past six months or so. When he was startled or frightened . . .

While Toni chattered amusingly of her day's chores at dinner Larry thought again of Mayne Cornaman. He too had had a mild heart dilatation—and Mayne Cornaman had adopted a defense. Abruptly, though he was not hungry, Larry said, "Toni, will you ring for Hilda, please? I want another cut of the roast—and all the vegetables."

She looked at him as she shifted her swollen body to press the buzzer under the rug, said, "I don't know what's come over you, darling. You never take seconds."

"Remember," he smiled, "I have to eat for three now." But at her quick joyous laugh he wondered about the child she was carrying. He hoped with all his heart it would be a girl.

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