

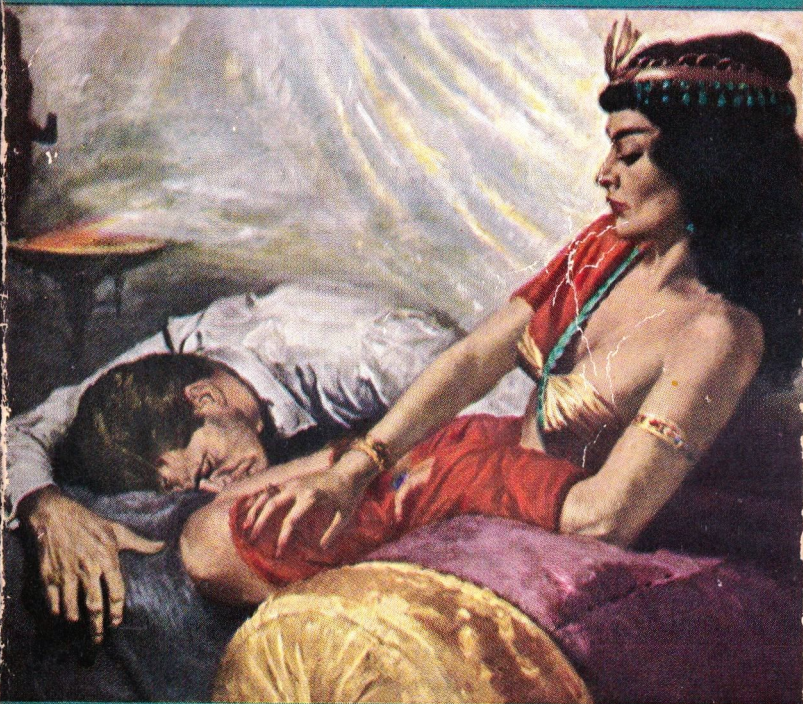
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Sumuru—enticer of women, enslaver
of men—in the most thrilling
adventure of them all

SINISTER MADONNA



SAX ROHMER
MASTER OF THE EXOTIC

Enchantment

She was speaking—strange words, exotic words—that conjured up a picture of a queerly furnished room. It had a black marble floor, and brightly colored curtains hung in the doorways. In a recess he saw a couch with leopard legs, and leopard skins were spread upon it. A silver lamp hung on a chain above the couch.

He himself was seated in a strangely fashioned chair. Around his neck he wore a gold chain, and on one wrist a heavy gold bracelet. Apart from a sort of skirt resembling a kilt, and sandals, he wore nothing but a jeweled belt to which a short sword was attached.

The illusion had become visual. He saw it, he lived in it.

The curtains in one of the doorways parted silently, and a girl stood there, watching him. Red highlights gleamed in her hair. The violet robe she wore was of such fine texture that every line and curve of her slim body was revealed.

He knew, now, for whom he waited.

She ran to him, sprang into his outstretched arms, and he crushed her against him.

"You will never send me away again?" she whispered.

He buried his face in perfumed curls, stood up, lifted her lightly and carried her to the couch. His sword belt encumbered him. He tore it off. . . .

A wave of perfume—or of music—or of both, swept him away. A voice murmured, "I adore you. . . ."

And he knew ecstasy so keen he seemed to pass into unconsciousness. . . .

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SINISTER MADONNA

A Gold Medal Original by

SAX ROHMER

Cover Painting by Charles Binger



GOLD MEDAL BOOKS

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CHAPTER ONE

FROM BEHIND A SCREEN in the darkened room, Detective-Sergeant Crowby by the light of a shaded lamp looked anxiously at his notes. Their accuracy was important: he knew that he was there because Scotland Yard was interested. The chief constable had stressed the fact.

In the long silence following the recorded words of the delirious patient he studied his report with care. It made fine sensational reading, but no sense. Detective-Sergeant Crowby looked past the edge of the screen to the other side of the ward where the sister on duty was seated beside a table on which another shaded lamp stood. He glanced in that direction frequently; she was a very pretty girl. At the moment she was reading, and her expression was quite placid. Detective-Sergeant Crowby returned to his report.

7:42 P.M.—“Where is she? . . . What have you done with her? . . . I might kill you one day. Sue . . .”

Here, Crowby had made a note: “There was something after Sue, but I couldn’t get it.”

8:10 P.M.—“Dolores, make up your mind . . . Slavery . . .”

Another note followed here: “Spoken in a different voice.”

8:23—“Fish you out of the Nile . . . with no head . . .”

8:32—“Ruby mines . . . Hate his guts . . .”

8:40—“It’s the Puma! Listen! . . . Gnashing teeth . . . Kills with a blow of his hand . . .”

8:45—“Ma Leach. . . Him. She . . .”

A note followed which read: “Can make nothing of above, but this is how it sounded.”

There came a sudden stirring from beyond the screen.

As Detective-Sergeant Crowby grasped pencil and book, he noted that the nursing sister had stood up and was crossing to the bed, whose occupant was hidden from his view by the screen around it. She vanished from his sight as footsteps sounded in the corridor outside.

He looked up as a door opened and Dr. Bowden came in. Dr. Bowden could see the sister, although she was invisible to Crowby. He nodded to her, smiled, then came toward Crowby.

"Good evening, Sergeant. Any developments?"

"Yes, Doctor, some more notes."

As the young house surgeon set the notebook under the lamp and bent over it, Detective-Sergeant Crowby watched him appreciatively. Dr. Kyrle Bowden was popular with the police. His name, Kyrle, was appropriate, and he had been known as Curly from childhood on; for he possessed a mass of the most intractable curly brown hair which ever grew on a man's head. Everybody knew him as Dr. Curly, but as everybody liked him it was a term of affection and not of ridicule.

From behind the screen came choking words rising to a scream: "Turn around—or I'll drill holes in you! Go back to Our Lady of Sins, and tell her . . ."

The voice faded.

Sergeant Crowby was scribbling rapid shorthand. Dr. Bowden walked around the screen and joined the nursing sister, who stood beside the patient's bed. The patient had started up and the nurse was supporting him. His head was swathed in bandages which reached his thick dark eyebrows. Fierce, gray eyes—feverish eyes—glared out. He was a mass of strappings, and only by some monstrous effort of will had he raised himself in bed.

"Thank heavens you came, Doctor!" the sister breathed.

Dr. Bowden stepped forward and gently forced the patient back onto his pillows.

"You must lie down, you know. You've had a bit of a bump. You must take it easy."

He looked down at the face of the unknown patient, a face which even now was fine and arresting, but which life had marred. It was seamed with many lines; beneath those staring eyes were pouches. But when the feverishly dry lips opened, revealing small even teeth—strong teeth—it was as though a younger man smiled through an ancient mask.

"Hello! Who the devil are you?"

"Dr. Bowden, and I'm trying to look after you."

"Too bad! Can't be done." Then, suddenly, his entire manner changed, and he snarled, "Blast you for a drunken son of a sow!" But he was no longer addressing Curly. "You've no right on the road. You belong in a pigsty!"

The effort exhausted him; he closed his eyes, then opened them again.

"Hello, Mister!" he said in the same hoarse voice. "What did you say your name was?"

"Bowden." The doctor looked at him fixedly. "You're an American, aren't you?"

"No, an Egyptian, and be damned to you. I'm through, so what does it matter!"

Crowby's pencil shot over paper, his reputation as the best shorthand writer in the Surrey police at stake. Now, the last remark recorded, he paused, pencil poised.

"Hear those gnashing teeth?" came dimly. "Don't you hear it? That's the Puma . . . Look out! He'll strangle you!" The voice, now, Sergeant Crowby noted, had lost its coarse tone. "He can break a man's neck with one blow . . . of his hand . . . Madonna! No! no . . . God! You she-cat! . . ." A long pause, then: "Don't let me see her eyes!"

The sergeant wrote rapidly. He heard movements from beyond the screen, but no other words were audible until:

"Yes; he's in a very bad way, Sister."

"Would it be any good to send for Dr. Jackson?"

"No. We've done all we can . . ." A short interval and then: "I'm going down to see the chief constable, Sergeant. Do you mind if I take a copy of your notes?"

Curly Bowden had joined Sergeant Crowby in his improvised study behind the screen. Crowby looked up with a smile.

"You're welcome, Doctor. I have no orders to the contrary."

Curly nodded, and began rapidly to transcribe from the sergeant's book into one of his own.

"It's a funny business, Doctor, isn't it?"

"Yes, very odd. An idea about it has just occurred to me. That's why I'm going to see the chief constable. Good-night, Sergeant. Keep your ears open."

"Good night, sir."

As Dr. Bowden stepped into his car outside the Kingsmead Cottage Hospital, a lithe figure resembling that of a large ape dropped silently from a tree onto the grass,

directly outside the room where the mysterious patient hovered between life and death.

The spot lay in deep shadow. Someone was waiting there, a short, stocky man dressed entirely in black. There came whispered words, but not English words, and a sort of whining sound. Then a small dial strapped to the wrist of the stocky man became illuminated. He began to speak in a low voice. He said, "Yoshida calling."

The man who received the radio call sat in an orderly, workmanlike office at a large, neat desk. He wore a black robe and a skullcap. His pale features were set in a perpetual smile. They might have been those of a smiling, ivory Buddha.

"Your report, Yoshida." His voice was utterly unemotional.

"Dr. Bowden has just left the hospital."

"Follow him. Report where he goes. Our Lady's orders. You have left the tablet as directed?"

"It is on the window ledge."

"Proceed . . ."

The man with the toneless voice stood up and walked slowly out of the office. He wore red slippers, and except for the faint slithering sound they made, his step was silent. He passed along a dimly lighted passage, and paused at a closed door. He rapped discreetly and opened the door.

The room beyond was a studio. Half the ceiling consisted of glass toplights, but all the blinds were drawn. It was very warm, the air oppressive with the scent of mimosa. Masses of that aromatic plant bloomed in terracotta pots that formed a bank below an aquarium of heavy plate glass in which aquatic vegetation grew. Lotus blossoms floated on the surface of the water, and a number of brilliant red fish swam among the stalks.

Amid the usual litter of a painter's workshop—piles of canvases, brushes, charcoal sketches, easels—there was evidence that someone was actively employed.

Detail studies of a nude model were pinned to the studio wall behind a crudely chiseled, life-sized wooden statue of a reclining figure. On a bench nearby lay modeling tools and a beautiful clay study some eighteen inches long of the same subject. Clamped in a wooden vise was a large slab of ivory upon which work had been in progress.

On a deep divan covered with dark mink, a woman lay, smoking a cigarette. She wore an evening dress, a gauzy

creation in violet with a sheen of gold gleaming through. Her hair was covered with a net cap matching the shade and texture of the dress. A mink cloak lay on the rugs beside the divan.

Her eyes, raised to the man who silently crossed to her, had an almost uncanny beauty. Their color seemed to change with every mood. Her shoulders were superb.

The man in the black robe saluted with deep respect and stood, head lowered, before her.

"Well, Caspar?"

Her voice had the haunting quality of harp music.

"Dr. Bowden has left the hospital, My Lady."

"He must be followed, Caspar."

"I have given those orders, on My Lady's behalf."

"Yoshida has left the tablet for Sister Linda?"

"He has, My Lady."

"How can we know what Drake may have babbled in delirium? Suppose this Dr. Bowden is on his way to police headquarters? In any case, I hope to meet him tonight. You know why."

"I know why, My Lady."

"He must be covered from point to point, wherever he goes. But warn Yoshida to retain stern control. If there is any mistake, Yoshida will pay the penalty."

Dr. Bowden was thinking about the unknown patient as he drove through the frosty night in the direction of the Town Hall. The mystery of the identity of this man in whom Scotland Yard seemed so deeply interested had given Curly much food for thought. Although it was already after ten o'clock, the air was crisp and clear, with no indication of that disastrous fog of the night before in which the unknown patient had come to grief. Curly was still puzzling over the problem when he drove in at the entrance to the Town Hall. Five minutes later he was in the chief constable's office.

"This is most extraordinary!" Chief Sturgeon removed his glasses and looked up from Curly's notes. "Can't make head or tail of it. What's this about slavery and ruby mines? And who's Our Lady of Sins?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"And what about the Puma with gnashing teeth? Is it just delirium, or is there a thread running through it?"

"I think there is. He mentioned the puma and gnashing teeth twice. In spite of the rough way he speaks at times,

he is undoubtedly a man of some culture—and, I believe, an American."

"Damned extraordinary!" Chief Sturgeon laid his glasses on the desk. "Here's a man who, when he was pulled out of the wreckage of his car, used language which one of my men described to me as worse than any stevedore he'd ever heard; now he calls on the Madonna. He wears rough clothes, but he hasn't the hands of a man who's done manual work. And what's this?" He resumed his glasses and read aloud: "Ma Leach . . . Him. She."

"That, I think, is Arabic. I give it just as Sergeant Crowby took it down phonetically. I may be wrong, but, as you see, he mentioned the Nile, and he told me he was an Egyptian. Read aloud the words sound like Arabic, don't they?"

"They sound like nothing to me," Chief Sturgeon said, leaning back in his chair. "We traced the car. He bought it from one of these used car depots on the bypass. Gave them the card of a firm of dealers in Essex, paid cash and drove off. As you're aware, no driving license was found, and no other evidence of identity."

The chief constable glanced in the direction of a locked bureau. "The exhibits are in there. Thick woolen socks, surgeon's gloves, picklock, a torch, a German automatic and, of course—the crowning mystery—an ancient dagger with a jeweled hilt."

"Funny sort of loot. Did I hear they photographed him this afternoon?"

"Yes. The Yard sent a photographer down. In a moment when he opened his eyes they made the picture."

"You know what they think up there? They think we've got Haresfoot—the mysterious burglar who's been working round the outskirts of London and never been brought in. The picture will be in the papers tomorrow."

There was a pause during which the chief constable stared at the doctor. Then he said, "Funny we've had no complaint about the jeweled dagger."

"Mighty poor haul," Curly commented dryly. "But there may be a clue there and that's what I want to see you about. Suppose I take the dagger along to Charles Ober up at Kingsmead Warren? I intended to call on him to-night in any event. What he doesn't know about the history of swords and daggers nobody can tell him. He might be able to identify the thing."

"That's an idea. The Yard has often consulted Ober."

Sturgeon rose, crossed his office and unlocked the bureau. He took out a handsomely jeweled antique dagger.

"There you are. It's been dusted for fingerprints, photographed, and so on. By all means let's get an opinion from Mr. Ober. I think he's mad, but I know he's clever."

"I'll go and collect my bag. I left it in the car."

"If you have anything to report, I shall be at the mayor's house until about midnight. If Mr. Ober wants to keep it for further examination, ask him to call Inspector Winchester, who will be on duty tonight. Otherwise, on your way back, you might drop it in."

As Curly walked along to his car, he had a glimpse of a vague figure disappearing into the shrubbery which bordered the driveway. There was a bright moon, but the shadow of the building lay across the path. His impression was that the figure went on all fours, and might be a large stray dog. In any case, there was little of value in his car to interest a prowler. He unlocked the door, took his bag out and returned to the office.

Chief Constable Sturgeon was standing with his back to the window which faced the driveway, and as Curly entered he raised a warning finger.

"Is there anyone out there?" he asked in a low voice.

"I thought I saw someone—or something."

They stood still, listening, and presently they heard the sound of soft whining, like a hound at fault, and then—another sound.

"Did you hear that?" Sturgeon asked.

"I did . . . Good God!"

The chief constable pressed a bell. There was a rap at the door and a police officer appeared.

"Yes, sir?"

"Go out the side door," Sturgeon directed. "Walk around the corner of the building, and then come in the front. If you find anybody prowling about, bring him in."

"Very good, sir."

The officer vanished. Curly packed the ancient dagger in his bag. Both seemed reluctant to speak. A few moments later the constable returned.

"Nobody there, sir."

"Very good, Stevens."

Stevens saluted and went out. Curly met a glance from Sturgeon.

"We can't both have imagined it, Chief. That was the gnashing of teeth . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

THE PRETTY NURSE in charge of the mysterious patient glanced at her wrist watch, then, furtively, at Sergeant Crowby. No sound had come from the injured man for a long time, and, beyond any reasonable doubt, Sergeant Crowby was dozing. The girl stole out, quietly, from the ward, and stood beside a telephone just beyond the door.

At the first muted buzz, she lifted the receiver.

"Sister Linda," she said softly.

A golden voice spoke over the wire.

"You are alone, Sister Linda?"

"Yes, Madonna."

"Listen closely, child. There is a tablet on the ledge outside the window near the patient's bed. On the pretence of either opening or closing this window, you must get the tablet, unnoticed by the policeman. You understand?"

"I understand, Madonna."

"You have a hypodermic syringe there, Sister Linda?"

"There is one in the medicine cabinet, Madonna."

"Good. The tablet will dissolve quickly. The injection should be intramuscular. If he speaks coherently, say it is a sedative to insure sleep. Whatever seems to happen, fear nothing. Carefully sterilize the instrument and replace it. You are sure you understand?"

"Quite sure, Madonna. I am proud to be of service."

"No service to our order goes unrewarded. You are studying for a medical degree?"

"Yes, Madonna."

"I shall see that your path to success is made smooth, Linda. When are you relieved?"

"At midnight, My Lady."

"I shall not call you again tonight. Sleep well, child."

All the way along to Ober's cottage—more particularly when he was clear of the town and driving along country lanes lined with hedges white with frost—Curly found himself thinking of the unknown patient, and of those un-

explained sounds outside the chief constable's office. A careful search of the shrubbery had produced no evidence of a prowler, man or beast. Of course the ground was hard and footprints weren't to be expected. His thoughts turned to Mary Glen. In fact, it was the problem of Mary which he had planned to lay before his friend Charles Ober that night. A decision of great importance to Curly must very shortly be made, and Charles could sometimes see farther in the dark than the next man.

At the entrance to Warren Lane, Dr. Bowden pulled up to light a cigarette.

As he took out his case, he found himself sitting holding it tightly, tensely still, and listening. Was it an echo of his own engine? Or had another car pulled up somewhere not far behind him?

"Hear those gnashing teeth? Don't you hear it? That's the Puma . . ." The words came back suddenly—alarmingly—in the very tone in which they had been spoken.

Suddenly he put the case away, shifted gears, and three minutes later found himself near the end of the narrow lane. Leaving the car at the gate, he grasped his bag and hurried up the gravel path. The door, giving on to a triangular porch, was thrown open and framed in it stood a huge, untidy figure.

"Is that Curly?" came Charles Ober's voice, a voice which always seemed to hover on the brink of laughter.

"Curly it is, Charles, and many problems I bring you."

"The first problem," Charles replied, as Curly stepped into the little hall, "is one of beer. My cask has nearly run out, and the swines I deal with have failed to renew it."

The door closed behind them, and in the remarkable apartment which Charles Ober referred to as his studio, Curly Bowden stood quite still, listening intently, until Charles returned with a foam-topped jug.

"Put down the jug for a moment, Charles, and listen."

"What do I have to listen for?" Charles demanded.

"Nothing in particular. It's very quiet along this lane. I just want your impressions of anything you may hear."

Curly watched Charles, who obeyed with a smiling frown. In the dim light of the studio he was a queer figure. His tweed suit looked as though it had been thrown under the bed every night. He stood there, six-feet-two of muscular, untended humanity, jug still in hand, and not a sound disturbed the silence of Warren Lane.

Curly looked about for some spot to put his bag. Other than the floor, no other spot was indicated. Little of the wall could be seen, owing to the presence of scores of sketches—most of them attached by drawing pins—of pieces of plate, swords, daggers, pistols.

There were several plain deal bookcases, chock-a-block with technical works, a number of cameras, portfolios, stacks of manuscripts—all this leading up, like an angry sea, to the island which was Charles's working desk.

This desk, which had at some time been a dining table, presented a smaller reproduction of the room. There was only one clear space, or cave, directly facing the chair occupied by the worker. Here the visitor observed with gratitude a clean writing pad and a sharpened pencil. What little could be seen of the once polished surface offered an intricate pattern of rings, indicating the presence of countless tankards and glasses of beer which had rested there.

"I can't hear a damned thing!" Ober declared. "Have you come to tell me a ghost story?"

"No, Charles." Curly put his bag on the floor, removed litter from an armchair and sat down. "I'm going to bore you with several problems."

Charles went to his chair, sat down and placed his glass in the clear bay before him.

Curly went on, "Suppose we start with Problem A—the dagger."

"Dagger?" Ober paused, pipe in hand. "Have you got some query about a dagger?"

"Yes. But first I must explain the history of the thing."

"Show me the dagger. I'll tell you its history."

"Be patient, Charles! You don't read the local newspaper, so that you're unaware of the fact that about this time last night a man was driving a very old Morris car along the London Road . . ."

"Which way was he going?" Charles inquired sarcastically.

"Toward the coast. It was a foggy night, and the surface was treacherous. About a quarter of a mile from here he crashed into a heavy truck which had got on to the wrong side of the road. The driver didn't stop. The car, and the man in it, were found later. He was brought to the hospital. I was on duty."

"How fascinating!" Charles yawned. "You're turning my blood cold."

Ignoring the mocking voice, Curly went on, "Scotland Yard thinks he's Haresfoot, the notorious burglar. Apart from his burgling kit and the usual odds and ends, the only thing in his possession was this." As he opened his bag and took out the ancient dagger, Charles swooped upon it.

"Now this, Curly, is better worth talking about than greasy roads and truck drivers!" He picked up a large lens. "What have we here? A museum piece! Note the intricate gold inlay on the blade. This is very early Damascene, one of the earliest I've ever seen. It's a ceremonial knife of some kind . . ."

"Is it valuable?" Curly inquired.

"As a collector's piece I should say it's probably unique. I used the term Damascene as defining the class of workmanship. But it may very well have come from Babylon."

"Babylon!"

"Yes, my friend. It's incredibly old. But I suppose Sturgeon will allow me to keep it for a time?"

Curly told him what he had arranged with the chief constable, and put the transcribed notes on Ober's desk. "This is a verbatim report of the patient's words from time to time. They may suggest a clue to your master mind."

Charles read the notes. "Except that he's been in Egypt and has a smattering of Arabic, they're far from illuminating," he announced then. "'Ma Leach' sounds like the Arabic for 'never mind,' and 'Him—she' is probably 'Get out!' The rest of it makes fine, confused reading. But tell me, Curly—" he looked up—"was it, by any chance, for the gnashing teeth you invited me to listen a while ago?"

Curly took a drink and nodded.

"It was! Sturgeon and I both heard it just before I left his office."

It was about an hour later when Curly walked into the Haygate Hill Hotel, nodded to the night porter and went upstairs. He knocked on a closed door.

"Come in," a clear voice invited.

Curly opened the door and went into what once had been a typical country hotel living room, but which Mary Glen, who lived there, had transformed into something better—a cozy little den with a glowing fire, a few pictures, a lot of books and a definite personality.

She stood up as Curly came in. She had been writing at a desk set under a window. They stood still for a moment, smiling at each other.

"Sorry I'm so late, Mary."

Mary had wavy hair, worn short, and it grew so thickly that it resembled carved mahogany in the shaded light. She was so slender and so vital, in spite of her cool poise, that the young doctor sometimes studied her with professional misgiving. But there was nothing feverish in the dark blue eyes, and her perfect figure had the elasticity of health.

He kissed her. Then she drew back, looking at him with her fascinating, one-sided smile.

"Let me make a nest for you."

Mary piled cushions on the floor against an old arm-chair, and Curly dropped down gratefully upon this improvised divan, and leaned back watching her. She threw another cushion down nearby, for herself, and sat there cross-legged.

"There's beer," she told him, "and I have coffee brewing in the percolator."

"Coffee, darling. I had enough beer with Charles."

He was thinking of Charles, whose advice he had sought that night. It was only when he realized that his plans, if they matured, meant living in the tropics, and that this might mean losing Mary, that he knew he couldn't face the prospect.

When he had put the problem before Charles, that incorrigible bachelor had laughed.

"But there's no problem at all, my poor Romeo!" he'd snorted. "If she loves you she'll go with you to whatever Congo swamp or other malarious hole your medical enthusiasm leads you. If she doesn't, she won't."

"It's not as simple as all that, Charles. She doesn't want to marry me."

"Then that settles it. To the devil with her!"

"You still don't get it. She has a distaste for marriage, not for me!"

"Which, if slightly unusual, simplifies the whole matter. I have a distaste for marriage, myself. If she prefers her independence, but is prepared to go to the upper reaches of the Amazon as your girl friend, I congratulate you!"

But Curly had found no comfort in that point of view. And now, as Mary prepared the coffee, he played for time.

"How's the work gone today, Mary?"

"It was a struggle, Curly. This week's piece is rotten—and I have to go up and face Father Damnation in the morning." Father Damnation was Mary's name for the feature editor of the *Daily Hour*, to which she contributed a weekly column.

"Don't feel like that about it. It's probably very good."

"No, it's slow poison. I simply hadn't an idea. Couldn't concentrate."

Curly studied her face, for she was looking away from him, watching the bubbling coffee, and he saw all the strength in that delicate profile. He had never been inside the rambling old mansion in which Mary had spent her youth, but he knew that during the later years of her father's life her busy pen had supported the household.

"I had an idea, Mary, that when you were lucky enough to lease the old house, it relieved the tension."

Mary served the coffee. Then, resuming her place on the floor, she grasped one slim ankle and dragged it under her almost viciously.

"It was a godsend, of course. American tycoons don't come along every day. And John Hanessy really is a wonderful man. But you see, Curly, according to the lawyers poor Dad, in leaving me the property, practically forced me into bankruptcy! The death duties are astronomical. Only by selling the place could I hope to meet them, and then I shouldn't have a cent."

"Perhaps Hanessy would make you a bid for the property?"

"No, dear." Mary shook her head. "He leased it for six months, and he's paying an extravagant rental. He came on business to England, and he's done a lot of entertaining, and practically refurnished the old ruin. And he's going to leave all the new furniture behind when he goes. But when he does go, I'm sunk!"

"Mary," Curly said, "I didn't quite realize, when I put in for this Colonial thing, what it would mean. The way things are today, it would probably be the British West Indies."

Mary said nothing.

"I've been more or less blindly thinking of my career. I've got my tropical medicine degree from London, and applied for an appointment. I have theories about certain diseases which, frankly, I'm anxious to test out. That was the way I thought until a few days ago, when I realized—"

"You realized what?" she asked, holding her head on one side.

And suddenly Curly was beside her, his arm around her, holding her tightly.

"I realized that I simply couldn't leave you, Mary. When I saw myself standing alone on the deck of a ship bound for the West Indies, I knew beyond any doubt that I couldn't bear it."

Mary remained silent, so that Curly experienced an unaccountable sensation—almost like a lowering of the temperature. Then, feeling her slim shoulders shaking, a ghastly idea possessed him that she was laughing at him. He drew back slightly and turned her head. There were tears on her lashes.

"Mary," he looked into her tearful eyes. "Mary! What is it?"

"Curly, darling," she whispered and threw her arms around his neck.

They were still like that when they heard a rap upon the door.

"Damn!" Mary spoke quietly. "I had quite forgotten! It's Mrs. de Castro."

CHAPTER THREE

CURLY, LIGHTING A CIGARETTE, was prepared for the entrance of one of those rather pathetic old ladies who end their days in country hotels. But Mrs. de Castro's beauty was regal, completely feminine. She wore a long, white mink coat, from the collar of which her face looked out like a flower. A net covered her hair, so that Curly couldn't have defined its color except that it appeared to sparkle in the changing light from red to gold. She had the longest eye lashes he had ever seen; they seemed to weigh her lids down, for she kept them nearly always lowered.

She looked about her with a disarming smile.

"My dear!" she said to Mary, "I expected to find you alone."

But Curly had a sudden suspicion that she had expected nothing of the kind, a suspicion confirmed by Mary's embarrassment.

"An old friend dropped in," she told her. "This is Dr. Bowden—Mrs. de Castro."

"Mary's friends are my friends, Dr. Bowden."

Her voice was exquisitely musical. He wondered if she could be an actress, but dismissed the idea. With her beauty and that golden voice, all the world would have heard of her. Moreover, she had a magnetic personality. Mary treated her with a deference which surprised him.

When Mrs. de Castro sank down into the only armchair, which Mary placed for her, she dropped her luxurious mink coat on the carpet with careless indifference. Mary lifted it, draped it on a hanger and took it into the bedroom.

Curly saw that Mrs. de Castro wore evening dress, leaving her arms and shoulders bare.

"I had to dine in London, Dr. Bowden. But I was glad to return to the peace of Surrey."

Her glance confused and embarrassed him. He turned aside, picked up his cigarette case and offered it.

"Does that mean you're a neighbor of ours?"

He tried to speak casually. She declined a cigarette, shaking her head.

"Thank you, but I am smoking no more tonight. Yes, I'm a temporary resident. I heard that my friend, Austin Rayburn, the painter, wanted to rent his house for a few months. I had business in London, but I loathe living there. So I took it."

"That's the big house near Lye Common?"

"Yes. Too big for me, of course, but delightfully artistic. You must come and see me, and bring Mary."

Curly was glad when Mary came back. Mrs. de Castro's caressing, but curiously analytical glance, gave him the idea that she was sizing him up, outside and in; physically, mentally, and spiritually.

They talked for a while. Mrs. de Castro declined any kind of refreshment. She seemed to have traveled in every quarter of the world, and was a fascinating talker. Presently she stood up, looking from one to the other and laughing softly.

"It's time I left you two to say good night to one another. I told you I should call on my way back, Mary, but I expect you forgot—"

"No, indeed I didn't!" Mary protested.

"Then please find my coat, child—and Dr. Bowden, please don't bother escorting me to the door. I know the way, and my car is waiting. I am so glad that Mary has chosen a personable lover, Dr. Bowden. I dislike ugly men, even when they are clever . . ."

Later, after Mrs. de Castro had gone, Curly stared hard at Mary, who was watching him with an odd smile.

"Mary, who is Mrs. de Castro? Have you known her long?"

Mary lighted a cigarette. "A month or so; since she came here. Linda Marlow introduced me—the pretty nurse at your hospital. Linda lives here, you know. I saw you were fascinated by Mrs. de Castro."

"She certainly is charming, and very pretty."

"Pretty? She's beautiful—the most beautiful woman I've ever seen! She's brilliantly clever, too. Linda lent me a wonderful book she has written. At first it rather frightened me, the ideas were so utterly revolutionary and so frankly stated."

Curly became interested and suspicious. "Sex, I suppose?"

"Yes. Her theory is that there can be no peace in the

world until all that is ugly has been destroyed—ugly philosophies, ugly art, ugly people. She says that only highly trained women can bring this about.”

“Have their work cut out, wouldn’t they?” Curly grinned. “Have these ideas of the clever Mrs. de Castro anything to do with your views on marriage?”

Mary said, “Yes! I don’t believe in marriage. Come and kiss me . . .”

It was close on midnight when Curly Bowden left. He was excited, ill at ease. He sensed that the beautiful Mrs. de Castro was a disturbing factor in Mary’s life—and therefore in his own. The power of her personality was unmistakable. He had experienced it himself.

What was her purpose? Was she a prophet of a new creed—or an agent of an old one?

He realized as he turned into Warren Lane, making for Charles’s bungalow, that he had allowed dreams to rule him, so that the mystery of the gnashing teeth had slipped into the background. He stopped before the gate. Light showed at the studio window. He walked up the drive, stepped on to the porch and rang the bell.

There was no reply, though he rang four times.

Coming down from the porch, he walked around to one of the lighted windows. The drapes were carelessly drawn, and he could see a large part of the room quite clearly.

And what he saw struck a chill to his heart.

The night remained crystal-clear, a sickle moon sailed in the sky. Curly stooped, picked up a piece of rock and crashed it through a pane of the window. Reaching in, he unfastened the latch, opened the window and jumped into the room.

Ober lay sunk forward, arms outstretched in the clear bay of his vast writing table. Curly heaved him back in his chair, stared into his face, became suddenly, coolly, professional, and examined him as he would have examined a patient admitted to the hospital. His examination concluded, he looked about him grimly.

The jeweled dagger was missing!

He stepped to the phone, which stood upon one of the deal bookcases, and dialed.

“Police!” He spoke urgently.

A few moments later a voice said: “Haygate Police Headquarters.”

"Dr. Kyrle Bowden speaking. Is Inspector Winchester there?"

"Inspector Winchester speaking, sir."

"Come along, in person, if possible. I want an ambulance. I'm in Mr. Charles Ober's bungalow—Warren Lane. He's been knocked out by burglars."

"I'll be there inside ten minutes, Doctor."

As he replaced the receiver, Curly stood still, listening. He could hear no sound. He turned and stared at the pale face of Charles Ober, then ran to the door and out to the car for his bag.

Early the next morning, Chief Inspector Gilligan walked into his office at Scotland Yard, hung up his topcoat and hat, and glanced over a report which lay on his desk. As he read, his expression changed. He turned back to the first page and read through again. The report was the last received from Chief Constable Sturgeon, and it contained a verbatim copy of the unknown patient's delirious ravings.

Inspector Gilligan opened a newspaper he had brought with him. Using a large lens which he took from a drawer of his desk, he studied a photograph in the paper, beneath which appeared the words:

"Do you know this man?"

He pressed a button, and a voice said, "Sergeant Hawkins."

"Rush me the glossy of a picture taken some time yesterday of a patient, now in Kingsmead Cottage Hospital, suspected to be Haresfoot. Advise Chief Constable, Haygate, to expect me at nine forty-five. Order my car to stand by. Get busy."

These instructions given, Gilligan lighted his pipe.

He had just got his pipe going well when there was a knock on the door. A smart young constable, in uniform, came in and laid a glossy photograph on the inspector's desk. Gilligan nodded, and the constable went out.

The lens came into play again as Inspector Gilligan examined the print. From a folder in another drawer of his desk he took out a second photograph and compared the two. He packed both prints in his brief case, stood up and put on the hat and coat he had just taken off. Five minutes later he was speeding along the Embankment, where a morning mist still hovered over the river, on his way to the historic town of Haygate in Surrey.

At somewhere about the same time that morning a remarkable and disturbing fact was brought to the notice of John Hanessy, tenant of Squires Pastures, Mary Glen's old home, in the same neighborhood.

John Hanessy got out of bed, drew the window drapes aside and, humming softly, looked down over a frosty lawn. He was a big man, over six feet tall, and generously proportioned. He was clean-shaven and still handsome. He might have passed for a judge, or even an actor. And the tone of his deep voice would have seemed in keeping with either of these occupations.

Now, pulling on his dressing gown, he rang for Sample, the English butler. Sample appeared almost magically with the morning rolls and coffee.

"Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, Sample."

"A beautiful morning again, sir."

Sample opened the drapes before the other windows, threw them up and busied himself over the breakfast tray. John Hanessy, still humming softly and walking up and down, watched him with appreciation.

"I have taken the liberty, sir—" Sample placed a cup of creamy coffee on the bedside table—"of bringing up a copy of this morning's paper." He produced it from his pocket. "I know you don't like to see the papers or the mail until you've had your shower, but I thought in the circumstances you would excuse me."

"Certainly." Hanessy smiled genially. "Go ahead. What are these circumstances?"

"It's this man's photograph, sir." Sample opened the paper and pointed to the front page. "It seems that Scotland Yard is trying to identify him. But the caption under the picture was what attracted my attention."

Hanessy took the newspaper and stared at the picture. It showed a feverish face with widely opened eyes and a sort of surprised smile. The man's head was swathed in bandages and the caption read:

"Do you know this man?"

A short paragraph underneath stated that the man was a patient in the Kingsmead Cottage Hospital, and that the only clue to his identity was an antique dagger with a jeweled hilt.

John Hanessy lowered his tufted brows.

"Conveying what?" he wanted to know. "Why should I be interested?"

"The dagger with the jeweled hilt, sir. You may recall that you were showing it to Mrs. de Castro the last time she dined here."

"Do you mean those odds and ends from the lounge cabinet described as heirlooms?"

"I do, sir. The dagger mentioned in the newspaper was one of them."

"Listen," Hannessy's voice boomed, "there's maybe half a million daggers with jeweled hilts spread around the world. Why would the one I showed to Mrs. de Castro have to be the one in this paragraph?"

"The point occurred to me at once, sir, and I checked before disturbing you. I requested Mr. Wetherby to open the cabinet in which the small teak chest containing the heirlooms is locked. He did so. The lock of the teak chest had been forced, and although more valuable items were undisturbed, the dagger was missing."

"What's that! You mean we've been burgled?"

"I fear so. Mr. Wetherby immediately called the police and read over the phone a description of the dagger from the owner's inventory. I believe the chief constable is already on his way, sir."

And no doubt this would have been true if, just as Chief Sturgeon was on the point of starting, he hadn't received Inspector Gilligan's phone message. So that at the moment he was pacing his office, impatiently glancing from time to time at an electric clock on the wall.

At exactly 9:45 a car drove in and Chief Inspector Gilligan stepped out.

"Good morning, sir," he greeted as he opened the office door.

"Good morning, Inspector. Glad to see you—but what's the purpose of your visit?"

Gilligan opened his brief case and took out two photographs.

"This man, in hospital . . . Think I know him."

"You know him?" The chief constable became excited.

"Who is he?"

"Like to be sure before I stick my neck out. Suspect he's Drake Roscoe, formerly of the F.B.I. Can I see him?"

Sturgeon shook his head irritably. "Sorry. You can't. He's gone."

"Gone?" Gilligan stared. "You don't mean he's dead?"

"The nurse called the doctor on duty just after midnight, and he certified the man to be dead. Of course,

it was expected. The body was moved to the mortuary."

"Should like to see it."

Again Sturgeon shook his head.

"It isn't there."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Someone removed it during the night. No precautions are taken to guard corpses. The outrage wasn't discovered until this morning."

"H'm!" Inspector Gilligan took out a large pouch and began to fill his briar. "Have photograph at Yard of antique knife found in man's possession. Could I see this knife?"

Sturgeon stood up, crossed to the window and stared out. He was beginning to feel ridiculous.

"I'm afraid not. I gave Dr. Bowden, one of the physicians attached to the hospital, permission to take the exhibit over to his friend, Charles Ober—an expert on such subjects. He lives near here."

"Know him by name, sir. C.I.D. used him more than once. He still has it, I suppose?"

"He hasn't—he was attacked in his cottage about midnight, and the dagger was stolen."

"Good Lord!" The imperturbable Gilligan nearly dropped his pipe. "Where is he, now?"

"In Kingsmead Hospital, suffering from concussion."

"Opinion might have thrown light on history of dagger. Pity." Gilligan opened his brief case again and took out Sergeant Crowby's report. "These notes wash out theory man in hospital is Haresfoot. Somebody far more important. What steps taken, sir, to trace legitimate ownership of weapon?"

Chief Constable Sturgeon had waited for this. Now he would show the celebrated Scotland Yard officer that the Haygate police weren't sleepwalkers.

"Highly successful steps, Inspector. I was about to leave for the house from which the burglar stole it, when I received your message."

CHAPTER FOUR

A YOUNG SCULPTOR was at work in the studio where mimosa flowered. His overrefined features and large luminous eyes suggested a delicate constitution, and the pallor of his handsome face was accentuated by a slim black mustache. He was working on a detail in ivory—the subtle curve of a woman's knee, the leg outstretched. He almost seemed to be holding his breath. Presently, speaking in French, he whispered, "Madonna, rest now—for I must!"

Mrs. de Castro, lying on the mink-covered divan, drew a robe about her and lay back luxuriously, raising her arms above her head.

"You exhaust yourself, Camille." The golden voice was music, but cold music. "Also, it is so early to pose."

"The light is perfect—perfect as your beauty."

Camille filled a glass from a wine bottle which stood beside him, drained it, set it down, and turned his large, hot eyes in her direction, his gaze seeming to devour her. He crossed to her in three long strides, dropped to his knees and clasped his hands as if in prayer.

"You are a goddess." He spoke huskily. "And so it is sacrilege to touch you. Your beauty will bring me fame second only to that of Phidias. But, Madonna, when will you hear my prayers? When will you become a woman—for *me*?"

"You are so impatient, Camille. It was the same with that unhappy Japanese genius whose study you have seen and have promised to improve upon. I beg of you, do not emulate him and die before I have time to reward you."

Camille sprang up, turned, teeth clenched, and walked back to his work.

"Please to resume the pose, Madonna."

Somewhere outside the studio a bell tinkled.

"It is Caspar." Mrs. de Castro sat upright. "How unfortunate, Camille. We must finish for this morning. He brings urgent news."

She removed her finger from a hidden bell-push as the feverish eyes were focused upon her.

"Caspar has interrupted my work too often."

Mrs. de Castro shrugged her shoulders.

"I have many responsibilities. It is unavoidable. Again I tell you—be patient."

Camille, his pale cheeks flushed, hurriedly put away and covered up his materials as Caspar came in silently. Camille brushed past the intruder and rushed out of the studio.

Caspar saluted ceremoniously.

"My Lady called me."

"It was necessary. Camille persists in his passionate overtures."

Caspar inclined his head, always smiling.

"Monsieur de Paris is one of the greatest living sculptors, My Lady. He is also a Frenchman. No doubt his passion will transform My Lady's statue into a vital work of art."

"No doubt, Caspar. But his ardor bores me. Your news?"

"Dr. Yoshida reports that Drake will live."

Mrs. de Castro flashed him a bright glance from half-closed eyes.

"But the knife, Caspar; the knife?"

"Dr. Yoshida has so far failed to detach the hilt. He fears to use violent methods."

"He is a fumbling fool." The lovely voice sank almost to a whisper. "How I miss Ariosto."

"My Lady can always recall him."

"No, Caspar, not yet. But this delay is torture. A magic talisman, the scepter of a vast kingdom, is in my possession—yet not mine! You have Sister Linda's report?"

"I have, My Lady. It is serious, for the same report is already in possession of the police. Drake, in his delirium, spoke words to lay a trail to this door."

"Read this report to me."

Caspar took a typed page from under his robe and intoned, in his sing-song voice, an almost word-for-word transcription of the ravings of the patient in the Kingsmead Cottage Hospital.

"Yes," Mrs. de Castro murmured, "it would be serious if the Haygate police knew anything of my record."

"Chief Inspector Gilligan arrived from Scotland Yard this morning."

"Then it is serious, Caspar. This man has interfered

with me before. Great persistence can sometimes succeed where genius fails."

"My Lady's power to change her personality may be called for."

She watched him from behind lowered lashes.

"You think he will come here? Very well. The Mrs. de Castro known to our neighbors is not, after all, my true self. We have met before, this English policeman and I. When we meet again, he will not know me."

When Chief Inspector Gilligan and Chief Constable Sturgeon arrived at Squires Pastures they were received by Byron Wetherby, John Hanessy's private secretary, a dry New Englander who seemed to have been born respectable.

"Mr. Hanessy expects you. Will you come this way?"

They found John Hanessy in a room furnished as an office. He was seated behind a large, shiny mahogany desk upon which there was nothing but a perfectly clean blotting pad and two fountain pens in a black plastic stand.

"Good morning." He glanced at his wrist watch and stood up. "I have notified my London office I shall be late. Unless you have any questions to ask, I propose we visit the scene of the robbery."

The party proceeded to a long, low, paneled room from which two French windows opened on a terrace. An old walnut cabinet with glazed doors stood between the windows. It contained all sorts of bric-a-brac, and on the bottom shelf was a small antique teak box with copper bands and a copper keyhole.

"That—" John Hanessy's deep voice made the words impressive—"is the box which contained the so-called heirlooms, of which the missing dagger was one. Sample, motivated by a paragraph in this morning's newspaper, requested Byron, here, to unlock the cabinet and check the contents of the box."

"Who is Sample?" Gilligan wanted to know.

"He's my butler. He thought he recognized the dagger described in the newspaper this morning."

Gilligan opened the cabinet and took out the teak box.

"Fingerprints?" John Hanessy asked.

The inspector said over his shoulder, "Man wore gloves." He raised the lid of the box and briefly examined the contents.

"According to inventory, everything checks except for the one missing item," Wetherby informed him. "Not much to tempt a burglar."

"Nothing of great value," Gilligan agreed. "Clearly, the thief came for just one thing—the jeweled dagger. Were the jewels real?"

John Hanessy stared at him uncomprehendingly, then at the chief constable. "I imagine, Inspector, you took a good look at them at the station house?"

"I had no opportunity. Chief constable can tell you."

Sturgeon cleared his throat. "I judged the jewels to be real, Mr. Hanessy, such as they were—carnelian, lapis lazuli and the like."

"I agree with you, but I hadn't examined them closely. I take it that the dagger will be returned immediately?"

Sturgeon glanced apologetically at Gilligan.

"Just as soon as we can trace it," the inspector assured Hanessy. "It was left last night with an expert for his report. The expert was knocked out, and the dagger stolen."

"What—again?" Hanessy shouted.

"We believe," the chief constable broke in, "that we are up against a highly organized gang. This dagger, which you thought of small value, must have been followed up right from the time of the smash on Haygate Hill which resulted in the thief's arrival, unconscious, at the Cottage Hospital. I have reason to believe that someone was watching outside my office at the time that I entrusted the dagger found in his possession to Dr. Bowden. Evidently, Dr. Bowden was followed to Mr. Ober's cottage—Mr. Ober is the expert—as a second attempt was made there later, this time a successful one."

"But this unknown character in the hospital—the burglar?"

"He died last night," Gilligan informed him dryly. "So the secret of the dagger died with him." He shot a warning glance at Sturgeon. "I suggest an interview with the owner of these treasures."

"I had already fixed a date," John Hanessy said, "with Miss Mary Glen, to whom these things belong. I'm going to see her right now, and I propose you come along."

They found Mary waiting in her cozy private room. John Hanessy introduced Sturgeon and Inspector Gilligan. Mary had expected them, for she had seen and heard Hanessy's big Rolls crunching up to the door of the hotel.

It was a frosty morning and a cheerful log fire crackled on the hearth.

"Dr. Bowden called me early," Mary said, "so I know most of the story. If there's anything I can do to help, please tell me. You see, I have to catch a London train in half an hour."

"Forget the train." Hanessy beamed with geniality. "I'm driving into the city myself. My car is right outside, and at your service."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Hanessy."

"Certainly a few questions I should like to ask," Inspector Gilligan admitted. "You know, Miss Glen, that some kind of oriental dagger kept with other things in teak box has been stolen."

"Yes. But I didn't know until this morning."

"Police had no idea where this thing came from, nor had anybody else, until Mr. Hanessy's butler read a paragraph in the morning paper and had the contents of teak chest checked. We're faced with a stiff problem, Miss Glen. The robbery at Squires Pastures is peculiar, but a second attempt at Ober's cottage points clearly to two facts: first, the unknown man who died wasn't working alone; second, this dagger must have some unsuspected value. I'm hoping Mr. Ober may be able to throw some light on the matter. But perhaps, as owner of the missing piece, you can help."

Mary shook her head. "All I can tell you, Inspector, is this: the small teak chest in which I know there was a dagger, an old watch, and some other trinkets, was always referred to by my father as the Kidd Treasure. It had been in his family for several generations, but what it meant, or where it came from, I have no idea. You see, my father lived altogether inside himself—in fact, he lived in the past. And although we were very close, I don't think he believed that I should understand or sympathize with old family traditions which I admit didn't seem to me to amount to much."

"May I suggest—" Chief Constable Sturgeon brushed his graying hair back from his forehead and seemed to come out of a brown study—"that these relics may have related in some way to the notorious Captain Kidd? I mean, this dagger may be a clue to the pirate's hidden treasure."

"I'm afraid it isn't."

"How so?" John Hanessy demanded.

"Oh, the connection is simple—but not so romantic. My great-great-grandmother was a Kidd—so far as I know, not related to the pirate—and an only child, and she inherited this box. It's been at Squires Pastures for ever so many years, but nobody ever bothered about it."

"Somebody bothering now," Inspector Gilligan remarked.

The woman known to residents in that part of Surrey which extends from Haygate Hill to Lye Common (although very few had met her), as Mrs. de Castro, lay among a nest of cushions on the divan in the studio. She wore the house dress of the harem—baggy trousers, embroidered sandals and a silk brassière. The gossamer texture revealed rather than concealed the perfect curves of her ivory body.

A short, stocky man in the white coat of a doctor stood before her. His Japanese features were inscrutable. In his strong, square hands he held the jeweled dagger stolen from Squires Pastures.

"You have degrees from four great medical schools, including your own, Yoshida." The woman's voice was low-pitched, caressing. "You are a brilliant chemist, an expert surgeon. You are also an archaeologist. You have had ten hours in which to discover how to detach the hilt of this knife from the blade."

"I succeeded in doing so before dawn, My Lady."

He spoke perfect English. His intonation alone betrayed his nationality.

The woman's eyes seemed to be closed; her black lashes lay on her cheeks. But Yoshida could see the points of light gleaming through. He knew she watched him.

"And it has taken you from dawn to this very hour to learn that the hilt is in three sections and that the hiding place is in the knob at the top." Her voice, now, was no more than a musical whisper.

"Which cannot be opened, My Lady, until all the other sections are removed. And each of them presents a separate problem."

"And now, to add to my admiration of your skill, you tell me that this receptacle is empty." She sat upright, leaned towards him, and fully opened her wonderful eyes.

Yoshida remained immobile. "Whatever it contained may have been found many generations ago, My Lady."

"Or it may have been found last night. A clever man,

whose talents I could use, had it in his possession for over two hours. Tell me, is there evidence to show that the sections of the hilt may have been unscrewed recently?"

Yoshida's expression did nothing to betray him. His hands, too, remained steady. He inclined his head slightly.

"There is, My Lady."

"Ah." She lay back, closing her eyes. "As I suspected. Mr. Charles Ober, Master of Arts and Bachelor of Science, has succeeded where you have failed. Leave the dagger there on the table, Yoshida. Send Caspar to me."

Yoshida bowed and went out.

Then came the silvery note of a bell. Caspar entered, smiling, silent, performed his usual salaam and stood waiting. His downcast eyes studied a slender, patrician ankle around which appeared the faint tracery, shadow-like, of a coiled serpent. His glance strayed slowly upward, although he never raised his head, passed lightly by charms over which many glances had lingered, and came to rest upon My Lady's right ear.

"Well, Caspar—are you satisfied that I am not growing fat?"

His sleepy gaze met hers for a moment. "I don't anticipate such a tragedy, Madonna. I was thinking that the Mrs. de Castro who meets Inspector Gilligan must conceal not only her ankles but also her ears."

She smiled, settling herself comfortably among the cushions.

"I am aware, Caspar, that in my description as recorded at Scotland Yard and also at the Paris Sûreté, stress is laid upon the fact that I have no lobes to my ears and that a coiled serpent is faintly tattooed around my left ankle. I shall deal with this."

CHAPTER FIVE

CURLY BOWDEN stood in a private room of the Cottage Hospital watching Charles Ober. Sir Miles Larrington, a celebrated consultant who lived in the neighborhood, stood beside him.

"He's coming around." Larrington spoke in a low voice.

Concealed once more behind a screen, Sergeant Crowby waited patiently. So far the mutterings of the patient had been unintelligible and he was hoping now for something more useful. He was beginning to wonder when his duties would be changed. Crowby was getting very tired of sitting beside beds waiting for semiconscious men to say something.

Charles Ober opened bloodshot eyes, stared in a puzzled way at the two faces and then raised his hand to touch his neck.

"Wow! Can't move my head!"

"I shouldn't try now, Charles," Curly advised.

A nurse came in, helped the patient to sit up, and held a tumbler to his lips. He drank greedily.

"Head bad?" the specialist inquired.

Charles, holding himself very rigidly, dropped back on to the pillow.

"How did you know?" he murmured. "I think it's full of wasps."

"We are very anxious to find out what occurred, Charles; do you feel capable of giving us any idea?"

Charles groaned. He raised himself in bed and the nurse propped him up with pillows. The injury lay at the back of his neck.

"A shrewd blow," he murmured; "the very devil of a wallop! When you left me the other night, Curly—I don't know what night it was, and please don't tell me. It might be depressing—I settled down with my well-known enthusiasm to identify Exhibit A, which you had left in my care." He paused and closed his eyes, then opened them again. "Let me concentrate—the dagger? Ah! The

construction of the hilt attracted my attention. I worked over it for half an hour, sitting at my desk. Then, I retired to my laboratory. Microscopic investigation put me on the right track."

"What did you find?" Curly spoke excitedly.

"I found that the hilt was perfectly made in three parts. That part attached to the blade had to be unscrewed first, and when the middle part was removed, the large enameled disk forming the top of the hilt could be opened like a watch. I succeeded at last in unscrewing them all. The threads were miraculously fine, and clearly hadn't been unscrewed for centuries."

His voice died away. He sank back on his pillow.

"I should like him to sleep now for at least eight hours," Larrington stated. "Don't you agree?"

"Yes." Curly nodded. "Of course I agree, Sir Miles. But it's awfully irritating. Charles has information of vital interest to Scotland Yard. . . ."

As Sir Miles Larrington stepped into his car—Curly having seen him to the door of the hospital—Chief Inspector Gilligan stepped out of another which had just pulled up.

"Hello, Dr. Bowden," Gilligan hailed, when Larrington drove off. "I wanted to see you."

"Come in, Inspector. We can be quite private."

"How's the new patient?"

"Coming around, but incommunicado until this evening. I'll tell you all about it."

They sat down in a small room reserved for the doctor on duty, while Curly reported Ober's provoking statement. Gilligan filled his pipe and lighted it. He didn't say a word until it was going. Then he said something which was remarkable.

"Did you ever hear of anyone called Sumuru?"

"No. Why?"

"It was a shot in the dark. Which of your nurses on duty at time unknown patient died?"

"Nurse Weston. She's on duty now, as it happens."

"Could I see her for a moment?"

"Certainly, Inspector. Excuse me. I'll bring her along."

Curly, bewildered by Inspector Gilligan's inquiries, went out, but returned in a few minutes with Nurse Weston. She was a stocky North Country girl with a freckled, good-humored face. Gilligan's interest seemed to evaporate

the moment she came in. He asked her a few questions in a kindly way, and let her go.

"What nurse was on duty before Miss Weston?" he asked Curly.

Curly was getting more and more bewildered. "Sister Marlow, the senior nurse."

"Could I see her?"

"Sorry, but she's off duty."

"H'm!" Gilligan frowned. "Happen to be a pretty girl?"

"Yes. She's quite a pretty girl. But what's the point?"

"Point is—her ankles."

"Her ankles!"

"Nothing unusual about her ankles?"

"Nothing that I've noticed. She has nice legs, if that's what you're driving at."

"Good. I hoped so. Where does she live?"

This conversation suggested so strongly that Chief Inspector Gilligan had an uncontrollable passion for pretty nurses that Curly grinned openly.

"Haygate Hill Hotel. She's a friend of my fiancée, Mary Glen, who also lives there. I should be glad to introduce you."

"Congratulations. Miss Glen is charming. I've met her." Gilligan returned Curly's grin. "No personal interest in either lady, nor in their ankles. The point is strictly professional, and important. I have noted Miss Glen's ankles."

"Many thanks!"

"Had to. It's my business." The inspector's expression had grown grim. "This thing is bigger than you suspect. A woman's the link, and her ankles are the clue. An accident in the fog upset scheme somewhat. The scheme concerned whatever's hidden in hilt of dagger."

"I must agree, Inspector."

"Original burglary was simple; any amateur could do it. There was an old-fashioned catch on the French windows. Someone had previously taken impression of the key of the cabinet, and a duplicate key was used. The lock of the box was primitive, easily forced. But covering you right from here to Ober's cottage, and on to Haygate Hill Hotel, was expertly done. The attack on Mr. Ober was the work of a trained thug. Probably Puma—whoever Puma may be. Believe steps were taken to detain you with Miss Glen until the Ober job was carried out. Nothing was overlooked. That brings us to the disappearance of the dead man."

"The most astounding thing that ever happened here! So purposeless!"

"Purposeless?" Gilligan took a pencil from his pocket and gently pushed down burning tobacco in the bowl of his pipe. "On the contrary. Know why they did it?"

"Why?"

"Prevent identification of man, dead or alive—and I don't think he's dead."

"What?"

"Fairly sure. Identification would complete case against Sumuru."

"Who is this Sumuru? A Japanese gangster?"

"No. Most dangerous woman alive today."

"Woman?"

"Very much so! Has more assassinations and other outrages to her credit than any criminal known to police of Europe and America."

"What a hideous hag she must be!"

Inspector Gilligan smiled grimly.

"Probably the most lovely woman living. Beauty is her deadliest weapon. She has disciples all over the world; specializes in attractive women. She uses them to seduce important men to work for her. She heads international gang called the Order of Our Lady."

"And you think that this gang is responsible for what's been going on here?"

"Yes. Remarks of our unknown patient, before the body was snatched, point that way. She's known to disciples as Madonna. Has a base in Egypt. I never supposed she'd risk her neck in England. Dossier at the Yard enough to hang her sky-high."

"Have you any reason to suspect that she is in the neighborhood?"

"No. It may be a case of remote control. Must call at Haygate Hill Hotel without delay."

The woman known to Inspector Gilligan under a number of other names, one of which was Sumuru, lay on the studio divan wrapped in the fleecy robe she had worn since leaving her bath. She was talking into a phone.

"When do you return to the hospital, Linda?"

"Not until tomorrow morning, Madonna. I have this evening free."

"Therefore you are not wearing your nursing uniform?"

"No, Madonna."

"Resume it, immediately. I anticipate that you may receive a visit some time today from Chief Inspector Gilligan. The coarse white stocking should effectually hide the mark of our order. He may ask embarrassing questions, but you know our rules and will know how to deal with them."

"Yes, Madonna. I shall be very careful. . . ."

Sumuru stood up, thrust her feet into mink-lined slippers and went out. She walked upstairs and stopped before a door at the end of a carpeted corridor, then opened the door quietly. There was a faint smell of chemicals. A man lay in a neat white bed placed near the only window. Yoshida was seated at a side table, reading. He stood up and turned; his yellow face showed no emotion.

"What are you reading, Yoshida?"

Sumuru's voice was softly musical.

Yoshida handed her the open book—a French treatise on the nervous system, still used as a textbook at the Sorbonne School of Medicine in Paris. It was the work of a brilliant young physician whose swift rise to fame had ended in a disastrous crash. He was tried for the cold-blooded murder of a beautiful girl, and narrowly escaped Devil's Island. Following a short term of imprisonment—he had been defended by the greatest criminal lawyer in France—he had disappeared.

Sumuru smiled, and returned the book. "Has it taught you anything, Yoshida?"

"I cannot accept all his conclusions, My Lady."

"But you recognize his genius?"

"His reputation has survived his disgrace."

"Naturally." She sat down in a chair beside the bed. "He was your predecessor, Yoshida. I financed his defense. He became my private physician. You have heard of him as Ariosto."

That Yoshida was astonished only the woman who studied him could know. His features did not betray his thoughts.

"I am honored, My Lady, to be counted worthy to replace him."

"So far, Yoshida, you have proved so. Avoid his mistakes and you will be well rewarded. He is at present employed in my ruby mines. The work is not salubrious. But his great medical skill should enable him to survive. Leave me now."

Yoshida inclined his head and went out.

Sumuru studied the chart attached to the bed, then, laying her hand on the patient's head, passed white fingers slowly down his face, a stroking, caressing movement. The strappings had been removed, showing an ugly scar just below the hairline.

"Wake up, Drake. Wake. Talk to me."

The man's eyelids fluttered, then opened. He stared up at the lovely face bending over him, then closed his eyes again.

"You hell-cat!" he muttered. "Leave me alone."

"Look at me."

He shuddered slightly. "What have you done with Dolores? Just tell me one thing. Tell me if she is alive, or dead?"

"Look at me, and I will tell you."

He raised weary lids, glanced once into the wonderful eyes watching him, then turned aside.

"I'm not fool enough to let you hypnotize me again. What did you make me do? What crime have I committed? Only let me lay my hands on that yellow vermin Yoshida!"

"You must not become excited. And you are ungrateful; you owe your life to Yoshida."

"I don't want life without Dolores."

Sumuru smiled, almost sadly. "I gave Dolores to you, Drake. She was the greatest gift I had to give. My best friend, my confidant. And you tried to corrupt her, took advantage of her love for you to poison her mind, make her my enemy. You failed. She never betrayed you. But I knew."

"Where is she?"

"She is still in Egypt, in charge of the Convent of Our Lady—"

The man sat upright suddenly. "You swear it?"

Sumuru laughed. "I have said it. Had you ever reason to doubt my word?"

The man groaned, sank back on his pillows.

"Why should I punish Dolores? She was guiltless. You were the culprit. Therefore, I tightened your chains. Yes, I forced you to commit a crime—not a serious one, but you are now wanted by the police. I had great difficulty in smuggling you out of the hospital. You left through a window and were carried to a van loaded with vegetables. You traveled here disguised as a sack of potatoes. You were very ill. Only the skill of Yoshida could have saved

you. Now you must go to sleep again, for very soon you have to be moved again."

He laughed feebly, and glared at her. But the gentle hand was laid on his forehead, magnetic fingers swept down in regular strokes.

"Sleep, Drake . . . You loved me, once . . . Sleep . . . You must sleep . . . sleep . . ."

"Did you have a good day?" Curly asked Mary. He had gone over from the hospital to have tea with her.

"Wonderful." Mary smiled happily. "Father. Damnation was in a surprisingly gay humor. Actually said my rotten piece was one of my best! Then Mr. Hanessy took me to lunch at the Savoy Grill. He's really a perfect darling. But he talked all the time about the missing antique. He's far more upset about it than I am."

"He may have good reason. Inspector Gilligan believes it's tremendously important."

"But in what way, Curly?"

"He thinks there was something hidden in a hollow of the hilt."

"Oh?"

Silence fell between them for a while, Mary sitting on the floor in her favorite pose, one foot pulled up under her; Curly in the armchair, staring down, and ever finding new wonders as firelight played among her gleaming mahogany curls.

Then the phone rang. Mary instantly became her businesslike self; she jumped lightly to her feet and answered the call.

"Yes—he's here. I'll tell him."

Curly stood up and took the receiver from her. "Is that Matron? Yes. I'll be right along."

He hung up, then turned. "Infernal nuisance, darling. We intended Charles to sleep for eight hours. He's a difficult creature, though. He has only slept for four. I must get along."

Sergeant Crowby had accumulated a mass of notes. The screen had been removed when Dr. Bowden arrived. Charles Ober was sitting up in bed, the remains of a light meal on a table beside him.

"Greetings, Curly!" Some of the old power animated his voice. "I have lunched, or dined, as you see. Lightly, but well. The past is no longer as in a glass darkly. It is

crystal-clear. This good fellow—" he waved his hand in the direction of Sergeant Crowby—"has communicated the astounding facts to his headquarters. Shall he read from his copious notes? Or do you prefer that I, in person, communicate my amazing discovery?"

"Your story, Charles, up to the time that you went to sleep, covered the moment when you unfastened the hilt of the dagger, and then it petered out."

Charles raised a judicious finger. "I had perceived at a glance that this strange weapon was Hebraic—"

"Hebraic!"

"I have said so. Its most remarkable feature was a huge pommel, enamel inset with real emeralds, which capped the hilt. It was out of all proportion to the size and weight of the blade. I may have revealed to you that when I had detached the two lower sections, then, and not till then, it became possible to open this mysterious disk. It contained—" Charles paused, as if reflecting.

"Yes?"

"Patience. One or two wasps in my skull are still at large. It contained an object which felt like a big coin, closely and perfectly wrapped in a piece of the thinnest papyrus I have ever seen."

"And of course you unwrapped it!"

"Of course. With exquisite care—for the papyrus was of great age, and covered with minute writing!"

"But what was inside it?"

Charles raised his hand imperiously. "One moment. I forgot something." He raised his voice. "Sergeant!"

Sergeant Crowby, who was standing near the door, turned. "What, sir?"

"I believe your notes read that I left the hidden object in the laboratory?"

"That's what you said, sir."

"What I said and what took place may not necessarily be identical." Charles frowned. "I carefully replaced the seal in its papyrus wrapping, which had become permanently folded to contain it, and put the thing somewhere or other before I returned to the studio. Is that clear?"

"Thank you, sir." The sergeant was trying to memorize the words. "I will add this to my notes."

He withdrew. Curly spoke excitedly "The *seal*, you said, Charles?"

"Fortunately—" Charles ignored the interruption—"I had works of reference available, and I sped to the studio

in search of same. I darted anxiously from bookcase to bookcase seeking the information I desired. But while I was thus engaged, I detected a sound without. At that moment, I distinctly heard a gnashing of teeth outside the bungalow!"

"You're sure?" Curly spoke tensely. "It wasn't imaginary, due to what you had read, or to what I had told you?"

"It was a gnashing of teeth."

Curly inhaled deeply.

"What did you do?"

"Frankly, I was scared. Why should I deny it? When I am scared I act, as you may know. Leaving the knife on the desk, I dashed out, across the lobby and threw the door open. I couldn't see or hear a thing."

"Did you go outside?"

"Yes. I walked right around the bungalow. I dare say I was a damn fool, because I left the door open. But when I returned, I closed it, and went back to my inquiry. I was getting warm, when the phone rang. It was Inspector Winchester, who had expected to find you there. He reported that the unknown patient had passed away. I told him that you would be coming back, and that I would tell you."

Charles propped himself more upright in the bed.

"You know where the reading lamp stands on my desk, Curly? I'm very particular about its position. Well, I was dipping into an old book, a very rare book, when a monstrous shadow crossed the page in front of me. It was a shadow much enlarged, of course, of a hand! The fingers were extended in a peculiar and unpleasant manner. No sound had warned me that anyone was in the room—nor can I even now imagine where this person had been concealed. But just as I realized someone was standing behind my chair, sudden and complete oblivion came. There was no pain—I just passed out."

"What a ghastly experience! But, Charles, what do these people want? For heaven's sake, what was wrapped in the papyrus?"

Charles Ober smiled complacently.

"A thing of fable, a fantasy, a supposed myth which to this day is regarded as a symbol of power throughout the Arab world. It was a glittering disk, a flawless jewel, which must have been cut from the largest diamond in the world. It was exquisitely engraved with certain sym-

bols. And it must have been engraved at a period long before archaeologists believe the art of diamond cutting was known. It possibly adorned the *yahalom* of a high priest."

"But what is it?"

"It is the Seal of King Solomon."

CHAPTER SIX

CHIEF INSPECTOR GILLIGAN left his car at the end of Warren Lane, told the police driver to wait, and went ahead on foot. He had been out of touch with Haygate headquarters for some hours, pursuing certain inquiries of his own. An interview with Nursing Sister Marlow had proved disappointing. She was a very pretty girl but he had hoped to catch her out of uniform. He hadn't been successful, and her thick, white stockings had entirely concealed her skin. If only she had worn sheer nylon!

The apparently ingenuous way in which she had evaded direct answers to his question had only made him more certain than ever that she was a graduate of the Order of Our Lady.

Gilligan was still reconsidering the incidents of that frustrating interview when he came to the gate of Warren Cottage. He had a card from the chief constable to make him known to the officer on duty, and give him access to the bungalow.

Opening the gate, he walked up the path to the porch. He had been told that he would find Constable James Wilkinson on duty.

He did—Constable Wilkinson lay face downward on a mat before the closed door!

Wilkinson was thickset and heavily built. He had come on duty early this morning, when there was a frosty nip in the air, and—contrary to police orders, but no doubt in accordance with his wife's orders—wore a woollen muffler. Inspector Gilligan, bending over the unconscious man, decided that the muffler had saved his life.

Those ramblings of the missing patient concerning a blow of the hand which could break a man's neck, later illustrated by the knocking-out of Charles Ober, returned to his mind. This was the work of the Puma. Clearly, his speciality was a blow not unknown to judo experts which, adroitly delivered, can sever the second cervical vertebra.

Constable Wilkinson had been lucky.

Gilligan hadn't brought a radio-equipped car from London. His only means of contact was the old-fashioned one. He took out his police whistle and blew a short blast. The sound of an engine started up told him that his call had been heard.

He made sure that Wilkinson's neck wasn't broken, then stepped over him and tried the cottage door.

It was locked.

Recalling Dr. Bowden's evidence, obtained that morning, he ran around to the first side window, and then to the second. The lower pane was shattered, the window half raised. It was the one by which Curly had entered. Gilligan raised it higher and stepped in. He had a service revolver in his hand, and stood quite still, listening.

He could hear nothing.

This was the room which Charles Ober called his studio, and it was in a state of the craziest disorder. Everything on the desk had been disturbed, and not a book remained on the deal shelves. All had been thrown to the floor. Chests and broken boxes had been ransacked, pieces of armor torn from the walls.

Inspector Gilligan surveyed the wreckage, then went into an adjoining room. This he found to be equipped in part as a laboratory. Here there was less disorder, but every cupboard and every drawer had been opened. No possible hiding place had been overlooked.

He smiled his tight-lipped smile. This was significant—and favorable.

Outside, the police driver sounded the horn to announce his arrival.

Sumuru, wearing her favorite eastern costume, knelt at the feet of a beautiful girl who stood before the mink-covered couch in the studio. She was presumably going to pose, for she wore no clothes; and an onlooker might have been excused for supposing that Sumuru was worshipping the symmetry of the model's body until Our Lady stood up, holding a tape measure in her hands.

"Not the smallest variation, Melissa. Physically, you are still my double!"

"You flatter me, Madonna."

"You know I never flatter, child. It is true. It is what makes you of such unique value to our order. I searched the world for you. My other second self, who formerly took my place from time to time, lost her figure in child-

birth; then I found you in Cos, island of lovely women. A touch from Caspar's cunning fingers, and few would doubt that they saw me. I am going to allot you a difficult task, Melissa."

"Madonna honors me."

"Put on your robe, Melissa, and sit here by the couch. I want to talk to you."

Sumuru settled herself among the cushions. Melissa knelt on the mink rug.

"I am listening, My Lady."

"I have noted, Melissa, that you find Monsieur Camille de Paris attractive."

Melissa flushed hotly, and raised her eyes to the beautiful face so close to her own.

"Madonna—"

"Well, child—what do you wish to say?"

"My Lady! Monsieur de Paris is a man of genius, a great artist, and deeply devoted to you. Madonna, I swear to you that never—"

"Stop, Melissa!" Sumuru was smiling. She laid her hand on the girl's head. "I am not accusing you of anything. I know of his devotion. But so many men have offered me devotion that I could not possibly drink so deeply of love. And I have other plans for Camille."

She paused, fitted a small cigarette into an onyx holder, lighted it and went on.

"Yoshida recently examined Camille and checked his medical history. Camille is that rare creation of the gods—a physically perfect man with a good brain. You are a physically perfect woman. You have only an average brain, but a sweet nature. You are a graduate of our college. You know the purpose of the Order of Our Lady: to remove ugliness—physical, mental and spiritual—from the world, and to restore beauty."

"I do, My Lady."

"Never yet—in matings planned over a span of years stretching back to a time long before your memory—have I succeeded in producing a perfect child. Beauty I have achieved in plenty; you have seen our neophytes in the Egyptian College. But when they inherited beauty they lacked brains. Or they were brilliant but ugly. Ugly males I can use. Ugly females are useless."

"My Lady desires beautiful and clever women," Melissa murmured nervously.

Sumuru exhaled aromatic smoke.

"Give me a sufficient number of them, Melissa, and I can conquer the world! With an army of female beauty, allied to intelligence, I can win to my cause the male genius of Europe, Asia, Africa and America!"

"But Madonna, who is a woman, is herself a genius."

Sumuru playfully ruffled the girl's hair. "Madonna is not quite immortal, Melissa. I look for my successor."

"It is impossible!" Melissa clenched her hands, looked up. "My Lady, there is no one like you; there never can be."

Sumuru paused, looking down at the kneeling girl. Then she asked softly, "Did you truly believe, Melissa, that Camille was my accepted lover?"

"Madonna, I think of you as above earthly loves. But I know that he adores you."

Sumuru smiled. "You have more wisdom than I believed, Melissa, for that is true. I have surrendered my body to men. Never because I desired them, but only for reasons of policy. I have never surrendered myself. Camille gives me all I need of him—his art—without reward. He believes, in his Gallic madness, that he loves me. I, who am learned in the ways of men, know that he only desires me. What you called devotion, child, is merely appetite. If he truly knew me, the woman, and still loved me, he would know that I had nothing to offer him. But you, Melissa, have everything. Physically, you are as beautiful as I am . . . and you love him."

"Madonna!"

"You have my consent to love Camille, Melissa. That, as you know, is our form of marriage. If your happiness is brief, I shall be sorry. But at least you will have lain in his arms. The rest, child, is your problem."

Charles Ober was seated by a small, cheerful fire in a private room of the Cottage Hospital when his visitors arrived. Curly had been called away; in consequence, the convalescent was smoking a foul pipe he had found in a pocket of his coat. He looked no more untidy than usual in a borrowed dressing robe, and to a large extent had recovered his usual form. He heard a deep voice speaking, outside.

When the nurse, frowning disapproval, opened the door to admit Mary Glen, the impressive figure of John Han-essy, and then Inspector Gilligan, Charles raised himself in his chair and extended both arms.

"All praise to Allah!" he declaimed. "Beauty waits upon the poor scholar!"

Mary gave him her hand. "This is Chief Inspector Gilligan," she told him, "and Mr. John Hanessy."

"Be so good as to be seated," Charles said after the introductions were over. "Inspector Gilligan, I doubt not, is acquainted with the facts. Therefore I address myself to Mary and Mr. Hanessy. I pledge myself to be brief."

Charles explained what had occurred on the night of the attack in his bungalow. He made it clear that the piece of papyrus wrapped around the enclosed seal bore writing in Aramaic, and that he hadn't, so far, more than glanced at it. But he stated that he assumed the seal to have been smuggled out of Jerusalem in B.C. 725, approximately, when the great Temple was sacked and many priests taken as hostages. Of one fact he had no doubt. The inscribed diamond disk was the fabled Seal of King Solomon.

Then Inspector Gilligan spoke. "What, Mr. Ober, did you do with the Seal?"

Charles Ober raised extended hands above his head.

"On this point, this vital question, a maltreated brain declines to function. I simply cannot remember *what* I did with it!"

During the following twenty-four hours, intense inquiries were carried out in the neighborhood, based upon the mutterings of the man whose body had been mysteriously stolen from the mortuary. The police were anxious to trace the Puma, for the attacks upon Charles Ober and upon the constable on duty at the bungalow pointed to the fact that such a horror was actually operating in the Haygate area.

These inquiries Inspector Gilligan left to the local police. He concentrated on his private theory that the missing patient was Drake Roscoe, formerly of the U.S. F.B.I., and that Sumuru or an agent of hers was behind the strange happenings which had disturbed the peace of Surrey.

Charles Ober assured him, and inquiries made by Scotland Yard confirmed it, that the holder of the authentic Seal of King Solomon would wield a mysterious influence throughout the East which might well upset the balance of power between many countries. The source of this secret influence was hard to trace. Gilligan wondered why

some impostor, knowing of it, had never produced a forgery. But he was told that the authentic seal could never be reproduced. Ober's statement that it was engraved on the surface of the largest diamond in the world suggested at least one reason why.

Gilligan knew that the "dossier Sumuru" contained no more than a fraction of the utterly fantastic deeds of this amazing woman. But he knew, too, that he was up against genius; that a false step might blast his career.

It was from Mary Glen that he learned of the existence of the fascinating Mrs. de Castro, and he checked her account of the South American widow's beauty with Curly Bowden. Neither mentioned the one thing that would have clinched the matter: the book lent by Nurse Marlow to Mary.

But he must make a point of calling upon Mrs. de Castro. . . .

Gilligan called at the house on Lye Common one sunny morning at eleven-thirty, unannounced. He was fully prepared to be told that Mrs. de Castro was out, or indisposed, to be asked to make a later appointment.

The door was opened by a remarkably pretty maid who greeted him with a smile. She took his card, stood aside and said, "Please come in, sir. Madame is at home." She had a slight accent, difficult to identify.

He sat down in a lobby decorated with some pieces of eccentric sculpture and a painting which looked as though someone had thrown ripe tomatoes at it. He was not alone long. The shapely maid came back almost at once. She wore gossamer stockings and there was no trace of the mark of the order on her ankle.

"Will you come this way, sir?"

Gilligan followed her to a severely correct office where a woman was seated behind an orderly desk. The parlor maid, having admitted him, went out without a word.

He studied Mrs. de Castro, who nodded, smiled, and pointed to a chair beside the desk.

He saw a woman, middle-aged but still of great beauty. Her hair, ash-blond, or brown, fading to gray was luxurious. She wore it brushed back from a high, intelligent forehead and coiled at her neck. She had perfect shell-like ears; their lobes curled slightly outward and resembled tiny tulip petals.

Fair lashes, untouched by mascara, swept up so as al-

most to reach the penciled eyebrows. Laughing bright eyes regarded him from a pale, clear-complexioned face. She was smoking a cigarette, and his visit seemed to be amusing her.

She pushed a silver box across the desk.

"Won't you smoke, Inspector? Cigarettes are so companionable, I think."

It was an oddly husky voice, deep-toned but musical; the voice of a tragedienne. He couldn't define her accent, but in her pronunciation of "companionable" it was very marked.

"Thank you, Mrs. de Castro."

He took a cigarette and lighted it.

"And now, Inspector, because I am so interested, please tell me why you favor me with a visit. Is it that I transgress some law of England? My passport, it may be, is not in order—no?"

"Nothing like that, madam!" He smiled his grim smile. "My visit concerns a recent event at Squires Pastures."

"You mean the burglary? But, of course! Mr. Hanessy has told me about it. You know him—Mr. Hanessy?"

"I do."

"What a charming man. And his protégée, the little Glen girl, how sweet she is."

"I agree Miss Glen is very sweet girl, but I should hesitate to describe her as protégée."

Mrs. de Castro laughed. "Forgive me if I am a cynic, Inspector. I have seen so much of the world. When I find an elderly, but still agreeable man, interested in a pretty young girl, perhaps I recall my own youth, and ask myself a question."

Inspector Gilligan decided that a gallant gesture was called for.

"Your own youth is still with you, madam."

"Oh, how sweet of you!" She beamed upon him. "It seems the English police are different. Some police I have known are so gauche. This is the hour, Inspector, when I drink one small glass of champagne. This morning, I insist you must join me!"

And before he had time for either thanks or protest, she was on her feet and crossing the office to the door.

Gilligan stood up, turned and studied Mrs. de Castro's ankles. She wore a short frock which perfectly fitted her graceful figure. If she wore stockings they were of the finest silk mesh, for her shapely legs looked bare.

And there was no trace on her ankle of the coiled serpent of the Order of Our Lady.

"Melissa!" she called from the open door. "My wine! Two glasses!" Then, smiling radiantly, she returned to her seat behind the desk. "You are quite the most agreeable policeman I ever meet! Please sit down and tell me—how can I help you?"

Inspector Gilligan tried to collect his wandering ideas. He asked himself: (1) Was this the woman whose beauty had so deeply impressed Mary Glen and Dr. Bowden? It was possible. His hostess was beautiful, but he had expected to meet a younger woman. (2) Did Mrs. de Castro in any way resemble Sumuru? Only in one respect. She had magnetic charm. But her ears were perfect. The mark of the order wasn't on her ankle. (3) Was the woman now seated again behind the desk, doubling for the real Mrs. de Castro?

He was still fumbling for a reply to her question when the maid came in carrying a tray on which rested a bottle of wine in an ice bucket and two champagne glasses.

Dexterously she opened the wine, filled the glasses and handed him one.

"My thanks, Mrs. de Castro," Gilligan said, "and your very good health." He sipped the champagne. "You can, perhaps, help in this way: You dined at Squires Pastures a few nights before robbery?"

"I did, Inspector." She watched him with the eagerness of a child. "What, then?"

"Tell me—during dinner, or afterwards—did you see, hear, anything to suggest stranger present?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Not at all, Inspector!"

"Mr. Hanessy opened cabinet and showed you relics known as Kidd Treasure. Can you recall if key of cabinet left in the lock?"

"But how could I, Inspector!"

"No. Couldn't expect it, I suppose." He was acutely aware of the fact that these weren't questions he would have asked, normally; but he had to say something. "Case is baffling," he added. "Just a shot in the dark."

He left shortly afterwards, deeply dissatisfied. Mrs. de Castro walked to the door with him. But just as he was about to step into the waiting police car, from somewhere inside the house came a snarling sound and the gnashing of teeth!

Gilligan turned and faced Mrs. de Castro.

She laughed and shook her head.

"Sadû, my Afghan hound! He should be locked up when visitors come. I fear I must get rid of my beautiful, dangerous Sadû."

Sumuru came from her bath wrapped in a fleecy robe, walked along to the studio and stretched herself luxuriously on the mink-covered couch. Darker tones had disappeared from face, neck, arms and legs. Her milky skin and delicate complexion were restored. Her hair was covered by a woolen scarf. On one white ankle appeared the shadowy tracing of a coiled serpent—the indelible mark of the Order of Our Lady.

Her small, faunlike ears no longer had lobes.

A bell tinkled somewhere, and a distant voice intoned, "Caspar, Our Lady calls . . ."

Noiselessly, the studio door opened and Caspar came in. His red slippers whispered as he crossed to the divan.

"Well, Caspar—" the beautiful voice had resumed its high, golden notes—"are you satisfied?"

Caspar inclined his head. "No, Madonna."

Sumuru sat upright. The fair eyelashes were black again; the strange eyes could no longer be described as merely bright. They changed with every mood. As she watched Caspar, there were cloudy emerald tints in them.

"Explain yourself, my old friend," She spoke softly. "I presented Madame de Castro as a handsome woman of middle age. Such a woman as might be counted beautiful by uncritical, youthful eyes. Is it so?"

"It is, My Lady. But Melissa could have carried out the impersonation without difficulty. Inspector Gilligan is dangerously intelligent. You deceived him at an interview some years ago in the West Indies. To attempt to do so twice is to tempt fate."

Sumuru lay back again, stretched her arms over her head, and laughed. "When life no longer offers dangers, Caspar, I shall cease to live."

Caspar continued to smile.

"I feared, Madonna, that he might resort to some trick, and violently detach one of the false ear lobes."

"I see," Sumuru murmured drowsily. "And so you took the precaution of having the Puma brought in—presumably in charge of Yoshida—to act should this occur?"

"Speedy action would have been necessary."

"Unfortunately, the precaution nearly defeated its pur-

pose. Inspector Gilligan had already heard the unpleasant sound which betrays the Puma's presence. He heard it again, here, today."

"I know, Madonna. Yoshida sustained a painful wound endeavoring to silence the Puma. I begged you to leave this creature in Egypt; for Ariosto, who really created him, alone can control the monster."

"You are wrong, Caspar. I, too, can control the Puma." Sumuru stood up, a sinuous, graceful movement, and wrapped the fleecy robe more tightly about her, securing it carelessly with a silk girdle. From a closet she took a short-lashed stock whip of a type much favored by lion tamers.

"Even Ariosto sometimes found primitive methods useful, Caspar. Let us visit the Puma."

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHARLES OBER walked from a bathroom back to his quarters. He had been pronounced fit to leave the hospital and was indeed leaving that evening. The clothes he had worn when brought in lay neatly folded in a locker in his room. Singing, *sotto voce*, he began to dress. Fully clothed, he picked up the odds and ends found in his pockets. Among these was a dilapidated cigarette case which he hadn't known was there.

He was regarding it without enthusiasm when Nurse Marlow came in.

"Hail, smiling morn!" Charles greeted her. "Or should I say O Star of Eve? I hold in my hand a token of esteem presented by my wealthy uncle on the occasion of my twenty-first birthday. He must have given deep thought to the purchase, as he knew me to be a confirmed pipe-smoker. But at this moment I crave a cigarette."

He opened the case, shook his head, then looked again—and his expression changed to astonishment.

"Ye gods!"

Between finger and thumb he drew out a flat object wrapped in what looked like dirty paper. Nursing Sister Marlow was watching, wide-eyed.

"What is it, Mr. Ober? What have you found?"

But Charles, holding the thing in his palm, looked down at it as a devout pilgrim might look at a holy relic.

"I have found, fair daughter, that which was never lost—only preserved. This mouldy cigarette case lay neglected among chemicals and test tubes for many moons. In a moment of divine inspiration I selected it as a hiding place for a treasure above price!" He dropped the treasure back into the case and put the case in his pocket; then he turned to Nurse Marlow and grasped her shoulders. "What about having dinner with me tonight? I need to celebrate . . ."

When Charles had left—and he declined to leave until Linda Marlow had convinced him that she wasn't free that

night, but would meet him the following evening—Nurse Marlow went into the lobby and made a phone call.

"Yes, Sister Linda? Have you news for me?"

"I am not quite sure, Madonna. But something has happened which I think you should know."

Linda reported the behavior of Charles Ober, his discovery in a cigarette case of a round, flat object wrapped in paper which he said he had hidden there, and forgotten.

"I don't know, My Lady, if this is important."

"It is important, child. You have been nursing Charles Ober?"

"Yes, Madonna."

"Naturally, he finds you attractive?"

"He asked me to dine with him tonight. I couldn't, but agreed to meet him tomorrow."

"You must do so. When did he leave?"

"Three minutes ago."

"Has he a car?"

"No, Madonna. And he declined to take a cab. He told me he was going to run to Warren Lane just to convince himself he was well again."

"Hang up now, Linda. I shall call you later."

Linda had just done so when the door opened and Bowden came in. His first question was: "Is Mr. Ober ready to leave?"

"He has left, Doctor."

"Left! When?"

"Less than five minutes ago."

"Did you call a taxi?"

"No. He insisted upon walking—or rather, he said he was going to run!"

"Damned fool!" Curly growled, and dashed out again.

Charles, without exactly running, proceeded at a long, swinging stride homeward. He followed byways known only to such ramblers as himself and presently came out at a point on Haygate Hill where there was a bridle path which led to Warren Lane. The evening was fitfully clear. High clouds from time to time swept across the moon. There was no frost.

He plunged into the narrow path. He could hardly wait to get to his desk, to continue his interrupted studies of the absorbing problem posed by this discovery of the Seal of Solomon.

The uphill walk had proved tiring. He began to regret

the bravado which had prompted it. After all, he had been a sick man for several days. But he pushed on.

And he was perhaps twenty or thirty paces along the shadow-patched path when he pulled up short, stood still, held in a grip of sudden horror.

A frenzied shriek—in a man's voice—split the silence behind him. Only once.

A moment later Charles was really running, and running fast—for he knew he ran for his life.

Padding footsteps, like those of an animal, bore down upon him—the racing steps of some swift creature that snarled!

Charles Ober, when in training, had a fine turn of speed, and for the first hundred yards he excelled himself. But he discovered that he was less fit than he had supposed. His breathing became labored. His heart seemed to be bursting. The padding footsteps and intermittent snarling sounded close behind.

What was following him?

He was flagging, he knew, bathed in perspiration. Warren Lane lay just ahead, his cottage a few paces to the left. But. . .

A cloud drew a black curtain over the moon. His heavy shoes thudding on the ground, he made a final, despairing effort and burst out into the lane.

He saw the headlights of a stationary car. They picked up his figure as he lurched into the beam. He heard a shout: "Charles! Charles, you bloody fool!"

Curly Bowden ran to meet him. Charles staggered, threw one arm around Curly's shoulder.

"Curly! Thank God you're here!" His voice had a sob in it. "I'm done—and the Puma's after me . . ."

"I'll take care of the Puma. Can you get as far as the door?" Charles nodded. "Then open it and go in. I'll join you."

Curly held a snub-nosed revolver in his hand. He turned, as Charles tottered up to the porch of his bungalow, and faced the blackness outside the beam of the headlights.

As he did so, Curly saw two gleaming green eyes, like the eyes of a great cat. He raised the revolver and fired, carefully. The eyes disappeared. And then he heard it, that damnable sound which sometimes haunted his sleep . . . gnashing teeth!

He fired again, in the same direction, spun around and ran up onto the porch as Charles thrust the door open.

"You are an idiot!" Curly assured Charles. "If I hadn't come to look for you, and brought a gun, that thing, whatever it is, would have finished you."

Charles disposed of a stiff brandy and soda.

"As you say, Curly—whatever it is. Do you hear anything?"

"Not a sound. It must have given up the chase."

"You informed me that in addition to snarling, and gnashing its teeth, it has green eyes?"

"Yes—cat's eyes."

"Were these eyes down near the ground, as would be the case with a member of the cat family?"

"Yes, they were. But he, or it, may have been crouching."

"Your missing patient, I recall, distinctly referred to 'he' and spoke of 'his hand.' Furthermore, it sounded like something running on two feet."

"What on earth prompted you to start out alone? You knew there was no one on duty here. I told you the constable had taken the special man off and left it to the patrol to check when passing."

"True, wise mentor, but the zest of the student fired me. I could scarcely contain myself until the moment when I should hold the final evidence in my hand—evidence to prove to incredulous archaeology that this—" he opened his old cigarette case and dropped the papyrus-wrapped disk on the desk—"is indeed the authentic Seal of Solomon!"

Curly started up out of his chair. "Charles! You mean you have found it!"

"It was in my coat pocket! It was in 'a locker in the hospital throughout the whole time I lay there inert in bed!"

"Now I understand! I couldn't make out this second attempt to get you. I chased after you because I thought you might be in a state of collapse. Lucky for you I did. I have carried a gun ever since I found out I'd been followed that night you were attacked here. But I'm wondering—"

"So am I!" Charles interrupted, speaking in a strangely subdued voice. "How did the crooks find out? How—"

He stopped as suddenly as though a hand had been clapped over his mouth.

From somewhere at no great distance—for it was clearly audible in the room—came an angry snarling, which de-

veloped into a ferocious howl! This, in turn, became an almost human screaming—and it was punctuated with the unmistakable crack of a heavy lash.

"Good God!" Charles came to his feet and faced Curly. "Some creature, human or otherwise, is being flogged to death out there. What do we do about it?"

"Nothing!" Curly dropped back into his chair. "Someone has let hell loose in this neighborhood. Give me another drink. I'm waiting for the police . . ."

Sumuru lay on the studio divan. She wore only a light robe. There were blue sandals on her bare feet. From a crystal flask on a table beside her she poured a glass of amber-colored wine, and sipped it languidly.

Caspar watched her, smiling his eternal smile.

"I am weary of living like a barbarian, Caspar." The exquisite voice sounded weary. "Can it be that the god of Juda is a powerful god—that I am forbidden to possess the Seal of Solomon?"

"My Lady has exerted herself unduly. These thoughts are not My Lady's thoughts. The Tomb of Harmachis was found on Madonna's property in the Fayyûm—"

"Stripped of most of its contents by the Frenchman, Champollion, in 1828."

"But with the sarcophagus undisturbed, Madonna. The seal and the priest's knife in the hilt of which it was concealed were figured in the list of items buried with Harmachis. Rather than being forbidden to her, the seal seems to have been placed in Madonna's hands."

Sumuru lay back, eyes closed.

"Two years' search in Paris and London, Caspar—and it is not yet in my hands. I am perhaps a little tired. I miss my baths, my massage. The gentle fingers of Bella had power to soothe me. She is joining us in France?"

"She is, Madonna."

"Why did I neglect your advice about the Puma! He is a biological phenomenon, but I should never have attempted to use him. Has Yoshida revived?"

"You succeeded in staunching the wound, My Lady. Hemorrhage has ceased."

Sumuru took up the wine glass and drank, slowly, then lay back again.

"Frustrated in his blood lust, the Puma returned to his first victim. Only our arrival saved Yoshida."

"Only *yours*, Madonna—with the stock whip! I pray,

before he brings destruction on us, that you will consent to end his unnatural life. Sanchez reports that a police car reached the spot four minutes after we left. Yoshida's scream may have been heard in Warren Lane, and certainly the cries of the Puma. Bloodstains will be found. We cannot leave too soon."

Sumuru was silent for a long time. The light robe, rising and falling over her breasts, alone betrayed deep breathing. Her eyes remained closed.

At last she whispered, "I have never accepted defeat, Caspar. I dare not! Where crude methods fail, subtle measures may succeed. There are police in Ober's bungalow. It will be guarded tonight. The seal will be restored to Mary Glen—who is soon, I believe, to become one of us. We must be patient. In winning Mary for the order I may achieve my end, but this could be destructive of my other plans for her. Dr. Bowden is so clearly her ideal mate that their union simply must be consummated—the product of such a mating might well be, at last, the perfect child of my dreams."

"He is, of course, tied hopelessly to the Englishman's code of what is done and what is not done. I quite understand, Madonna. If Mary Glen joins the order and declines the usual form of marriage, My Lady thinks that Dr. Bowden would refuse to consider any other form of contract?"

"I fear so. His intense sense of delicate propriety has enabled him to associate with this ardent and lovely girl for over a year without either compelling her to marry him or making her his mistress. I shall never understand these cold Englishmen. But I could be sure of both of them if only I could stimulate their mutual passion to one moment of intimacy. It must be soon, or it may be too late. I am waiting only for Suleiman. How long must I wait?"

Caspar extended his slender hands. "Suleiman is one of the finest lapidaries in the world. He arrived from Cairo only four days ago. He is a conscientious artist. I saw him this morning. He labors night and day. It is difficult to find suitable rhinestones, Madonna."

Sumuru's eyes flashed. "Let him use diamonds! I have plenty. Speak to him. It must be ready. This is an order."

Caspar salaamed deeply. "It shall be obeyed, Madonna."

"Next, Yoshida and Drake Roscoe must be transferred to France. Have you plans?"

Caspar, smiling, inclined his head.

"It will be necessary to remove the two patients to Dr. Villiers' nursing home in London. He will contrive to have them transferred, by private plane, to the Institut Therapeutique in Nice—which belongs to My Lady."

"Arrange this, Caspar. Both will be well enough to travel, in charge of a competent nurse, by Thursday."

CHAPTER EIGHT

SEVERAL THINGS are quite clear." Inspector Gilligan glanced at Curly Bowden, then at Charles Ober. He was walking about restlessly. "This thing known as the Puma is some kind of trained killer, human or otherwise. Imagine it's kept on a leash. It was put on your trail tonight—" He pointed at Charles. "Went berserk and overcame its keeper. The blood found at the end of the bridle path is now being analyzed. It's almost certainly human."

Charles shuddered slightly and helped himself to another drink.

"Took up the trail," Gilligan went on. "It would have been your finish if Dr. Bowden hadn't been waiting—with a gun. The thing started back to wherever it's kept. A search party went out, with the head keeper. Sounds overheard by both suggest that Puma has been subdued. So far, it's theory, but sound theory. Now to the facts."

He began to fill his pipe, but didn't sit down.

"First fact: *Someone* reports to the gang that the seal is found in your cigarette case." He stared hard at Charles. "Member of gang starts out with Puma. Tell me—who was present when the seal was found in the case?"

"Nurse Marlow."

"On good terms with her?"

"I have an appointment to dine with Nursing Sister Marlow tomorrow evening."

"Keep it—it's important. Second fact: I called recently on Mrs. de Castro—"

"Oh!" Curly stared. "Whatever for?"

"Professional reasons, Doctor. When leaving, I heard snarling and gnashing of teeth corresponding to earlier evidence."

"At Mrs. de Castro's?" Curly sounded incredulous.

"Yes. She told me the sounds were made by her Afghan hound. I have nothing on Mrs. de Castro—yet—so I couldn't ask to view the animal. Anyone seen that lady out with an Afghan hound?"

"I'm not acquainted with her," Charles informed him. "She is a newcomer in these sylvan glades. What about you, Curly?"

"I met her quite recently. She's a friend of Mary's. I thought she was charming. But I have never come across her out walking. So I can't say if she has such a dog as you mention. Look here, Inspector. Mrs. de Castro is a friend of Mary Glen, whom I hope to marry. Have you any reason to suspect that Mrs. de Castro is an undesirable acquaintance?"

Inspector Gilligan got his briar well going. "As of this date—no. I have put my cards on the table, gentlemen. Discretion will be accepted." He paused for a moment. "Tell me, Dr. Bowden, have you any doubt in your own mind on that point?"

Curly laughed shortly, in an embarrassed way. "I don't suppose it's anything to worry about, Inspector, but it seems that Mrs. de Castro is an author. Mary has been reading some queer book of hers which has certainly had some influence upon her."

"H'm. Know the name of the book?"

"I don't. Mary borrowed it from Nurse Marlow, and I hesitated to ask Linda Marlow for it, as it's clearly intended for women only!"

"Leave it to me!" Charles broke in. "I shall be seeing Linda tomorrow, and—"

"Don't mention the book," Gilligan interrupted. "It would spoil everything. If you want to be of real use to Scotland Yard, find out—but don't let her know—if Linda Marlow has a faint tatoo mark on her ankle."

It was on the following evening that Curly drove Mary back from a restaurant on the coast road to the Haygate Hill Hotel. Mary made drinks and they shared the big arm-chair.

"Did I tell you, Curly, that Inez de Castro came in, just before you called for me?" Mary stroked his unconquerable hair.

"No, you didn't."

"Well, she did. She came to tell me of a wonderful dream she had about us."

"About us?"

"Yes. She's really psychic, Curly."

Mary disengaged herself and crossed to the buffet. She came back carrying a box of cigarettes. Curly took one and

lighted it, after lighting Mary's. He found it mild, and of a pleasant but curious flavor.

As Mary rejoined him in the big chair, he said, "Can you remember the name of that remarkable book Mrs. de Castro wrote?"

"It's called *Tears of Our Lady*." Mary spoke absently.

"Sounds religious."

"I assure you it isn't. Our Lady of the title, according to Inez de Castro—is head of a society with branches all over the world. She must really be a genius, because her theories are absolutely fool-proof—if they could be carried out."

"What are her theories?"

Mary spoke with sudden animation. "They all rest on the premise that woman holds in her hands the power of life or death. To put it crudely, if all women decided to bear no more children, human life would end on the planet. Our Lady believes, according to the book, that woman's failure to recognize her power is responsible for the present mess."

"What should woman have done?" Curly asked, smiling.

"Declined to bring children into the world to be slaughtered on battlefields, until man has realized that war can never win peace."

"The nature of man would have to undergo a radical change."

"Our Lady would bring this about by selective mating. Undesirable types wouldn't be permitted to become parents at all. They could mate, but they would be sterilized."

"I suppose she'd want to sterilize us?" Curly murmured drowsily.

Mary brushed her cheek against his face and snuggled closer. "No, she wouldn't. Inez assures me she would recognize ideal mates at a glance, and she's completely in Our Lady's confidence. They believe in reincarnation, and Inez dreamed a most vivid dream in which she saw us together in some place that sounds like Ancient Egypt. She made it so real to me that I almost seemed to see it all, too."

A pleasant languor was stealing over Curly, but with it came a sharpened awareness of Mary's beauty, a tingling appreciation of the lithe young body lying in his arms.

"Let me try to tell you . . ." Her voice sounded sleepy, he thought; and when she began to relate the details of the

dream, he had a queer impression that the words weren't of her own choosing. They were more like a translation of an exotic poem. . . .

They conjured up a picture of a queerly furnished room. It had a black marble floor on which skin rugs were spread. Brightly colored curtains hung in the doorways. In a recess he saw a couch with leopard legs, and leopard skins were spread upon it, and a silver lamp hung on a chain above the couch.

He himself was seated in a strangely fashioned chair. Around his neck he wore a gold chain, and on one wrist a heavy gold bracelet. Apart from a sort of skirt resembling a kilt, and sandals, he wore nothing else, except a jeweled belt to which a short sword was attached.

Mary's voice was no longer audible. The illusion had become *visual*. He saw it, lived in it, was part of it. But he felt content to accept what he saw. The hotel living room, Mary herself, both were forgotten. He knew only that he waited for something.

The curtains in one of the doorways were parted silently, and a girl stood there, watching him. Red highlights gleamed in her hair. The violet robe she wore was of such fine texture that every line and curve of her slim body was revealed.

He knew, now, for whom he had waited.

She ran to him, sprang into his outstretched arms, and he crushed her against him.

"You will never send me away again?" she whispered.

He buried his face in perfumed curls, stood up, lifted her lightly and carried her to the couch above which the silver lamp was suspended. His sword belt encumbered him. He tore it off. . . .

A wave of perfume—or of music—or of both, swept him away. A voice murmured "I adore you!" . . . And he knew an ecstasy so keen that he seemed to pass into unconsciousness. . . .

The next thing Curly knew was a thing so astounding that it made him doubt his reason. He closed his eyes again.

He reopened them . . .

It was true!

Gray light of morning was stealing in through the slats of the blinds. Mary lay beside him, sleeping like a child. His heart performed that unpleasant trick which suggests

that it has missed a beat. She lay on his left arm, which had gone to sleep. The pain had awakened him.

Gently, with anxious care, he disengaged it, and stole out to the room where they had been seated together in the big armchair. There was enough light there to enable him to distinguish objects fairly well.

He was terrified, and cold with fear.

How had it happened?

Every detail of that wonderful dream, or vision, was etched on his memory. He knew now—something he hadn't known in his dream state—that the lovely girl he had held in his arms was Mary, but . . .

His fevered brain began to cool. Creeping, barefooted, about the room, he first examined the stubs of two cigarettes which lay in a tray beside the armchair. He sniffed the stub of the one he had smoked, and tasted the tobacco. Then he did the same with the other, identified by a faint stain of lipstick.

He nodded, crossed to the buffet, poured out some whisky from the half-empty bottle, a popular brand, and tasted it. He recorked the bottle.

Without waking Mary, he managed to get ready to leave. Although satisfied about both the drinks they had had and the tobacco they had smoked, he thought at first that he would have the whisky and the cigarettes in the box analyzed. On second thought, he decided to leave both where he had found them.

Cigarettes and whisky contained hashish.

He crept downstairs, wondering if he could open the front door without arousing the night watchman.

The window of Mary's room was open a few inches at the bottom. Through the gap a pair of keen eyes had been surveying the room as Curly moved about. They had disappeared, but directly he left, they reappeared. A man who supported himself on the ancient ivy which grew on the wall quietly opened the window wider and stepped into the room.

This memorable night, which had ended for Curly Bowden at dawn the next day, had been profitably employed by Sumuru. At about the time Curly called at the hotel for Mary, Our Lady returned to the house on Lye Common.

She wore an evening gown which left her arms and shoulders bare and exposed a smooth back down to the

waistline. A snow mink cloak was draped over the chair in which she had seated herself behind her desk.

Caspar stood before her, smiling, head lowered.

"This box of cigarettes, Caspar," she directed, pointing to one before her, "must be restored to Mary Glen's living room before she awakes—also a half-empty bottle of something called Johnnie Walker, which you can provide. Those which I left there must be removed."

Caspar bowed. "I shall instruct Sanchez."

"I used Ariosto's preparation, with which he had such success. But I had no means of controlling either the number of drinks or the number of the cigarettes used. I assumed that the reaction would be swift, and that one cigarette and one drink would produce the desired result."

"We must hope for the best, Madonna. Much will depend upon the girl's response to My Lady's post-hypnotic suggestions."

Madonna laughed again. "Subconsciously, my wise old friend, she desires her lover intensely. She represses her feelings for *his* sake. You see, Caspar, she adores him . . . Send Camille to me now . . ."

When Camille de Paris stepped in, he was frowning angrily.

"You treat me as a child, Madonna! What you say to me has no meaning!"

Sumuru spoke, the golden chords in her voice subdued.

"You *are* a child, Camille. All men of genius are children. It is because they never grow up that the wonderful dreams of childhood which other men forget survive in them to delight the world. I repeat that your work must be completed in time for the opening of the Paris Salon."

"How can I complete it if you no longer pose for me?"

"I shall pose for you again, Camille, as soon as the many demands upon my time allow. But the sculpture must be finished."

"Reluctantly, I agreed to work by artificial light. I came prepared to do so. I find you dressed to go out!"

Sumuru smiled slightly. "I am not going out, Camille. I have just come in, and I expect guests. But you shall work. Let us go to the studio."

She stood up, drew the mink cloak around her shoulders and walked to the door. Camille opened it for her, and followed. They came to the studio. Sumuru threw the door open. Blinds were drawn. The studio was brilliantly flood-lighted.

Someone wearing a light robe, identical with the robe Sumuru used when posing, lay on the fur-draped divan. She sat up as the door opened.

"There is your model, Camille!" Sumuru stepped back so that the sculptor had a clear view. "Physically, she is my exact duplicate. Drop your robe, child. Stand up." Melissa obeyed.

A perfect Greek statue, the embodiment of his dreams, stood before Camille de Paris.

"It is magic!" He spoke distractedly. "It is an illusion!"

Sumuru's voice came from behind him. "Translate the illusion into terms of ivory, Camille, until I can pose again. Then, as you told me recently, your fame will equal that of Phidias . . ."

The golden voice faded away into silence. Camille turned as the studio door closed. Sumuru had gone.

He swung around. The model had dropped back onto the divan. She sat, hands raised to her face, but watching him through the bars of her fingers. He experienced an unfamiliar sense of embarrassment.

"Mademoiselle, this, I think, is delirium, but what is your name?"

"Melissa, M'sieur."

"Melissa?" He stepped towards her. "But you are not that Melissa I have seen sometimes in attendance upon Madonna—"

"Perhaps you took no particular notice of me, M'sieur de Paris. My features are very like Madonna's, except that they lack her great beauty. Also, you have never seen me like this!"

Camille moistened his dry lips with his tongue. "Please take the pose, Melissa. I think I am going mad!"

Melissa obeyed, stretching out on the couch. Camille's trained eye traced every line and curve of her body from the crown of her head (her hair was covered by a net) to the tips of her rosy toenails, and then whispered, "It is a miracle! Only the lobes of the ears are different."

He met the glance of long-lashed eyes. They were fine eyes, if not the wonderful eyes of Sumuru, but he detected a tenderness in them which he had never found in the eyes of Our Lady.

The Rolls-Royce flowed noiselessly out into Warren Lane.

Charles Ober's plans for an intimate evening with Linda

had been upset. She had phoned him to say that Mrs. de Castro had invited Mr. Hanessy to dinner and had called her to ask if she could bring a man friend to make a four-some. Deeply as he loathed the formality which goes with a black tie, he had had to agree.

When the chauffeur pulled up before the hotel, Linda, who evidently was waiting, came running down the steps. Her figure was entirely concealed under a gleaming fur coat, but Charles noted, with satisfaction, that her slim and shapely ankles were clad in gossamer stockings.

"Good evening, Henryk," she greeted the chauffeur.

"Good evening, Miss."

When she was settled comfortably beside him and Henryk had put out the inside light, Charles demanded, "Do I behold you clad in mink? The reward of a wealthy marriage, or the wages of sin?"

Linda raised her eyes to him. It was impossible to ignore the fact that she was a very pretty girl.

"You do, Charles."

Charles put his arm around her shoulders.

"My poor child! Confide your shameful secret to me."

"It isn't a shameful secret. The coat was a present from a woman friend who has her own mink farm."

"Such generosity is overpowering. Let me give you a cigarette."

Charles opened the famous case—and saw Linda's lashes flutter as she recognized it. She took a cigarette and he took another. He returned the case to his pocket and sparked a lighter, lighted Linda's cigarette and began to light his own. He dropped the lighter.

"Fool! Clumsy oaf!"

Out came a little flashlamp. He sank to his knees. Linda swiftly raised her feet, to assist his search. A decimal point too late.

On one of those slender ankles he had seen in the beam of his lamp a scarcely discernible, faint tattoo.

He picked up the lighter, pocketed his torch, and started his own cigarette.

"You have dangerously pretty legs," he remarked.

They were shown by a white-coated half-caste manservant into a small library. French windows overlooked the garden. These were draped tonight, and the room was cozily lighted. They found John Hanessy seated there in a leather armchair, a whisky glass at his elbow.

Then Mrs. de Castro made an entrance.

Everyone stood up, including Linda. It was as though a queen had entered. Charles looked at her with an expression almost of disbelief. Unless illusion gripped him, he knew that Mrs. de Castro was the loveliest woman he had ever seen. Her wonderful eyes turned in his direction at the moment she came in, and the words "The world's desire" flashed through his brain. . . .

Linda nearly dropped to her knees, but Mrs. de Castro raised her up and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"You look charming, child. Mr. Hanessy, you are very welcome." John Hanessy had grasped her hand in a gesture of devotion. She turned to Charles. "I am so happy to meet you, Mr. Ober. Mary Glen owes you so much. I had hoped that she and Dr. Bowden would join us, but they had other plans. Please sit down, and excuse my delay. Here come your cocktails. . . ."

Dinner at Mrs. de Castro's was an astonishing experience.

In the first place, it was a dinner such as only one of the best restaurants of France could have surpassed. The dishes were rare, delicate, and perfectly cooked. The wine, of which the normally beer-drinking Charles was a connoisseur, brought an appreciative sparkle to his eyes. He didn't know such vintages were any longer obtainable. It was all expertly served by the unusual butler, whose name he learned was Caspar, to whom Mrs. de Castro gave her orders in a language which, at first, Charles couldn't identify but which at last he recognized as Coptic. He had an idea that some of their conversation wasn't intended for the ears of the guests.

"Suppose we take our coffee in the studio," Mrs. de Castro suggested. She turned to Caspar, who had just come in. "Have you prepared the studio for us, Caspar?"

She addressed the butler in English, giving a radiant smile to Charles.

"I have, madame."

In the studio, Mr. Hanessy's attention was immediately arrested by a clay model on a pedestal, and then by a life-sized statue in ivory no more than just begun. "What's this? Is someone at work here right now?"

"Yes." Mrs. de Castro smiled languidly. "A brilliant young sculptor. I arranged to allow him to use this studio while he is in England."

John Hanessy was examining the study on the pedestal.

"He must have a remarkable model."

"Yes. She is beautiful," Mrs. de Castro agreed.

Caspar appeared silently, wheeling a wagon loaded with a percolator, cups, glasses, and a regiment of bottles. "Here is our coffee."

When Caspar had distributed coffee and liqueur, Charles seated himself beside Linda. He had chosen a pale green liqueur, contained in a long-necked bottle, which came from Greece. He had never heard of it, but Mrs. de Castro assured him it was delicious. Mr. Hanessy also had accepted her advice. Linda drank only coffee.

Charles had noted that their hostess ate next to nothing at dinner. A plate of some special, colorless soup, fruit, and a glass of the light wine which seemed to be her only beverage.

"Linda—" Charles subdued his voice—"Mrs. de Castro is a very beautiful woman, but she eats hardly anything. Is she on a diet?"

Linda dragged her adoring gaze away from the object of his inquiry. "Madonna eats nothing but vegetables and fruit."

Charles stared, and then, "Did you say Madonna?" he inquired.

Linda flushed, shook her head. "I was thinking she looked like a madonna."

"Oh!" Charles glanced across the studio. "She is, undeniably, laden with every physical asset, but she doesn't, in my eyes, resemble the traditional Madonna."

"You don't see her as I see her."

"Clearly not. You know her very well?"

"Yes. She has been kind enough to take an interest in me, to help me."

"Because you're pretty, or because she thinks you have brains?"

"Perhaps for both reasons." Linda was at her ease again. "I sit for my medical degree next month. My—Mrs. de Castro has had me privately coached by a brilliant physician."

Charles found himself wondering about the mark around Linda's ankle, wondering why Inspector Gilligan had asked him to look out for it. He couldn't see her ankle as they were seated. He tried to visualize the mark, to work out what it represented, and presently he succeeded.

It was a snake! And it was an endless snake. It went on and on. He could see it creeping around Linda's

ankle, then going further. It was winding around the trunk of a palm, now, and still it went on. He followed it into a jungle. The snake coiled its endless body around everything that crossed its path. Suddenly it turned. He saw the baneful eyes watching him. It was coming back! It was going to . . .

"I was telling Mrs. de Castro about the Seal of Solomon, Ober!"

That deep, vibrant voice aroused Charles. He inhaled deeply, looked across the studio. John Hanessy was obscured by a mist, but he could see Mrs. de Castro clearly. Her wonderful eyes were fixed upon his own. He was held, helpless, in her gaze.

"Oh, yes!" He knew he was speaking thickly. "Yes. The thing you have locked in your safe?" And as he spoke a moment of sobriety came. "Linda!" He grabbed her. "I'm as drunk as Silenus! Be an angel. Get me a glass of water."

Linda stood up—but, miraculously, Caspar materialized, carrying a tray on which were glasses and a jug of iced water.

"You asked for water, sir?"

Charles drank deeply, as the voice of John Hanessy said, "I guess I could use a glass of water, too! Mrs. de Castro, I'm no wine drinker. I hope I haven't disgraced myself."

The mist cleared, slightly. Charles could see Hanessy more clearly now. The big man was on his feet. He swayed somewhat as Caspar offered him a glass of water. He drank it down.

"As the cat's out of the bag," he remarked unsteadily, "but the secret in safe hands, I propose to satisfy Mrs. de Castro's natural curiosity. What do you say? Let's all go to Squires Pastures for a fine—final drink, and show her the seal. What do you say?"

Charles said, "I'm in favor, if I don't have to walk."

CHAPTER NINE

DRAKE ROSCOE lay in a chair on the private bathing beach of the Villa d'Or wondering if there were any sea in the world quite so melodramatically blue as the Mediterranean.

The Villa d'Or was a luxurious extravaganza created at a cost of many millions of francs for the Gaekwar of Bengaza as a present to the beautiful Duchesse de Séverac. She had graciously declined to accept the gift, but at last was prevailed upon by the infatuated prince to occupy the villa whenever she wished.

In those days, which now seemed so far away—the days in which he had been a skillful and respected officer of the United States Secret Service—Drake Roscoe had held evidence in his hands which could have condemned the lovely duchesse to execution; evidence to prove that the Duchesse de Séverac and the notorious Marquise Sumuru were in fact one and the same. But she had tricked him!

So deep were the roots of her power that the French authorities had had no choice but that of dismissing so ridiculous a charge. The old duc had left her the whole of his vast property, including the famous vineyards which produced Chateau St. Sabre, one of France's choicest Burgundies.

Sumuru! He had staked his life upon unmasking her, and had lost. She had made him her slave. Even now, under a Riviera sun, he turned cold to look back upon the degradation to which she had dragged him.

A faint crunching of the white sand made him turn his head.

Bella, Sumuru's favorite attendant, had just stepped out of the narrow gorge which led up to the villa. Bella was a Nubian girl from Upper Egypt. She had a body like a perfect ebony statue. She carried towels and a white robe and wore a swim suit no larger than a pocket handkerchief.

Her teeth gleamed when she saw Roscoe looking at her.

"You can look, Mr. Roscoe! In France My Lady makes me dress!"

"So I see, Bella! Is Madonna coming down to bathe?"

"She is swimming round from the Cape. I am to meet her here."

There were powerful and treacherous currents which swept around the headland, and it was a long swim. But Sumuru wasn't born to drown. She loved danger and she swam like a fish.

So Roscoe stayed where he was, and presently saw her heading in for the tiny bay. Her remarkable hair was confined in a cap which gleamed, golden, in sunlight. In the limpid, still water her limbs appeared supernaturally white. She swam effortlessly, with long, graceful strokes that soon brought her into shallow water.

She began to walk up to the beach, laughing like a carefree child.

"Bella, come to meet me." Bella ran down and wrapped her mistress in a large towel. Sumuru smiled at Roscoe. "You know I always swim in a state of nature, Drake. It is no longer proper that you should see me!" She walked up to the gully. "Wait for me. I want to talk to you."

Roscoe waited, lighting and smoking a cigarette.

He had exchanged one form of slavery for another. Real love had found him, and had given him the strength to cast off the shackles by which Sumuru had held him. But Dolores d'Eze belonged to the Order of Our Lady, and was blindly devoted to Sumuru. Sumuru unhesitatingly gave her consent, the only form of marriage recognized by the order, but he must himself remain a member or give up Dolores.

He had remained, but his stifled conscience at last had conquered. He had rebelled . . .

Bella was piling cushions on the sand. Sumuru, wrapped in her fleecy robe, lay down beside him.

"You may leave us, Bella. I shall be ready for my massage in five minutes."

As Bella went away, Roscoe glanced at Sumuru. She was watching him, smiling. He avoided her glance. She spoke softly.

"You are still afraid of me, Drake!"

"I have good reason to be."

"Only because I know I can no longer trust you. I gave you everything—even myself. Physically, you were my slave, but we always remained spiritual enemies. When

you found out—as I had known for a long time—that Dolores loved you, I gave you Dolores. If it had not been for Dolores, I would have made such an example of you as would have told every member of our order in the four quarters of the world how I deal with traitors.”

The musical voice had grown very soft. It seemed to merge with the gentle murmur of the sea rippling onto the beach.

“You and I may attach different meanings to the word.” Drake Roscoe was on treacherous ground and knew it. “So you brought about the disappearance of Dolores, and—”

“And forced you to carry out one of my plans. Exactly.”

“You had me drugged by that yellow rat Yoshida. Then you exercised your infernal hypnotic gifts. To this hour I don’t know what you made me do. I know only that I nearly passed out!”

“Because of an unforeseen accident, Drake. This was no part of my plan. But it was Yoshida who got you away before you were identified by Scotland Yard, and Yoshida who saved your life. Left to the mercy of those country doctors, you would never have recovered.”

“I wish I never had. I am a man who can no longer look at his own face in a mirror.” He stared out across the sea. “If the truth came out about me, my name would stink. No one who had never met you could understand!”

“Look at me, Drake. Your punishment is over. Look at me. Then ask me the question that burns in your brain.”

Drake Roscoe met the gaze of beautiful, mysterious eyes.

“Where is Dolores?” he whispered.

“You forget that I have already told you—but you were very ill—that she is in Egypt. She is waiting for you. . . .”

On advice from Inspector Gilligan, news of the discovery of the Seal of Solomon was suppressed.

The local police were only too glad to soft-pedal the facts of those singular events which had had them jumping for many days and nights. Teams of London reporters haunted the neighborhood, and for a while their stories made the front page. “The Vanishing Corpse” was a characteristic headline. They interviewed the doctors, the nurses and the orderlies.

No one could throw any light on the mystery.

Chief Constable Sturgeon disappointed them, too. He

had nothing to add to his original statement. As he said to Inspector Gilligan, "If I once let out the story of the Puma, the gnashing teeth, the thing with green eyes Dr. Bowden shot at up in Warren Lane, and the sound of someone, or some *thing*, being lashed to death the same night, there'd be a panic all over Surrey."

The inspector had to agree.

That the missing patient, alive or dead, was Drake Roscoe he had little doubt. They had worked together. Almost certainly Sumuru was concerned in the affair. On which side had Roscoe been?

Linda Marlow was a member of the Order of Our Lady; Charles Ober had reported finding the mark on her ankle. But the Order of Our Lady was not listed as subversive. In fact, many Scotland Yard officers, including the superintendent, remained sceptical about the existence of such an organization. And he had found out that Nurse Marlow was adept at the art of evasion.

He had come to a dead end.

Charles Ober had reported details of the dinner party at which he and Linda had been guests of Mrs. de Castro. He endorsed Curly Bowden's impression of her singular beauty, and told Gilligan that Linda Marlow undoubtedly was devoted to her. Concerning the latter part of the evening, he admitted that he had "drunk deep of rare vintages" and awakened in a spare room at Squires Pastures.

"What were you doing there?" the inspector was anxious to learn.

"I don't know. Nor could my gallant host enlighten me on this point. He, too, had quaffed the good wine to excess . . ."

Interviewed by the inspector, John Hanessy confessed, with embarrassment, that the charm of Mrs. de Castro's company had led him to drink not wisely but too much. He had a vague idea that some of the party had returned for a nightcap to Squires Pastures, but he couldn't recall if Mrs. de Castro or Miss Marlow had come. Maybe only himself and Charles Ober. It was late, he said, before they left the house on Lye Common, and Sample, his butler, had had orders not to wait up.

Had they returned to Squires Pastures in Mr. Hanessy's car?

No. He was almost sure Mrs. de Castro's chauffeur had taken them.

Seen shortly afterwards at the hospital, Nursing Sister Marlow admitted that Mr. Hanessy and Mr. Ober had not been strictly sober after the dinner party. Mrs. de Castro's chauffeur, she said, had driven them all home, first dropping her at the Haygate Hill Hotel and then going on to Squires Pastures.

Inspector Gilligan didn't press the point. He felt this wasn't the time to interrogate Linda further, or even to let her suspect that he knew her to be a member of the Order of Our Lady. At present she was a link. He knew that if he made a false move, the link might disappear. He preferred her to remain where he could find her.

It was no news to him that the feminist Order of Our Lady was well established in England. Nothing could be done about it. Women of high social standing belonged; men too. The founder and president was a woman wanted by the police of England, France and the United States for a variety of crimes which included a number of ghastly murders.

But Sumuru was a will-o'-the-wisp. She constantly submerged her identity in new marriages. All the grooms had been wealthy, and all, to date, were dead. Her first recorded husband, the Japanese Marquis Sumuru, had committed hara-kiri. Then came Baron Rikter, who had died in her arms, leaving her his vast fortune. Lord Carradale, her third recorded husband, was killed in an air crash. She inherited the great Carradale airplane business. The old Duc de Séverac figured last on the Scotland Yard list. Gilligan had launched inquiries to find out if there had been such a person as the late Mr. de Castro. He had no authority to inspect Mrs. de Castro's passport.

It looked as though Sumuru's latest scheme had misfired. But there were two robberies and several murderous assaults by her agents to be accounted for. It was humiliating to accept the idea of her slipping out of the net again.

Gilligan was staying at a cheap hotel, the Station Inn, patronized mostly by small-town traveling salesmen. He smoked his pipe in the private bar, sitting in a corner, a mug of draft beer on the table. Through the open hatch he could hear conversation in the public bar beyond . . .

"I'll be real glad when Mr. Rayburn comes back," he heard. "Not that this friend of his, Mrs. de Castro, gives me any trouble in my garden. Knows all there is to know about gardening, she does, and gives me a free hand."

"I hear she's a good looker."

"She's right enough to look at." A chorus of suppressed laughter. "My old woman's good enough for me." Renewed laughter. "It ain't her," the gardener went on. "It's the queer things that goes on."

"What sort of queer things, George?"

"Queer people in and out. Funny goings-on. But, especially, something she keeps in the old air-raid shelter at the bottom of the vegetable garden. Her butler, who's a white-faced foreigner, tells me it's an Afghan hound, but I never see it."

"What's wrong with it, anyway?"

"It howls, and it gnashes its teeth. Savage like. Also, it rattles the door like mad. I keep well away, I tell you! Which ain't all."

"Have another pint, George." Gilligan heard the barmaid serving more beer, then: "What's funny about the Afghan hound?"

"That's what I want to know, Herbert! There's a little Japanese bloke goes down and unlocks the door two or three times a day. See? Brings a big basket with him, he does. When he goes in there's this gnashing of teeth. Then he starts talking."

"What's funny about that?"

"So far, nothing. But twice I hear another voice *answering him!*"

Loud laughter followed. "It's a talking dog, George!"

"You can laugh—but I ask you: when's it exercised? A big dog has to be exercised, doesn't it? And who answers the Jap?"

Twenty minutes later, Inspector Gilligan was ringing the bell of the house on Lye Common. The door was opened by a handsome but dangerous-looking manservant.

"I regret, sir, Señora de Castro left for the South of France early this morning."

CHAPTER TEN

THERE WAS A ROOM in the Villa d'Or, a reproduction of a part of the old summer palace at Anungar where the Gaekwar was born: here were divans, rich carpets, a marble pool with a tinkling fountain, and screened windows overlooking a terrace garden and the dramatically blue sea.

This was Sumuru's chosen retreat. •

Wearing the gauzy eastern dress in which she felt so entirely at her ease, and which suited her mysterious personality, she lay on a deep, cushioned divan. An ebony cabinet inset with mother-of-pearl stood on the Arabian coffee table. A speck of amber light glowed in one of several panels, and a voice spoke. It was the voice of Melissa . . .

"He has returned to London, yes, Madonna. The report just came in."

Sumuru answered, without changing her languid pose: "He visited the house again?"

"Yes, Madonna. Henryk told him Mrs. de Castro had gone to France. Shortly afterwards he left for London."

"You will leave early tomorrow morning, Melissa. Airways had no accommodation. Henryk will drive you to Victoria Station. He has your passport in the name of Inez de Castro and a reservation on the Golden Arrow. You will not join the Paris Express at Boulogne. My car will meet you on the French coast. The rest of the journey will be by road."

"I understand, Madonna."

"The seal has not been submitted to the British Museum?"

"Not yet. Sister Linda reports that Dr. Becker-White, the curator of that department, is away until Thursday."

"Good. You have done well, Melissa. I am pleased with you."

"Thank you, My Lady . . ."

The amber light went out.

Somewhere in the distance a bell sounded, and a woman's voice called: "Caspar—Our Lady wants you."

Unheralded by any warning of approach, a tapestry drapery hanging in a keyhole-shaped doorway was parted and Caspar came in. He crossed to the divan. His butler's uniform had been discarded. He was dressed again in the black robe and red slippers. Smiling, he performed his ceremonious salaam.

"My Lady?"

"Sister Melissa has reported, Caspar. All is well there, it seems. You have made the necessary arrangements to have her met at Boulogne?"

"I have, Madonna."

"Sanchez is remaining until Mr. Rayburn returns on Friday. If anything has been overlooked we can count on him to correct it. Are you satisfied, my old friend, that our dangerous visit to England was not so dangerous after all?"

"I am not, Madonna."

Sumuru's lashes were lowered. When she spoke, the golden voice was very soft.

"Your dissatisfactions increase with the years, Caspar."

"So do Madonna's indiscretions."

"Do you assume the right to criticize me?"

"Always, Madonna." The emotionless tones remained unchanged. "Since you have made me responsible for your welfare, that privilege is mine. My will to protect My Lady lends me that intuition which belongs to love. Always, I seek to protect Madonna from her impulses."

Sumuru relaxed and lay back among the cushions. She sighed.

"I adore your courage and your constancy. You have no fear of my moods because your love is untarnished by lust. How wonderful!"

"Age cools human passions, as the great age of the earth has cooled its primeval fires."

Sumuru looked up at him and laughed. It was the laughter of a happy child.

"Caspar, do you think it is my great age which makes me immune to passion, as you are?"

Caspar bowed gravely. "It may well be. You have the body of a beautiful girl, but a soul which was already old in Babylon. May I continue, Madonna?"

"Continue, my friend."

"Very well. It is a question only of time—and time is

so treacherous—before the English police notify the French police of certain occurrences in the county of Surrey. Chief Inspector Gilligan, who belongs to what has been called the bulldog breed, has a file on Sumuru at Scotland Yard. Inquiries will be made at the Chateau Neuf St. Sabre, Madonna. The name of the Duchesse de Séverac occurs in the Sumuru dossier."

"The Duchesse de Séverac, like Caesar's wife, is above suspicion, my friend. She is reputed to be a woman of gallantries, and the French adore such women. Drake Roscoe—whom we knew as Drakos before he became a renegade—attempted once when still in the service of the United States to bring charges against the duchesse . . . Poof!" She exhaled tobacco smoke. "His charges went where the smoke has gone. Into unheeding air."

"Air only seems unheeding, Madonna. You know, even better than I, that the atmosphere records, and preserves, sound. It is a repository of rumors."

"Wherever I go, Caspar, rumors follow me. If real danger arises we shall know how to meet it. Tell me, has Camille set up his studio?"

"In the orangery, Madonna."

"Perhaps I should give him another sitting. Yes, I will see him . . . No, not here. In the orangery."

In an alcove formed by the masonry of the villa where it adjoined a small grove of orange trees, Camille de Paris sat on a long, narrow, mink-covered couch intended for the model. His face was sunk in his hands.

A piece of ivory clamped to a bench was assuming the form of a rounded shoulder. The place it was intended to occupy showed on a life-sized wooden skeleton only partially clothed in ivorine flesh, which resembled a body in process of dissection.

Camille had worked in stone and in many kinds of rare marble. He had dreamed, sometimes, of working in ivory; but sufficient quantities of this valuable and brittle medium had never been available until he had met the dazzling Duchesse de Séverac.

Her resources seemed to be limitless. An apparently inexhaustible supply of the finest African ivory was placed at his disposal. For all the delicacy of his touch on this unfamiliar material, he had, nevertheless, ruined several fine pieces. The ivory had been replaced without delay, but the work of inspired hours was lost forever.

The magic of a lovely subject had sparked his genius. Unavoidably, it had influenced his Gallic heart, then lighted a fire of passion which had nearly consumed him.

For the exquisite duchesse, although she exposed her beauty to him with the unaffected ease of a professional model, remained smilingly unapproachable. And the existence, in her household, of a girl who was her exact physical double had confirmed the terrifying idea that the duchesse must be a creature not entirely of the normal world he moved in.

Melissa was beautiful. She was unable to disguise the fact that she loved him. But although her kisses had power to thrill him physically, when her arms were around him the pleasure was a vicarious pleasure. It was the other he embraced.

Yet more and more he found himself thinking of Melissa. The other one he hadn't seen since some time before leaving England. Now Melissa was gone, too—and he missed her.

A faint footstep made him turn his head. Someone was walking towards him through the orange trees. He stood upright, his hands clenched. It was Melissa, at last!

The graceful figure drew nearer, sometimes in masking shadow, sometimes in sunshine. She wore a light robe and sandals.

She was beside him. She smiled.

"Madonna!" he whispered. . . .

On the morning of his sensational awakening in Haygate Hill Hotel, to find Mary asleep in his arms, Curly Bowden drove to his rooms, bathed, changed, lighted a cigarette, and sat down to think. By this time it was full daylight.

Where had dreaming ended and reality begun? That both he and Mary had been drugged, he knew. He had identified the drug as some preparation of hashish. But although, as a physician, he was familiar with the strange and treacherous properties of this drug, he couldn't account for its singular effects in his own case. Beyond a slight headache, there was no aftermath.

Some other influence had been added to that of the Indian hemp. Was it a kind of post-suggestion projected upon a drugged brain?

In his vision, Mary had been the operative factor. Could it be that Mary, under hypnotic direction, had been instrumental in transforming dream into reality? It was

just possible. But it implied that subconsciously she had desired this consummation.

He recalled the ecstasy he had known in what he believed to be a dream. He, too, subconsciously had desired it. In short, someone had deliberately released the inhibitions which frequently stand between lovers.

Someone? Mrs. de Castro!

Why?

What were Mary's memories? Would she misjudge him?

He paced his room, smoked ten cigarettes, made a pot of coffee, drank it. At eight o'clock he called Dr. Jackson, said he wasn't feeling well and asked him to take over morning duty.

For a further painful half-hour he tried to force himself to lift the receiver and call Mary.

At last he managed it and heard her voice:

"Curly darling! Please come along at once! I must see you."

Curly was in Haygate Hill Hotel in ten minutes.

He found Mary in slippers and dressing robe, fresh from her bath. As she opened her door he looked at her anxiously. She gave him a radiant smile, came into his arms and kissed him—a lingering kiss of absolute, happy surrender.

Curly held her close, breathless with the wonder of her beauty.

"Mary, last night—"

"Last night, darling, was a night of magic! I dreamed that I was chained—that I was released—that I ran back to you—that we were united again."

"I remember!"

"I woke. You were gone. But I knew it was true. I don't know how it happened, and I don't care. But I do know we belong to each other and I'm glad."

It was some time before Curly found an opportunity to sample one of the cigarettes in the box in the living room, but, when he did, he recognized the fact that they were quite harmless. While Mary retired to dress, he sipped the whisky. It, too, was perfectly good!

The mystery was deeper than ever. Momentarily, he doubted his sanity, but he knew he was wildly happy.

Some twenty-four hours later, John Hanessy's Rolls-Royce pulled up outside the British Museum. He helped Mary Glen out. Charles Ober followed. They had taken

the seal from the Glen deposit box at the bank, and had an appointment with Dr. Becker-White, curator of seals and one of Europe's greatest experts, to examine it.

They were shown upstairs into a small office and asked to wait for a few moments, as Dr. Becker-White had been detained. Charles laid the package on the doctor's desk and began, carefully, to unfasten it.

Excitement overcame John Hanessy. He crossed over and stood beside Ober. Mary Glen remained seated.

The wrappings were removed; the lid of the small box inside was taken off. He opened the papyrus and took out a gleaming disk which it contained. He raised it between finger and thumb, and then nearly dropped it!

Mary sprang up. "Charles! What's wrong with you?"

"With *me*?" He laid the seal on the desk, grabbed up the papyrus. "Nothing. But there's something very wrong here."

"Maybe," John Hanessy boomed, "you would explain what's going on."

"Look, man, look!" Charles held out the seal on his open palm. "This isn't the Seal of Solomon!"

At which moment the office door opened and a tall, lean man with a pale, scholarly face, a man who carried himself with a slight stoop, came in.

"Excuse me," he began—and stopped, looking from face to face. "You appear to be much disturbed."

"Dr. Becker-White?" Charles bowed. "I am Charles Ober. This is Miss Mary Glen, and Mr. John Hanessy."

Dr. Becker-White bowed courteously to all.

"Please be seated. I am at your service. I wished to apologize for my delay." He sat down behind his desk.

"But something seemed to have upset you. I have your letter here, Mr. Ober, in which you tell me that you would like my opinion of an unusual seal. I am all attention."

"It's a more than unusual seal!" Charles assured him.

"In the first place, this isn't the seal which I hoped to show you. In the second place—" he picked it up and stared at it as if hypnotized—"I never saw one like this in my life!"

Dr. Becker-White took it from him, studied one side, then the other. "It is of course intended to have a holder, or handle, attached on the converse," he muttered. "But the material! Whatever is it made of?" He adjusted a jeweler's glass. "The matrix shows the four guardian spirits of Sky, Air, Earth and Water, suggesting an Arabic

origin; it is exquisitely engraved. Good heavens! This is indeed an unusual piece!" He glanced up, then returned to his study of the seal. "It appears to be engraved upon a disk of incredibly fine mosaic composed of a number of—can it be?—diamonds and some other gem."

"My guess would be rhinestones," Charles volunteered dismally. "It's the most brilliant forgery I ever saw. The work of a genius."

Dr. Becker-White put down his glass.

"You mean it is a reproduction of the original? I fail to imagine why so elaborate a duplicate should be made. Whatever its origin, it is certainly of considerable value. Except under a magnifying glass, it presents an apparently unbroken surface. What is its history, Mr. Ober?" And he put the glass back in his eye.

"I don't know, Doctor. I never saw it until I unwrapped it in your office!" He glanced from John Hanessy, who looked as though somebody had just hit him hard in the face, to Mary. She was pale, but quite composed. "We have been sold out. This is a job for Inspector Gilligan. I don't think, Doctor, we should take up any more of your valuable time."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SUMURU SANK BACK on the cushioned divan. She had returned from the orangery, and now Caspar stood in the doorway. He carried a silver tray on which were a long-necked flask, a glass, an ebony cigarette box, an onyx holder, two ripe peaches, and a silver fruit knife and fork.

"You never fail me, Caspar."

"Yes, Madonna. Sanchez has just reported from London. I feared My Lady had misjudged the dosage on the night of the dinner party in the case of Mr. Ober. I doubted if he would remain conscious long enough to carry out My Lady's wishes."

Sumuru smiled and closed her eyes.

"It would not have mattered, Caspar. John Hanessy had the key, and only John Hanessy knew the combination. Mr. Ober spent the night at Squires Pastures."

"I gathered from Sanchez' report that Madonna's plan was successful. He covered the party from the bank to the British Museum, and was examining seals in the cases when they came out of the curator's office."

"The plan deserved to be successful, after two years' search in Paris and London! That a Greek papyrus, found in a tomb in Egypt, should give a clue to a treasure hidden for generations in England, almost defies belief." She bit delicately into a peach which Caspar had placed beside her.

"The Greek scribe's careful diagram of the seal proved to be of vital importance, Madonna. Without it, Suleiman could have done nothing."

Sumuru smiled up at him. "His duplicate, which you have seen, was nearly perfect. My plan was aided by the fact that the real seal proved to be wrapped in a fragment of papyrus which age had moulded to its shape. I had no difficulty in substituting the duplicate in the wrapper before it was restored to Mr. Hanessy's safe. Both men were completely under the influence of Ariosto's formula, and entirely in my hands. They will retain no recollection

whatever of the later events of the evening. I knew we were safe until Charles Ober submitted the seal to the British Museum for examination."

"Madonna," Caspar ventured, "it was a very great risk. Where has My Lady hidden the treasure?"

She sat upright. "Bring me the cloak I wore that night."

Caspar bowed, went out silently, and returned carrying a mink cloak. Sumuru draped it over her knees, felt in a pocket in its lining, and held up an object which shone like a minor moon, which seemed to dim the studio lights.

"See what I brought with me! All the money in the world could not buy it, Caspar. Mary, sweet child, shall lose nothing by what I have done; for I hold in my hand not only wealth, but power!"

"Madonna, you stand on the edge of a precipice! I have unquestionable information that the staggering influence which could be exercised by the holder of the seal has been made clear to the British authorities. They may force the French to act. The villa may be searched by experts. Without delay the seal must be well hidden until we get it safely to Egypt."

Sumuru sank back on her cushions: "Have you any suggestion to offer, Caspar?"

Caspar bowed. "I have, Madonna. What better hiding place for one great treasure than in another?"

In his office at Scotland Yard, Inspector Gilligan sat behind a desk on which there was nothing but a blotting pad, a telephone, and the duplicate seal. He was smoking his favorite pipe. He carefully studied the faces of his three visitors.

Mary appeared quite calm. Charles Ober had ruffled his hair until he looked like a Hottentot. John Hanessy, alone, seemed to be gravely concerned.

"I regret the great loss, Miss Glen," the inspector assured Mary. "As I surmised from the start, an expert gang is at work. This job is work of a very clever jeweler. Sergeant Bronsen, our gem expert, tells me more than a thousand pounds' worth of diamonds were cut and ruined to make it. It's wonderful workmanship. Good enough to pass, at a glance, for the original. Looks as though he had a scale diagram to work from."

"He must have had." Charles's voice had lost its edge. "That's the puzzling thing."

"You mean," came John Hanessy's deep bass, "that if

the gangsters ever had the real one they'd surely have kept it?"

"Surely."

Gilligan fingered the duplicate almost lovingly. "These gangsters had big financial backing, Mr. Hanessy."

"I believe you have some idea, Inspector—" Charles Ober's voice remained toneless—"of who's responsible for it all. Anything to do with girls' ankles?"

Gilligan glanced at Mary Glen. Her expression didn't change.

"Yes. If only I had the chief's authority, I believe I could crack the whole thing wide open." He banged his clenched fist on the desk. "But I'll never get it."

"But something must be done!" John Hanessy insisted. "I imagine Scotland Yard doesn't expect us to brush off this outrage and call it a day?"

Gilligan stared at him gloomily. "Is the key of the safe always in your possession?"

"Sure. On my ring."

"No other?"

"There's a duplicate in Haygate bank."

"Combination known to anybody?"

"Nobody. Not even Byron, my secretary."

"And the seal is never removed from safe until it's taken to the London bank?"

"Never to my knowledge, Inspector."

"Who took it to London—you, or Miss Glen?"

"I drove Miss Glen up in my car and saw the package deposited in the Glen box in the bank strongroom."

"What kind of package?"

"A cardboard box wrapped in brown paper and tied with string."

"Sealed?"

"No. Why should we seal it? It was never out of my safe until we lodged it in Miss Glen's bank."

"H'm!" Gilligan looked dissatisfied. "Pity it wasn't sealed. You see, Miss Glen, the only time a substitution could have been worked was *before* the package was left at Squires Pastures. Someone must have burgled your safe, Mr. Hanessy."

"The idea's preposterous, Inspector!"

"There's only one other chance," Gilligan went on. "In the car on your way to London, who carried the package?"

"I had it in my handbag," Mary told him quietly.

"Any stops on the way up?"

"No, sir." John Hanessy was getting ruffled. "Door to door."

"H'm!" Inspector Gilligan went on smoking and said nothing until Mary spoke.

"Really, Inspector, it does seem quite impossible, doesn't it? If you can see any daylight, I admit I can't!"

Gilligan glanced at Charles Ober, then at John Hanessy. "All right for me to say what I think in front of Miss Glen?"

"Okay by me," Hanessy assured him.

Charles nodded.

"It's just this," the Inspector told them. "There was one night which seems to be a blackout in both cases. Anything could have happened—on the night you dined with Mrs. de Castro."

Hanessy stared guiltily at Charles. Neither spoke.

Mary laughed. "Linda told me you let things rip that evening! I don't know what time Linda got home, but I gather that Mrs. de Castro's chauffeur drove you two back to Squires Pastures singing!"

There was a moment of embarrassed silence.

Then Charles Ober admitted, "I can't contradict the chauffeur's story, Mary, but assuming—which we don't accept without further evidence—that Hanessy and I were slightly elevated, what bearing has our condition upon the mystery?"

"It *could* explain it!" Gilligan stated dryly.

"Wait a minute!" John Hanessy shouted hoarsely. "Are you trying to tell me I burgled my own safe?"

The phone buzzed.

"Excuse me." Inspector Gilligan lifted the receiver and listened. Then he hung up. "Mrs. de Castro left Victoria by Golden Arrow today for France."

John Hanessy's expression became positively ferocious, but Mary spoke first.

"I could have told you that, Inspector. She has invited me to join her on the Riviera for a couple of weeks as soon as I can arrange it."

Hanessy turned angry eyes on the inspector. "And now, sir, I'd like to ask you a question. Am I right in supposing you have had Mrs. de Castro covered?"

"Right."

"Might I inquire why, or is it an official secret?"

Inspector Gilligan began to knock ashes from his pipe into a large ash tray.

"Surrey police. Routine. She employed foreign servants."

"That's true," Charles broke in. "Chauffeur's a Pole, I think. Butler's a yellow mystery."

"Very pale face, movements like a sleepwalker, monotonous voice?"

"You know the man!"

Gilligan's expression grew suddenly grim. "I think I do. The man who told me Mrs. de Castro left three days ago is probably the Pole . . ."

At the Villa d'Or, Sumuru was considering her plans.

She was seated at a desk in a perfectly conventional office, a room which she had re-equipped. There was a typing table for a secretary; there were filing cabinets; there was that orderly simplicity which business calls for. Our Lady wore a plain linen dress. On the desk before her lay a pair of sunglasses; on the polished floor a large sun hat.

"I have made these notes, Caspar."

Caspar, smiling, imperturbable, stood watching her.

"I am all attention, Madonna."

"Our guests will arrive by air at Nice. They will be met, of course. A guest bungalow is prepared?"

"One is prepared."

"Miss Glen knows me as Mrs. de Castro. In good time I shall allow her to understand that I was formerly the Duchesse de Séverac."

Caspar bowed. "It is understood . . . My Lady's South American marriage promises to be unprofitable financially. The heirs of the late Ramon de Castro have filed suit. I hesitate to advise, but—"

Sumuru glanced up from her notes. She smiled radiantly. "It would be dangerous to defend? Much as I love danger, Caspar, always I try to avoid legal entanglements. I have the de Castro emeralds. They will pay the expenses of the Egyptian college for at least two years. I agree with you that I made a mistake. Ramon was unendurable. The upkeep of the order grows greater year by year. But I hope, very shortly, to increase our capital. I had two purposes in inviting Miss Glen to visit us."

"I appreciate both those purposes, Madonna."

"Drake is a problem. I can no longer be sure of him. It was only for Dolores's sake that I took so many risks to save him."

"I ventured to point out to My Lady at the time that—"

"It was an error to use him as I did? A whim, Caspar. I intended to crush his pride, to force him to commit a common felony. In this I succeeded, but at a heavy price. Well, we shall see. The reception must take place soon. I hope to offer up a new sister."

"The sooner the better, Madonna. Sister Melissa will be here to take charge of the secretarial work."

"You were thinking, my friend," Sumuru said softly, "that Melissa might be called upon to perform a more important task. . . ."

CHAPTER TWELVE

"BUT CURLY!" Mary clung to him, and her kisses stirred his blood in a way he had never known before that miraculous dream. "Inez de Castro has reserved two places for us on the Golden Arrow. I know you can get away, at least for a week, if you really try. And just think of a week together on the Riviera, in a luxurious villa!"

"It would be paradise, darling. But whatever you think about it, I don't fancy the idea of having my life—our lives—run by Mrs. de Castro. You have dismissed the fact that she almost certainly drugged us recently—"

Mary wrenched herself free, sprang up, and stood looking at him with blazing eyes. "In the first place, I don't believe it. In the second place, even if it were true, I don't care. You mean that you're sorry?"

Curly dragged her back into the big armchair. He kissed her. "Do I seem sorry? I have hungered for you since the day we met. I would have married you a week later. Circumstances—never mind what circumstances—threw us into one another's arms. It was so wonderful I couldn't believe it had really happened until I woke up."

"Nor could I, darling."

"And now you suggest that I don't want a whole week of rapturous happiness with you? God knows I do! But the whole thing, from beginning to end, culminating in the theft of the seal, must surely convince you that Mrs. de Castro is an impostor—a brilliant criminal."

Mary kissed him—not passionately, but as one would to console a child.

"I take a totally different view of her, Curly. She's brilliant, I agree, but her motives are not criminal. She belongs to a movement to make a better and more beautiful place of the world. To bring this about, the present man-made laws must be ignored, broken down. The Seal of Solomon, in a museum case, would be merely a curiosity. Perhaps in her hands, it would be an instrument of power."

Curly sighed. "I can see that you have been indoctrinated! But I still don't like the idea of your going to France as her guest."

"You mean you're not coming?"

"I mean nothing of the kind. I mean, if you're really going, I shall follow at the first possible moment! Tomorrow, honestly, is impossible. I have obligations I can't ignore, even for you, my darling."

"But you'll really come?"

"Nothing could hold me but an act of God."

"The address is the Villa d'Or—"

"I shan't be staying at the Villa d'Or. But I shall be nearby. I'll find you."

Sumuru, wearing a loose robe into which she had changed from the dress worn at dinner with Mary, lolled on the divan in her favorite room at the Villa d'Or. She smoked one of the small cigarettes which seemed to be her sole indulgence. There was coffee on the table beside her. Mary sat in a deep, cushioned ebony chair, quaintly carved and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. She, too, was smoking, and sipping the sweet Turkish coffee.

"Linda has done something to help you to understand my aims, Mary. You have read *Tears of Our Lady*." The magic voice had Mary enthralled. "You know now, for I have told you, that I am 'Our Lady' of the title, that I wrote that book. It is the primer of the creed to which we are dedicated. Does my cult of beauty appeal to you, child?"

Mary struggled to preserve her self-possession under the barrage of those wonderful eyes.

"Very strongly, Mrs.—"

"Call me Madonna, Mary. By that name I am known to those who love me. The world of men has drifted into a dreadful chaos, because men believe that physical force can rule. It was so that Rome fell. No empire upheld solely by manpower can hope to survive. When ugliness supplants beauty, the end is near. My mission is to restore beauty before it is too late."

The voice, the intellectual magnetism of the speaker, her eyes, but above all, the voice, were conquering. Mary watched and listened. For a spirit so independent this alone was a tribute.

Sumuru smiled. She had read Mary's thoughts.

"You are thinking, Mary, that I am no more than a few

years older than yourself. You are wondering why you listen to me so patiently. My body seems to be as youthful as your own; yet there is something you see in my eyes which tells another story."

"Your eyes are very beautiful . . . Madonna."

"But not with the fresh young beauty of yours, Mary. I have plunged deep into life; you stand on its margin. And because you are beautiful too, have poise and culture, I want you to join my campaign to end ugliness, wars, wholesale massacre of populations. Men, blind to all but their physical strength and aided by the deadly implements put in their hands by science, have misruled too long. When misnamed ideologies rear their heads, the time has come for beauty to return."

Faintly, a bell tinkled. Sumuru turned and touched a knob on the ebony cabinet beside her.

"An urgent message for My Lady."

Mary recognized the voice of Caspar.

"I will call when I am free." Sumuru extended both her hands to Mary. "The affairs of the order are very demanding, child. We shall have other opportunities to talk together. I hope your bungalow is comfortable."

"It is simply wonderful, Madonna." Sumuru's strange regard dominated her. "No hotel in Europe could provide such luxury."

Sumuru smiled again.

"The order has great resources, child. Your chosen career as a writer will be successful beyond your dreams when you are one of us. You will find, Mary, very soon, that I am known here as the Duchesse de Séverac. It is simple. My marriage to Señor de Castro lasted only one year. He died. I was the widow of the Duc de Séverac. As such I am known in France. Good night, child. May your dreams be of beauty."

When Mary had gone out, the draperies in the keyhole doorway parted, and Caspar came in. He crossed to the divan on whispering slippers, stopped and touched his brow, his lips and his breast with his fingers, bowed his head.

"My Lady."

"I was successful with Mary and her handsome, puritan lover, Caspar. They are united. Their union must continue. As I anticipated, he declined my invitation. But he will be here soon. She has him now, in the strongest chain which can bind a man—the chain of desire."

"True, Madonna. Yet even that chain can sometimes be broken."

Something like a shadow crossed the beautiful face of the woman who watched him.

"Let us drown our memories, my old friend. We live today. What is your news?"

"Dr. Kyrle Bowden secured a canceled seat in a plane leaving London for Nice tomorrow morning."

Sumuru smiled. "Good. See that he is covered from the moment of his arrival."

"It is arranged, Madonna."

"And send Yoshida to me."

When Caspar silently approached a door at the end of a carpeted corridor and was about to open it, he paused and stood quite still, smiling. There was a faint smell of incense and the sound of a chanting voice. Caspar listened. Then he pressed down the silver handle and gently opened the door.

The room inside was simply furnished—a camp bed, a desk, two chairs, a glass-topped table. A large, glazed cabinet filled with chemical apparatus and countless stoppered flasks and bottles occupied one wall. There was a bookcase under an open window. The window overlooked part of the terraced garden of the villa.

A deep closet was open. It had been converted into a shrine. Fresh flowers stood upon the little altar. Incense sent up pencils of aromatic smoke through the perforated lid of a bronze burner.

Yoshida, wearing an embroidered kimono, stood before the shrine, his normally impassive features transfigured. In both hands he held up a long sword, horizontally, the blade slightly curved, the hilt curiously ornamented. His lips moved in what sounded like an incantation. He was so completely absorbed in his strange devotions that he remained unaware of Caspar's presence.

Caspar reclosed the door as quietly as he had opened it.

He walked back along the corridor some eight or ten paces, then began to return slowly.

"Yoshida!" His sing-song tones were peculiarly penetrating. "Yoshida! Our Lady calls you . . ."

Before Caspar had reached the door again, it was thrown open.

Yoshida stood there in shirt and trousers, the embroidered robe discarded.

"My Lady wants me, Caspar?"

"Such is my message, Yoshida." Caspar was looking over Yoshida's shoulder into the room. The closet door had been shut. "You were burning incense. It smells very sweet."

"I find it conducive to reflection, Caspar."

His exact English, but odd intonation, his now impassive features, would have convinced anyone who had not witnessed the dedication of the sword.

Caspar bowed and turned away.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CURLY BOWDEN was driven from the airport to a small hotel recommended by Charles Ober. He hoped to pick up some information in Nice about the Villa d'Or before making his plans. Mary had been unable to tell him much.

Having unpacked his bag, he went and sat down at a table outside the hotel, shaded by a gaily striped awning. He lighted a cigarette and ordered beer.

The whole pattern of his life had changed. His entire future had to be re-arranged. If Mary persisted in declining marriage, he couldn't hope for a Colonial appointment. As a government doctor it would be impossible for him to bring a mistress along. It was equally impossible to leave her behind.

He sipped his beer. This was a quiet street, and idly he noticed a furtive-looking man passing on the other side, a man who gave him a quick, piercing glance and as quickly looked away. Curly saw him walk into a café further down.

A voice spoke out of the shadows behind him:

"Don't look around, Dr. Bowden. Be at the Café Rouge at eight-thirty tonight. I'll meet you there. The doorman will tell you the way."

Curly held his breath. He couldn't place the voice, yet it rang a faint bell in his memory. Excepting Charles Ober, no one knew he was coming here. What on earth did it mean?

He waited for a moment before he looked back. No other table was occupied.

A sense of excitement claimed him. He, and therefore Mary, too, had become involved in some underworld intrigue. The appalling idea swept through his brain that perhaps Mary had been kidnaped by the mysterious organization Inspector Gilligan had talked about.

An early dinner was a mere pretense. He had no appetite. But he drank a bottle of good wine, and ordered

brandy with his coffee. He remained in a state of suspended animation, constantly consulting his wrist watch and checking the time by the dining-room clock.

He restrained his impatience until ten minutes past eight. Fifteen minutes later, he found himself getting out of a taxi in front of a small café. Several dwarf orange trees grew in boxes, tables draped with check cloths grouped behind them. None was occupied, but inside the café he could see people dining.

He sat down at a table until a waiter came out, ordered wine and lighted a cigarette. The time was eight twenty-seven.

At eight-thirty exactly a hand touched his shoulder.

"Good evening, Dr. Bowden. I hope I didn't startle you."

Curly turned. Seen silhouetted against the lighted café window, the man's features were hard to discern. Then he moved forward and sat down facing him.

"Good God!" Curly whispered.

"I see you recognize me."

"You're the dead man!"

The dead man smiled, a grim smile showing a row of even lower teeth. "Not quite dead—physically, that is. My name is Drake Roscoe—or it was." He touched a long scar just below the hairline. "You will remember this."

Curly found himself looking into the arresting face. The bold eyes held the light of command, but lines around the mouth told a story of humiliation. This man, his hair streaked with gray, was still handsome in a haggard way, but suffering had smudged out much of the former fineness of his features.

"I'm not a burglar," Drake Roscoe went on. "What I am today I will try to tell you. But first, you have to get Mary Glen away from the Villa d'Or."

"But how did you know she was there? And how did you find me?"

"Very simple. I'm living at the Villa d'Or and I've been tailing you ever since you arrived. Or rather, I tailed the man who is tailing you! It belongs to the A.B.C. of my former profession. I was an F.B.I. agent."

"My man seems to have lost the scent."

"Temporarily. Just behind you there's a section of curtained window. I can see people in the street reflected in it. I may leave rather suddenly. What I'm going to tell you is strictly confidential. I was big brass in the United

States until I tried to unmask the most dangerous criminal alive today. She broke me."

"She?"

"Sumuru's the name she's known by in the American police records, to the Paris Sûreté and to Scotland Yard. How many other names she has I can't tell you, but I do know a few: Baroness Rikter, Lady Carradale, Madame Saint Sabre, the Duchesse de Séverac—"

"The Duchesse de Séverac!"

Roscoe studied the look of amazement which suddenly swept across Curly's face. He nodded. "Known for a short time recently in England as Mrs. de Castrol!"

That remarkable woman was absorbed at the moment in an equally remarkable occupation. Seated at her desk, she studied a number of sheets of what looked like parchment, each sealed, although none had any writing upon it. The wax used was of a different color in every case, but the seal was always the same—the Seal of Solomon. She laid down the powerful glass she had been using and touched a control on the desk.

A few seconds later a door opened and Caspar come in.

"My Lady?"

"The best result, Caspar, is with the reed papyrus and the beeswax preparation. It is this sheet." She held it up. "Yoshida has dyed the wax blue, but the color must be changed."

Caspar took the sheet. "This is Egyptian papyrus, Madonna, from the tomb of a scribe of the twelfth dynasty. Plain pieces of this size are rarely found."

"This piece was found. Others can be found."

Casper bowed again. "I shall instruct that a search be made."

"The latest reports, Caspar. What of the new arrival?"

"Sanchez, who is covering Dr. Bowden, reported fifteen minutes ago that Dr. Bowden was dining in his hotel."

"Who is covering Drake?"

"I detailed Ferrani, of our resident staff, to watch Drake Roscoe, Madonna. His quarter-hourly report is overdue."

"Ferrani is a fool!" The melodious voice rose little above a whisper.

"I cannot agree with My Lady. A man of Mr. Roscoe's peculiar experience is more difficult to shadow than a desert lizard in the sand."

Sumuru was silent for a few moments.

"What a mistake," she finally murmured, and her wonderful voice held the music of a quietly running stream, "to keep near me a false lover, a man who would have destroyed me! Can you tell me, Caspar, why I suffer more for another woman than I would ever suffer for any man?"

"Dolores is truly your friend, Madonna. And to you friendship is above sexual passion."

"Yet always I dream, Caspar, of that divine unity."

"Madonna knows better than I that it is possible only to the gods. By poor humanity it is unattainable."

Sumuru opened her eyes, and smiled.

"Your cynicism is a sharp medicine, Caspar, which rarely fails to restore me. Order Sanchez to radio reports of Dr. Bowden's movements every five minutes. Order Henryk to stand by with the Hispano. And send Mary Glen to me."

Curly Bowden still sat at the table outside the little café, staring with a sort of horrified amazement at Roscoe.

"I've been covered all night," Roscoe told him. "But that's a game I know more about than the guy who's covering me! I'll let him pick me up again when it suits me to do so." He emptied his glass.

"I can't doubt one word of what you have told me." Curly spoke with unusual earnestness. "It's too incredible not to be true."

"Without mentioning my name, you have to find some way to get Mary Glen away. If she's once hypnotized into joining the order, you will never see her again."

"This is awful." Curly beckoned to the waiter and had the drinks renewed. "What I don't understand, Mr. Roscoe, is your place in this fabulous household. How you came to be there at the beginning is clear enough. You planned to learn all about this order before striking. The woman struck first, and having met her I don't need to be told that you fell. But now that she knows you're not to be relied upon, that nothing holds you but love for someone else, why does she allow you to remain at large?"

Both were silent until the waiter had served them and gone away.

"It's hard to explain," Drake Roscoe admitted. "I'm not even sure that I know the correct answer. But Sumuru has a complex character. One of her peculiarities is her love of danger. She enjoys nothing more than to have the police on her track. She despises all police, as she despises me. She believes, and with good reason, that she's above

the law. I shouldn't live another day if it weren't for Dolores. Sumuru loves Dolores, and would do a lot to spare her any sorrow."

"Seems to me you're on a chain . . . which reminds me of something you may be able to tell me. What, or whom, is the Puma?"

Roscoe's expression changed. He hesitated before he answered, "Did you ever read H. G. Wells's story, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*?"

"No."

"Well, the Puma might have come from there. He is the creation of a brilliant villain called Ariosto—formerly Sumuru's resident scientist and physician, but now exiled to her ruby mines."

"Ruby mines! For heaven's sake, where are they?"

"I don't know. I've never been there—thank God—and she has never told me. Ariosto is a scientific genius, but a sadistic scoundrel. The Puma is only partly human."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that he's the result of a surgical experiment; a product of vivisection and drugs. The Puma is a biological monster. It has a semihuman brain. Ariosto even taught him to talk. He has the blood lust of a carnivorous animal. He can run, spring, climb like a great cat. I don't need to say he should never have been allowed to live."

"So that was the thing that nearly scragged Charles! Where is he—or it—now?"

Roscoe shook his head. "I don't know. He may have been shipped to any one of Sumuru's many headquarters. Or he may be dead."

"And you're sure this woman has the Kidd Treasure?"

"There's no doubt about it."

"But how was it done, and when?"

"I have no more idea than you. You haven't told me what this Kidd Treasure is. But if the purpose of Sumuru's visit to England was to get it, she wouldn't have left until she had it."

"That was her purpose, Roscoe." Curly came to a decision. "You've trusted me; I'll trust you. The Kidd Treasure is the Seal of Solomon."

"What?" Drake Roscoe half rose from his chair. "She has searched the world for it—and if she has it, she'll wreck the world! I assure you, Doctor, in the hands of a woman of genius the Seal of Solomon could be used to

start a holy war that would set the East on fire! She must be forced to give it up."

"Can you help?" Curly asked eagerly.

"I can and I will. What I foresee must never happen."

"Can't she be charged with the theft?"

Drake Roscoe laughed. "Try it. You'd have no more chance of getting the French authorities to take action against the Duchesse de Séverac than of persuading Scotland Yard to arrest the Archbishop of Canterbury!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CURLY SAT in front of his hotel, drinking beer, smoking, and thinking.

The extraordinary happenings at Haygate had to some extent come into focus. Curly knew, now, that there was a far-flung secret society called the Order of Our Lady. Its aims, if fantastic, had merit. The methods adopted to clear the way for them he found rather appalling—and who, really, was the woman behind them?

His meditations were interrupted.

A pair of soft arms crept around his neck from behind, and the voice he had longed to hear whispered, "Curly, darling, you have kept me waiting for a long time!"

When, astonished, he had got to his feet and swept Mary into an embrace, he became sufficiently collected to look at her. She wore a charming evening frock which left her smooth shoulders bare. She was excitingly lovely.

"Mary! You're so beautiful!"

"Am I, Curly?" She sat down at the table, watching him.

"What did you mean, Mary, when you said I had kept you waiting?"

"I meant that Madonna—Mrs. de Castro—told me I would find you here nearly an hour ago. I have been waiting inside ever since."

"How did Madonna, as you call her, know I was here?"

"She knows everything, Curly. She's a very wonderful woman."

"Her information was faulty this time, though." He remembered just in time that he mustn't mention Drake Roscoe. "I was out for a stroll."

"The Villa d'Or is simply wonderful, darling. There was a guest bungalow all ready for you, and—she—was so disappointed. She will be deeply offended if you refuse to be a guest. Why be stiff-necked, Curly? You know we should be together. Don't make me unhappy."

And Curly was thinking this might be a trap laid by the lady with so many names. But his place was beside Mary.

"I could never willingly make you unhappy, dearest." His mind was made up. "Shall I come tonight?"

"I'm here to take you, Curly dear!"

"Then I'll go and pack, pay my bill, and—"

"Henryk has settled your account, Curly, and packed your bag. He had orders to do so."

"Had he? Madonna seems to have been quite sure of me."

Half an hour later they lay side by side on a deep divan. Perfume of night-scented flowers crept in through the open French windows. Mary wore the charming evening frock she had worn when she met him. Her arms were around him. He kissed her, and her lips were strangely exciting. He kissed her shoulders, her round arms, and then again her tempting mouth.

"I'm hungry for you, Mary. I don't know how to wait."

She broke away from his clasp. "Let's have another drink, Curly. You must want one. I do."

Curly Bowden tried to recapture himself. He was in the Villa d'Or, under the roof of a woman whom he had good reason to believe was a dangerous criminal. It was clearly a Bohemian household, for Mary hadn't troubled to present him to her hostess. She had led him to a luxurious bungalow in a beautiful garden, and, lying in his arms, tried to convince him that the Order of Our Lady alone could save the world from destruction.

He watched her at the small buffet. She was very shapely and graceful. Her white shoulders gleamed in the subdued light of the lamps. He roused himself.

"Mary darling, just one glass of beer, and then I must get back to wherever my own quarters may be."

She turned. "These are your own quarters, darling. Our Lady had them prepared for you. . . ."

In his studio, Camille de Paris was fitting a final piece of ivory into the statue. The work was a masterpiece, a thing of awesome beauty; a mingling of ivory, gold and cunning fragments of precious stones which had produced the perfection of Sumuru in the nude.

The smiling features were those of the lovely model. Half-closed eyes revealed glints of emerald, amethyst and

moonstone. The hair, in which amber, old ivory, silver and gold had been inset with genius, might apparently be disturbed by the lightest breeze.

Melissa, her robe wrapped about her, sat on the model's couch watching Camille as if entranced, her beautiful eyes alight with adoration.

"Camille, you are very wonderful!"

He raised his eyes from his delicate task and smiled. "So are you, *ma chérie*." He bent to his work.

"When did Madonna pose for you last?"

"A week ago. For the features only."

"They are my features," Melissa murmured. "But the expression is hers. It is miraculous."

Camille stood upright, facing her. When he spoke, he lowered his voice. "It is true, Melissa. And in that expression which I have captured do you see something unearthly?"

Melissa glanced around, in sudden fear. She replied in a whisper, "I have sometimes thought so, Camille."

Camille came across, dropped to his knees, and put his arms around her.

"Let me tell you, for you truly are human—warm, glowing, responsive. The last time Our Lady posed for me she allowed me to kiss her. To you I can be frank. Listen. I approached her, trembling. I had dreamed of possessing every curve of that wonderful form. I took her in my arms . . . and my mad passion died on her lips!"

He crushed his face against her, kissed her smooth shoulder.

"I conceived the terrible idea that I embraced a beautiful mummy. I knew, even as she seemed to surrender herself, that she was mocking me. I read laughter in her eyes . . . contemptuous laughter."

Melissa ran her fingers through his hair. "And how did it end?"

"Madonna said, 'I promised to reward you, Camille, when your work was done. Melissa is waiting for you. Go to her and take your reward.'"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE VILLA D'OR was a house of mystery. Curly and Mary had lunched once with the Duchesse de Séverac, and although he had fought against the insidious influence of which Charles Ober had warned him, Curly had found himself more and more under the spell of the beautiful duchesse. Her frank acceptance of the state of affairs between the two lovers had put him at his ease.

"Your ambition to study the more obscure tropical diseases, Dr. Bowden," she had told him, "of which Mary has spoken, would best be realized as a member of my research staff. There you would find facilities unobtainable in government employ, and could carry out your experiments regardless of cost. Nor do I demand a marriage certificate from members of the order desiring to live together. My approval of their suitability is all that is necessary . . ."

He found himself in a Lotus Eater's paradise. The duchesse's guests enjoyed complete freedom, and all the amenities of a great hotel. Two cars were always at their disposal.

But there were certain areas of the extensive grounds surrounding the villa which Curly had found to be inaccessible. And of these the one which particularly intrigued him was what appeared to be a small orange grove adjoining the west side of the house and surrounded by a high white wall. Sometimes, passing along the path which bordered it, he had heard voices.

A gate at the lower end was always locked, and through the scrollwork which decorated it nothing could be seen but orange trees and the further wall.

One morning, when Mary had an appointment with the duchesse, Curly wandered off alone. His steps led him to the path outside the orange grove. He stood still, listened. There was no sound.

A sturdy bougainvillea had been trained across the gateway, its main branches as thick as an ash stick. Using this as a ladder and resting some of his weight on gaps in

the scrollwork, he climbed to the top of the wall above the archway in which the gate was set, and looked over.

What he saw took his breath away.

Fallen petals strewed the ground; the air was laden with their sharp, sweet perfume. And through the branches soon to be festooned with golden fruit he had a glimpse of a recess formed by a buttress of the villa, designed to carry an overhanging balcony. In this recess, reclining on an ivory couch, he saw the Duchesse de Séverac in undraped beauty!

The morning air was cool, and the couch stood partly in shadow—hardly the time, or the place, for a sunbath. She remained uncannily still!

Then a door in the recess opened and Caspar came out. Curly hadn't seen him since the luncheon party at which he had been in attendance. He wore, as he had worn then, a black robe and red Arabian slippers, and his walk had the languorous grace of the Near East.

He carried what looked like a fine linen sheet. This he spread carefully over the reclining figure, tucking it in at points so that it shouldn't be disturbed. This done to his satisfaction, he raised a whistle to his lips and blew a soft note.

Two men came out, neither of whom Curly had seen before. They pushed the ivory couch in at the doorway, and Curly realized that it rested on a wooden trolley with rubber-tired wheels. Caspar followed, and the door was closed.

The figure was an ivory statue, attached to a sculptured ivory couch.

He began, carefully, to climb down again. The ground reached in safety, he continued his ramble, deep in thought, and presently found himself at the imposing main gate opening from the driveway. A small sports model stood there, and a Japanese having the stocky build of his race was getting out. From the seat he took an improbable object—a sword in an old shagreen scabbard.

The Japanese said, "Good morning," and passed into the house.

Sumuru lay on the divan wearing the flimsy dress of an odalisque. Caspar stood before her.

"The Vicomte de Saint Sabre has accepted my invitation, Caspar?"

"He will be here, My Lady."

"Good. The vicomte has met me only twice. At my wedding to the duc, and at his funeral. But what you tell me about Yoshida is disturbing."

Caspar extended eloquent palms.

"Our friends in Tokyo are still at work. They have failed to find any flaw in his credentials. His degrees—of that city, of London, Oxford and Paris—are authentic. They have been checked. His skill we know, Madonna. But only a clever man is really dangerous."

Sumuru's golden voice sank to a musical murmur. "I am acting upon this information, Caspar, day and night. But you are heavy with news. Unburden yourself, my old friend."

"Sister Linda reports from Haygate that Inspector Gilligan came back yesterday and submitted her to a new and painful interrogation."

"I must speak to Linda."

"It shall be arranged, My Lady. The inspector also interviewed our friend Austin Rayburn. We must assume, Madonna, that he has blundered onto new facts and hoped to substantiate them."

"In any case, our plans for tomorrow must be followed without change. It is not impossible that the industrious Inspector Gilligan will pay us a visit. You, therefore, must leave on the Isis, as we planned. The Inspector has met you before. Drake Roscoe will go with you. Members of the order arrive at the hour stated. I shall receive them in this room."

"All is arranged, My Lady."

The room was filled with beautiful girls, choice flowers from France's garden of loveliness. Caspar had provided comfortable chairs for all. These faced in one direction, towards the cushioned divan which at present remained unoccupied. The room was softly lighted.

There was a subdued hum of voices. Music from a hidden source increased the strangeness of the scene. It was unusual music, queerly muted, pagan and remote.

Mary Glen, seated a long way back, experienced an almost painful feeling of suspense.

The music ended on a series of queer chords played on harps. A high, sweet-toned bell rang three times.

Silence fell, sudden and complete. Everyone stood up. The draperies hanging in a Moorish arch were parted, and Sumuru came in.

"Our Lady!" was murmured in a concerted, awed whisper. Simultaneously the girls dropped to their knees.

Sumuru wore a flowing Greek robe and gilded sandals. The texture of her robe was cobweb-fine, so that every line and curve of her perfect figure could be seen through it. Jasmine was twined in her hair. She crossed to the divan and seated herself facing her disciples.

"Dear friends of mine, rise up, I beg, and be at ease," she said tenderly.

Her enthralled congregation rose and resumed their seats.

"Some," Sumuru went on, "meet me now for the first time. I wish it lay in my power to devote hours to getting closer to every one of you. Some here are already spreading our doctrine; others stand on the threshold, soon to be entrusted with tasks suited to their particular accomplishments. Every one of you knows that wholesale propagation of unwanted children must be stopped. Women alone can check this disaster. Better far that ninety per cent of the women living today be sterilized than that they be allowed to flood this earth with millions more hungry mouths."

There came a whispered sigh, in which the one word "Madonna" mingled. . . .

She paused, her eyes searching the ranks of devotees.

"Beauty is before me; beauty of body and beauty of spirit. Beauty is the foe of ugliness. Away with those who preach it, sing of it, write of it, paint it, wallow in ugliness! The Order of Our Lady rejects them, and one day must destroy them." She stretched out her hands in a benediction.

"Our Lady! Our Lady!"

Soon, smiling, she checked them.

"Our time, unfortunately, is short. When you leave me, you will have many opportunities to establish new and useful contacts. Creative artists, men of imagination, we welcome to our ranks. The countless parasites who prey upon them we reject." She glanced at a list which lay beside her on the divan. "Sister Diane, will you present your friend?"

Sister Diane proved to be a shapely brunette sheathed in black. She approached the divan, followed by an ethereal blonde. Both curtseyed and stood before Sumuru, heads bowed.

"Madonna, I present Heloise, to whom I have taught

the first principles of the order. She wishes to be one of us."

Sumuru bent forward, hands extended, and drew Heloise toward her. She focused a look upon the nervous but fascinated girl which claimed her as a disciple.

"Your formal acceptance will be soon, Heloise. You are welcome, child."

The two returned to their places. Another name was called, and so the remarkable ceremony continued. . . .

Curly was hopelessly restless. He wandered about the gardens tormented by his knowledge of the fact that something secret and mysterious was going on. Mary had told him that some kind of meeting would take place that night, to which she had received an invitation impossible to decline.

His wanderings had led him once to the main gate, and he had seen a whole fleet of cars parked in the driveway. What did this mean?

Curly kept out of sight, turned back and descended the terraces which led down to the seaward side of the property.

There came a flurry of light footsteps—he turned, and there was Mary.

"Come along to the bungalow, Curly. I must talk to you. There was a meeting here of the Order of Our Lady tonight." Mary spoke excitedly. "*She* addressed us. Of course, she is wonderful. Her beauty, that unforgettable voice, make her different from any other woman; and there were some really lovely girls there. I felt less than nothing when I looked at them. But Madonna shone like a star among flickering candles. It's magical, Curly, for she must be far older than we are!"

Curly held her to him. "It's some kind of hypnotism, darling."

"Is it?" Mary looked up at him. "You've met her, in Haygate and again here. Well—tonight, watching her cast a spell over all those women, it came to me that her beauty must be unnatural, that a woman who possessed such enormous power must be far, far older than she appears to be. I have had private interviews with her, and she is desperately anxious, for some reason, to convert me to her form of philosophy. And her knowledge, Curly, is phenomenal. She speaks almost every language. She knows the history of remote civilizations as if she had lived in those

days. And tonight, listening and watching—but outside the radius of her wonderful eyes—she frightened me! Of course, I realize that she's a superwoman, but something about her stirred up the superstition hidden in all Gaelic characters, I suppose, and I found myself wondering if she weren't something more than that."

Curly kissed her. She resigned herself to him, lying back in his arms.

"Does all this amount to a change of heart, Mary? Have you given up the idea of joining the Order of Our Lady?"

"Well, Curly, I still believe in many of Our Lady's ideals, but I distrust her strange powers, and perhaps, most of all, I distrust her influence on you."

Their next kiss was a very long one. . . .

Curly was standing under a tree watching the front of the villa when a hand grasped his shoulder.

He turned in a flash, fists ready. He saw a shadowy figure.

"Go easy. It's Roscoe."

"What!"

"Sure thing. Been watching developments. I've been covering you all evening. Just follow me. If I'm seen talking to you tonight I'm a dead man."

Roscoe walked away. Curly followed. He lost all sense of direction, for the grounds of the Villa d'Or were extensive. He followed up steps and down steps. Then his guide disappeared. Curly stopped and looked into shadows.

"This way. Move left."

A light gleamed. He had a momentary glimpse of a rocky alcove in which a semicircular seat had been built. Roscoe held a flashlamp. As Curly stepped in the lamp was extinguished.

"Sit down. I've been rifling the bar. Scotch and beer."

"Beer for me."

Curly heard the cap of a bottle being removed. Faint reflected moonlight penetrated the little cave, and his eyes became accustomed to the dim light. He took the glass from Roscoe, and saw him help himself liberally to whisky.

"Tell me, Roscoe, where have you been hiding? I have been twice to Nice and have searched for you everywhere. Where do you hide yourself in the villa? I have never had a glimpse of you."

Roscoe laughed dryly.

"I have quarters over the garage, which, as you may know, is near the main gate. My only neighbor is Dr. Yoshida, Our Lady's resident physician. When I was brought here—God knows how—I was a very sick man. I believe that Yoshida saved my life. I don't thank him for it."

"You're very bitter, Roscoe. But remembering what you told me, I can understand. I think I met Dr. Yoshida the other day."

He described the Japanese who carried an ancient sword.

"That's Yoshida," Roscoe told him. "I waved the olive branch and struck up a diplomatic friendship which the little ruffian seemed to welcome. The sword, a museum piece, was the one used by a trusted friend to speed the honorable passing of his revered father. He had probably taken it to have it sharpened."

"What for?"

"It was his father's sword. He regards it as a sacred duty to keep the blade keen."

"This place is a madhouse!" Curly shuddered. "I have to get Mary away!"

"That's sure, Doctor. And try to call me Drake, if you can scratch up a bone of respect for one who's sunk so low. You certainly have to get Mary Glen away from here. She's falling into the power of Sumuru, who is Satan's daughter! But there's something else to be done—something not so easy. The Seal of Solomon mustn't remain in the hands of Sumuru."

"We have no positive evidence that she has it."

"Yes we have!" Roscoe rapped out. "Visual. I've *seen* the Seal of Solomon!"

"Are you sure?"

"Couldn't be more so. I know the villa at least as well as the man who built it—and it's part of my training to note and memorize ways in and ways out. Also, I know Astar's habits. Astar is one of Sumuru's *real* names. When she gets hold of a new toy, she keeps it in her bedroom and looks at it every night before going to sleep."

"You mean you hid in her room?"

"No, not exactly. But when you told me what the Kidd Treasure really was, I slipped along by a route I knew, and watched. I saw it. And I had never seen anything like it in my life. It seemed to light up the room. She keeps it in a jade and gold casket on her dressing table!"

"What's your plan?" Curly asked.

"I'm going to get it, if it's still there."

"When?"

"Tonight! I'm breaking away if I get the Seal, running for it. It may even mean losing Dolores. But whatever it means, I can't stand by and watch her start a new kind of holy war!"

"I hope what I've done won't upset your plan."

"What have you done?" Roscoe snapped.

"Tipped off Scotland Yard that Mrs. de Castro, known as the Duchesse de Séverac, is in fact the notorious Sumuru. You see, Drake, I'm still captain of my soul!"

Drake Roscoe laughed again, humorlessly.

"You meant well, Curly, and in a way did the right thing. But Scotland Yard won't recover the loot, and Sumuru will never be arrested."

"How so? Is there no justice in France?"

"Yes, but there's also the Duchesse de Séverac. That woman will never be behind bars. Also, if your plan succeeds, I may have to change my own. I've parked my car half a mile along the Corniche. I'll let you and Mary know if I succeed. And I suggest that you come with me."

About an hour later, a boat with four rowers returned for the second time to the little cove which sheltered the bathing beach of the Villa d'Or. This lay deep in shadow, owing to the position of the moon behind the adjoining headland. A trim, white motor cruiser lay off the beach, only her riding lights showing.

Sumuru, muffled in a dark cloak, turned to the men who stood beside her.

"You are sure that all our members have left, Caspar?"

"I conveyed My Lady's wishes to them individually."

"It has been impossible to check the reports from Nice, but Sister Renée is well informed."

"As an intimate friend of *monsieur le préfet*, I think we can rely upon her information, Madonna."

"The Vicomte de Saint Sabre?"

"Is deeply engrossed in the orangery, My Lady."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE GATES OF THE VILLA opened on to the Middle Corniche, and some of the departing cars turned to the right, others to the left.

With the departure of the last car, Henryk was left to dream about its driver, a long-legged, slim brunette, with indescribably wonderful curves, and lustrous dark eyes.

His dreams were interrupted by an increasing roar of motorcycles. Police swept in through the open gates. A large black sedan followed, and then more motorcycles.

A short, stout man, with a red but normally good-humoured face, stepped out of the car. Henryk saluted. He recognized the *préfet de police*.

"You have the key of the gate?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Lock it." The police had dismounted from their cycles. M. Bonvillière glanced around. "Two men stand by here. No one is to enter or leave. The others will follow me." He turned to Henryk. "What is your name?"

"Henryk Lienkowitz, monsieur."

"What do you do here?"

"I have the honor to be the Duchesse de Séverac's chauffeur."

At this moment another man stepped out of the *préfet's* car, a man whom Henryk didn't know. He had a military bearing and looked like an Englishman.

"Inform madame that I wish her to authorize me," the commissioner of police went on, "to interview all the members of the villa staff." He glanced over his shoulder. "We shall go with you."

"Very good, sir."

Henryk led the way. The second man fell into step with Bonvillière.

"You know, inspector," Bonvillière said in a low voice, "I find myself in a highly compromising situation. A directive from Paris leaves me no alternative, but I feel that you alone are the promoter of this inquiry."

Inspector Gilligan replied, "Scotland Yard has new information, Commissioner, which suggests that the proceeds of a spectacular robbery in England may be in the Villa d'Or."

"This you have told me, but my embarrassment remains. The mere suggestion that the duchesse should have a thief in her household! You give me an extremely difficult task!"

"I admit it's difficult!" Gilligan agreed dryly. "But here we are."

The entrance to the Villa d'Or, an imposing marble portico and a Romanesque lobby, had the curious character of many Riviera houses. To reach the principal rooms one went not up, but down; for the villa was built on a series of terraces. In the lobby Henryk paused and indicated a cushioned couch.

"I will try to find Mr. Simpson, the duchesse's butler," he said.

A group of motorcycle police who had followed them from the gate stood lined up in the portico in obedience to an order which the commissioner had snapped. Gilligan began to fill his pipe. He was nervous, too. This job, if it failed, might break him. He had met Sumuru once only before, in the British West Indies, where she had been known as Madame Saint Sabre. He was almost sure that Mrs. de Castro, whom he had interviewed in England, wasn't the same woman. Had he ever met the *real* Sumuru, he asked himself—or was there such a person?

Henryk returned with an English butler, too perfectly correct to be quite credible. He bowed gravely to the visitors.

The commissioner handed him a card.

"My compliments to the duchesse, and my regrets for troubling her. But a short interview would be welcome."

The butler made a dignified retreat.

Inspector Gilligan looked thoughtfully at his pipe, put it back in his pocket and began to walk up and down restlessly. M. Bonvillière sat watching him, until Simpson reappeared.

"If you will come this way, madame will receive you."

They descended the marble stair to a floor below. Gilligan had glimpses of rooms furnished in an ornate French style. The lower stair was not marble but was thickly carpeted. It brought them to the ground floor. Here he saw a well-stocked library on the right. But Simpson

turned left, led through a Louis Quinze drawing room to a room beyond.

This was half a lounge and half a conservatory. There were banks of flowers growing in pots, a large aquarium in which goldfish swam around the stems of aquatic plants. The air was heavy with mingled floral perfumes. There was also a buffet and a lacquer cocktail cabinet. There were deep lounge chairs, and rugs, apparently mink, were spread on the floor. Through open French windows he saw a vista of orange trees.

The Duchesse de Séverac was seated on a brocaded divan. She wore a green backless evening gown which exposed her arms and shoulders in their white perfection. Except for medallions of pink pearls in her ears and a similar bangle on one wrist, she wore no jewelry.

A youthful old man with scanty auburn hair stood frigidly upright beside her. He wore a tail coat, stiff collar, white bow and the button of the Legion of Honor in his lapel.

The commissioner hurried forward, seized a white hand listlessly offered and bent over it with a reverence usually reserved for royalty.

"Madame—my profound apologies for this intrusion."

"The prefect is always welcome. This is my cousin, the Vicomte Raoul de Saint Sabre."

The vicomte inclined his head slightly.

"May I introduce—" Bonvillière was desperately ill at ease—"Inspector Gilligan of Scotland Yard."

The vicomte didn't stir a muscle. He inquired, "Might I ask for what purpose the inspector is here tonight?"

The conversation had been in French; and while Gilligan was able to follow it, considerable concentration was necessary before he could take any part in it. Bonvillière was looking at him with entreaty in his humid brown eyes.

"I fear my knowledge of the language is rather uncertain. I know that duchesse speaks perfect English, and my friend's English is better than my French. Could we change over, sir?"

The vicomte smiled sardonically. "By all means, Inspector. I am equally at ease with either tongue."

All the time, covertly, Gilligan was studying the duchesse. In that queerly dim light he couldn't have defined the color of her hair or eyes, but the lovely face was unmistakable, and few women possessed such flawless arms and shoulders. One thing he knew—this was not

the Mrs. de Castro who had insisted that he drink a glass of champagne in the house on Lye Common.

She was watching him from under lowered lashes, and now she spoke.

"Why do you say, Inspector, that I speak perfect English? Have we met before?"

The tone of her voice was not quite as he remembered it, but the lapse of time might very well have dimmed his memory. She certainly spoke perfect English.

"Surely, madame, you remember my call at Casa Montana, in Jamaica?"

"Casa Montana?" She looked up at the vicomte. "Where is Casa Montana? Do you know, Raoul?"

The vicomte shook his head. "I am not acquainted with the British West Indies."

"Nor am I, Raoul. This is evidently another exploit of our unknown friend who amuses herself by impersonating me. Strangely enough, Inspector, my cousin and I were talking about this impostor earlier tonight. I was telling him how the American F.B.I. once tried to detain me when I was leaving New York after a visit to old friends. It is becoming a persecution. Some action must be taken."

"Action is being taken," Gilligan assured her, tactfully. "We fear that elements of the impostor's party have attached themselves to your household. Recent crimes in England, we suspect, were committed by this unidentified person."

"Do you refer to what happened at Squires Pastures? Mr. Hanessy told me all about it."

"I do, madame. You were there at the time, I believe?"

The duchesse closed her eyes wearily. "I had been visiting in London, and badly needed a rest, and fresh country air." She smiled a slight smile. "I decided to disappear. My friend Austin Rayburn, the painter, kindly placed his house in Surrey at my disposal. I stayed there incognito."

"Incognito as Mrs. de Castro?"

"Yes. I have an old friend of that name. I met several charming people."

"Can you recall the date you left?"

"On the third of this month."

Inspector Gilligan was badly shaken. This assertion, if true, meant that the woman he had interviewed in the house on Lye Common was not the Mrs. de Castro he had wanted to see, but someone impersonating her. This

he had certainly suspected at the time. But it also meant that the woman who had entertained Mr. Hanessy and Charles Ober must have been the same impostor.

The vicomte was growing restive. "Do you suggest, Inspector, that there is any doubt in the minds of the British authorities concerning my cousin?" He turned to Bonvillière. "Or in the minds of the French authorities?"

"No, no! But not at all!" The unhappy commissioner became almost unintelligible. "It is unthinkable! It is only that we fear there may be in the employ of the duchesse, spies, agents of this criminal."

"You see, madame," Gilligan broke in, "this woman, who posed as the Duchesse de Séverac in the United States, has been identified by F.B.I. and Scotland Yard as the same who was, at different times, Lady Carradale, Baroness Rikter, Mrs. de Castro—and the Marquise Sumuru."

He watched the beautiful face. But its supercilious expression never changed even for a fleeting moment.

"This is worse than I suspected," the duchesse declared. "I never heard of any of these women—nor have I ever been, Inspector, in the island of Jamaica. In England, yes, several times. Raoul, be so good as to ring for Simpson."

"Certainly, Melissa."

He stepped back and pressed a stud in the wall. The duchesse stood up and began to pace the floor in an agitated way. Gilligan admired her bare back, but regretted that her frock concealed her ankles. The lobes of her ears were hidden by the pearl ornaments.

She said, "I shall convince you tonight that the Duchesse de Séverac is not Lady Carradale, and—what is it?—some baroness, and someone else."

Simpson came in and bowed.

"Simpson—" the duchesse returned to the divan and opened a jeweled purse which lay there—"I am giving you the key of the bottom right-hand drawer of my dressing table. You will find a small metal box there. Bring it to me."

Simpson took the bunch of keys, bowed again, and went out. The duchesse sank down among the cushions. The Vicomte de Saint Sabre sat down beside her, putting an arm about her shoulders.

"Melissa, my dear, why disturb yourself about these trifling absurdities!"

She looked up at him. "You are very sweet to me, Raoul. As these absurdities touch the honor of your family, it is necessary that we should kill such rumors at their source, once and for all."

Bonvillière clasped his hands. "I am disconsolate!"

"I shall console you, Commissioner." The duchesse rested her beautiful head on the vicomte's shoulder.

An embarrassed silence followed, broken by the return of Simpson carrying a small metal box. "This is what madame requested?"

The duchesse nodded, smiled, and Simpson retired. From the bunch which he had returned to her she selected a small key and opened the lid of the box. She looked up. Her eyes swept scornfully from face to face.

"I am going to place evidence in your hands, gentlemen, which will forever destroy the impudent impostures of this abominable creature. Some of these, I assure you, I learned tonight for the first time."

From the box she took out a document neatly tied with red tape.

"Melissa!" the vicomte protested. "Is this necessary?"

"Yes!" She untied it. "This is my marriage certificate, gentlemen." She handed it to Bonvillière. "I should be obliged if you would read it, and then pass it to the inspector."

The commissioner took out his reading glasses and glanced over the certificate. He looked up.

"Am I right, Vicomte, in assuming that this signature as one of the witnesses is yours?"

"It is; I was present at the ceremony."

Bonvillière shrugged and handed the paper, with a pathetic grimace, to Gilligan.

The inspector read. He could read French better than he could speak it. The wedding had taken place in the ancient chapel of the Chateau Neuf Saint Sabre, and the bride was described as Melissa Carnassus, daughter of Phileto Carnassus, of Cos. He returned the document to the duchesse. He knew in his very bones there was something wrong, but felt that diplomacy was called for. His case was falling around him in ruins.

"I am obliged, madame. But my friend and I are not disputing your claim to title of Duchesse de Séverac. We are anxious only to protect your interests."

The duchesse smiled slightly.

"That is most kind of you. I will have my entire staff

assembled in the drawing room. Simpson will provide you with a list of employees and you may interview them one by one, here."

The interrogations, carried out by M. Bonvillière, were highly unsatisfactory. The whole staff, apparently, except Henryk and Simpson, was composed of French. Some had never traveled further than to Nice. Two had worked at the Chateau Neuf during the duc's lifetime, and three had been employed in Paris. None of them had ever left his native land. Henryk had served with the Polish Air Force and later with the RAF in world War II. Simpson had landed in Normandy with the British, and, when demobilized, had taken a job in France. . . .

Finally, Bonvillière, lamenting that he had been forced to affront the lovely Duchesse de Séverac, and Inspector Gilligan (badly shaken) got back to the main gate.

"My prestige is lost!" Bonvillière moaned as they stepped into his car.

Thunder rolled ominously in the hills. A sudden Mediterranean storm was brewing.

"So's my job, if I'm not damned lucky!" Gilligan growled. . . .

In the room upstairs, the woman they had been interviewing sat on the mink-covered divan. A disk of light glowed in the radio cabinet. A voice like the music of distant harps was speaking.

"The visitors are all gone, the gates are locked, Melissa?"

"Yes, Madonna."

"You are sure the inspector was satisfied?"

"Of my identity, Madonna? Yes. His eyes gleamed when he saw me!"

A peal of laughter came over the air.

"And my cousin, the vicomte?"

Melissa hesitated, and then said, "He stopped just short of proposing marriage, My Lady!" she whispered.

The rippling laughter came again.

"Child, you are a credit to your training! He supported you, I am sure; showed great indignation?"

"He did. He was furious."

"You were confident? You never forgot your lines?"

"Never, I believe, Madonna."

"You assumed indignation, and sent for my marriage certificate. This clinched the argument, of course. Dear

child, I love you so much. I not only claimed your lovely body, so miraculously like my own, but your identity. In marrying me, the late duc married Melissa Astar Carnasus, of Cos. You have ceased to exist, Melissa, except as my dearest friend and an indispensable part of the Order of Our Lady."

"Madonna!"

"And Camille?"

"We are very happy, My Lady, and counting the hours until we shall be back in Egypt. I have learned to love the Nile, and it is always calling to me."

"You shall answer the call, child, and Camille shall go with you. Finally, Melissa—and this is very important—Camille's statue must be moved to the Chauteau Neuf early tomorrow morning. Caspar will tell you where it is."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE VILLA D'OR had been built under the personal supervision of the Gaekwar of Bengaza, and among other novelties he had constructed a short passage from his own suite to the bedroom designed for the duchesse. This had not been pointed out to her on the occasion of her first visit of inspection. At the Gaekwar's end it opened from a deep wardrobe closet and at the other end into a cedar-wood-lined recess directly facing the ornate, pillared bed. On many nights, bare-footed, he had crept along that passage to feast his eyes on the sleeping beauty.

Drake Roscoe was equally well acquainted with this convenient means of communication, and during the time of his delirious bondage to Sumuru had used it regularly.

He had also found another ingenious passageway of the Gaekwar's devising, which he didn't believe was known to Our Lady. It was concealed behind a small bookcase which was really a door, and it led by a short stair down to the garden.

On the night of the police visit, from a point of vantage he had a glimpse of the conference in the lounge adjoining the orangery. Here was the chance he had waited for.

The storm had reached the coast. Torrents of rain fell. Thunder as loud as heavy artillery shook the villa.

He wore a black shirt and trousers, felt slippers, and had a neat Colt repeater and a flashlight in his pocket.

He was drenched, but didn't care when he stole up to the Gaekwar's luxurious suite, which had once been his.

The secret doors opened silently. They were of perfect construction. He knew the way, and needed no light to guide him.

Softly he crept along. He came to the door in the cedar paneling. The scent of the wood penetrated his nostrils. Once he had found it intoxicating.

Silently he opened the door, and peered out from the shadowy recess. A blinding flash of lightning eerily illuminated the room, flooding the high, pillared bed . . . and

she lay there, her head resting on one upraised hand. She was awake! He could see the gleam of her eyes!

This was a mystery. Only a few minutes earlier, he had seen her, from a distance, talking to two men in the lounge below!

How exquisite she was . . . surely the only perfect woman in the world, he thought, as he traced the flawless lines of that ivory body.

Suddenly he was in complete darkness, and heard a crash of thunder almost stunning in its violence.

Then—the incredible became the impossible.

A sinister figure was taking shape on the other side of the bed. It appeared to be rising slowly from the shadow, like a spirit materializing!

Roscoe became frozen with horror. He could neither speak nor stir. And so he stood, rigid, until the terrifying phantom rose from the floor to the average height of a man. There was another flash of lightning.

It touched a bare, muscular torso. The skin was yellow, moist with perspiration. Held between extended hands, a glittering sword appeared and was raised high above the apparition's head. Slowly the head was bent, and Roscoe saw a contorted Japanese face, teeth bared in a grin of ferocious hatred, looking down at the nude figure on the bed.

He recovered himself in a flash. The intruder was a man of flesh and blood—an assassin!

And as the Japanese straightened himself and swung the sword, Roscoe's numbed brain began to function again. He acted, not a second too late.

The blade fell on that slender white neck as the automatic barked twice rapidly. Roscoe uttered a piercing cry, and staggered forward. That mighty blow had snapped the tempered steel even as it shattered the perfection of Camille's masterpiece!

Yoshida lay coughing, dying, across the ivory statue of Sumuru, the broken samurai sword clenched in his hand.

Roscoe snapped his flashlight into action. He had no time to waste. The beam shone on Yoshida's contorted face—and shone on something else.

The blade had fallen on that delicate curve from neck to shoulder—the last part of Camille de Paris's statue to be completed. The stroke had cut through the ivory and uncovered a small package concealed in the framework beneath.

And it had uncovered a round object which, as lightning flashed again, blazed with a blinding, dazzling radiance.

Melissa sat by the radio cabinet in the *zenana* room. There were tears in the beautiful eyes behind the tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses, for she knew that Camille's masterpiece was ruined—and part of it, at least, was *her*.

There was only a short interval before an unfamiliar voice said, "You wish to speak to Our Lady?"

"This is Sister Melissa; the message is urgent."

Less than thirty seconds later Sumuru's golden tones came over to her.

"My dear Melissa, what has happened? Have the police returned?"

"No, Madonna! But . . . "

"But what, child?"

"Dr. Yoshida is lying dead in My Lady's bedroom, a great sword in his hand . . . and Camille's statue is shattered!"

There was a brief silence.

"You are, not unnaturally, overwrought, Melissa. Give me the complete story, calmly, and I shall tell you how to proceed . . . "

The story of the night's events was told succinctly.

" . . . Simpson, who knows Madonna only as Duchesse de Séverac, thought he heard shots from Madonna's bedroom. He hurried to my room, as I alone have the key. I made Simpson wait outside. What I saw was frightful, Madonna. The storm was still raging. . . "

"This is what you must do," came the beautiful, soothing voice. "Caspar is in the annex. Call him. Tell him to return to the villa at once, that Inspector Gilligan has gone. He is to notify me at the moment of his arrival. Instruct Simpson to take his orders from Caspar."

A few minutes later Caspar established contact with the duchesse at the ancient seat of the Ducs de Séverac, Château Neuf St. Sabre.

"My Lady, the worst has happened!"

"Explain to me."

"Yoshida's blow, which was designed to behead you, Madonna, shattered not only the blade of his sword, but also the heavy piece of ivory joining the neck of the statue to the left shoulder. It was beneath this piece of ivory,

just before Camille set it in place, that we concealed the Seal of Solomon—”

“True. But his blade cannot have shattered a large diamond.”

“No, Madonna. The seal has been removed!” There came no comment, and Caspar continued: “Clearly Yoshida believed the ivory figure to be My Lady. At the very moment of striking the blow, he was shot in the head. Yet the door was locked. It is true that the window was open, and I believe Yoshida entered in that way. But who killed him? And how did the killer gain access?”

“I think I know.” Sumuru spoke softly. “Did you assign Sanchez to cover Drake Roscoe?”

“I did, Madonna. I deeply regret to report that Drake eluded him tonight.”

“I thought so. Arrange for Sanchez to proceed at once to the ruby mines. You hear me, Caspar?”

“I hear and obey. The body of Yoshida I buried. A new report from Tokyo is recently to hand.”

“Tell me quickly what it contains.”

“It makes clear, My Lady, that we have nurtured a scorpion. Yoshida only awaited what he believed to be the hour to strike. Your gods above the gods of Japan, Madonna! He was the son of the Marquis Sumuru!”

“What do you tell me, Caspar?” An unfamiliar tremor had crept into the beautiful voice.

“The truth, Madonna. Yoshida, son of the Marquis Sumuru, was a member of the Black Dragon—a society nearly as old as our own. The marquis—My Lady’s former husband—was an ex-president. With the admirable patience of his race, the brilliant man we knew as Yoshida dedicated himself to the task of avenging his father.”

Sumuru remained silent for some time, and then she inquired, “And Mary, that beautiful straying lamb?”

“The lamb has strayed indeed, Madonna! She requested an interview with My Lady only an hour ago, saying that Dr. Bowden must return to England immediately, and that she wished to go with him.”

“Did Melissa receive her?”

“No, Madonna. Acting on my advice, she sent a message by your devoted servant and the best of good wishes.”

“It was wise. Tell me, Caspar, did you have them covered?”

“I did, Madonna. They took only the light suitcase carried by Dr. Bowden. Half a mile along the Corniche

Road a car was waiting. Henryk in the Hispano followed, with Mario."

"Mario! His duty is to guard the Puma!"

"True, Madonna. But the Puma escaped tonight, and was last reported on the road to Grenoble."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CURLY BOWDEN stared down over the edge of the path to where a swollen torrent raged below. Roscoe's car had developed engine trouble far short of Grenoble, for which they were bound. It had happened on a detour known to him, taken because he was sure they were followed and intended to throw their followers off the track.

The trick had succeeded temporarily. But they didn't dare take the risk of delaying for repairs. Led by Roscoe, they were climbing up a steep path to a village in which he was on friendly terms with the innkeeper.

Mary, from uneasy suspicion of this strange, mysterious American exile, had begun to recognize the fact that he was a man of enormous resource, who apparently knew the neighborhood better than she knew the environs of Haygate. She had come to trust him implicitly, and to distrust the lovely duchesse.

Curly picked up the grip. The storm had swept out across the sea. There came faint echoes of thunder and remote lightning flashes. A heavy mist hung over the gully around the rim of which their path led them. An angry moon tried to peer out from gaps in the racing clouds.

"How far now?" Curly shouted to Roscoe.

"About two miles. But it's our only chance. There's probably a gang of Sumuru's musclemen on our tail."

Mary clutched her handbag, which held the Seal of Solomon.

"Straight ahead!" Roscoe shouted, a note of calm desperation in his voice. "You lead, Curly."

They set out again, Curly ahead, Mary in the middle, Drake Roscoe bringing up the rear and constantly glancing back along the winding path below.

Another hairpin bend was reached on the dizzy path.

"Stop!" Roscoe shouted. "Look back. The other side of the gorge. Do you see what I thought I saw?"

Curly and Mary turned and looked back. Both had keen sight. Mist was moving like smoke in the serpentine coils of

the road they had followed. With his left hand Drake Roscoe grasped Curly's arm; his right hand was extended, index finger pointed.

"Not a thing! What am I to look for? Wait! Good God! It's a man! It's running on two feet!"

"It's on our trail." Roscoe spoke close to Curly's ear. "It has met you before, and hates you. It knows your scent, and mine. It's the Puma! We can't outrun him. Physically, he's a match for any living prizefighter or wrestler . . . Damn her! She has set this horror on my trail!"

"Don't get sentimental!" Curly hissed in his ear. "Have you got a gun, Drake?"

Drake Roscoe showed a small automatic which he had already used that night.

"Here's where we wait for it!"

Curly saw a recess in the rocky path, a small cave. The darkness was growing, and mist, like rising smoke, began to envelop them. They crept in. Curly put his arm around Mary. She was trembling.

Roscoe spoke in his ear. "We kill him, or he kills us!"

"Good God!" Curly's words weren't audible to Mary. "Here it is!"

First, through the mist, he saw a glint of eyes which looked like the eyes of some jungle beast, for they were low, down near the path. Then he detected an outline of the body . . . It wasn't an animal, for it was clothed; but now he saw that the thing crouched on all fours. He saw abnormally large hands, blunt-fingered like those of a baboon; powerful forearms—

Then the Puma sprang.

There was a ghastly gnashing of teeth, and the monster was on top of them. Its legs were disproportionately short, and although clothed in some way, resembled the hind legs of a quadruped, leopard or tiger.

Curly sprang in front of Mary and hurled the heavy suitcase. It was tossed aside. Roscoe's automatic spoke, once, twice, three times. The reports were muffled eerily in the mist and the roar of the torrent. The deformed shape reeled away. Curly rushed forward.

Roscoe grabbed him harshly. "Bloody fool!" he shouted. "Leave the thing to me!"

The Puma, falling back, upright, from the recess, dropped to all fours, and then the creature sprang at Curly's throat.

He struck out wildly, was clutched in arms of steel, and dragged to the edge of the precipice. He heard Mary scream, saw her dart forward, heard two more shots—and passed out. . . .

The blank didn't last long. He woke up to find Roscoe forcing brandy into his mouth.

"Where—where's Mary?" Curly gasped.

"Here I am, darling!" Mary whispered beside him. "We nearly went over together!"

"Brave kid!" Roscoe shouted. "I couldn't stop her. But I stopped the Puma for keeps."

"Where is it?" Curly gasped.

"Down in the gorge. Something for French scientists to quarrel about."

"So is my bag!" Mary cried; all my money, my passport—and the Seal of Solomon!"

They reached the tiny inn on the High Corniche and succeeded in arousing the landlord. He placed wine before them and proposed to prepare supper. He was about to light all the lamps in the dining room when Roscoe checked him.

"We're afraid we are followed," he explained. "Our car broke down, and we have abandoned it. We are not going back."

"Ah-ha! The police!"

The landlord's eyes sparkled appreciatively.

"No. Someone worse than the police, Defarge. In the morning we must get a car to pick us up here. But for tonight, show us somewhere to sleep, bar the door, and put all the lights out. A few sandwiches and some more wine we can manage in the dark. If anyone comes, speak from the window above again—but don't let anyone come in!"

These arrangements had just been completed when the Hispano swept up to the door, driven by Henryk. He was accompanied by a huge Nubian.

They rang the bell and banged until Defarge opened a top window demanding their business.

He was told that they were looking for three desperate criminals, two men and a woman, who had robbed the Duchesse de Séverac. Defarge assured them he had seen nothing of these criminals, that he had no guests, and that no one had passed the inn that night.

Then he closed the window. . . .

Curly and Mary were married in Paris. Drake Roscoe was best man.

"An irresistible wave of Victorian morality," she explained. "But after all, Curly, there's always divorce."

They had not been molested in any way, a circumstance which was more than surprising as Sumuru must know that they had taken the seal. But as Roscoe said, she was probably waiting now for news of its reappearance. No report had appeared of the discovery of the body of the Puma.

"It may be an unpleasant idea," Curly confessed, "but the thing that particularly staggers me is why Our Lady hasn't scragged *you*, Roscoe!"

Drake Roscoe smiled his grim smile. "She knows she has only to wait. It will save her a lot of trouble."

"I don't quite follow. We took it for granted you were coming to England with us and then probably pushing off to America."

"No." Roscoe shook his head. "I leave by Air France tomorrow for Cairo. Whether I die outright or drag out my life in the ruby mines, at least I may see Dolores once more . . ."

THE END
of a novel by
Sax Rohmer

SINISTER

MADONNA

She's back—that mistress of strange delights, goddess of a pagan cult, enslaver of men—spinning her web of silken evil in every corner of the world!

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Sumuru the elusive,
Sumuru the enchantress,
with the body of a beautiful girl—and the soul that was old in Babylon.

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