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CORNELL WOOLRICH


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savage bride

Overnight the lovely
girl he married
became a
she-devil —
a tigress



THIRD BIG PRINTING



“FIRST I FRIGHTENED YOU

by trying to make love to you,” he said hoarsely. “Now your passion has frightened me.” He opened a bureau drawer and took out a bottle of rum. “It was like holding onto something that—that suddenly becomes a tigress in your arms. Not just a girl but some jungle thing. Do you—know what you did just now?”

He showed her his hand with the threads of blood streaking across the back, the angry red marks on his face. “To kiss is not to bite. To caress is not to claw. It was like a panther tearing me to pieces.

“And those strange words—what were they? They weren’t English; they weren’t words at all.”

She held out her arms and he shook his head. His bloody hand moved and he poured himself a drink, a full glass. He drank it down without pausing.

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Savage Bride

By Cornell Woolrich



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Chapter One

HIS NAME was Lawrence Kingsley Jones. He was just like any man, like you, like me; and yet, this is what happened to him:

In the room, just darkness, broken by the squared outline of a moonlit window, with its spectral complement lying flat upon the floor beneath it. Outside, silence, a countryside asleep under a star-punctured sky. Inside and out, both, tension, a brooding hush, as if action were being held in check, waiting for some given signal to start.

Shouetted against the window was a girl's hand, holding pinned to one side a curtain that was like smoky chiffon shadow. Just under the hand, the curve of a shoulder could be detected; just over it, the profile of a watching face. But nothing moved, neither hand nor shoulder nor face; they were all motionless, waiting for the signal that had been promised, that was to come.

Suddenly it came. The signal had been given. A car horn blatted just once, in curt interrogation, from the roadway out in the middle distance that ran past the grounds of the house. A splash of yellow, rayed out by the swerving of a pair of headlights, flickered briefly across the darkness in a semicircle, and went out again.

The pane slipped upward, tempered to a stealthy little squeak, softer than a mouse would make. Outside there

was a faint crunching footfall on gravel. Then, directly below the window, a man's voice sounded in cautious query. "Ready?"

The figure in the window square spoke for the first time. "I can't get out. He locked the door of my room. I heard him turn the key in it. He's downstairs in the back, someplace. They've both been watching me like hawks all day, as though they suspected something."

"Where's the other one?"

"Cotter? He's not here right now. He took their car and went somewhere about nine. He hasn't come back yet." Her whisper became unsteady, shook all over "Larry, Larry, I'm so frightened. I'll never be able to."

"You still want to, don't you?"

"More than anything I know. Don't leave me here, don't leave me."

"There must be some way of getting you out of there. I'll see if I can find a ladder."

"There's one the gardener uses. You know where that greenhouse is, around at the back?"

Grass-blurred footsteps drew away around the turn of the house, died out. The figure at the window pivoted around to face the room behind her, stood there tautly listening to the inner sounds of the house. A little bureau clock went tick, tick, tick in the darkness near her, as if to say: "Get out, get out, get out while you can."

There was a smothered clout, as of a pole striking lightly against the clapboard just below the window.

She whirled around in terrified urgency. "He's coming up! Oh, Larry, what'll we do? I hear him. He's locking up for the night down there."

The man spoke steadily, reassuringly, from the foot of the ladder he had now reared. "Don't lose your head. We'll make it. Throw your things down first. I'll carry them over to the car."

"I haven't anything. Just take me, just me myself!"

"All right, easy now. Sit on the sill and swing yourself over to this side. I'm holding it steady for you. That's it. Now reach down backward with your foot. There's the top rung right under you."

Her second foot came to rest beside the first. "He's on the stairs already! He's coming up! I can hear his hand slapping on the rail!"

"Sh-h-h," he urged her soothingly. "Don't stand there listening. You're out. Another one. Now just one more. That's the lady. You're down. You're in my arms."

She turned as they closed about her and buried her face against him in frightened relief.

"You're safe," he whispered consolingly. "You're free. I've got you."

He led her across the black, moon-frosted grass; out through an iron-barred gate left narrowly ajar between two granite plinths that broke a high-topped iron picket fence, close-set and forbidding. He hurried her down the road a few yards, to where a gently slimmering roadster stood waiting, over to one side. He armed her protectively into the seat, got in after her. The door made a sturdy, defiant thud. "They'll never get you back again now."

As he floored the accelerator, and the night swept back behind their ears, he turned to her without a word and blotted out her mouth in a long-drawn kiss. "Our wedding kiss," he murmured.

The house he had stolen her from was pulled out of sight behind them, like something jerked on lead strings. The road ahead swirled toward them like a tracer bullet. Her unbound hair streamed out behind her over the back of the seat, like something impregnated with electric current, alive, crackling, with their fugitive speed.

The whole night was in a hurry, rushing past them. Only the stars and moon held steady, weren't running away.

She looked back once. She said above the wind, "When Cotter gets back, they may come after us and—and try to—"

"Let them," he said tersely. "They'll never catch us. You're mine for keeps now."

"Larry," she said presently, glancing at him wonderingly. "What's the world like?"

"You're going to see it. I'll show it to you." He snapped on the car radio. Pulsing, brassy music welled up into their faces. "That's the world, hear it?" He gave the dial a twist. Laughter flooded out, an audience roaring at something funny that had just been said. "And that's the world." He twisted it a second time. A woman's scream winged out like a knife slashing between them, punctu-

ated by two or three hollow-sounding revolver shots. He quickly clicked the radio off. "And that's the world, too," he muttered in an unwilling undertone.

Chapter Two

A FANLIGHT overhead lighted up murkily at the continued thumping. There was a juggling with the bolt, and the door opened. A silver-haired man, with rimless glasses and pendulous red turkey-gobbler throat, stood looking at the two men.

"Land sakes, couldn't you hold your horses?" he said querulously.

"Has there been a young couple here tonight?" the older of the two fired at him.

"There've been several. I'm a justice of the peace." He smiled deprecatingly.

"Dark-haired girl, olive-skinned. And the man with her was fair-haired. Giving the names of Mitty Fredericks and Lawrence Jones?"

"Yep, they were," the justice nodded. "Not more than three quarters of an hour ago. Fact, they were the last ones here tonight."

"And you—you did it? It's already over?"

"I married them, yes," the justice told him succinctly. "That's what I'm here for."

The older one turned and gave his companion a look of utter calamity. "Too late," he said dismally. "It's already been done."

The second one stirred his breath with an expressive, long-drawn whistle.

The justice looked troubled, plucked at his wattled throat. "Nothing wrong, is there? Are you two relatives?"

"In a way," said the older man limply. "I'm Professor Fredericks. She was my ward."

The justice plucked some more. "Their license seemed to be in order," he said defensively. "Took it out in Baltimore two or three days ago, waited the required length

of time. I didn't see any reason ~~not~~ to accommodate them."

"Baltimore, did you say?" the younger of the two repeated sharply. He turned his eyes inscrutably toward Fredericks for a moment.

"That's right. I can only go by what documents are shown to me. I ain't no mind reader, you know, mister." The justice seemed more and more unsure of himself in the face of their accusing silence. He had shifted his plucking now to the topmost button of his bathrobe. "She gave her age as eighteen," he added in final, faltering vindication.

A hiccup of morbid derision sounded in Fredericks' throat.

"Eighteen," he repeated.

Cotter slapped their car to a collision-like stop. They flung out of it as though the jolt itself had hurled them forth, leaving the doors gaping open on both sides.

They ran into the pier building, through its walled-in forepart, and down toward the far end, where gaps showed at the side, as if a long row of sliding doors had been left open. Opposite these, close enough to touch, a line of portholes studding weather-beaten iron hull plates was creeping unnoticeably along, like something on a moving belt. The ship was still so close alongside its berth it was hard to tell whether it was actually under way or not. The water strip between was still so narrow it was invisible from above.

The newly retracted gangplank was still partially in position, but now it led off into vacancy. Cotter had leaped up on it and covered half its distance before he was collared and hauled back by two or three of the pier crew. "Hey, there, mister," one of them grinned, "what you trying to do, dunk yourself?"

"Quit it, you fool," Fredericks advised him from below. "It's no use any more."

They finished rolling the mobile structure back out of the way. Cotter stepped down and rejoined Fredericks. "Look at it," he fumed. "Still close enough to touch!"

"Two minutes sooner," Fredericks agreed bitterly. "Maybe that last traffic light did it. Or maybe that wrong turn you started to make, on the way down."

"There comes the name," Cotter said. He started to spell it out in reverse as the letters cleared the pier hatch one by one. "A-I-L—*Santa Emilia*. Do you see them? Maybe they're not on it after all."

Fredericks grabbed him by the arm suddenly. "There they are! Look, up there, on the second deck. In a straight line over that rust streak on the hull."

They were standing there in a long line of others lining the rail. The man was hatless, tow-haired, everyday-looking; they probably wouldn't have recognized him on his own account. But the girl next to him, nestled within the protective curve of his arm, would have stood out even at a greater distance. Black-haired, dark-eyed, with high cheekbones; there was something oddly exotic about her. Byzantine or Polynesian.

"Here goes; this is our last chance," Cotter said grimly. He cupped his hands like a funnel out before his mouth. The taut line of his throat quivered with the volume of voice he was forcing out. But not a sound could be heard, even by Fredericks, at his very elbow.

For at that instant, with perfect synchronization, an abysmal, long-drawn blast sounded from the ship's siren, drowning out everything in a tornado of din.

The man and the girl were slowly borne past. They were both looking up, in the direction the blast was coming from. The girl stuck a fingertip into each ear and shuddered. The man laughed. Then the two of them turned inward toward the deck. An empty space was all that remained to show where they had been, and even that didn't last long.

The ship continued to glide past with mocking, trance-like slowness.

Cotter lit a cigarette, "No Smoking" signs papering the pier shed notwithstanding, and blew a shaft of smoke dejectedly down his shirtfront. A peculiar sort of fatalism seemed to have taken possession of him. "*We* know," he said sepulchrally. "But *they* don't. He doesn't. Even she doesn't herself. Maybe knowledge is the only real danger in this case. Why don't we let them alone, let them work it out for themselves?"

Fredericks turned on him fiercely. "Do you know what you're saying? Marriage is a sacrament. Any man who takes a woman to be his wife; I don't care who he is, is entitled to—"

"To what?" asked Cotter presently, with a flicker of mordant amusement. "Entitled to what?"

Fredericks didn't answer that.

"Come on," he said in an oddly quiet voice, turning away. "We're going to send a wire to San Francisco, to be delivered to him when the ship docks there, after it's run up from the Canal."

"Why not at sea?" Cotter queried. "Why not a radiogram while they're still at sea, right now?"

"Because while they're still at sea, he can't get away from her. Once they've docked at San Francisco, he can."

"If," said Cotter sardonically, "he wants to. He just now married her, remember? They go blind in the heart when they do that."

"He's got to be given the chance," Fredericks fumed. "He's *got* to be told. They've *got* to be separated."

Cotter snapped his half-finished cigarette into the mucous eddy the ship had left in its wake, and watched it go around in insane circles.

"Whom God hath joined together," he murmured half audibly, "let God have mercy on. They're going to need it."

Chapter Three

TWO A.M. The ship lay at rest now, anchored in Havana harbor. The stateroom was lighted, but no one was in it. The stewardess had turned back the covers of the double berth, awaiting occupancy for the night. On one side lay a pale pink nightdress, on the other a pair of pajamas.

Outside somewhere there were the lights of Havana, sprinkled on the black surface of the harbor like nuclei of colored confetti soaking in the stagnant water. Morro Castle was like a stubby stick of gray chalk poised against the blackboard of the sky. A blue diamond near its tip twinkled, then dimmed, twinkled, then dimmed; over and over.

A key turned in the stateroom door. He came in back-

ward, pushing the door inward with his shoulder. He was holding her in his arms, like a groom is supposed to carry his new-made bride. He was in white evening jacket, she was in black lace.

He was smiling. She wasn't. Her eyes were downcast, as if there were fear hiding in them and she didn't want him to see it. She even held her head a little averted.

He backed the door closed with his heel. He released her, and she dropped to her own feet, the black lace settling about her like a puff of black smoke.

"What a town!" he exhaled. "You don't need alcohol in your drinks here—the town itself supplies the lift." He yanked out his tieknot.

She was very quiet; she didn't say anything. He glanced over at her, as if for the first time noticing that her mood didn't match his. The black evening gown fell to the floor. He saw her hang her head a little.

"Tired?" he asked gently.

She shook her head, but without lifting it. It was so low he could see the part in her hair now, the gardenia she wore at the back. She sat down, pulled off one of her dancing shoes. Then the other.

He wasn't smiling now any more, himself. He was thoughtful, downcast. "I know," he told her quietly. "You're frightened. Still frightened."

She inclined her head still more abjectly forward, but didn't answer.

"But we were married Tuesday. This is Friday. How long . . . ?" Then he didn't finish it. He shrugged his coat back on again. He went over toward the door.

While his back was turned, there was the silken sound of her slip, and the pink nightdress was suddenly whisked from the bed, spilled itself over her, like some kind of rosy foam.

"Do you want me to go outside for a while again?" he asked her. "Like the other nights?"

She wouldn't answer, or she couldn't.

"What is it? Don't you love me?"

She raised her head suddenly. She forced herself to. He could see that she was trembling a little, although the night temperature ashore in Havana was eighty degrees. "I love you, but I'm afraid of love. I'm both at once," she said in a low, muffled voice at last.

"Then why did you marry me? You knew what marriage was, didn't you?"

"All day in the sunshine, I'm not afraid. You are my love. Then the night comes, a drum beats low, deep in my heart . . ."

"What is this fear? Love doesn't hurt you." He came back toward her and crouched down beside her, taking her hands in his.

"Doesn't it?" she quavered uncertainly, like a child asking something of a teacher in school. "Then what—what *does* it do?"

He groped for words. "You can't be told of it. You can only—live it."

Her eyes were like two dark haunted pools.

"Where were you," he asked her sadly, "that you never learned about love?"

"In that house there, where you found me."

"Won't you trust me?" he pleaded gently. "Can't you look at me and see that I'd never hurt you? Won't you—take a chance with me?"

She was still trembling. Slowly her arms opened. She drew them back in a gesture of passivity, of acceptance. A switch snapped, and the stateroom became a square of perfect darkness, a pall, an undeveloped photographic plate. . . .

Then later, in the nothingness, her voice spoke, low, troubled.

"Have I displeased you?"

There was no answer.

The switch ticked once more, the light went on, and they were far apart. It was her hand that had touched it. He was across at the other side of the stateroom from her, standing near the dresser, his back turned her way. Sweat traced an erratic satiny track here and there down his face. A forelock of hair overhung his forehead like a scythe.

"Why do you leave me this way?"

On the floor, petals of a disintegrated gardenia had fallen, as though a storm had buffeted it. The gardenia that had been in her hair. One petal was clinging to his shoulder. He raised his hand and flicked it off impatiently.

"Please tell me. Please. What have I done?"

He didn't answer. The hand that took up one of the black-filled Cuban cigarettes wasn't steady.

"What is it, what did I do?"

His voice was husky. "Nothing. Don't notice me. I had too many drinks ashore, maybe, at Sans Souci and Bajo la Luna."

"You didn't drink at all. I watched you. Only coffee."

He sensed by way of the mirror, without seeing it, her intention to move, to join him. His arm gestured her back. "Stay there. For just a minute. For just a minute, let me stand away from you."

"Won't you tell me?"

"First I frightened you; now your passion has frightened me." He opened one of the drawers, dredged up a bottle of straw-colored Cuban rum. He passed the back of his hand across his forehead, as if trying to erase or stifle some emotion churning within it. "It was like holding onto something that—that suddenly becomes a tigress in your arms. I don't know how to say it. Not just a girl. Some jungle thing. That's why I jumped away like that. Do you—know what you did just now?"

He brought his other hand out before him, eyed it, red threads of blood snaking across its back. He took a pocket handkerchief, saturated it in rum from the bottle, held it to it. And then to his cheek, where there was an angry red diagonal traced. Then finally he tied it around his hand.

"I couldn't tell if it was love or hate. Only, it was too fierce for me."

"It wasn't hate. You named it for me. You named it love. So love is what it was."

"To kiss is not to bite. To claw is not to caress. It was like a panther tearing me to pieces. Those strange words—what were they? They weren't words at all. They weren't English."

"I didn't know. I didn't hear them."

"You spoke them."

Her voice was a whisper, scarcely heard. Her extended arms guided it toward him. "You said it was love. Come back to where it is. If it is love, then it is here inside my arms."

His bandaged hand moved. With it he poured himself a drink. A great big fat one. He drank it down to the bottom without a hitch.

Chapter Four

MIDNIGHT over a tropic sea. Two cigarettes winking close together across a ship's rail. Two faces ignited into incandescence by the hammered-silver sheen of the moonlit water below. Inside somewhere, the ship's band was playing "*Perfidia*." The song of treachery, the song whose very name spells faithlessness. Out here, two strangers standing side by side, two strangers joined in marriage, groping desperately toward the beginning of acquaintanceship, the beginnings of understanding.

"Why do you look at me like that? What do you see?"

"I'm trying to figure it out. There's a sadness in your eyes. I wonder what it is. You're a thousand years old, inside your eyes. You must have been born old, Mitty."

She glanced at him with an odd little quirk of surprise. "It's strange you should say that," she answered slowly. "I was, in a way."

"How do you mean?"

"You know, I can't remember my childhood at all."

"Darned few of us can. I can hardly remember my own. Just faded snapshots of a licking or two, of my first day at school."

"No, but you're speaking of infancy, early childhood; I mean even late childhood, the early teens—" She stopped to ask him, "You won't be disturbed, Larry?"

"No, why should I be? What was it?"

"Illness, I think. Fever of some kind. Maybe even sleeping sickness. He never told me exactly what caused it. It wiped out all recollection of everything that had gone before. It was like starting all over again. I had to learn to talk, to read—why, I can even remember their teaching me how to walk."

He whistled. "How old were you when this happened?"

He saw her stop and try to think. "I don't know. They've never told me my exact age. This was about three or four years ago."

He tried to compute it for her. "Well, if you're eighteen now, and this was about three or four years ago—"

"I'm not sure that I am eighteen now. I've never been sure of my own age."

"Well, didn't he have to produce a birth certificate when he took out the adoption papers?"

"I don't think there was one available. I've never known who my parents were. His face, Fredericks', was the first thing I can remember, peering blurredly down at me, feeding me something with a dropper or giving me shots in the arm. I must have lain in a stupor for weeks and months."

"That's bad stuff, that sleeping sickness," he agreed soberly.

"When it finally ended, I had to learn everything all over again. I'd even lost the use of language. I had to pick up words from him, one by one. He'd hand me something to drink and he'd say, 'Water.' Then when I wanted it again, I'd say, 'Water,' and he'd bring it to me. That was how I learned."

"But you mean, in your own mind, you didn't call it 'water' before you heard him call it that?"

"No. I knew what it was. But I must have had some symbol, some word of my own for it. Because the sound of the word was strange to me. I couldn't even pronounce it correctly in the beginning. I had trouble with it on my tongue. Wa-wa, and then wa-ta. It was like a foreign word, a word in another language."

She fell silent for a time, and he did too. His mind grappled with the enigma she had revealed to him, or rather presented; for the key that would have revealed it was still missing.

Suddenly she blurted out, "Larry, why were they that way to me?"

His eyes narrowed. "That's something I'd like to know myself."

"They always made me feel so queer, so *different*. As if there were some shadowy secret hanging over me."

He thought about it. "What you just told me about being ill—I suppose that's it. They were worried about your health."

"No," she said. "It wasn't because I'd once been ill. They didn't try to keep that from me; I knew it anyway. It was something beyond that. Some knowledge that they had, but that I was forever excluded from. Some knowl-

edge that it would be terrible for me to come into possession of. So many times a look would pass between them, a remark would be exchanged, that they knew the meaning of, but I didn't. Like in that game that children play, where a ball is tossed over your head, for somebody else to catch behind you. It was as though—as though I were a thing apart. Different from all other girls. They taught me all the things a girl is supposed to know, and then they kept me from using them. They crammed eighteen years of education into just about four years, and then they kept me just shut up in that house. They even taught me to dance. And then they wouldn't let any boy come close enough to dance with me. They had an instructress come down to the house from Baltimore two or three times a week and give me lessons. I learned the steps, but for the longest time I thought that just women were supposed to dance with one another, like she and I were doing. It never occurred to me that one partner was supposed to be a man."

He made a grimace of distaste.

She sighed whimsically. "So I waltz beautifully, but until I came on this ship with you, I'd never been in a man's arms on a dance floor."

A little flare of resentment kindled in him for a moment. "Who were they, anyway? What were they? An elderly man, and a younger one. What were you doing with them, a girl like you? Those are associations that don't just happen. How'd it come about? Those are the things I'd like to know!"

"And those," she said softly, "are the things I would, too. And I never did know. And I still don't. He was writing, all the time writing, Fredericks. I think it was a book. And I think it had to do with me. They'd subject me to all kinds of tests. And then he'd jot things down. And then he'd lock himself up in that room in the back, and write for hours."

"They didn't—mistreat you in any way?"

"No, no," she assured him. "Nothing like that. But you need a lot more than just—kindness."

"Yes," he said, as if to himself. "You need love."

"I used to hear that word all the time," she said. "That was one subject, though, they tried to keep in the background. When this dancing teacher I just told you about

came to give me lessons, she brought a portable phonograph with her, and various records. Most of them were straight instrumental, but a few had vocal choruses. And right in the middle, they'd pop out with this talk about love. They'd swoon about it, they'd go into a fever about it. Sometimes they were happy about it, sometimes they were sad about it, sometimes they were mad about it. Sometimes it was a girl sobbing for a man. Sometimes it was a man groaning for a girl. Once it was four men at once, and they were all in love with the same girl. I think she was called Diane. I said to the teacher, 'What is that? Why does it do that to them?' She just sighed and dropped her eyes. But Fredericks overheard me. And before she left, he sorted out the records, and told her not to bring any more that had vocal choruses."

She shrugged. "But it was in the books I read, anyway. They were full of it. In one play, the lovers killed themselves. He took poison and she stabbed herself."

"*Romeo and Juliet*," he assented.

"It was strange," she reflected, "to hear of it all around you, and yet not know what it was."

"Wasn't there *anyone* before me? I suppose every husband asks his brand-new wife that at least once. And this is my once to ask it. But wasn't there anyone at all?"

"No one. You were the first. You were the first who ever kissed me. You were even the first I ever rode with in a car, and that was the night we ran away to Baltimore."

He blew out his breath in a sort of soundless whistle.

"Only once," she continued, "did a boy ever get as far as the door of that house. And that was as far as he did get, the door. That was about a year before that night that you lost your way and knocked on the door to ask directions."

"He lost his way too?"

"No, it was different that time. I wasn't on the lookout that time, as I was when you came along. I didn't have any little balled-up note prepared, to throw down to him out of the window, as I did to you. I missed the chance. He was opportunity, and, as they say, opportunity knocks only once, and then goes away again."

"Tell me about it. Let's hear."

"They'd taken me in to a dinner party in the city, in

Baltimore. I suppose it was to complete my education, as a sort of extension course in social behavior. It was at the house of—oh, I don't know who he was, some college professor or famous man of some sort. There were no boys and girls there my own age. All elderly people, very learned men, most of them with beards, scientists and doctors and what not. This boy was the nephew of somebody who was present. He didn't even live there in the house, just popped in with a message for a minute. Before he'd popped out again, he'd seen me from the far end of the room. And I'd seen him. That was really all there was to it. Not even a single word was exchanged between us. But the eyes can do wonderfully quick work. I remember he smiled at me from the doorway. So I smiled back. Before he could go any further, get himself introduced to me, suddenly my wraps had been brought, very suddenly, and I was being hustled home, with Fredericks marching on one side of me and Cotter on the other, like bodyguards.

"I made one more sign. I turned my head a little and looked back over my shoulder. He was just standing back there forlornly. He hadn't even been able to be introduced to them, so what chance did he have to get to *me*? But—"

"He followed through."

"He tried to. He found out where I lived, and a couple of evenings later he showed up at the door, complete with a box of chocolates. You know, the usual first call. They wouldn't let me come down, of course, but I crept out to the head of the stairs and overheard the whole thing from there. Fredericks got rid of him in the oddest way."

"What was it?"

"Well, he wasn't brusque, he didn't slam the door on him. He was kind about it, fatherly, almost. That's the point I'm trying to bring out. As if he were trying to warn him off for his own good. As if he were trying to keep him from dire misfortune."

"What was it he said to him?"

"It was the implication, more than the words themselves. He slung his hand to the boy's shoulder, and gently turned him around the other way. 'You seem like a nice boy,' he said. 'For your own sake, I want you to listen carefully to me. You find some other girl. There are plenty around. Some other girl, who'll be just right for

you. This one— isn't the one you want. That's all I can say to you. You'll live to regret it if you don't take my advice. Don't come near here any more. Forget this house. Forget your way to it. Forget my foster daughter. *Forget you ever saw her.*

"And there was something about the way he said it that made my blood run cold. As though there were some horrid thing, some terror, waiting to be unleashed if this boy—or any other—forced his acquaintance on me any further.

"It wasn't a bluff he was putting on, either. You could tell by the ring of sincerity in his voice that he meant it.

"And the boy must have felt it too. I noticed he didn't argue, didn't insist any further, seemed glad to leave. I watched him from the window. He threw the candy away on the lawn, climbed into his car, and drove away fast, without looking back.

"I rushed to the mirror. I stood there and stared. Oh, how long and hard I stared at my own face, to try to see what there was that was wrong with me. I held my hair pressed down flat and stared deep into my own eyes. I couldn't see anything different there, anything wrong."

She turned to him suddenly, her face suffused with emotion. She took him by the shoulders, and pulled at them pleadingly, as if hoping to draw from him the answer she needed so.

"What was it? What is it? What's the matter with me?"

He placed his hand gently across her trembling mouth, sealing it, keeping it there until the frightened inquiry had left her brilliant dark eyes. "Say this to yourself. There *wasn't* anything before tonight. Anything before tonight wasn't you, wasn't true, never happened. We begin tonight, you and I."

"We begin tonight, you and I," she murmured softly.

After a while she said, "Now tell me about you. What were you like—before? Before me?"

"What's there to tell? No different from any other young fellow, I guess."

"I never knew any other young fellow, remember? So to me it's new."

"I'll try. I was born in a town you never heard of."

"Tell me anyway."

"Pueblo, Colorado. I had no brothers and no sisters.

My father was a bus driver there. The bus turned over and burned one day. I was eight. My mother worked then. She passed on when I was sixteen. I got out of school. Then I worked. In a garage, in a grocery store, lots of things like that. Then the war came along and I was drafted. I guess the war was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me. The war was my parents, the war was my support, the war was my education. I went to college on the GI bill, took engineering. When I finished, I got a couple of small jobs, nothing much. Then this big one came along, the opportunity of a lifetime, the one I'm heading for now.

"And that's about all." He shrugged. "I have no folks. I never had a sweetheart, never had a girl. Each time I'd single one out, somebody else was there ahead of me."

"How did you know how to make love?" she asked wonderingly.

He laughed a little. "I didn't say there weren't any girls. I said I never had one of my own, to keep. In France and Italy, for a bar of chocolate or a pack of cigarettes, there were girls for an hour. It's not the same."

She thought about that as though she couldn't understand what the difference was.

"Well, anyway," he went on, "here I was, making this trip by car with one of my buddies from the war, both of us working our way by easy stages toward jobs that were waiting for us, and one night near a crossroads we lost our way. I got out and went over to this house, to ask directions. The house you were in.

"I came back and told him about a beautiful face I'd glimpsed in a window, about a tap on the pane, about a note that had landed at my feet.

"He said, 'Don't be a sap. This is what comes from waiting too long to get yourself a steady girl. You fall suddenly, in the dark, sight unseen.'

"I said, 'This is my steady girl—now. From now on.'

"He went on the rest of the way by train. I stuck around. The car was mine, you see. And the rest is—our story. The rest is—tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," she repeated softly. They both turned to look seaward again. One of the velvety gardenia petals in her hair brushed his cheek. "Tomorrow is—?"

"Puerto Santo," he supplied.

"Are we going ashore there?"

"Not worth it; nothing to do or see. Just one of these stick-in-the-mud tropical holes, I understand."

"Then we'll stay on the ship. I'm satisfied."

He crooked his finger under her chin, guided her face around toward his. Their faces blended, in the shadow under the deck roof.

Midnight over a tropic sea. Two strangers, getting acquainted with one another. Two strangers: man and wife.

Chapter Five

HE WOKE UP, and the motionlessness of the ship told him they were in port. The stillness seemed unreal. He missed the slow fluctuation, the creak of woodwork.

This was Puerto Santo, he remembered. That midway stop, going up the west-coast leg of the trip, the one between Panama and Acapulco. The one they'd decided not to go ashore at.

She wasn't there. She'd dressed and left the stateroom ahead of him. Probably to go up and take a look from the rail.

During the whole time he was dressing, he expected to see her back any minute, bubbling over with railside descriptions of the place, but she failed to appear.

He emerged on deck into a wilting heat. The ship lay becalmed in what felt like an oven. The usual breezes were totally lacking now. Even the water had changed color. The deep blue of other days had changed to the light green of a shallow harbor basin. Across it, in the distance, was a thin crescent of flat tin and tile rooftops, like driftwood or accumulated refuse pushed into the joint between sea and sky by tidal action. Behind these was traced a hazy blue line of mountains, thin as cigarette smoke or azure sky writing, clearer at their tops than at their bottoms, as though they had no bases, hung suspended in mid-sky.

A few native skiffs and rafts were being slowly poled

about, close up against the side of the ship, piled with fruit that carried its own flies even this far out, Panama hats, and assorted curios and trinkets.

His first, indifferent look was at all this, broadside to him as he came down the deck, without breaking stride. His second, far more concerned one was for her.

All down the rail ahead of him stood little groups of his fellow passengers looking out over it, some in twos and threes, some singly. Very few seemed to have gone ashore. His eyes kept seeking her out as he passed along behind them. She wasn't included in any of them. Nor was she in any of the chairs either. Nor was she on the upper deck. Nor was she on the one below. Nor was she by the pool, nor was she in the lounge, nor had she—when he took a quick look back into their cabin—returned there.

"Has anybody here seen my wife?" he finally had to ask one of the railside groups of passengers.

"She went ashore, didn't she?" a woman answered.

"Without me? No, of course not." And yet if she were anywhere on the ship, why hadn't he found her?

He accosted the first officer he caught sight of and put the inquiry to him.

"No, she didn't," the man said. "I remember asking her. She was standing by as they were getting into the tender, but she said she wasn't going, the two of you had decided not to."

Another passenger had joined them, and he contributed, "I think I did see her go, after the others had already left. She was sitting in one of those little native skiffs. All by herself in it too, just with the boatman and the small boy that most of them seem to carry along for supercargo."

Jones was thunderstruck. "Why should she go in one of those things, when she turned down an offer to go in the tender? You must be mistaken!"

"I know your wife when I see her, Mr. Jones," the man insisted. "I stood there by the rail looking right down at her."

They were both staring at him a little curiously. The shock must have shown quite plainly on his face, he supposed. He didn't care about that so much; what shook him was that she'd gone off like that without a word of warning.

"They'll be coming back soon, and then you'll see for yourself," the man suggested.

Jones stood there for a while by the rail with him, pretending to talk of other things. He heard hardly a word that his companion said; he couldn't think of anything but this incalculable defection of hers.

"Here comes the tender now."

It had an awning over it, so those in it couldn't be seen from overhead until they had emerged. He shifted farther over, to a position directly above the foot of the Jacob's ladder, and looked down on their heads as they bobbed into sight one by one.

There weren't very many of them. And she wasn't with them, she hadn't come back.

He hovered there on the outskirts of the little group as they stood on the deck. Some woman greeted him, and he instantly asked her the question that was really needless, since he could see the answer for himself. "Didn't my wife come back with you?"

"No, she wasn't with us."

He found himself immensely relieved for a moment. "Somebody claimed they'd seen her going ashore. I didn't think she—"

She promptly gave the report devastating confirmation. "She was. I caught sight of her myself, some distance off, in the town, when we were being led about by the nose. There was no sign of her when we gathered to get back in the tender again, so we thought maybe she'd come back ahead of us in that same little boat she hired." Then, noting the strain in his face, "Hasn't she?"

"No."

"You'd better go back after her yourself! She may have been left stranded on the—"

He didn't need to be told that by now. He was already at the ladder head, roaring down in advance of his own floundering descent, "Wait a minute, hold that thing! I'm coming with you. My wife's still ashore."

"We're sailing in three quarters of an hour, Mr. Jones! Don't stay too long!" one of the officers called overside to him as the tender nosed along the heat-blistered hull and then veered off landward.

Jones subsided uneasily into the pit of the boat. The heat was unbearable down this close to the water; it was

like cutting through boiling tar. He instinctively withdrew his hand to avoid touching it, as if afraid of being scalded, though that was only a sensory illusion.

The age-old verdigris-coated stone quay slowly reared itself above the water line before them. Jones jumped out and ran up the slimy slabs that formed the stairs, his foot skidding from the lip of one and striking the one below in momentary misstep that failed to slow or throw him down save for a momentary lurch.

She wasn't in sight anywhere. There was no sign of her. He turned to one of the idlers lounging about. "*Señora?*" he said, dredging up one of the few Spanish words he knew.

The fellow pointed out to the ship and said something that probably meant, "They all went back a few minutes ago."

"Not the one I mean," Jones muttered. He didn't loiter there bothering to translate it, but struck off the landing stage and into the town proper without wasting any more time.

One of the sailors called out some warning about returning in time, but he paid no heed. His mind was intent on one thing and one alone: on finding her.

Now that he was in the midst of it the place had condensed itself still further, so that it looked even smaller than when seen from the ship out in the roadstead. A main street of sorts ran up straight before him from the quayside plaza. A few lesser ones crossed it at uneven intervals, like misplaced ties on a railroad track. And that, seemingly, was the whole sum and substance of it. It seemed unbelievable that anyone could lose himself in a place such as this for any length of time; that is, fail to find a way back to the starting point. But then—where was she, what had become of her?

He chose this spinal thoroughfare first, up one side, down the other, trying the interiors of the handful of shops that might have attracted her. She was in none of them, she had been seen in none of them. Everywhere heads shook, hands widened.

He returned to the quay again, still without her. One of the sailors from the tender again shouted a warning to him, pointed out to the ship. There wasn't much time. It spurred him to an added frenzy of distracted searching.

He ran into one of the side streets. Cheap little drink shops, tawdry booths, all the effluvia of tropical barter. She wouldn't be in any of these. What was there here for her? For that matter, what was there for her in this entire place? He turned, went back again.

He was good and frightened now, and in a deplorable state of breathlessness, dishevelment, and cumulative perspiration brought on by his own efforts.

He discovered a hotel of sorts, probably the only one the place boasted, but again all he got were shrugs and splayed hands.

He even looked inside a crumbling pink-sandstone church he came across, glossy-coated buzzards nestling along its peristyle and cornices like lacquered sentinels of corruption. The cavernous place was empty. Candle flames fluttered with the disturbance of his entrance, in a serried line ascending one side of the altar, descending again on the other; first all leaning over one way, then bending back again to lean the other, before they righted themselves again.

He took off his hat, withdrew backward, less cyclonically than he had entered, dropping a coin into the alms box for amends as he turned and went out.

Outside, he tottered down the steps again, palm flat to his forehead in a sort of salute to bewilderment. Where, then? Where else? Where was there left? He'd been all over the confounded little place.

There must be a police station of some sort, even in this benighted little backwater. That was it. He'd have to go there for help.

And then, well on his way to it, and already almost there, the need for it was suddenly done away with.

She was in a shop of sorts, scarcely a shop, a booth set back into the walls like a niche. The white of her dress gleamed out palely from the dimness of its interior. She was standing motionless, her back to the roadway outside.

His sudden appearance at the single-file entrance darkened over the little light there was, blotting out the interior for a moment.

"Mitty!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

She seemed not to hear him, she was so absorbed.

He stepped quickly over to her and took her by the arm. "Mitty are you crazy? I've been frightened half out

of my skin! I've been hunting everywhere for you, all up and down this town!"

She turned to him as though she didn't know him for a minute.

Then, as though his presence had finally registered, she exclaimed belatedly, but with perfect composure, "Oh, it's you, Larry! How did you get here?"

"Mitty, d'you know what I've been through?"

"Have I been in here very long?" she asked vaguely. "I've been trying to remember something."

She turned and followed him docilely enough out into the open once more. The shopkeeper trailed behind her, saying something in tactful insistence. Jones turned in time to see her give him back one of the curios, a grotesque little clay figurine of a squatting human form, arms laced about its knees, head disproportionately large, which she had unknowingly retained in her hand.

"What possessed you?" Jones was saying disjointedly, as they struck back in the direction he'd just come from.

She looked behind her; whether at the shop itself, or the shopkeeper standing there in its opening looking after them, or at the little clay figure, he couldn't be sure.

"I was roaming around, I happened to pass by there, and I looked in. I caught sight of those things on the shelf, those rows of little stone figures he had, and I don't know—every time I picked one up, I got the funniest feeling, I couldn't seem to tear myself a—"

He had no time to hear her out. Some blurred remark in postscript swept glancingly past his attention. "It's like when you open an old trunk, and see things that you haven't seen in a long time, and try to remember where and when you—"

"We're going to lose that ship if we don't hurry." He began to beckon violently.

A little hooded carriage turned, toiled laboriously up to them—the street was on a sharp incline—turned once more, and drew up. Jones helped her in.

"*El puerto*. The water front. Understand? Quick!"

They clattered, noisily over the cobbles, on an acute downgrade, the strips of street scene going by now fast on each side of them, like film whirring through a projection machine. His head and shoulders were held slanted out at one side of the carriage, while he stared down ahead of their own course.

"There it is, I see it at the end of this street. We're finally getting there!"

Suddenly he stood bolt upright in the carriage as the enclosing buildings fell back and it swept out onto the quayside plaza.

"I don't see the launch! It's not here any more!"

He jumped down without waiting for the vehicle to slacken and swing broadside, and ran out onto the landing stage. The same black cur with yellow undersides was lolling there, the same somnolent loungers, backs to warehouse walls, hats over their eyes, legs out before them on the ground. Everything the same as before.

But down at the bottom of the steps the water heaved green and glassy and empty.

Out beyond the harbor roadstead, black smoke trailed like a scar across the translucent sky, from a rodlike attenuation that crept in misleading sluggishness along the line where sea joined sky.

He came back to her finally. It seemed like a long time after. It no doubt was. She had stayed in the carriage.

Even the ship's smokestack was gone now. The black smoke hung disembodied, unraveling on the air like yarn, a symbol without a visible cause below it.

There was nothing to say. Words were superfluous to add clarity to the situation, impotent to remedy it. An occasional slap from the green water lapping emptily against the understones of the quay was the only sound there was.

Two people standing silently, wonderingly, side by side; at the edge of nowhere, poised at the brink of the sea, in a strange place.

The sea and the place alike began to darken rapidly around them, as night came down like a black roller shade.

Chapter Six

"God, what a place!" he exclaimed with suppressed savagery that night, in the fusty cavernous hotel room. "Thirty days in a trap like this! Talk about being buried

alive! It's worse than that. When you're buried, the earth is cool around you, at least."

She was sitting huddled in one of the two gigantic beds, her face a ghostly oval against the mosquito netting that misted her over.

He took a turn or two around the tiled floor, one hand worrying the skin at the back of his neck. "It's good-by job, too. They'll never hold it for me thirty days. I was due to report by the tenth, at the latest."

"Larry, have we any money?" she faltered. "Or are we—?"

"We're not completely broke, if that's what you mean. I happened to have a little money in the pocket of this suit. The rest of it's in the purser's safe, going north without us, at this moment. But I suppose they'll hold it until we claim it. That's not what worries me. It's just that this knocks all my plans sky-high. I was counting on that job."

"Can't we take a plane out and still get up there on time?"

"Not a chance," he said glumly. "That was the first thing I asked downstairs, when we came in. Even the planes skip this place, it's so far off the beaten track. They don't come within hundreds of miles of it. Nothing to bring them here."

He paced another desultory lap or two. "Let's kill the light, shall we? It's attracting all sorts of things in here. There's shoals of them flying around it already. Want it any more?"

"No," she said docilely. "It's probably cooler without it."

After a moment or two a match winked out, over by the window, where he must have come to a halt, staring sightlessly out at nothing.

"Larry, can I have a cigarette?" she murmured penitently.

"Here," he said grudgingly. His tread came toward her hollowly across the tiled floor. "Hold your net out of the way, so I don't set fire to it."

The second match flare illumined her face into a coral-tinted mask for a minute. Then the mask faded again.

"Larry, are you very angry at me?" she muttered.

He didn't answer. Which was his answer.

She tried again. "Larry, I'm sorry about getting us into this fix."

"Then why did you do it?" he answered tersely.

"I didn't want to," she said tractably.

He took a deep breath of exasperation, baffled at the contradiction. "But you *did* come ashore, Mitty, so how can you say that?"

"I don't know, Larry. I'm telling you the truth, please believe me. I didn't want to come ashore and I didn't mean to. I had no such idea when I first stepped out on deck this morning. I was only going to take a quick look from the rail, and then turn around and come right in again. Can't you see that by the way I was dressed? I didn't even have a hat or anything, to keep the sun off me. I left the cabin just the way I was."

His silence was an indication that that point had just occurred to him, himself, now that she mentioned it.

"One of those little native boats came drifting by below me. It had some things to sell, but nothing that interested me. Fruit and things. But there was a clay water jug in it, in the form of a hollowed-out image. He'd brought it along just to keep his produce fresh, maybe, or to drink from it himself. I kept staring at it, and staring at it, and—I felt so funny, Larry."

"How, funny?" he demanded.

"I don't know, myself. I only know I couldn't take my eyes off it. The little boat, by now, had sneaked into place at the foot of the ladder, where the tender had been before. First I leaned as far over the rail as I could. Then before I knew it I was edging my way down the ladder step by step, to get a closer look, and then there I was standing right in the little boat itself. And then I was sitting there, holding this jug in my arms and fondling it. I don't remember after that; maybe I asked him where it came from, and he pointed to the shore, and then I told him to take me there. But I don't remember that part of it. I only remember that the next thing I knew I was in the town, walking around on dry land."

"The whole time you were ashore, the whole afternoon long, didn't you think of me at all? Didn't you think of the ship, even? Didn't you realize it was due to sail at a certain hour, and I was on it waiting for you?"

"I seemed to forget everything. I couldn't help it. I wandered around the whole time with the strangest feeling. Did you ever have a word on the tip of your tongue, you're just about to remember it, but you never quite

can, it keeps slipping back each time? Well, it was that feeling, that sort of agonizing, expectant feeling. Only, it was something on the tip of my memory, and not on the tip of my tongue. It seemed to drive everything else completely out of my mind, and yet it wouldn't take over itself, it wouldn't complete itself; so I was left in a sort of blank state, a walking daze."

"If you ask me, I think it was a touch of the sun. Wandering around with your head uncovered."

"No," she insisted vaguely. "It was something on the tip of my memory. Then when I saw this little clay figure, this idol, inside that shop where you found me, I couldn't tear myself away. Time stood still. Each time I tried to put it down, my hand would reach out and pick it up again. It seemed to have something to tell me."

"Something to tell you," he scoffed with impatience.

"I'd stand holding it for the longest time. I'd have this feeling of a word creeping out on the tip of my tongue, just hanging there, but never quite emerging. Oh, I know; you asked me not to speak that way. But that's the only way that fits it. There's no other way."

He had relapsed into a moody silence.

"I've antagonized you, haven't I, Larry?" she said presently.

"No, you've just made me feel sort of peculiar."

He crushed out his cigarette and unraveled the furled mosquito netting from atop its frame.

"Well, it's a mystery to me. It's the strangest thing I've ever heard of."

The stillness that descended was one with the heat. It was a smothering sort of silence. Even the stars visible beyond the window seemed to pulse hotly, with a sort of vindictive fever.

Chapter Seven

THE DAYS were like successive pairs of handcuffs, each one composed of twenty-four separate links, holding them prisoner.

The sun would come up in a blaze of yellow, gaseous heat, fuming in at them through the slats of the blinds, searing livid tiger stripes across the walls of the room. Its ferocity too was tigerish, at six o'clock.

Her wan voice would sound through the mosquito netting. "Are you awake yet? So am I. Oh, it's terrible, isn't it?"

"I tried thinking of snow," he said, eying the ceiling. "It works a little."

"He'll be here pretty soon. Here he is now, I can hear the water slapping onto the tiles as he carries the buckets along."

There wasn't any running water in the place. There was an artesian well, and the porter would trundle up bucketsful, two by two, on a crosspiece arrangement over his shoulders, and duly empty them into a slab-sided stone quadrangle that looked as though it were made of basalt. "The concrete mixer," Jones had called it the first time he saw it. It had taken a good deal of hammering insistence in the beginning, but the porter now brought the water daily without being told, for these peculiar people who bathed not only on church holidays but every morning of the year.

And yet, for all its crudeness, this was one of the brief respites of the day, this plunge into coolness.

The rest, from then on for the remainder of the day, was simply the fatuousness of motion without purpose, without aim. A vacuum that was so much more empty even than boredom that to have called it that would have been flattery.

The hotel had a patio of sorts, but it was too hot and too impregnated with insect life and the steamy exhalations of plant life to sit in during the daytime. There remained only their room and the streets, some of them fortunately shaded over by *portales*, the tunnel-like arched passageways characteristic of Spanish architecture. Still, the monotony of seeing nothing but stone arch supports and stone building walls, the same supports and the same walls over and over, back and forth, palled soon enough, drove them back inside the hotel again in glassy-eyed surfeit.

The relief that nightfall brought was only an optical

illusion; the glaring light that seemed to create the heat was gone, but the heat itself remained.

He would wake up each morning and say to himself, Thirty days more. Then, Twenty-nine days more. Then, Twenty-eight. And so on. Then presently he stopped doing it. For some curious reason, instead of making the time seem shorter, this system of subtractive reminder seemed to make it pass much more slowly. Each day was endless when you pasted a numeral onto it. If you left it blank, unidentified, it slipped by less conspicuously.

It was around the tenth day (twenty still to come) that the arm bangle appeared. He came into the room and found her standing there. As she turned toward him she was holding her arm in a peculiar way, tightly gripped close up toward the shoulder.

"What'd you do, hurt yourself?" he asked anxiously, casting his hat aside.

She let the sheltering hand drop to reveal what at first sight almost appeared to be some encrusted, gangrenous excrescence, encircling her smooth ivory-pale skin. Then at closer range, as he stepped quickly over, he saw to his vast relief that it was only a band of thick, crudely fashioned metal, some three inches wide. Traces of some rotary design were still faintly visible through its weather-beaten patina, studded at intervals with chips of turquoise.

"Where'd you come across that?"

"I saw it in one of the windows. I don't know, something about it drew me. I'd start to go on past each time, and then I'd come back again and look at it some more. Finally I went in the door."

"But what'd you put it on your *arm* for?" he asked with a grimace of repugnance.

"I don't know—it just seemed to belong there. I didn't even know I was doing it. I looked, and there it was on me already." She traced it dreamily with her fingers, almost caressed it. "It just seemed to belong there," she repeated. "And, I don't know, once I had it on"—she gestured helplessly—"I just couldn't seem to take it off again."

"But you're not going to keep it on?" he protested incredulously. "It's claptrap. The sort of thing a Kaffir

woman would wear. Look at it, it's all green and tarnished, kind of—" He reached out to disengage it.

She drew back a step, shielded it protectively with her hand.

He shrugged. "Well, if you want to keep it, that's up to you. But it looks freakish, fantastic."

She drew it off very slowly, very reluctantly, and held it in her hands for a long time. At last she put it lingeringly away in a drawer.

The next day he saw her standing by the partly open drawer, looking down at it without taking it out. She closed the drawer softly when she became aware he had entered.

He said nothing.

The second day after that he was in time to see her thrust it back into the drawer, then close it. This time she had been holding it in her hands. Again he didn't say anything to show he had noticed.

The third day, it was on her arm again. It stayed on her arm from then on.

Presently it became a little more lustrous, a little less encrusted, with the friction of her skin. Or perhaps he had grown more used to it. Either way, the sight of it became more bearable to him.

Thus the days of their isolation toiled by.

It was impossible for him to tell at what point he first noticed the absent-mindedness. Absent-mindedness was his own inappropriate mental description for it, discarded again almost as soon as he had become aware of anything at all intermittently present in her manner that required naming even to himself, but with no other designation at hand suitable to take its place.

First a vacant look. He said something to her and she did not hear him. He repeated it, and she heard him. That was all there was to it, that time. Its incipency was that elusive. The incident was over. It was not even an incident. It was nothing.

Later, the vacant look came again. He remembered the time before. Now, therefore, he *looked* at the vacant look. Thus he became aware of the "absent-mindedness." It was under way. But again, that was all there was to it. Oh, he said to himself, she's just trying to get a little air out there on the balcony. She's lost in thought.

He addressed her once more. "Are you going to freshen up, Mitty? We may as well go down and eat their God-awful rice and beans and get it over with."

She got up at once and came into the room.

It was still nothing, less than an incident.

But it happened out on the street too.

They were strolling together and their way led past the mouth of another street that opened onto the one they were following. As they crossed before this gap, he heard her step beside him slacken, then failed to hear it resume, and turning, saw that she had fallen several paces behind him, had faltered to a halt, and was standing with her body still aligned in the same direction his was, but with her head turned aside the new way. He joined her in looking, as anyone would have, and there was nothing there. Nothing to see. Just the marginal lines of the street drawing together in perspective to a single point. There was not even anyone moving along its length. It led straight out to nowhere. Suspended beyond even that nowhere, as if to show that perspective itself had a limit, was the mountain, like a filmy blue backdrop.

"Why do you stand here like this in the middle of the road?" he asked her. "You haven't reached the shade yet. What's stopped you like that?"

"I don't know. I suddenly looked down that way, and—"

"And what?" he said, looking again, and seeing again what he had seen the first time: nothing.

"I don't know." She blinked at him, as if seeking some sort of assistance. "I don't know now. It's gone again. But I felt something strange."

He was obtuse at this stage. Not alert yet to the things he could not have grasped anyway. "A speck of dust fly in your eye?" He thought she meant something like that.

She shunted the remark aside unanswered. "Wait a minute, Larry," she said.

She turned and retraced their last few steps. This carried her back past the street opening, to where the impeding side walls sprang up again. There he saw her turn and start forward again, as if seeking to test something. He would have even thought she was seeking to discover something she had lost on the ground, but the forward cast of her eyes showed she wasn't. Her concern was with

some impression within her mind; the blank yet expectant look in her eyes as she came toward him showed it to be that.

Once more the street mouth sprang open beside her. She turned and looked aside—as she must have the first time—then came on toward him the rest of the way. “It didn’t happen the second time,” she said.

“What didn’t happen? You haven’t even told me what it was the first time.”

“Something seemed to pull at the corner of my eye. And as I turned to look, but before I *had* turned to look, while I was still only *going* to, I knew I was going to see something that I’d seen before. Then when I did turn and look, there it was, just as I’d known it would be: that mountain ’way off there.”

“Of course you thought you saw it before; why wouldn’t you? Maybe you came past this same crossing yesterday, or maybe the day before. The corner of your eye remembered it and—”

She moistened her lips. “It was a deeper before.”

She just looked at him, and he looked at her, as if there were a barrier between them; a vast, thick sheet of glass that didn’t block vision or the sound of their voices but cut off everything else.

Finally he grinned, to put an end to the situation. “You’re a funny girl,” he said patronizingly. He went on down the street beside her.

It was nothing. Just an incident, a stray moment’s exchange between them as they walked along a street together.

This was the beginning of what, for a short time, he designated as her absent-mindedness.

Chapter Eight

HE REARED to a sitting position under the mosquito netting, still in the transition between sleep and awakening, some sort of fear in him; fear that had carried over from sleep into wakefulness. Only now did it begin to

ebb away, revealing itself by the traces left behind, as a receding tide leaves bits of shell and dampness on the sand where it was a few moments before.

It hadn't been a dream. There had been no images just now. Just some sort of formless fear. He pushed his hair back, and his hand came away from his scalp wet.

The net was a gray blur all around him, like vapor. He flung it aside after that moment or two of baffled, threshing confusion that always preceded his accurate locating of the hidden seam that it parted on.

The confines of the room enclosed him like a black velvet pall in the stifling tropic night. He palmed the marble-topped stand between their two beds, turned up an invisible circle against the darkness that showed minute flecks of phosphorescent green, let it lie flat again. A quarter of three in the morning.

Then he saw her.

She was seated outside on their balcony in the moonlight. Motionless as a white statue. Staring toward that accursed mountain.

He watched her for a while from where he was. It was unnatural, it was uncanny, to sit that still. Not to move at all. To stare that hard, that long, that all-obliviously. It was more than a stare of fascination, it was a stare that approached a trance.

He got up and placed his bare feet on the tiled floor. She never moved; she was as unaware of the blurred motion behind her as though he had been a thousand miles away.

He lit a cigarette, drew on it once, found it no solace, and put it out again. Even the flicker of the match, which must have been like a yellow star shell bursting in the dark vault of the room behind her, failed to attract her attention, failed to reach her senses.

He drew in his underlip as one who inhales sudden coolness. He was frightened. Something cold was touching him, something unknown. He couldn't identify it, and so was helpless against it. His hand went to his head again, staved there a moment clutching at his hair in harassed futility.

Then he went slowly out onto the balcony behind her. He stood just at her back for a moment, and still she didn't see him, didn't sense his nearness. He let his hand

come to rest on her shoulder finally, gently, in order not to startle her.

At once she turned and looked at him, in perfect and continuing possession of her faculties. For a minute he had a terrible sensation that she didn't recognize him. Then it passed, along with the passing of whatever had caused it; he couldn't tell what that was. Something in her eyes, most likely.

"Can't you sleep?" he asked.

"I *was* asleep, but something woke me up. I don't know, I just seemed to come out here." She turned to look forward again, as though she couldn't refrain from it for very long, even with him at her shoulder.

"Have you been doing this very often at night? Other nights, when I didn't wake up?" He kept his voice casual, detached.

"I don't know. I suppose I have. I must have. Something seems to *pull* me out of my bed, and—and I come out here."

"I watched you just now, Mitty. You keep staring just at that, at that thing. Not over to the left, not over to the right, not down below us at the rooftops—not *anywhere* but just at that. Only at that, straight at that."

"I know," she said submissively.

"What is it, what does it?"

"I don't know."

"Do you hear anything?"

"No," she said waveringly. Then she confirmed the uncertainty of it by adding, "Don't you hear anything?"

His answer was a little flash of shock within himself.

"I guess it's in my own head," she quickly qualified it.

His hand tightened a little on her shoulder. "What is?"

"I don't know now any more. When I try to catch it, it keeps still."

He crouched down on his haunches beside her chair, like a tame bear. He tipped her face toward him with a finger to her chin. "That fever you once told me about—do you feel all right, Mitty?"

She answered the text of his question, but without doing him any good. "I feel all right."

He dropped his voice to a forlorn undertone meant for her inner ear alone. "There is something, Mitty. Last night when we were sitting here in the room—remember,

when I seemed to be reading that magazine? I wasn't, I was watching you over the top of it. There was a look on your face as though you were being *drawn* out that way, in that direction. It wasn't just that your head was turned. After a while you were actually leaning over that way in your chair, from the waist up. The upper part of you. As though something was tugging at you. I coughed, and you relaxed and sank back against your chair. I could see you didn't know it yourself. It mayn't sound like much, but—" His voice shook. "Won't you tell me what it is, what you feel?"

Her eyes were fixed limpidly on him, wide with helpless inability to succor him. "I can't tell you any more than I've already told you. I don't know. Larry, I don't know."

"But why don't you look at the sea? There is a sort of fascination in the sea, I could understand that. But why always in there, inland. to the back country? What is there about that? Can't you put it into words for me? Don't you love me enough to put it into words for me? I don't care what words, but just words—to take away this creepy nothingness!"

"I don't know." She always came back to the same thing again.

"I don't know my face is turning that way, until suddenly I find that it already has. I don't know my eyes are seeking it, until suddenly I find that they're already on it."

He straightened up, raised her to her feet. He had to draw her away after him with both arms. "Come inside, Mitty. Don't stay out here any more." He led her back into the darkness of their room. Then he stepped over to one side of the window. "Here, let me lower these blinds," he said tight-lipped.

"We won't get any air."

"I don't care. I don't want you to see that damned thing any more."

And as the blinds came rustling down, dismembering the night sky into parallel slivers, he did a strange thing there behind her back. A strange thing for a young husband to do. He shook his fist. Not at another man, trying to take his wife away from him, but at a mountain, crouching out there at the foot of the far-off horizon.

Chapter Nine

AGAIN a startled awakening. Again the receding tide of fear, the casting aside of the encumbering net. Again the velvet pall of the room. Everything the same, except that this was another night.

His eyes, piercing the gloom, sought her first on the balcony, in remembrance of the time before. She wasn't out there. The spidery little wrought-iron chair she had sat on stood empty. This time she was gone completely.

He crossed to the rail of the balcony and looked down. There was nothing there below, no one. Dark lanes running through a patchwork of tiled roofs interspersed with patio foliage; an entombed light or two here and there, standing guard in the silent watches of the night.

She couldn't possibly be down there. What would she do down there at this Godforsaken hour? But then, there were no other places for her to be but up here or down there. And up here she wasn't.

Turning from the rail, he trod on something soft and white he had not noticed lying there before. Her handkerchief, dropped on the balcony. So she had stood there by the rail a little earlier, as he was doing now.

He plunged back into the room, found the cumbrous light switch, and the uncertain electricity went on. Her nightdress clung to the rim of the bed, dripping down toward the floor, as though thrown from a distance and in a hurry. One slab of the ponderous wardrobe teetered open, and her dress was gone, the only one she had, the one she'd happened to have on that unlucky day she'd stepped off the boat.

The light only confirmed what the darkness had already told him. She'd gone out of this room. She'd dressed and gone out of here, into the night-bound town, while he lay asleep.

In a moment he had his trousers on, was out in the silent, shadowed hall, and then down the stairs to the

ground floor. He knew the answer and he was afraid to admit it to himself. The mountain.

He punched the bell on the untended desk with the whole side of his tightly fisted hand, and it exploded with a jangle in the stillness. A chair scraped somewhere out of sight, and the clerk came waveringly sleepily forward.

"Did my wife go by here? *Mi señora?*" He swept his hand along.

The clerk nodded. *Sí, señor.* I saw her go by a little while ago."

"Did she speak to you? Say anything?"

"No, *señor.* I bowed; she didn't seem to see me. I said something to her; she didn't seem to hear me. She was just looking out that way intently." He shrugged expressively. "*Salió.*"

Jones floundered out into the darkness of the street. He looked up and down it. He didn't even know which way to go. He chose a direction at random, and jogged along on the double. There was no one in sight around him. There was no sound but the scuff his own hurrying footfalls made. Then a low-hanging palm frond drooping over a wall got in his way, and he sliced it aside. It gave a venomous reptilian hiss, as though a raging boa constrictor had been looped over his head. He shivered and went on.

Something kept swelling inside his breast, and it had nothing to do with shortness of breath or the exertion of his run. Some sort of fright. Fear in the night. Fear of the night. Fear of strangeness. Fear of things that are not to be named.

After the first couple of blocks he couldn't hold it in any more. It burst from him between cupped hands, a hoarse cry of sheer, undiluted terror: "Mitty!" and went reverberating down the street, shocking the somnolent night.

That was no way for a grown man to call anyone, he knew; berserk, half crazed like that. He tried not to do it again.

It came again before he could stop himself.

"Mitty!"

He flung up his forearm, and that stifled it the third time.

A figure materialized from some doorway, approached, raising hand to headgear. This man wasn't like the police up north, snarling a challenge to noisemakers. He was deferent to the light-skinned outlander.

Jones veered and hurried to meet him, almost slobbering in his gratitude.

"A woman. An American woman. Have you seen her? Did she come this way?"

"Sí, señor. A woman by herself. She passed by here a little while ago. I stood and looked after her a long time. It was the first time I ever saw anything like that. I knew she must be an *americana*, for our women do not walk alone at night like that."

"Help me try to find her. I don't know my way around here."

"*Servicio, señor.*" He touched his cap again, and they started out together.

Sweat that wasn't just the sweat of hurrying or of heat was all over Jones's face, like pearls of agony.

He knew that it wasn't the mere fear of something happening to her, some bodily harm befalling her, that was wrenching at his vitals so. It was the strangeness of her doing it that had him so short-breathedly terrified.

They wavered there for a moment, in uncertainty.

"Where does this go? How far does it go?"

"Nowhere, *señor*. It just keeps going, out toward the mountains."

"Mitty!" was jarred from him again, as though his chest had been dynamited.

They went on again.

The town began to crumble to pieces around them, the bare earth to show through. A dog barked, off across a small patch of cultivated ground, roused by their distant passage, then subsided again.

The policeman touched him on the arm; his darker eyes had pierced farther ahead. "There she is, *señor*. Sitting on that tumbled wall, resting. See, straight before us?"

Jones came to a dead halt. "Go back now. I'll go the rest of the way alone. Here." He took out his wallet.

"No, *señor*. I haven't done anything."

"Here, please."

He went on toward her. She was like a part of the wall, she was so still. She was sitting there sidesaddle, one leg higher than the other. Always, sitting, walking, resting, she seemed to be looking *that* way, toward *that*. Never any other way but that.

"Mitty," he said quietly from a few yards away.

She turned. Lack of recognition, as on the balcony.

"Mitty, don't you know me?"

"Oh. Larry, where did *you* come from?"

"From the hotel. From our bedroom."

She stayed there, draped on the wall. Then as his hand sought hers, "Why is your hand shaking so? Look, it dances in mine."

He swallowed, unable to answer.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Larry? Your face is so white."

He brought his face close to hers, pleadingly. "What is it, Mitty? Tell me, what is it?"

She just looked at him, like a wondering child.

"Mitty, this didn't begin tonight. It's been growing more noticeable all the time. I can't talk like a book. I only know there's a line dividing strangeness from what isn't strange. I only know you're on one side of that line now, and I'm on the other."

He leaned his head against hers, in a sort of desolation. But the smile still held, for she was looking one way now, he another.

"Help me to help you, Mitty. I don't care what it is, how strange, or how bad, or how *anything* it is. But put it into words. I won't look into your face, if that'll make it easier for you; I'll keep my eyes like this, the other way. Talk to me as your husband. No secrets, no reservations, no separate identities between us. Just *one* of us, here on this wall in the moonlight. Don't let me stay this way, Mitty. I'm scared now about things I didn't even know existed before."

Wonderment, still only wonderment on her face. The wonderment of a child who hears a grownup talking but doesn't know what he means.

"What brought you out? Where were you going?"

"I don't know. I just felt drawn. Like when water carries you along."

"Didn't you know that every step was taking you farther away from our room, from where I was, from where you belonged? Didn't you know that shouldn't be?"

"I—I didn't think *behind* me. I only thought *forward*."

"But when were you coming back?"

He saw her try desperately to give the answer, and saw that she couldn't. That supplied it to him without her aid, and it was like a knife through him. She wasn't. She wouldn't have. Not if he hadn't overtaken her.

A tortured cry broke from him. "Oh, why don't they send that ship to take us out! There's something around here that's bad!"

He lifted her bodily in his arms, and turned away from the wall with her.

"I'm heavy, Larry. I can walk."

"No, I want to make sure of getting you back with me."

He started on the long return trip with her, walking slowly. The soft crunch of the powdered road dust under his feet was the only sound of their spellbound promenade. In the town ahead a church bell tolled the hour with infinite, age-old melancholy. As it must have tolled it two hundred years ago, on the same sort of night as this.

Down the rutted street he came, walking straight-legged with his burden, and he knew without looking at her that her head was turned, the whole way, to look back over his shoulder at the mountain.

As they passed the cantina its handful of inmates came out to the lighted doorway and stood there watching him go by. They stood there in a curious silence, without laughter or jeering remarks. And somehow he could sense what they were thinking, in a sudden spontaneous flare of kinship that flickered back and forth between him and them, overleaping the barriers of language and of race. Every man has his own penance to perform; this particular one's was to carry his prowling wife home in his arms, save her from the evil mysteries of the night. He saw some make the sign of the cross, in pitying awe.

They were not wrong, they were not wrong.

And as he turned the last corner with her, he could feel, by the shift of her bodily balance, her neck elongate, to cling to the last lingering view of it, before the walls closed in behind them to shut it out.

Chapter Ten

THE NATIVE DOCTOR, a swarthy, oily-skinned man with close-cropped black hair, wore a crash linen suit and an apricot silk shirt, the latter darker in some places than in others from too close adherence to his body. In the background Jones strode feverishly back and forth while the stethoscope shifted here, there, the next place, like a little bug hopping about on her.

The chair scraped back, the doctor rose. He went over to Jones, satchel in hand. They turned and went out the door together and stood in the dim hall beyond.

The doctor put down his satchel first of all. He shrugged in complete frustration. "She has nothing, *señor*. Why did you send for me? What was it?"

Jones motioned. "She went out. Out into the street alone. About an hour ago, in the middle of the night."

The doctor swept his hand out. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"But you don't understand—"

He broke off short, staring across the doctor's shoulder into the room they had just left. She'd quitted the bed, put on a thin wrapper, and gone out onto the balcony. It was growing lighter every minute. The sky was turning blue along the eastern horizon, where the mountain was, as though flickering gas flames had just been lit all along its contours.

He gripped the doctor's arm. "Look, that's it now. Always like that."

"The air is fresher out on the balcony."

"No. *La montaña*. Always *la montaña*. Every night, see what I mean?"

The doctor smiled. "The mountain attracts her?"

"It pulls her. She wants to go to it all the time. Can't you help me? Can't you tell me what it is?"

"But this is nothing. This is no illness. Many young women are dreamy like this. They have the too strong imagination. It is no more than a form of poesy."

"She wants to go to it. She wants me to *take* her to it." He poked his finger repeatedly in that direction, to make him understand. "Before you came, she asked me to. She got down on her knees and pleaded with me. I have never seen her like that before."

The doctor pondered, pursed his lips. "The climate down here on the seacoast is hard to bear. The change may do her good."

"But what's back there? I don't know anyone. I don't know where to go. It's no place to take a woman, is it?"

The doctor motioned into the distance. "All the way back, no. On the other side of it is a *tierra desconocida*, an unknown land. No one goes there, not women nor men either. The government, even, does not know what lies there. But on this side, just a little way out, to where begins the rise, is all right. Would be cooler."

He took out a card and began to write on the back of it.

"I have a friend has a coffee plantation out that way. One of your countrymen; American, like you. He comes down to coast sometimes on business. You go to him. He be glad to see you. He put you up."

He handed Jones the card. It had a name on it, Mallory, and underneath, "Finca La Escondida."

The doctor tapped his pocket. "You pay him a little something for your visit. He be glad to have you." He picked up his bag and turned to go.

Then he halted once more, a scant step away, to repeat, "Not all the way out. Not beyond there. Just that far and then back again." Cautioning with his finger, he pointed to the card. "You understand?"

Jones nodded. "Not past there. Only out to there and back." He looked down at the card, tapping it thoughtfully against his other hand. Then he raised his head and called after the doctor, "Why only that far? Why no farther?"

The doctor was gone. He had already turned the corner of the passage.

Jones stood there staring after him, down its empty length.

Not beyond there. Just out that far, but no farther. As though there were an invisible line drawn across the face of the earth as in some old tale of dark enchantment.

He went in again and back to her on the balcony. She

was seated now, but still looking toward the mountain. He let his hand trail to her shoulder. "You still want to go out that way?"

Her hand flew to his, atop her shoulder, as though to keep it from escaping.

"He knows some people out that way. I'll get in touch with them, see if I can make arrangements. We'll go, if you're that set on it, Mitty."

The worst thing about it, to him, was the avid way she tried to rear upright in her chair. He had to put both hands to her shoulders to hold her down.

His face was bitter as he stared out across the early-morning sky to where it reared, resplendent in new-minted hues. "You win, damn you," he said in a surly undertone. "Whatever you are."

Chapter Eleven

THE LITTLE narrow-gauge toy train, which had been threatening to expire for hours past during its laborious upward climb, finally gave up the ghost entirely with a single exhausted puff of steam, and this was the end of the line. The halt seemed to occur almost impromptu, in what was little better than a clearing with an open shed standing in the middle of it. Under the tin roof were numbers of bales. A few Indian women stood in the background, children strapped to their backs, looking on curiously. The rest was just close encroaching jungle wall.

Jones stood up and stepped down to the ground without further ado, the car being open on one side and the seats placed lengthwise, as in some old-fashioned summer trolley cars up north. He helped her down after him and they stood there a moment looking around them vaguely.

A man was already coming toward them with the leisurely certainty of someone who has only one train to meet and only one possible pair of passengers on that train to accost.

His skin was the regional saddle tan, but as he came into closer focus his cast of feature became more synony-

mous with the American origin the doctor had ascribed to him. He had on corduroy trousers and a flannel shirt, and a peculiarly shapeless felt hat that looked as though it had been endlessly waterlogged.

"Mr. Jones? I'm Mallory. Glad to see you."

They pumped hands. There may not have been much to him, sartorially or otherwise, but Jones rather took to him at sight. He had a keenness and steadiness of eye, set deep within a perpetual and apparently ineradicable squint, that inspired confidence.

"This is my wife."

Mallory tipped his mobile hat brim to her without elevating the crown part from his head.

To her he was obviously of less interest than their inanimate surroundings. She smiled parenthetically and went on looking absorbedly around her.

He turned his attention back to Jones again. He didn't look like a man who felt particularly at ease with women, anyway. "Well, I guess we may as well get started. You both ride, don't you?"

"Oh, isn't this it here?"

Mallory smiled a little, good-naturedly. "Not anywhere near it. This is only a little better than halfway. This is still lowland country to us." He led them over to one side, where there was a gap through the canopy of foliage. "You can see it from here." The tilt of the ground was continually upward. "See where the line of vegetation stops, and that brown dryness starts in? That's us. Right along the edge there."

"Pretty far up," Jones commented.

"Last cultivated patch out. After us, nothing."

Jones was watching her covertly while Mallory talked to him. She was happy, he could see that. It was written all over her. Something about this whole thing pleased her. She was pleased with the scene around her, pleased with him (the way she twined herself about his arm showed that), pleased with everything. She was more like herself than she had been at any time since they'd left the boat. That was all that mattered.

He launched the thought on a sigh of doubt without noticing it himself.

Mallory whistled and a "boy" came forward bringing their horses. The designation was strictly occupational;

he was probably older than either of the two men. Mallory introduced him one-sidedly. "This is Pascual, from up at our place." A flash of white teeth split Pascual's face.

They mounted and set off single file, along a dirt track that was about the width of a single wheel rut. Pascual went first, to indicate the way, although this was hardly necessary so long as the closely knit foliage hemmed them in. Then came Mitty, then the two men considerably to the rear.

The two of them spoke in desultory snatches.

"Have many people come out to visit you like this?"

"Not often. There's nothing to bring them here. . . . Your wife's a good horsewoman."

"Wish I could say the same for myself."

"We'll be able to make better time once we get up a little farther; it's not so overgrown."

Finally he asked Jones, "You down here on business?"

"My business is waiting for me up in Frisco. Was, I should say. We missed our ship down at Puerto, had to wait over for the next one."

Mallory gave him a rueful look. "What do you think of Puerto?"

Jones expressively sliced his finger across his own neck.

Mallory nodded dourly. "I agree with you there. I can't stand the place myself. Haven't been down there in eighteen months now."

Funny life for a white man, Jones reflected, looking him over. He wondered how long he'd been down here, but didn't ask him.

And that was about the sum total of their conversational exchange during the entire three-hour ride.

They came into the enclosure or compound fronting the ranch house at a desultory trot, three abreast. It had grown dark some time before, but considerably later than it did down in Puerto Santo. An oxidized green glint still manifested itself along the lower reaches of the western sky, where the sun had last been, as though a powerful chemical agent had tarnished it over that way.

"We're up higher, the evening sun stays with us longer," Mallory mentioned.

Pascual dismounted and took charge of their horses as they followed his example.

Jones couldn't get a very good idea of the place in the blue dusk that cloaked it. Before them he could make out a whitewashed building glimmering wanly at them, a wooden veranda running along the front of it, the green-yellow of oil lamplight peering from its open doorway and slitted window blinds. An Indian woman was making great to-do on the veranda steps, floundering about, dipping her head, and jabbering unintelligibly—evidently Mallory's housekeeper welcoming them. Off to one side was a huddle of ramshackle structures, *jacales* or little lean-to huts of adobe, plaited bamboo, and even empty gasoline tins and packing cases, thatched with palm and banana fronds—evidently the workers' quarters. Over to the other side of the main dwelling, forming the third arm of the quadrangle, was a long shedlike structure with a corrugated tin roof, part of which was used as a stable for the horses and the rest as a warehouse for storing the sacks of green coffee beans. Overhead the gorgeous, mountainside stars seemed to hang low enough to touch, filling the sky like bursting white raisins.

"Come on in and find out the worst at once," Mallory invited in that dry manner of his.

"My legs are dead up to the hips," Jones admitted, stamping them on the ground to get them to work before he raised them to the veranda steps.

Mitty had already gone in at a little quick step, as though she owned the place, the Indian housekeeper ingratiatingly at her heels.

There was a large central room, entered directly from the veranda, which bisected the rambling, one-story structure. One wing, leading off this, was evidently Mallory's own quarters.

"Your room is over on this side," he said, leading them into the other wing. "We're not very fancy up here. You understand how it is." He opened a door to reveal a rather shadowy interior, plank-floored and timber-roofed and almost barren but for a decrepit mahogany bed and a truncated chest, topped by a twinkling oil lamp, which cast alternate rays and shafts of shadow around it like the spokes of a wheel.

"Come out when you get hungry," Mallory said, and withdrew down the hall.

Jones looked around him, and then at her.

It was only slightly more primitive than the hotel, after all. She was taking deep breaths, as though she couldn't get enough of the air, as though it were something pertaining to her that she had done without for a long time. Unconsciously, her head was even tilted back a little, to be able to draw upon it more freely.

He tried to turn the little wheel of the oil lamp, to bring it up higher. He turned it the wrong way first, and it nearly went out altogether. Then he corrected himself, and brightened it the way he wanted to. The spokes of shadow lessened and the rays widened. Her face came into view more clearly. Her eyes were liquidly vivacious; that lacklustre quality that had clouded them so often down on the coast was gone. And her face itself wore that most infrequent of all its expressions, which he had so seldom seen on it before now: She was smiling.

"How's this?" he said. "Better?"

"Better. Much better."

He didn't mean the oil lamp, and he could tell she didn't either.

Maybe I took the curse out of it, he thought.

Chapter Twelve

THERE WAS a fourth place laid at the table, Jones noticed when they came in. He thought for a moment it must be intended for some assistant of Mallory's, perhaps a foreman or overseer that he had on the place. When the three of them had seated themselves, however, it still remained vacant.

Mallory gave a crooked grin, as if enjoying some little private thought of his own. "Bashful," he murmured elliptically. "I suppose I'll have to go in there and— We don't get to see many people out here, and when you're alone too much you get sort of skittish of strangers."

He got up, went over to the door opposite the side from which they had emerged, and called through into some distant and hollow-sounding beyond: "Chris!"

His son, Jones supposed. There had been a note of

paternal pride discernible underneath the mock impatience.

There was a wait. The doorway remained empty for a moment longer, while Mallory came back to the table and reseated himself. Then suddenly there was a lovely, slim thing standing in it, confused, uncertain whether to come forward or dart back out of sight again.

The clothing was that of a boy, the form wearing it a girl's. She may have been eighteen; she looked about sixteen, and acted like fourteen. Her hair was as blonde as Mitty's was black; her eyes as blue as Mitty's were dark. There was a little bowknot of freckles high up on each cheek, and they formed a bridge across the top of her nose. But they weren't very thick or distinct; just a scattering, like gold pollen on the apricot-tan bloom the sun had given her fair complexion.

She was as tall as she would ever be, but she still had to fill out; she had retained a child's spareness of figure. She looked as though the span of a single hand would have been enough to encompass her waist.

It was her youngness that was so breath-taking, as she stood in that doorway, unconsciously framed there for them to look at. She was youngness itself, in all its awkward grace, all its gauche charm, all its eternal evanescence; abashed, self-conscious, embarrassed, tormented—yet able in an instant, at a smile or a word, to become daring, sure, self-oblivious, ecstatically delighted. And most often being a little of both at one and the same time.

Youngness personified, looking in at them. The number of her years had nothing to do with it; it was her spiritual state.

"Come in, Chris," her father encouraged. "These people won't eat you." He dropped Jones a deprecating wink, on the side of his face away from her.

She came forward faltering, "I couldn't find my—" She didn't finish the lame little excuse, which none of them believed anyway. She had probably been ready for hours before, and watching for their arrival from behind the shutters.

"Chris, this is Mr. and Mrs. Jones," Mallory introduced.

"You promised," she breathed, in a private little re-

buke to him that she tried to keep them from overhearing.

"Oh, I forgot," he blurted out clumsily. "Excuse me—Christine."

The apricot tan deepened momentarily to full-fledged rose, then lightened again to what it had been. "Chris is a boy's name," she said defensively. "It was all right when I was young, but—"

Mallory nodded in grave accord. "That's true, I see what you mean; but now that you're venerable and stately—"

"Christine's a lovely name," Mitty offered tactfully. "I used to know a girl—" She began to talk to her, to put her at her ease.

Jones, turning his own attention exclusively to Mallory, to permit the effort to proceed even more successfully, but glancing at her occasionally, could see the diffidence melting away like snow in a hot sun. The only regrettable thing about it, he reflected, was that it would never come again, it was gone for good—at least with them. That first minute in the doorway was already gone. They had made her that much older. It was like quicksilver, that quality of being young; even as you looked at it, it had already grown a little older before your very eyes.

Mitty was already up and stirring when he opened his eyes the next morning, although the mists of dawn were still swirling about the place, inside and out. The coolness of the early morning at this altitude was delicious. It smelled of ferns and dew.

"Some improvement, isn't it?" he greeted her cheerfully. "After that caldron we've been stewing in until now. I'm glad I called that doctor fellow in that night."

"Come on," she said. "Do you want to come with me for a ride? I've been outside already, and that boy that rode up with us yesterday is bringing a couple of the horses around."

He groped for his shoes along the floor, interrupted himself to plant a hand against his writhing back. "I'm still stiff from yesterday, but I suppose one of the quickest ways of getting rid of it is to get stiff all over again today."

She shifted weight from foot to foot in the doorway. "Hurry up, don't take so long. Oh, never mind your tie!"

"That was just habit," he grinned, casting it behind him. "Gosh, you're impatient, aren't you?" He liked to see her that way. It was better than all that broody stuff down on the coast.

The two horses were outside waiting for them, Pascual afoot between them. Early as he'd thought it was, he found Mallory already on the veranda.

"Going for a ride, I see. Want me to send Pascual with you?"

"No, why bother? You might need him around the place here. We'll just lope out a way, turn around, and come back again."

She was already mounted. She shook her unbound hair back, like a rippling mane. "Come on, Larry, you take so long to get started."

"I haven't got the sleep out of my eyes yet," he grimaced.

She wheeled and trotted off, without waiting. She and her horse cast a great blue shadow athwart the ground, against the preliminary rosy fuming of the still unrisen sun.

Mallory said, with an air of casual indifference that somehow didn't quite go over altogether successfully, "Might be a good idea not to go too far off the *finca*. Plenty of room for you to work out your horses inside its limits."

Jones stopped with his foot to the stirrup. "Why?" he asked. "Any particular reason?"

"Oh, no, no particular reason. Just that I figured you were riding on empty stomachs and wouldn't want to be out too long. You know, distances can be deceptive in this clear mountain air."

Jones had a feeling he hadn't quite meant that, but saw no reason for lingering there to lock conversational horns with him, especially since Mitty was by now nearly out of sight.

He overtook her only with a good deal of difficulty, and as he finally came up alongside he inquired ruefully, "Hey, are we supposed to be riding together or separately?"

"Why, I was holding him in waiting for you," she jeered.

"Oh, you were, Miss Valkyrie! Well, try to catch up with this." He spurred to a slingshot velocity for a brief, dust-raising stretch. In no time she had shot past him.

"Try to catch up with what?" she inquired coolly when she had again allowed him to overtake her.

"Where'd you learn to ride like that?" he grunted.

"Fredericks taught me."

He promptly let the subject drop, as he invariably did whenever that name came into it.

"Look," she said presently, as they ambled on, "isn't this worth coming out to see?"

A curious piebald shadow-and-lividness had developed across the landscape as the sun progressed in its ascent. There was something unreal about it, like a stage setting bathed in colored spotlights and viewed from the dimness behind the footlights. For they were so close in under the slope of the mountain, in fact midway up on it and of it itself, that the sun for them had not yet been able to top its crest, and where they were was still blue shade, save for a few flesh-toned fissures here and there. Yet miles below and behind them, sunlight already blazed in undiluted strength, and luminous zones of coral-pink, fuchsia, magenta, and orange-gold glowed up at them, like vivid tiles or the patches of a shimmering crazy quilt.

"We get it later than the lowlands do," he murmured.

"It looks later down there to the eye, and yet we can already see it right now from where we are, before we've caught up to it ourselves. That's what gives you that curiously unreal feeling," she analyzed.

They went on again. There was no such thing as a bridle path, of course. They had to pick their own way, improvising as they went, but the terrain was fairly passable. They were already too high up here for any full-fledged jungle.

"There it comes now," she said. "Watch. It's breaking cover."

It topped the crest, like a geyser, spraying the slopes with white and silver brightness, and suddenly all the remaining shadow had been swept off them at once and was gone, not to reappear again until night brought it back.

He squinted, turned his head aside, and said, "Whew! It's sure strong."

Almost immediately, as in a desert, heat became noticeable. Not the enervating, humid heat they had escaped from on the coast, but a dry, baking heat, absorbed by the boulders and rocky, arid mountainside soil and given back again, as by bricks in an oven, in refracted exhalations that caused the air to quiver.

She turned and pointed behind them down the mountainside. "Look. Look how far we've come. Look back, you can see nearly the whole *finca* down there below us. Look, see their little hats, where they're picking the berries? Like pin points. And you can see the roof of the house—and those little things around it must be the shacks. It's like looking at something through the wrong end of a telescope."

They had already put a considerable distance between themselves and the outermost limits of the plantation's cultivated area, discernible from here solely by the difference in coloring, the dark green of the bushes.

"We'd better turn back now, hadn't we? He said not to—"

"Not to what?"

"Not to stay out too long if we want anything to eat."

She curled her lip. "I'd rather keep on riding than eat, wouldn't you? It's early yet. Come on, just another quarter of an hour."

He offered no objection, although his acquiescence was somewhat unwilling. The terrain around them was diamond-clear in the sunlight. It seemed ridiculous to think there could have been any guarded warning implicit in Mallory's parting remark. Probably he'd only been afraid they'd lose their way, on their first unaccompanied ride around here.

She'd gone ahead again. He watched her from the rear. She rode with her head tilted back, scanning the mountaintops, imminent now and not remote, with a good deal of that same fixed intensity she had so often shown at their window and on their balcony down on the coast. It was less disturbing up here because, for one thing, it was more natural for her to look on ahead like that, and for another, the act of riding took some of the static melancholy out of it.

His horse's bit began to lather. He reined in. "Mitty, this is far enough," he called out to her. "Let's go back. The horses need watering."

She waved a casual, reassuring hand to him without turning her head. "There's a little spring in a hollow just over the next rise. They can drink there. Come on, I'll show you."

He didn't get it for fully a minute or two. Most likely the offhand manner in which she had said it had something to do with the blunting of his perceptions. She had gone down out of sight into one of the frequent recessions they had been encountering all along. By the time he had topped it in turn and joined her down at the bottom, she was already off her horse and watering it at a little struggling freshet that spilled from the rock formation, formed a little pool, meandered for a few laborious feet, and then disappeared again underground, whence it had come.

He was already in the act of dismounting before it finally hit him, as if by a sort of delayed timing. It rocked him. He left his saddle unsteadily and stood there looking at her half frightenedly, his hands against his horse's neck, as if to help him support himself.

"How did you know the spring would be here?" he asked hoarsely.

She looked from him to the spring, uncertainly. "I don't know. Well, it is here, isn't it?"

"I know it's here. But how did *you* know it was going to be? We only got here last night! We never came up this way before in our lives!"

"Larry, don't get so frightened always!" she tried to remonstrate. "Your face is starting to sweat."

"It's the ride," he said, brushing an inattentive forearm past it. He tried to pull himself together. "I guess Mallory told you, is that it?" But how could he tell her just *where*? He wondered, even as he said it.

She shook her head. "I didn't speak to him before we left. You saw me go."

He slumped down on a flat rock and let his shoulders go concave. He tried to light a cigarette, and he lost it between his fingers. The second one he caught just in time.

She came over and put a hand on his shoulders in a sort of mute consolation. He didn't look up at her.

"Maybe you heard it before it came in sight," he said gloomily, looking down at the glinting, mica-flecked ground.

"Yes, maybe. I—I guess that must have been it."

She hadn't, and she knew it. She was just saying that to try to make him feel better. The spring made hardly any sound. Even this close to it you could hear only the slightest occasional gurgle.

"Maybe your horse—"

But her horse hadn't spoken, she had.

She had gone back again and was letting drops fall through her cupped hands. "Try some," she offered. "It's refreshing."

"I don't want to drink from the damned thing!" he exclaimed with a resentful cast of his arm toward her. "It's spooked!"

For him all the peace and joy had gone out of their ride. *That* was starting in again. That—he didn't know what to call it—that strangeness.

They were silent for a while after that. She was busy with her thoughts, and he with his. His had to do with her, but somehow he knew, he could have sworn, that hers had nothing to do with him; he had no place in them. What they were he couldn't think, and almost didn't want to know. His belly was full enough of this strangeness already. He wanted no more of it just then, if he could help it.

He slumped on the edge of this flat, slablike-stone, his back to her and the brimming concentric circles of the little pool, his hand bent over and weighted down as if by the heaviness of the disregarded cigarette that dangled from it. Though he didn't look at her to see, he could tell what she was doing, what posture she had fallen into, by her sharply inked shadow on the sun-whitened ground, which fell well forward beyond him. She was sitting at the pool's edge, with her knees bent upward before her and her arms folded about them. She was not looking down at the pool before her. Her head was tilted upward, almost back, and he knew what she must be looking at to elevate it so. There was only one thing higher, and that would have been the open sky itself, directly overhead.

She was looking up at the outlined crest of the mountains—of this mountain, at any rate—just up ahead of them. It seemed very close, now, very easy to attain.

His teeth locked, then shifted over so that the two parts of his jaw were askew, then locked once more. What was this never-ending nostalgia for the unknown and the beyond and the just-over-the-rise? This triangle formed by him and her and the metaphysical, in which he came out a poor third!

He looked at her broodingly, as she lay upon the ground, cut out in black litmus paper. A strange aberration, a momentary optical illusion coursed through his mind and then left it again. There was something aboriginal about the silhouette. Perhaps the arid surroundings, the little pool, the shadows of the two horses in the background had something to do with it. The attitude of patient contemplation, the crouched figure she made suggested a Bedouin huddled waiting at a well in an Old World desert or a Navajo squatting immobile by an Arizona water hole.

Then the impression flitted on its way again; he was getting like her, he told himself.

He got up and went over to the pool and stood looking down at it. It was very small. There was a permanent dimple in the middle of it, and circles kept spreading out from this, never resting, never stopping. He tapped his foot along the margin of it, with a sort of latent animosity, as if to see what it was, what it was doing here, how she had come to know of it. It told nothing. It was nothing; just a finger's width of water running out of the mountainside, circling a little, then draining off again back where it had come from.

He flung his cigarette down into it. The paper turned gray as it took the water. It went slowly around three times, each time in a wider circle, then found the rill that drained off the pool, escaped through it, and was lost to sight.

He felt like spitting into the water, as one does into an enemy's face, but he didn't.

She continued to look upward, only upward.

"Come on," he said. "It must be nearly eleven. We'll never get back."

"We could have gone farther," she said dreamily. "Do you see that cleft up ahead there? I wonder where that leads to. I bet you can see right through to the other side."

"Come on. Never mind that now." He was terse about it.

He mounted, waited long enough to see her gain her feet, then wheeled and started up the shallow saucer-like tilt on the downward side, over which their way back lay.

He glanced back from the top, and she was putting foot to stirrup. He dropped on down out of sight, on their homeward way. Then in a moment more, when she should have overtaken him and there was no approaching trot in the wake of his own, he stopped, circled, and went inquiringly back to the top again.

Her horse's head and her own came up above the ridge simultaneous to his own arrival, but she was on the far side, continuing on up the mountainside, going from him instead of coming toward him. He couldn't believe his own eyes. "Mitty!" he called hoarsely. "What are you doing?"

At the sound of his voice she suddenly broke into a furious, toiling, upward scamper, her horse's hoofs spilling little trickles of stone down at every straining fall. The horse wasn't running away with her, or it would not have chosen that difficult direction. She was the one directing its heroic efforts. He could even see the scissoring effect her knees made gouging into it, from where he was.

He put on a burst of speed, plunged down into shallow trough and up again, and went scrambling up the far side after her, the up-ended ground rattling and sidling as it passed between them like a moving belt.

She took a deal of overtaking. He only overhauled her, finally, by driving his own horse to the uttermost. Even then he had to partly block her off, and reach out and snatch the reins from her hand, to get her to come to a stop. He quickly jumped down and pulled her off after him. She came down in his arms, inert, passive, like a sack, still looking upward to the last toward the goal she had set for herself.

He had to shake her to try to get her to look at him. "What's the matter with you? I can't stand any more of this! It's starting to— Will you look at me? Will you tell me what's wrong with you?"

She strained away from him even in his very arms, in a stubborn, wordless sort of way.

He couldn't do anything with her. "Mitty, stop it! Stand still. You're not well. I'm going to get you out of here. Now come on, I'm taking you back to the *finca* with me."

"I want to go. Let me go. I want to go up there. I want to see what's on the other side."

"Mitty." His voice was tightening up.

Her head rolled loosely around on her shoulders, though the eyes remained open. "I want to see the white-haired mother of us all," he thought he heard her say. "The snow-capped lady is calling to me. I want to see Coatli again."

Suddenly his open hand had swung in sharply, slapped her on the face.

She fell motionless. He looked down at her. Neither of them said anything. It was the first passage of violence there had ever been between them.

He motioned her to climb up on his horse, braced her, placed her on the forepart of the saddle, and mounted directly behind her. Then he started down with her that way, leading her riderless horse alongside by its bridle.

They didn't speak. Their heads were very close together all the way back. Their heads never once touched.

Chapter Thirteen

HE CAME OUT, closing the door of their room quietly after him. He was restless, he couldn't sleep. She had retired some time before. Whether she was asleep or not he couldn't tell. Most likely not; he'd detected two studs of glistening brightness set into the dim outline of her face, where it lay motionless on the pillow, as if her eyes were open in the gloom.

He had a strange feeling that he couldn't remember ever having had before where she was concerned. He hadn't wanted to stay in the room with her. He wanted

to be away from her, for a little, by himself, or more preferably still, with just another man. Someone to talk with for a while, uncomplicated, simple, as he was. One of his own kind. Someone he could feel relaxed with, without having to be on guard every moment, watchful of every sound or sign he made. That sort of feeling.

He drew a deep breath, without being aware of it himself, and went out on the veranda.

A figure motionless against one of the uprights turned its head, and the half-swallowed grunt of greeting told him it was Mallory. That was what he wanted, someone like that to talk to.

He went over to him, and they went through the small, friendly traffic of preparing to have a smoke together.

Mallory's eyes met his questioningly over their mutual match flare in the darkness, as though sensing that Jones wanted to ask him something.

He took a minute or two, and finally began, "I suppose you know the ground pretty well—er, over there on the upslope?"

Mallory took another moment or two to answer. "As well as anyone, I guess."

"Did you know there was a well, a sort of pool, up there at one place?"

"No, there's no water up that way. It's dry as a bone. It's the first time I've heard of it, if there is one." He waited a while; then, since nothing more was forthcoming, he said, "Why, did you happen to find one up around there?"

"Yes, we found one up there this morning," Jones said. He thought about it for a while. "I suppose some of your workmen around here would know of it, though."

But if she couldn't talk Spanish and they couldn't talk English, how could they have told her about it anyway?

"They might," Mallory admitted. "Though I still claim to know as much or more about my own place than anyone else on it."

Jones watched the paleness of his smoke trail off into the darkness past the veranda rail. "What's on the other side of that rise, anyway?" he asked presently.

Mallory took a long time about answering, as though weighing his words. "*Tierra de los Muertos*," he murmured at last. "The Land of the Dead. That's the hands'

name for it, anyway. It's supposed to be peopled by ghosts, evil spirits."

Jones chuckled a little. Mallory, he noticed, didn't join him in it.

"It's got a bad reputation," Mallory went on quietly. "Every once in a while someone disappears around here. Then they blame it on the other side of the mountains. Some of them even claim to have seen the spirits of phantom warriors slinking along the skyline at night, and to have heard ghost drums pounding the still air. I don't take any stock in native superstitions myself, but it's undoubtedly true that from time to time somebody does vanish."

"Lose their way and die of exposure, I suppose," Jones supplied. "Or a wild animal gets them. But then when they come across them—or their remains—again, doesn't that prove to them it had nothing to do with the mountains?"

The *finca* manager didn't answer immediately. Then he shook his head a little. "They never do come across them again," he murmured. "They never have yet."

They'd reached the well again.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go back now. This is our usual turning-around place."

She made no move to follow. "No, I want to go on to that cleft."

He reached over and caught her horse by the bridle, abruptly. He held it fast that way, drawn in protectively close to his own. "It's a good additional half hour's ride, at least, as close as it looks from here. You won't see anything different from there than you already do from here."

"But why don't you want to go?"

"Because I say so. Don't ask me why."

Suddenly, for no reason that he could account for, a clash of wills was in the making. It had nothing to do with domination. He could feel some uncertain element stiffening his determination against her, uneasiness or even a slight tincture of fear. He tugged commandingly at the gripped bridle and her horse came around obediently in company with his own.

"Mitty, look at me. Listen to what I'm saying. I'm get-

ting sick of this spooky nonsense. I forbid you to go any farther up that way. Today or any other time.

He was surprised at his own starkness of voice.

He had strayed down by the native workers' shacks. There was nothing there, but he was at loose ends with himself. A chicken paused in its pecking about to quirk its head at him quizzically, one claw furred off the ground. An elderly woman, on her knees kneading moist meal with a stone roller down an inclined stone, looked up and grinned at him, showing blackened tooth crevices.

He grinned back and stood watching her. She sprinkled a little water on the meal and rolled it thin. A youngster came to the doorless opening of the *jacal* behind her, his stomach thrust forward under a faded yellow shirt, and stood gaping at him. Another joined him, in a faded green shirt. Then a third, without any shift at all. A woman's voice called out something inside the hut, and the three of them disappeared.

He found nothing to interest him and went on from there after a moment or two of loitering about. Down a way farther in the pleasant heat of the sunlight, strong but not wilting up here as it was down on the coast, he passed the well where they got their water. It had a little parapet of cemented pumice stones built around it, and a little shed structure over it to keep the sun off. Then a little farther on there were a number of scrubby trees gathered together in one place, struggling, rather than growing, out of the sloped ground. They were too few to be called a grove, but they cast a light stenciling of shade about in this one place. He sat down under one of them and leaned his back against it, and let his eyes stray down the descending lines of coffee bushes, with small figures moving along them here and there.

He didn't hear her step behind him until she was already standing there at his back.

"Hello," she said shyly.

There was a shade of formality lingering there that she had long ago discarded with Mitty.

She came around in front of him and sat down beside him.

He looked at her with a sort of approving disapproval. The approval was for her appearance in general, the dis-

approval for a new detail he had not noticed before. "Where'd you get that?" he challenged her, almost as though he were her father.

There was a crumbling and inexpert tracing of red overlapping her mouth, in particular her upper lip. It had slipped its moorings several times.

"Mitty—Mrs. Jones—gave me one of hers."

He shook his head a little. He felt like saying, "Why don't you leave yourself alone? Don't you know there isn't an older woman in the world who wouldn't give anything to be just as you are at this moment? Don't you know you're going to lose that soon enough, and never get it back?" But he didn't. It was none of his business.

"I think she's wonderful," she said. "I wish I could be like her."

"Why not be just the way you are? No two people can be alike."

"You married her suddenly, didn't you?"

"How'd you know that?"

"She told me." She sighed wistfully. "I think that's awfully romantic."

"I did, too." He realized he'd used the past tense. "I mean, I—guess it is."

Presently he became aware of something. Or thought he did. He waited a moment to confirm it. "Why do you keep looking at me like that?"

"Because I like to look at you." She didn't smile.

He tried to change the subject. "Is that good for you, to keep eating so many of those green coffee beans?"

"I just chew them and spit them out. You haven't been watching. What did you think I was doing when I kept turning my head away like that?"

The conversation lapsed for a few moments. He thought idly, What do you talk about with kids that age?

Suddenly she had reared to her knees, inching closer. "A caterpillar just got on you. Wait, don't move. I'll get it off. I can see it and you can't. It's on your collar, around at the back." She picked up a twig. "Keep your head over that way."

He could feel the twig lightly brushing him once or twice. Finally he said, "It's taking you a long time. My neck is getting stiff."

"He won't get on it. He keeps wanting to go on straight down your collar."

He turned back. "There isn't anything there."

She laughed, a little shakily. "I just said there was. I don't know why."

He looked in another direction and swallowed.

Presently she said, "I like to watch you smoke a cigarette. I like to watch everything you do. I like to watch my father, too, but—I don't know—I like to watch you in a different way than I like to watch him."

I suppose they all have to go through this stage, he thought remorsefully. I should be some kid her own age, but she's been so cut off out here—

He reached out and chucked her under the chin, mechanically, without any meaning.

Instantly her smile died, and she looked at him with a sort of wistful gravity. Her face moved forward slightly, toward his own, then drew back again.

He looked full at her for a minute, with a sort of inflexibility in the expression of his eyes. Then he got up.

"Come on, we're going back now," he said quietly.

He took her by the hand and led her firmly along with him, out at a little distance, as you do with a child who has been misbehaving.

Chapter Fourteen

THEIR ROOM was still deeper in the throes of drawn than on other mornings when he awakened, yet she had already risen and gone out before him, he saw when he opened his eyes. He thought she might be waiting for him on the veranda, but when he dressed and went out there, there was no sign of her. He called to Pascual, and the latter came shuffling across the violet-tinted compound bringing a single horse with him.

"The *señora* go already?"

"*Si, señor.*"

"Why did you let her go alone?"

"She said you would follow. She said not to trouble, that she knew the way."

He might have known she'd do something like this, he told himself. He mounted and set off fast, along the familiar uptrail they took together every day.

Incredible dawn colors began to streak the slopes as he went along, but his face was sullen against their vivid glow. There were gashes of flesh pink, coral, and mauve, and overhead a sky that glistened like light-blue cellophane. More of that will-o'-the-wisp stuff, like down at Puerto Santo, he kept thinking.

By the time he'd come to the spring, the sun had cleared the crest, the rainbow tints were gone, and the entire terrain around him had taken on a bisque monotone. He stopped there briefly and let his horse drink. Well, she'd got that cleft out of her system, at least. Maybe after this there wouldn't be any more attraction to it.

He went on up from there, breaking new trail now for the first time. There was still no sign of her anywhere ahead. The cleft, as he finally neared it, proved to be somewhat in the nature of an optical illusion. That is to say, from below, from where they'd been before, it might have seemed to be a sharp notch, an indentation in the billowing horizon line above. Now it became simply a curved, semicircular aisle or lane, running between two moundlike elevations of ground, one partially telescoped behind the other. It was the superimposition of their tops that made a little dip in the skyline, but they were actually not abreast; one was forward of the other. In between them wound a little curving gully, of no great depth, scarcely deep enough to hide a rider's head from view when he was mounted. A great many little scrub bushes dotted the ground up here, and, uneven as it was, it was on the horizontal plane now, no longer sharply tilted. Somewhere beyond, the mountain must begin to descend again, into that mystic valley that had them all so terrified.

His shadow and his horse's rippled along the side of the mound beside him as he rode along the little depressed track, undulating fluidly over scrub bushes, boulders, and lumps of sun-baked earth.

And then as he slowly circled and the domelike impediment sidled rearward on its axis, she suddenly came into view.

She had dismounted and her horse was nudging at one of the bushes off to one side of her. She was kneeling beside what at first sight seemed to be a cone-shaped pile of stones. Her outlines were thinned, colorless, almost transparent, unlike the horse, which stood out boldly black, although it was only a yard or two away from her. It was as though she were veiled with dust, and he couldn't tell what was causing it, for it blended so with the color of the barranca around her that it was invisible save where her own figure gave its filmy texture background.

Then when he looked upward, over her, he saw that it wasn't dust, for it didn't hang listlessly inert against the sky but rose in agile activity straight upward. It was faint smoke from a fire.

As he came on toward her he saw her open a furled horse blanket that she had brought along with her, and fling it down with both hands so that the orifice of the stones was covered. Her figure cleared into its full color strength, and the upper smoke against the blue of the sky was erased as if by a gigantic puff of breath. Then she drew the blanket off again, and haze once more fumed from the stones. She turned to greet him as he dismounted, holding the blanket doubled and stretched out between her hands. There was something vainglorious in her attitude.

He nudged his toe against the odd-looking cone of stones, the hollow in its middle as deep and as perfectly rounded as though it had been cemented by hand. Scattered about lay twigs and branches of numerous small bushes that she must have uprooted with her bare hands.

He looked at her curiously. "What did you light that for? Are you cold?"

"No, I—I just came across this sort of kiln here and I thought I'd like to try it out. Those bushes burn wonderfully."

"But how'd you know what it was for? You can hardly tell what it is now, even with the fire in it."

"I don't know; it just seemed to be for that and nothing else." She gathered up a few more twigs and dropped them in.

She watched for a moment. "Now it's gaining strength," she said. She tilted her head back admiringly. "Look. Look how straight up it goes. So thin and clear. Like a ribbon. Now watch when I do this."

She took the blanket and flung it down, stifling the orifice.

The slender column stopped short. It continued to rise, but the break in it rose with it, ending it as it went. Then as she raised the blanket it shot upward again.

He laughed a little. "What are you trying to do, send signals by Morse code?"

"I don't know the Morse code," she said gravely. She recapped it again, waited, and withdrew it once more.

"Then what are you doing, making up a code of your own as you go along?"

"I don't know any code of my own."

"Then how do you know when to bring the damper down and when to take it off again?"

"I don't. My arms just seem to do it of their own accord." She stared bemusedly upward, fascinated by her own handiwork.

"Come on," he said, "that's enough." He sounded irritated about it even to himself. He kicked his foot down into the stones, scattering burning brands and smoldering twigs. A dozen separate little skeins of smoke now rose, but not strong enough to reach past the skyline, as the one main one previously had. They died with the faltering little sparks that caused them.

He remounted, waited until she had done so too, and stood aside until she had gone ahead, then turned and rode after her, as if ushering her away.

They rode that way, one behind the other, back along the curving gully, and out, and down the outside slope, in silence. He hadn't said a word about her riding off without waiting for him, or about her going on beyond the water hole in spite of his forbidding her the time before. Both things were in his mind, nevertheless.

They were halfway down to the well when she stopped short suddenly. She was looking back, her horse held as rigidly motionless as her body was. Her eyes gazed past him, into the upper distance. He turned around on his saddle to look with her.

It was rising again, the same sort of slender wavering

line against the spotless sky as when they had been up there. A finger of smoke, attenuated upward into nothingness.

But it was not the same one they had just left back there. That one had not kindled again.

This time it was coming from behind—from the other side of the cleft—miles and miles off in the distance.

As he looked, a clean break, a cessation, ran up through it. It had ended, as cleanly as if snipped off short by a pair of giant shears.

The sky stretched stainless before them.

Then suddenly it began again. It climbed upward and hung there, incredibly gossamer.

Then once more it ended.

After that it was no more.

They didn't move, either of them. They waited, but it did not come again, it was done with.

When at last he turned forward once more, there was something trembling on the grip of his saddle, and when he looked down, it was his own hand.

He didn't speak of it to Mallory. He wondered why he shouldn't, but he didn't. Something held him back. He supposed, of course, that it was because he'd only imagined it, it had been merely some trick of perspective, some mirage against the clear mountain air, and it would sound silly to repeat such a thing. The other man would begin to lose his respect for him.

But then he knew that wasn't true. He hadn't imagined it. He'd seen it with his own eyes.

And still he didn't tell Mallory about it.

Chapter Fifteen

IT BEGAN that night.

It had a beginning. It was strange to think later that it did have, that on such and such a precise moment, at such and such an exact instant, it had begun, and before then it hadn't been.

It was an hour after sundown. They'd finished their evening meal and were sitting there playing bridge. Chris was his partner, and Mallory was Mitty's. It was just another evening on the plantation, and they'd had many like this. There was no strangeness to it.

Mitty was holding a cigarette in her hand, leisurely scanning her cards. (She was modern, she was everyday, she was common place.) "You should have come back to me in spades that time, partner," she said.

"Told you I wasn't very good at this," Mallory mumbled, crestfallen.

Chris looked across the table at Jones and smiled a little. Not because of anything in particular, just for the sake of smiling at him. She smiled at him nearly every time he looked at her, he was beginning to notice. And when she didn't she had a sort of soulful, mooning look on her face that he liked even less. He was married, and—well, she was just a kid.

Mitty paid out her card and the rubber ended. Mallory slumped back in his chair, swept his hand in front of his face, and said, "I'll never learn."

Jones drew the cards toward him and began to shuffle them.

Chris parted her lips slightly, sighed, and murmured, "I love to—"

"I know," he finished for her dryly, "you love to watch me mix the cards." She'd said it last night and the night before. The night before that, too. Mitty was beginning to snicker about it when they were alone together in their room.

He was dealing the cards, and at the fall of the third card, to Mitty's place, it began. Then. He stopped dead in the middle of the deal, listening.

They all probably heard it with him, they were all listening. No one moved or said anything. He held the pack poised in his hand.

It was faint, far-off, but yet deep-throated. You could detect a downbeat in it each time, one to each double concussion. *Thump-thump*, *thump-thump*, *thump-thump*.

He was the first to speak. "What's that? A storm coming up?"

It was too even for a storm, too rhythmic; he didn't have to be told that.

Mallory said it for him a minute later. "That's no storm. That's too continuous." And then he added, "This is the dry season, anyway. We don't have them this time of year."

They sat raptly listening for a moment more. Then Jones looked down at his hands and saw that he'd interrupted his card-dealing. He resumed a little jerkily, as if under mechanical compulsion.

No one picked up the cards or looked at them as they fell. They were waiting for it to stop as unaccountably as it had begun, and it didn't. Their faces kept rotating before him, from left to right, as he turned his own in accompaniment to his card-dealing. Mallory's was turned slightly sideward, as if listening down past his own shoulder; as if that were where the sound came from. Chris was looking straight over at Jones. She wasn't smiling now. Her eyes were rounder now than they had ever been. There was a questioning sort of look in them, as if to say, "Is this bad? I'll do whatever I see you do. If you show fright, then I'll be frightened too. If you don't, then I'll know it's all right." Mitty was looking straight downward at the table. There was to her expression more of a thoughtful, introspective cast. It was more than just physical listening, it was a form of mulling-over as well. Her hand moved, absently, and a puff of smoke came from before her face.

It reminded him for a second of the way she had looked veiled by the smoke haze of that fire she had built within the stones, when he came upon her in the gully this morning.

He remembered that, then forgot again. There was no time for the past in the present.

Nobody made a move to play. A chair leg scraped shatteringly in the stillness, and Mallory got up and went outside. The screen door ebbed back in place behind him, and his figure stood revealed through it for a moment, orange from the lamplight behind him; then it receded into the gloom outside, darkening into invisibility rather than diminishing with distance.

The downbeat hurt a little, Jones noticed. Not the ear-drums, for it was not loud, but the chest cavity, for it was deep. You felt it there each time.

Thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump . . .

It was like an endless train going by. Each time a car passes you think it is going to be the last, but the next one comes, and the next.

Presently Jones got up and went after Mallory.

He could feel Chris's eyes following him, but somehow he knew equally well, without looking back, that Mitty was not even aware of his going; was not aware of any of them around her; was lost on some other plane.

Mallory was standing by one of the uprights at the veranda rail in the dark. He didn't turn to look at him, though he heard him join him.

"That's it," he said quietly.

"That's what?"

"Ghost drums. What I told you about that they claim to have heard. *Tambores de los muertos*. I never heard it before myself."

"Don't say it in Spanish. It sounds even worse." Jones heeled his hand to the veranda rail. Not once, but twice, three times, repeatedly. He saw that he was keeping time with it, and quit it abruptly.

It kept plucking at your chest, as though there were a hollow spot there, a sound box that it echoed in.

"What do you suppose it is, some echo or freak acoustic in the mountains?"

Mallory didn't answer.

"It does sound like real drums, at that." He tried to laugh a little, so that the other man would join him in it. "Fools you, doesn't it?"

Mallory didn't join him in it. "No, it doesn't fool you."

They stood a moment longer without saying anything more. Then Mallory glanced over his shoulder toward the lighted screen door. "Let's go in. The kid's getting nervous."

They both re-entered with that pretended cheerfulness men are apt to overdo a little when they wish to keep women from becoming alarmed.

"Queer sort of sound, isn't it?" Jones said lightly, drawing out his chair once more.

"It'll quit before morning," Mallory promised.

They gave one another a look.

"But there's no one up there," Chris protested, her voice a little high. "What can be making—"

"Who bids?" Jones said briskly.

Mitty turned over a card limply and looked at it. He could tell she didn't know what was on it, even while she looked.

They went ahead with their game, tried to ignore it. Yet while they went through the motions of playing, each and every one of them knew that the other three were hearing it, thinking of it, just as he was.

It didn't come any nearer, but it didn't go any farther away. It didn't grow any louder, but it didn't grow any softer. Jones knew what there was about it that was getting them finally. They kept waiting for it to stop, all of them. And it didn't, it never did. It was that principle of the second dropped shoe overhead carried out to its ultimate point of excruciation.

It was even, so it should have been more bearable than otherwise, but it was uneven within its evenness; it was that downbeat that did the damage. One thump high, the next low; one high, the next low again.

He saw that Mallory was smoking too much. Far too much. And he himself, he noticed, couldn't seem to get his body adjusted right to the chair seat. He kept shifting every few minutes, crossing his legs and then recrossing them the other way around. Chris kept sweeping her hair back with one hand while she pored over her cards; hair that was not down over her brow at all, that was not out of place in the least. She'd look at him from time to time, and once or twice she'd smile; but it was a different sort of smile now, a fearful fleeting sort of thing that was more like a habit of the recent past lingering on than any warm greeting of the present. Her eyes remained large and bright.

And Mitty—Mitty still had that attitude of disembodied listening, of secret inner conjugation. Something about it annoyed him. She seemed to be trying to decipher it, make more out of it than—than there was to be made out of it. He tactfully turned his eyes away. He didn't remember ever having been annoyed with her like this before, without any reason. Not even when they'd missed the ship at Puerto Santo on her account; at least not as intolerantly and as causelessly annoyed as now. He supposed that had something to do with the effect of the thing on his nerves.

"Think it would do any good to close up the windows and that main door over there?" he suggested.

Mallory said, "It would come in anyway. But try it if you want."

Jones didn't stir. Putting the burden of timidity on himself wasn't what he'd intended; he'd been thinking of making the two women feel easier.

Suddenly Mallory dropped his cards and stiffened to attention so unexpectedly that it drew a half-stifled little cry of alarm from Chris before she could restrain it. The clopping sound of a horse's hoofs had suddenly started up somewhere nearby outside, rapidly receding into the distance. A moment later another followed. Then a multiple stampede of five or six at one time, galloping off into the dark from the direction of the stables.

"They've heard it down at the *jacales*, and that's the part I don't like!" Mallory flung back his chair and bolted from the room. Jones got up and went after him.

An infant was wailing somewhere across the compound. Figures flitted in and out of the *jacales*, dimly visible by the wavering light of a number of pitch torches that hopped like crazed fireflies. Men were calling out to their women, and women were calling to whimpering children. A mass exodus was under way.

Mallory rushed into their midst, waving his arms, even striking at some of them, trying to stem the tide. Jones took a more passive part, contenting himself with trying to head them off by getting in their way. They simply darted around him, time after time, eluded him and continued their scampering desertion. It was useless to try to do anything with them. They were in the grip of a maddened, unreasoning panic. They went scuttling off into the dark, fleeing downcountry toward the sheltering jungle, safer for once than the barefaced uplands. Their shrill, frightened voices faded into the night, babbling over and over, "*Que vienen los cocos! Que vienen los muertos!*" The ghosts are coming! The dead are coming!

Silence descended on the empty shacks and barren compound in their wake, broken only by that pulsing that was a sound and yet not a sound, a tremor.

Mallory rejoined Jones from his useless pursuit of the hindmost ones, growling imprecations.

"They took the horses with them too," he said. "Now we're stuck here whether we want to be or not. You can't

do anything about it when that many people all get a single idea in their heads at one and the same time."

"No," Jones agreed bleakly. "I guess you can't. You'd have to tie them all up, separately."

"They'll be back again in a day or two, when the cursed thing stops. I've seen this happen once or twice before. But they're always a few hands short when they do come back."

Jones pitched a thumb over his shoulder. "Is it *that*, each time?"

"No, I never heard that myself, until tonight. They may have, though. Usually someone claimed to have seen a line of ghostly figures outlined against the moonlit sky, up there on the heights. Something like that would start them off."

He spat disgustedly. "Well, there's no use just standing around out here listening to it. If it's going to keep up, let it keep up. I'm going to bed."

They started back toward the main house together, Mallory plowing his feet heavily over the ground in frustration.

Mitty came out of the lighted doorway just as they arrived in sight of it. To meet them, Jones thought at first; to join them and find out what had happened. But instead, as she came down off the veranda, she turned sharply up the opposite way, away from them, and glided off into the surrounding darkness like a sleepwalker. It was impossible that she hadn't seen them coming toward her. They were near enough by then and there was enough light filtering from the door and windows of the house to have shown them to her. It was impossible, too, that she should mistake in which direction the native huts lay and in which the open uplands; the very tilt of the ground was there to tell her.

He called her name, and then called again, and when she didn't answer, continued to recede into the gloom like a wraith, he left Mallory's side and spurred after her.

She didn't hurry at the sound his overtaking footsteps made behind her, but she didn't stop either, or turn to him, even after he'd bellowed out her name a third time, in mid-pursuit. She paid no heed; it was as if her faculties were utterly unaware of him.

He only halted her finally by overtaking and pinning

her against a stunted tree a considerable distance to the rear of the house. Even then, as he brought her around to him by main force, by the shoulders, her head remained stubbornly turned the other way, the way she had been going, the way in which the sound was coming from.

"What's got into you? Have you lost your mind? Don't go wandering off like this alone, in *that* direction, when all the rest of them are running the opposite way!"

He couldn't capture her attention. She kept striving to go on past him toward that distant yet ever present reverberation.

"Mitty!" he said sharply, and shook her by the shoulders to bring her back.

Words were loosened from her, fell out at random, as if the shaking had dislodged them. "They're calling me," he heard her murmur, "calling me. Let me hear what they want to say."

He swept her up in his arms forthwith and staggered back to the house with her.

Mallory was still waiting for him outside the doorway, where he'd left him. "What's the matter, did she turn her ankle?"

"No, she's—I don't think she's well. She's talking kind of funny, as if she's gone out of her head. What'll I do?"

"It's that sound doing it," Mallory said. "It's made her hysterical or something." He held the door back for him.

Jones carried her inside and into their own room, past the startled eyes of the youngster, who was the only one of the four of them still remaining at the table where they'd been playing.

He closed their room door behind him with the back of his foot and set her on her feet. "What's the matter with you?" he urged in a plaintive undertone. "What're you acting this way for?"

He struck a match and lit the lamp.

She had sought the edge of the bed by now, and was sitting on it. She was looking at him as calmly, as matter-of-factly, as though the incident hadn't occurred at all.

"You'd better lie down," he suggested.

He saw her put her fingertips lightly to each side of her forehead,

"Do you want a cold cloth for your head? Does it bother you?"

"I keep trying to think," she said vaguely. "Oh, if you'd only let me alone!"

He lit a cigarette and flung the spent match impatiently aside. "You know what you said out there, don't you? What'd you mean by that? Did you know what you were saying? What'd you mean, they were calling you? Who was calling you?"

She pushed the back of her hand absently in his direction, as if the very sound of his voice was an interruption in itself.

Somebody knuckled the door lightly, and when he opened it narrowly, Mallory was standing outside. "Here," he said, "try these, see if that'll help her any." He handed Jones two small tufts of absorbent cotton, evidently taken from a first-aid kit; they were twined into the elongated shapes of stoppers.

Jones thanked him with a nod and took them over to her. He stroked back the hair from the sides of her head. "Here, let me put these in your ears, see if they'll shut it out a little."

She glanced down at them curiously, but offered no resistance while he deftly inserted them.

"Can you still hear it?"

She didn't answer. She just looked at him as though she wondered what he was doing it for.

He adjusted them a little tighter. "Now can you hear it?"

"I hear it—" She didn't finish what she was saying, but her hands had started towards her chest.

When she tried to raise them toward her ears, he quickly held them down to keep her from removing the stoppers. He sat with her like that a while, watching her closely. In a little while she had quieted, made no further attempt to free her wrists. He got her to lie down, and when her eyes had dropped closed, in either sleep or resignation, he left her and went outside to the others.

Chris was sitting there with her hands loosely crossed and resting against the edge of the table, in an attitude of enforced calm. The tautness of the lines of her face, and its whiteness, and an occasional palsied vibration of both her hands at once, as if with the unease of their position, showed how insincere the attitude was.

Jones joined them without saying anything, and roved

restlessly about the room, making a complete circuit of the table two or three times at a slow drifting gait. Each time he came around the side opposite her, her eyes would fasten on him and follow him along the short arc of his passing before her, until the curve had carried him to far offside again. They had a pleading, questioning look in them that he was powerless to answer.

It kept on and on and on. There had never been a time when it wasn't; he couldn't remember any. There would never be a time when it would no longer be sounding; he couldn't visualize, couldn't conceive of any.

The girl's head suddenly dropped to the table. Mallory shifted closer and put his hand on her shoulder caressingly.

"Don't cry, honey. It's nothing, it won't hurt you."

He coaxed her to stand up. She held her face averted from Jones, as if ashamed now that he had witnessed her momentary capitulation. She held it pressed concealingly against her father's encircling arm.

Jones found a curious thought assailing him. With a glance behind him at the doorway through which he had recently passed, he thought, I wish *she'd* cry too, like that.

"I'll take her in," Mallory said to him under his breath. He led Chris over to the door at the other side of the room. "I want you to get some sleep," he said. "I'll sit with you a while until you drop off. You're not such a big girl yet after all. Not too big for that, anyway."

And then, after the door had already closed behind the two of them, Jones overheard Mallory's answer to some low-voiced plaint she must have made to him. "No, he won't think any the less of you. Don't you fret about that. He knows just how it is. Everybody can't be brave all the time."

Jones shook his head to himself, alone there in the room, in a sort of pantomimic compunction.

He was still there when Mallory came out again a good while later. Without a word, as though both were moved by the same common impulse toward uninhibited discussion and review of the matter, the two of them went outside to the veranda together and stood there by the rail.

A pall of silence hung over the *finca*, a silence that was only emphasized by that ceaseless throbbing. Even the stars seemed to jar in their fixed places with it.

"Sounds a little closer, doesn't it?" Mallory suggested. Jones timed it with his fingertips against the rail. "Either that or the beat's quickening up. Did you get Chris to go to sleep?"

"She'll be all right. I told her I'd be right outside."

Jones kept on drumming in time with it; then saw that he was doing it and desisted abruptly. "Let's try to break it down," he said, turning toward the other man.

"How d'you mean?"

"Get at it. *Do* something with it. Not just stand here drinking it in. Well, either it's something dangerous or it isn't. Now to be something dangerous, actively dangerous, it would have to be something human, wouldn't it? Something caused by a human agency. You've been living around here longer than I have. Just what human agencies are there around here that could be responsible for a far-off drumming like that?"

"There aren't any," Mallory answered flatly.

"I suppose that should be a consolation, but if anything it makes it worse. It's certainly not supernatural; I can feel it right here in my chest, at every vibration."

"There are no wild Indians, no nomad Indians, on this side of the mountains. They're all people who've been domesticated for generations back, like the ones who work for me. They're afraid of it themselves. You saw how they all ran off."

"What about the other side of the mountains?"

"That's an uninhabited valley."

"Well, has it been established beyond a shadow of a doubt that it's uninhabited?" Jones persisted. "Has it been investigated, or has it just been written off as uninhabited?"

"It's sort of taboo land. And after all, investigation is, or has to be, a two-way proposition. To investigate a place, you have to *go* there and then come back again. I've never known anyone to come back from there and bring a report. So you can say that if any investigation ever *was* made, it was involuntary, and the findings were never publicized. They died with the investigator."

"What about the so-called government down here? It's national territory, isn't it?"

"Sure. But they seem content to carry it on the books as a dead loss, so to speak."

"What about planes?"

"It's off the beaten airlines. All the commercial planes go down the spine of Central America. A few have gone over it, mostly off course, but the mountains keep them at a high altitude, and they've reported nothing to be seen but jungle carpet. If there was anything alive, of course, it wouldn't be visible up at that height, anyway. They've made out a few ruins, but ruins are cheap down here. They're not worth their weight in building material."

"Where does the ghost stuff come in? You said it was called—"

"*Tierra de los Muertos*," Mallory supplied. "The Land of the Dead. Local superstition gave it that name, I suppose. The phantom silhouettes of warriors that they thought they saw outlined against the crest from time to time. What could they be but ghosts? Drumbeats like the ones we're hearing now. Maybe it's just the pounding of some subterranean waterfall, which plays up now and then through some freak of mountain acoustics. Anyway, to them it's the Land of the Dead, and you can't tell 'em different. You're as good as dead if you go in there. The Spaniards made their usual passes at it, and for once drew a complete blank."

"How do you mean?"

Mallory hitched his hip up onto the veranda rail and crossed his arms.

"There was quite a high degree of civilization in all these parts of the world before the Spaniards got here and cracked down on it. I suppose you know that. It was highly advanced, but it was dark and cruel; Prescott'll tell you all about that."

Jones wasn't sure who Prescott was; some local trader or planter whom he hadn't met yet, he supposed. He didn't interrupt the recital to inquire.

"Anyway, this valley is one place that held out against them. The lowlands were a pushover, but the mountains made a natural barrier. The branch of the Mayas—I guess they were Mayas—that inhabited it retired into their shell, and that was that. 'Come and get us.' One of the earlier viceroys, as soon as he had things in hand down on the coast, sent an expedition in to clean up on them. Just a little token expedition. You know the kind of odds

they were used to, from Mexico and Peru. About five hundred to one. They were spoiled. Well, he waited, and he waited, and no word. Finally he sent a second expedition in to find out what had become of the first. And he waited, and he waited, and no word from them either."

"Then I suppose he sent in a third."

"That *would* be the perfect punch line. But no, the fact is he didn't. They changed viceroys or something, and the new man was too lazy. Or maybe he couldn't spare the men, or figured this one dinky little valley wasn't worth it. Then about two years afterward, one solitary survivor of the whole two expeditions came staggering out. He was one of the friars who had gone in there with them; they always had them along. He was down to skin and bone, but he made it. His tongue had been torn out, so he couldn't say a word. Well, they handed him a parchment and a quill, to see if he could set down what had happened. He only had strength enough to scrawl a single line. '*Es una tierra de los muertos.*' It is a land of the dead. Before they could get anything more than that out of him, he'd died. One opinion was that what he'd meant was only that the two expeditions had died to a man, killed off by the inhabitants. The other was that there was no one alive in there at all, expedition or inhabitants. This one finally won out. The Church was a deciding factor, and the king in Madrid. Funds for a third expedition would have had to come out of his purse, and since no stories of hidden gold had been featured as a come-on, he wasn't interested. The Church excommunicated the valley, proclaimed it accursed. And that's the story."

Jones screwed up his face. "Grisly, isn't it?"

"So," Mallory went on, "if there was anything alive in there then, and if half of what there was was male and the other half female, which is the usual arrangement, then chances are there should be something alive in there today, the laws of nature being what they are. And if there was anything alive in there then, back in the fifteen hundreds, since nothing worth speaking of has gone in since, and absolutely nothing whatever has been known to come out, then whatever there is in there should be a little cell of pure undiluted sixteenth century."

"A little too fantastic, don't you think?" Jones said.

"What's fantastic and what isn't?" Mallory challenged him. "Who knows any more? What do we really know about the world today? Less than we did a hundred years ago. Then they could still be sure of their world. Today we can't any more. The plane was fantastic in 1902. But in 1903— The atom bomb was fantastic in 1944. But in 1945— Besides, the difference between an aboriginal Indian tribe of the fifteen hundreds and an aboriginal Indian tribe of today is so small that it doesn't really matter much in the end. It would be hardly noticeable to the naked eye. The earlier ones would kill you a little more quickly, maybe; at sight instead of waiting for provocation. Bangles instead of white cotton pants, feathers instead of straw sombreros, sun worship instead of a one-two whitewash of very diluted Catholicism. It's only relative, after all. Don't confuse it with the difference, for instance, between Tudor England and today's England. That's not the same thing."

"It's still too fantastic for me, thanks," Jones said, with all the irritability of one who feels he is getting the worst of an argument. "I finished reading Henty and Rider Haggard when I was twelve."

Mallory held up his finger to indicate the throbbing in the air. "And that is—?"

"You name it," Jones snarled almost belligerently. "You live around here. I don't."

"It's getting you, isn't it?" Mallory suggested understandingly.

"No, I like it! It's like dentists working on you with a drill on twenty-four-hour shifts. It's like a subway being excavated right between your two legs. It's like a concussion you've got already, being tapped with hammers."

He bowed his head abruptly, clasped his hands, and pressed them down hard across the back of his neck, as though to relieve the strain.

"I was at Anzio," he said, "but that wasn't like this. Every bang had a reason behind it. And they didn't come *even*, on the downbeat, each time. Oh, God, how I wish I were back in the middle of good old Anzio again! There were other fellows all around me, and I wasn't afraid. You could see the flash that came with every crash."

Mallory didn't say a word, just sat there watching him closely.

Jones's head suddenly came up again. "I'm a liar," he blurted out unasked. "There *is* something to this, and I *know* there is. What am I bickering with you about it for? What am I denying it for? I saw a smoke sign coming up from the opposite side, the *far* side, only this morning when I was out riding with my wife. I shut up about it. I didn't want to admit it to anyone else, I guess because I didn't want to admit it to myself first of all. There's already been too much strangeness in my life. I didn't want any more. It keeps piling on, and piling on, until I can't stand it any more! If it's me, if I'm going crazy, if I'm riding for a nervous breakdown, why doesn't it happen and get it over with? What do I have to have this long build-up for, what're they trying to prove to me? I'll take their word for it. Only they should hurry up and finish the job. And if it isn't me, then it might as well be, because what's the good of *not* being crazy, when your whole little private world around you suddenly is?"

"It isn't you," Mallory consoled him, with shrewd, sleepily lowered eyelids. "I hear it too, as I sit here, don't forget. And if you've seen strange things, maybe I have too, and maybe I haven't spoken about them either. I haven't seen any smoke signals, maybe, but on many a ride when I was out by myself, I've had the feeling of eyes watching me from over a rock. But when I turned to look, there never were any there. And many a hand I've lost"—he swept his arm out expressively—"who didn't go down that way."

Yes, but you're still better off than I am, thought Jones bitterly. With you, it's still on the outside of you. Not in your very bed with you, like me.

They fell silent after that. Presently Jones drifted down the steps and ambled about in front of the house.

At one point he stopped, with his back toward Mallory, and a flickering orange halo outlined his head for a minute while he lit a cigarette. As it went out there was a slight spat from the ground, somewhere close to him.

He turned his head and looked intently downward.

"Did you do that? Was that you?" He thought the other man had spat over the rail, over to one side of him.

Suddenly he'd taken a quick step over, dropped down on his haunches, and stayed that way, peering close.

"Come here a minute."

Mallory was already on his way down the steps to him before the summons was uttered. He crouched down alongside him.

They could barely see it in the dark. Jones struck another match, and it came into view. It was slender, motionless, just a long line on the ground.

Mallory said to him in a curiously hushed voice, as though there were danger of their being overheard, "You know what that is, don't you?"

"Certainly I know what it is. What I'd like to know is—"

Mallory didn't let him finish. "Put that damn light out." He did it for him with a sharp jet of his own breath, without waiting. "Let's get back under the veranda. The light was what attracted it to you, and we're both right out in the open here."

Jones plucked at the ground, and they both straightened up, turned, and ducked back under the veranda shed again. "Don't touch the point," Mallory warned. "There may be something on it." He opened the door and motioned him in with a swift punch of his thumb. "Bring it in with you. I want to get a good look at it in the light. I can't out here."

He closed the door quietly after the two of them. "Keep your voice down. Don't let them hear us."

Jones was teetering it upright alongside of him, running his thumb and one finger up and down its surface. "Look at that. It's nearly the height of a man's body. Ghosts, eh?" He juttied his chin up at the other man. "That wasn't thrown by any ghost."

"Maybe not, but—" Mallory took it over and looked at it, lengthwise. The color in his face dropped a little. "It's an archaic weapon."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, I'm no archaeologist, but look at it for yourself. The head's a piece of whittled-down obsidian. That stuff hasn't been used in hundreds of years. All weapons were fashioned of it in the days of the Aztecs and Toltecs and Mayas. I've seen some just like it in the museum down at Puerto; that's how I know for sure. And hummingbird feathers dyed scarlet; that was another characteristic of—"

"It still could have been thrown by a modern." Jones's voice was a little unsteady.

"Yes, but there's no reason for any modern to have thrown it—against us or anyone else. There's no race consciousness in this country. The whites and the Indians have been living peacefully side by side since the sixteenth century, and now you can hardly tell which is which any longer."

"In other words, we've had a spear thrown at us out of the fifteenth or sixteenth century, and it is your idea that the hand that threw it is also out of the fifteenth or sixteenth century?"

"No," Mallory said stolidly. "Hands that were swinging in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are dead by now. But I'm holding a weapon from those days in my hand and we're both listening to that thing throb out there. Now let's hear your idea on it."

Jones swallowed a couple of times, plumbing for an answer. He couldn't seem to get hold of one.

Mallory took the spear and stood it up in a corner of the room. Then he shifted a chair out before it so that it couldn't be readily seen.

Jones was back at the door again. He opened it and stared sullenly out into the boiling darkness. "I'm going out there again and see if I can—"

"Watch yourself," Mallory said tonelessly. He came over and closed the door against the other's staying hand. "This is no time for hero stuff. There's just the two of us here by ourselves now, with two women on our hands."

Jones turned away reluctantly, moved back to the table, drummed on it rebelliously. "It's the drums that get you so itchy," he snarled. Then he suddenly clenched his fist, raised it, and pounded it like a mallet.

"Want a drink?" Mallory asked with quiet understanding.

Jones shook his head, already repentant over his own outburst. He ran his hand over his hair a couple of times in a sort of unspoken apology. "Guess I'll turn in," he muttered lamely. "I may as well listen to that lying down as standing up. It'll never stop." Then he added, "Think it would be a good idea to lock things up?"

"I don't think it would be a bad idea." Mallory went over to the door and drove home a crude cross latch. "The only trouble is it's like locking up a sieve. These

wooden wedges are no good. The place is nothing but doors with a roof over them."

"How about one of us sitting up, then, and keeping watch for a while?"

"I was thinking of that," Mallory agreed. "I'll do it."

"What's the matter with me?"

"The place belongs to me, after all. You go inside and get some sleep. I'll call you in about an hour and you can relieve me, if you want."

He slung a chair over by the door and settled it just inside it. He opened the door leading to his own and Chris's living quarters and stepped quietly inside for a moment. Then he came out backward, with a revolver in his hand, and closed the door again. "May as well bring this out with me," he said. He went over to the chair and took up his position in it, the gun loosely across his knees. "Put out the light before you go in," he said.

Jones turned the wheel of the oil lamp and killed it. Mallory disappeared in the dark, as if wiped out with an ink brush. There was nothing left but that rabid thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump, sounding on a new triumphant note now that it had the night to itself.

The last thing Mallory said to him, as they parted in the blackness, was: "No need telling the girls about—that."

Jones knew what he meant. The spear from nowhere. The spear from five hundred years ago, dropping to earth only now, like something aimed from one of the stars.

Chapter Sixteen

IT WAS THE silence that woke him. He couldn't tell what it was at first. There was some lack, something missing. It was the contrast that had roused him.

Then he got it. The drums had stopped. They were dead. The air hung tense, as breathlessly still as a swollen

cloud about to erupt into a torrent. It weighed heavily on his chest.

This was worse than the other, this stillness.

He started up jerkily, at varying sharply arrested levels; at elbow height above the bed, then at full arm's length, then sitting erect, then turning to drop legs to floor, at last upright at full height upon his feet.

Something rustled slightly, as though there were a bird trapped in his room, winging around trying to find its way out. The sound came at about mid-height between floor and ceiling, at about the height of his own head, as he stood now at the bedside. He even turned his head in various directions, trying to orient his detection of the sound. He lost it. Then it came again, the feathered whisper.

There was someone in the room with him. He could hear breath, all but feel it, stirring toward him in the night-clogged air.

Maybe it was—

"Mallory, is it my time yet?" he said softly.

He reached for his matches, plucked one, fumbled to locate the lamp where he had left it, close beside his bed. He took the chimney off, set it down, struck the match, and put it to the wick, bending down close as he did so to turn it up. Yellow light came on, sluicing waveringly up the wall from below, at the level at which the lamp stood. It spread out sideward too, like a slow tide rolling back in the dark. It revealed Mitty's dark hair spilled upon her pillow, her half-hidden face inert in sleep against the cleft of one arm.

He saw that much, that was the last image of normalcy he was to see, and then he turned, and reason was shattered; a series of delirium flashes took its place. Visual explosions, one crowding upon the other, vivid, immediate, but unreal for all that, undecipherable, impossible to translate into meaning.

His eyes struck the feathered thing that had rustled first of all. They saw it immobile, suspended in air before him. Loosely flared feathers of a parakeet, yellow, green, vivid scarlet. Then under it a face, dark of color and darker of mien, nightmare-threatening. A face that could not be alive, that surely must be a mask in its balefulness of lineament, and yet whose black-pitted eyes were

quick with light and whose nostrils dilated and contracted even as he watched with the suppressed breathing of animosity.

And under it, giving it foundation to the floor of reality, the coppery torso of a man, the distended, graduated breast structure rising and falling with that same leashed, treacherous breath.

He tried to assimilate what he was looking at, and couldn't. It was coming toward him, creeping frontally upon him, growing larger, nearer, even in the act of his looking.

Along the side wall, where the backthrow of the lamp was, its grotesque shadow sidled along in company with it, crouched for the spring, a gray hallucination of a bird perched atop a human figure. Yet one was no more unreal than the other was; of the two, the shadow was more readily understandable than the substance, for at least it had the substance to give it explanation. The substance had nothing to give it explanation.

He heard a frightened cry from Chris, over at the other side of the house. "Father! Daddy! They're in here!" The voice was that of a child. She was a little girl again in that moment; her smiles and simperings at him, her borrowed lipstick were forgotten. And perhaps for the last time she was a little girl. It was more than a cry of fright. It was death of a little girl, in a woman's body.

And in its wake, behind him, he heard the sudden stirring of Mitty, coming awake.

But there was no more time for these last fragments of the former mold of rationality that had encased things, flying about in disintegration now; the new nightmare flux was too close upon him now, pressing him back, overthrowing him, engulfing him. He threshed helplessly with a weight that was no dream heavy upon him, a sinewy arm hooked about his throat from behind. Other feather-sprouting figures were slinking in the doorway, one by one. His flailing arms were caught separately, drawn together behind his back, thongs whipped around them holding them fast. He lay there loglike, immobile, face down and staring up around his shoulder at something that he couldn't understand.

Mitty had half gained her feet. She stood there at bay, in a frozen tableau of fear. She pressed her back to the

wall beside her bed, unable to retreat from them farther than that. One leg supported her on the floor; the other bent double, still rested on the bed from which she had just now risen. Even her hands had crystallized, arrested in the half-completed gesture of donning the pink silk wrapper she habitually made use of on rising, and which instinctive habit had made her seek now, even at this moment of final catastrophe. Her fingers were riveted to its edges, one at the turn of her shoulder, the other down lower at her waist, on the opposite side, so that its incompleting concealment was biased, one shoulder and the upper arm on that side left completely bare. Below, of course, peered the filmy insubstantiality of her night-dress, talcuming the exactly defined contour of her body rather than veiling it.

Her hair was still aslant as the pillows had cast it, pressed back on one side, revealing her ear, dropping too far forward on the other side of her face. One foot had gained the sanctuary of one of her steep-arched bedside slippers. The other slipper lay untenanted on its side. The rays of the oil lamp, dull and tarnished on all the other surfaces they revealed, flashed dazzlingly back from the turquoise-studded circlet on her upper arm, which she had not removed for many days, and which had grown burnished with continual wear. It created a zone of blurred sheen that refused to come into focus to the eye.

Her fear was less an active pang, such as had caused Chris to cry out in the other room, than a sort of hypnotic awe. Even Jones, in his distorted position on the floor, looking back and upward at the pale halo of her face, could sense in it something less than the stark unbridled terror that was to have been expected. A degree less only, perhaps, but a degree less. Though her lips were parted, it was not with effort to cry out; she made no sound. It was rather puzzlement, a sort of mesmerized regard that held them that way. Though her eyes were wide, showing more white than he ever remembered having seen them show before, they were not dilated with panic so much as with a bemused retrospection, which held them steady and almost dreamy in their fixity.

They closed in upon her, and he saw their dark arms go out to seize her, crossbarring the pink-and-white cameo she made in his view beyond their outlines. He

floundered in his bound position on the floor, seeking to rise and throw himself over there, snarling unheeded threats in a choked voice. "Get away from her! Keep your hands off, you hear me?" A weight held him crushed to the floor, pressing upon his back until he thought his spine were shattered; it was a foot planted on him to hold him down, by one of them who had been left to guard him. It ground him flat again with brutal inexorability. A hand snaked to the back of his neck, gripped it as in a vise, and forced his upreared head down, so that it struck the ground and water was dashed from his eyes. It relented again only as he lay quiescent.

And then suddenly something had happened, lost to him in the throes of his own struggle. The vignette had changed. They were all frozen now, she and they alike. The foremost of the predatory hands, which had already fastened on her shoulder, wrenching at it, ripping at her clothing, had fallen loosely away and she was untouched again. The dislodged outer garment fell to the floor at her feet. The circlet on her bared arm flickered in corrosion. They drew slowly back, a step at a time. The grouping that had been about to enclose her widened again. The hands that had reached out graspingly remained extended, pointing. The indicating fingers were like the spokes of a wheel, and the hub of it was that prismatic light that fumed upon her arm.

They were frightened now in turn, more than she had been. Hoarse whispers sounded from them here and there. They drew farther back, then still farther back again. A space was left between her and them, a space of superstitious awe.

She moved. Her hands went up and drew the cotton from her ears. She was staring at them as raptly as they were at her.

One of them spoke. Some guttural sound passed the lips of one, meant for the others.

The answer came in a woman's voice; that same guttural gibberish, but in a woman's voice. He thought dimly that one of them must be a woman.

None was. The only woman in the room was Mitty, his wife. Some trick of the senses, some ventriloquistic effect had made the sound seem to come from against the wall, where she was.

Her lips were moving. Now he would hear her say, "Larry, who are they? What are they going to do to us?"

Her lips were moving. He heard them say, "*Achini go achini haya—*" It began like that, and then went on, and his ears couldn't follow; it was a blurred cacophony to them.

A great sigh went up, and all those before her, all those who had been so dangerous to the two of them only a moment ago, went down suppliantly before her, some on one knee, some on both. Some shielded their eyes with their bent arms before them, others held their heads low, eyes averted to the floor.

She went on speaking, steadily speaking, in a hesitant way, as though trying to remember, trying to explain something that baffled her. And while she spoke, something even worse was happening than this sound of a voice he had loved receding back through the ages away from him, though both were in the same room. Her hands went to her hair, and a modern fastening she wore in it at night, a sort of pin or clip, was loosened and fell away. Then before his horrified eyes she began to pull at her single remaining modern garment that clothed her, the night robe, and ripped it bodily away from her, like someone emerging from a cocoon.

Not a head was raised, not an eye looked up. For a single instant she was completely unclad there, in this roomful of savages bowing before her; white and beautiful as even he, her own husband, had never quite seen her before. His cry of frightened reproach stuck in his throat. He was seeing something that his senses refused to accept. His eyes rolled a little and his mouth opened and he groaned deep in his chest, lying there bound on the floor.

But she had already reached forward and drawn away, from a pair of the submissive shoulders bent before her, a sort of military cloak or cape that one of them, higher in command than the others, had been wearing, and this she drew around her waist and fastened there into a kilt or girdle. Her upper part she left unconcealed, with the unself-consciousness typical of primitives all the world over and in all ages. Last of all she withdrew the one foot that had been encased in the high-heeled slipper, and stood upon the floor unshod.

She had reverted to barbarism, gone into darkness there before his very eyes. She no longer saw him there, groveling on the floor. He didn't even exist for her, he could see that. She had eyes only for the feathered heads bowed before her, making obeisance.

He couldn't tell what it was he was crying to her, for his mind had no part in directing his tongue, only his heart and the very marrow of his being. For this was fright now in its deepest form, the fright of unreason. It must be a dream—and yet it wasn't. She pointed toward him, yet without turning her face to look as she did so, and the blows that quickly fell on him to still him and punish the sacrilege of his crying out to her were real enough.

Then two of them quickly seized him and dragged him out of her presence, backward through the doorway into what had been the central room of the house last night—a thousand years ago.

There were others of them milling about in there. It must have been a raiding party of some two score or so. They had kindled several torches of some resinous wood to give them light, now that the capture had been effected and stealth was no longer needed. He was flung back against the wall, upright, beside Mallory and Chris, who were already bound as he was. A shrewd intelligence evidently directed these forays. The house was not looted, nor was the torch applied to it. It was as if their intention was to leave it exactly as it had been found, with only this difference, that it would be empty. They apparently wanted to give the outside world no actual proof of their existence.

"It's my fault," Mallory said in a low voice. "I fell asleep there over by the door. I guess I didn't really think there was anything to be on the watch for."

Jones was incapable of answering him. What difference did it make now, anyway? To him even the fact of their capture was not the terrifying thing.

"Why are you shaking so? What did they do in there?" Mallory asked him. It was as if he had said, We are all in the same boat. What have they done to you that is any worse than what they have done to the rest of us?

Jones was sick in some peculiar way that he couldn't account for. Sick at his spirit, if there were such a thing.

There was a great clammy weight upon him, all over, yet he couldn't tell where. "I don't know," he gasped. "I'm seeing things that—aren't so."

Mallory didn't understand what he meant. Who could have understood? "They're real enough," he said dryly. "You can almost feel the heat from their bodies every time they go by."

Jones could hear Chris whimpering, over on the other side of her father. She was cowering against him, away from all this strangeness. He felt sorry for her, but even she didn't have to contend with what he did. With her and her father, the fear was external, outside themselves; with him, it was on the inside. Even if all these strange, shadowy figures went away now and left them alone, the fear wouldn't go away. It would never go away again.

A crude sort of palanquin was being knocked together outside the house, while they were held here awaiting its completion. It was of four crosspieces, covered over with plaited branches. Then the feathered men stood back and a lane was opened, leading from the inner room out to where it waited. Every knee was bent and every head inclined, and through their midst slowly moved the figure of reverence that Mitty had now become. One of them. One set high above them, perhaps, sacred to them, dedicated to the offices of their religion, but one of them. One of their own. Impassive, idol-like. The figure of a woman who only a little while ago—

"Mitty," he whispered hoarsely from the background.

He could hear Mallory, beside him, draw in his breath sharply, as if some sort of cold pang had just assailed him. And even Chris. He heard her give a little frightened whimper to herself. "They've dressed her all up."

They hadn't. She had done it herself.

He saw her step within the litter and seat herself upon it, in proud unapproachability. Then the litter was raised upon their shoulders, high above all heads, and slowly moved forward in ceremonial procession.

"Mitty!" he screamed out to her, in agonized terror. "Turn and look at me! I'm going mad!"

She seemed not to hear. She stared straight forward, into the past toward which they were carrying her.

A stinging blow drove the blood out of his lips and chin. What difference did its exact meaning make? It was

eloquent enough for him to understand. One did not address a goddess, the high priestess of a cult.

His head lolled sideways against Mallory's shoulder, then turned slowly so that his face was hidden at last. "Let me stay like this," he said in a flagging voice. "I don't want to look at it."

He started to go limply downward. The other man couldn't support him or arrest his descent, for he himself was bound.

He toppled inertly to the floor, into a little respite from strangeness that his mind couldn't bear.

Chapter Seventeen

IN THE HOUSE up in Maryland, Cotter came back from the door with an opened telegram in his hand, and its contents already on his face. "Here's the answer from the Associated Fruit Line's San Francisco office. Their ship the *Santa Emilia* just docked there."

Fredericks took it and read.

CAPTAIN S.S. STA. EMILIA REPORTS LAWRENCE JONES AND
WIFE ACCIDENTALLY LEFT BEHIND AT PUERTO SANTO.
FRAWLEY, CO. AGENT

They looked at each other. Long and forebodingly, as they had that day at the steamship office in Baltimore.

"It *could* happen," Cotter tried to suggest uncertainly.

"It's a little too much of a coincidence. Why should it be at just that one particular port of call? It wasn't Havana. It wasn't Christóbal. No, it was Puerto Santo. You and I have both seen that place. There's not enough there to take up half an hour of anyone's time, much less make them overstay a shore leave. Something happened."

"You mean—?"

Fredericks nodded curtly. "Yes, I mean. Now the thing is, what're we going to do about it?"

Cotter eyed him in silence, waiting for him to give the answer himself.

"Just one more thing, to make sure. We'll communicate direct with the authorities in Puerto Santo. If they're still accounted for down there, if they're in full view waiting for the next ship, all right. If they're not, then we'll know. I'll send a radiogram right now."

The answer came back in seventy-two hours. "It's in Spanish," Cotter said when he brought it in. "You better tackle it."

Fredericks roughed out a running translation on a piece of scratch paper as he read it through.

MR. AND MRS. LAWRENCE JONES UNREPORTED SINCE 12TH INST. LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS FINCA LA ESCONDIDA. DISAPPEARED, FEARED TO HAVE STRAYED INTO JUNGLE AND PERISHED.

YBARRA, CHIEF OF POLICE

All Fredericks said, when he'd turned it over to him, was: "Now we know."

Cotter glanced up and saw him strip the phone with a decisive tweak. "What're you going to do?"

"Make two reservations on the first plane that we can get to take us anywhere near there."

Chapter Eighteen

THE PHANTOM tribesmen and their captives were going up the mountain now like figures in a dream. And he was one of them. Awake in that dream, yet unable to escape from it. They were going up the way that he and she had ridden so many times in the morning, up toward the spring, up toward the eventual cleft that she had once yearned so to attain.

They went single file, heads low, wending in a long serpentine procession under the night sky. The sky was dark, but the mountainside was white as borax under the starlight, and its sheen was strong enough and clear enough to reveal every changing play of muscle on their naked backs as they went laboring upward, to seam their

sculpturesque spinal indentations with fluxing shadow lines. They were so photographically realistic to his fear-taut eyes, they were so unbelievable to his logic-demanding mind. They should have thinned out, faded away in the starlight; instead little stones and pebbles rocked uneasily under their tread, clods of earth were dislodged by their substantial passage and fell back to rest again.

They moved with the terrible, grim silence all war parties afoot had once had, in the days before the wheel was invented and war became explosive. Each one stepped in the same place and along the same way the one before him had trod, with never a variation, never an overlap. A little low-clinging dust spurted out at the sides of their course, like foam tracing backward from the prow of a ship.

The whole thing was horror incarnate. He was gorging on horror. Digesting it, sweating it. But horror had a central point, a focus. Horror wasn't this long line of softly padding apparitions in whose midst he was being towed along. Horror wasn't the binding of his hands behind his back. Horror wasn't the blows he received every time he faltered or tried to get out of line. Horror wasn't any of those things.

Horror was that palanquin swaying up ahead, and what it held in it. Borne shoulder-high at the very head of the procession, so that even this far back the starlight showed him the white form, the oblivious head nestled within it. A head that did not look back to see where he was. A head that held no thought of him, that did not know him any more. A form that sat content, in passive acceptance of its journeying and of its destination.

That was horror, for him. And every time he looked up there, he groaned.

They were clever. A shrewd, primeval intelligence directed these forays. There were no torches to light their way, to look from a distance like fireflies climbing up the mountainside and betray them to the enemy civilization below and behind them in the lowlands. They hadn't fired the house, either. When it was come upon again, it would be as it had been last; untouched, unaltered. Only empty. Nothing to show what had happened. Only the stars would know.

A voice suddenly called out to him in English. It came

from farther back, from somewhere at the very end of the long, toiling line. A hoarse voice, broken, frightened, just as he knew his own would be if he were to use it like that, rawly naked against the night. English; he'd never known before how beautiful one's mother tongue could be. He'd never known how much he loved it. It must be hell, he thought, to die and not hear English any more. That must be worse than the fact of death itself.

The call was: "Jones! Jones! Where have they got my little girl? What have they done with Chris?"

And then, before he could answer, he could already hear the vicious blows falling, beating the voice quiet, smothering it to extinction. He knew if he spoke back, that was what he'd get too.

He braced himself, drew in his breath, and let go into the night.

"She's up front, Mal. They've got her by-by that thing they're carrying. She's fastened to it, walking along beside it."

The blows came down like rain—tough, leathery rain—and he went down first on one knee, then on both, then rolled over, but they kept following him like nettles clinging to him. The first few he could hold out against, but the ones that followed added their own pain to the pain of the first, until there was too much pain all at one time, and his voice seemed to break from him in shrill outcry, not through his mouth alone, but at every flaming, stinging pore.

He was dragged erect, thrust forward again, stuffed back into the long line, floundering at first like a weighted sack that threatens to fall first on this side, then on that, until at last he had steadied himself, regained the rhythm of the interlocking, piston-like ascent. He was conscious through it all of only one main thing: That form up there aloft had not shifted, that serenely held head had not turned to look back at the sound of his cries in the aboriginal night.

He groaned deep down inside him, but it wasn't from the blows he'd just had.

They were traveling steadily upward to meet the sun, which was coming up toward them unseen on the other side of the mountains. The sky along their crests was paling to an electric blue, bright against the eyes. It was

like looking at a sheet of smooth gas flame, spread out in curtain form. They began to throw shadows on the ground, the long line of them, where there had been only even darkness before.

Day was coming between two centuries. Breaking on the mountaintop, midway between two ages. And these people in whose hands he was were hurrying back to regain their own, before the day came.

His eyes centered on the heel of the individual directly before him. Coppery red; rising, falling, rising, falling. It had blood on it. It was alive. It left an impress. It was real. Where had it come from? Where was it leading him to?

They had entered the cleft now, that secretive tuck in the living rock flesh of the mountain along which he had followed Mitty that day to where she stood wreathed by smoke, signaling to the unburied past. Her palanquin for a while skimmed the surface of the ground—or seemed to—the bearers under it hidden by the cleft in which they trod. It was like a skiff or boat sailing on solidified waves of rocky earth. The top of an occasional feather cropped up before or behind it. The figure in it was motionless as a doll; motionless as the living idol it had been transmuted into. The sun, about to blaze upward into untrammelled space, was filling the air with golden motes now, like a sort of vaporized pollen.

Then suddenly the slow-coursing litter was submerged, sank from sight, as perpendicularly as if it had been sucked into quicksand. It had been ahead of him around a curve, so that he could mark its going at a tangent, as on a curving train one can sometimes see something ahead before one's own car has breasted it.

When finally this turn, the last convolution of all along the trail they were following, had straightened out and was no more, he received for a moment a startling impression that the toiling line ahead of him was telescoping itself into nothingness, consuming itself individual by individual until soon there would be nothing left of it. For the mountain face, obliterating the cleft, rose squarely before them; no one was going up that surface, and yet the distance between himself and it kept lessening man by man.

But this was just for a moment, and because the shoul-

der before him impeded full perspective ahead. At second glance he discovered the palanquin standing empty and at a tilt on the upcurving ground to one side of the defile, with two members of the party who had detached themselves bending over it, rapidly dismantling it into its original components of staves and branches. Evidently they wished to leave no telltale vestige of it behind.

A few paces beyond them, marking the party's actual extinction point, which had baffled him until now, a curious slab of rock, tapering, triangular, and looking almost planed in its smoothness of surface, rested upright against the frontal rise that blocked off further advance, that choked off the sunken defile. Beside it was its complement, a black chasm in the rock face, which matched it in every detail of proportioning, as though one had been pried away from the other. Which it obviously had. Into this needle-like fissure, little more than hip-wide, one by one the marauders blotted themselves out, lowering their heads to a point at which they could safely be trusted to pass through. Two of their number, larger and more powerful than the rest, stood waiting by the reversed slab or rock, to draw it around after them and seal the fissure up after the last of their cohorts had gone in.

He balked instinctively as this terminus of light and of the known, this maw of the past and the unknown, crept up flush with him. It was not the fear of suffocation that gripped him, made him rigid with recalcitrance; it was rather the premonition of entering upon some totally different plane from this point on, of leaving the world behind in a sense even worse than that of physical death.

The heel before him that he had watched was gone now; a curtain of darkness fell over it. It was his turn now. He bucked and tried to bolt sideways. The tilt of the defile facing would have defeated him even had he been unhindered. He went up it two, three steps by sheer momentum, then started to fall back again, pulled down by gravity. A hand seized his bound arms, wrenching him back to his starting place. Another caught at his neck, forcing his head down low. He was propelled forward.

The lips of rock narrowed over him, sucked him in. Darkness.

For a little while, as he went stumbling on, propelled

like that, there was a little ghostly light behind him, where the opening was; the memory of light, glinting feebly on the moist rock walls and chill rock floor of this tunnel passage.

Then suddenly it was blotted out, too suddenly for lengthening distance alone to have killed it. There was a grinding and hollow reverberation, back there where it had been, carried forward along the bore, and the entrance slab had been drawn into place, sealing the opening up.

A drop of sweat rolled down his face, chilled before it had even left his pores. The present was gone. The past had claimed him for its own.

Chapter Nineteen

THE SECOND-FLOOR corridor in the government building at Puerto Santo was cool and twilight-dim compared to the broiling glare of the streets outside. It was not the most uncomfortable place in town to have to sit and wait for any prolonged length of time, as Fredericks and Cotter were having to do now. It was no mere passage but a broad gallery, tile-floored and roofed by a succession of stone archways. Set within the arbitrary subdivisions these created along the wall space were a succession of rather monastic doors. As a matter of fact, the building had once been the Palace of the Inquisition.

Opposite the first of these doors, first both in importance and in location, was placed a wooden bench, back to wall, and on it sat Fredericks and his companion, beginning to wilt now after their third successive day of interminable waiting. Facing them, on guard before the stubbornly closed portal whose entrance they sought to gain, stood a high-cheeked, flat-nosed mestizo soldier, in rather sloppy-fitting khaki, a very efficient and unsloppy-looking Mauser planted stock to floor before him.

Cotter came back to the bench, after a brief period of pacing back and forth to relieve the tedium of posture, and sank down on it once more.

"This one's keeping us waiting the longest of all," he grunted bitterly.

"The higher you go, the harder they are to see."

"Well, we've worked our way up to the top. After him there's no one." He leaned forward, let his hands hang down dejectedly, elbows to knees. "If there was only an American consul in the place we could appeal to, maybe we could get some action, slash through some of this red tape."

"An American consul wouldn't be able to give orders over the heads of the departmental officials. Besides, there isn't one. This country's not even important enough to have one of our consular representatives accredited to it. It's lumped in with one of the neighboring republics, and the same consul takes care of both."

Cotter dispiritedly let his head dangle now, in alignment with his hands. Then presently he raised it again.

"What's the good anyway?" he remarked. "We're too late. It's a solid month since it happened." Then he added, "If that's what it was."

"If that's what it was! What else was it?" Fredericks caught him up sharply. "Do you have to be told? They disappeared completely, from a place right on the slope of the mountain. The drums were heard. Let others doubt it. *We* should know what that means, of all people."

Cotter elevated his eyebrows in moody acceptance of the rebuke, but he let it go without answering.

"You're willing to turn around and go back, I see." Fredericks had turned toward him, was looking at him steadily. "Well, I'm not."

"It's not that, exactly. But if it's too late, what then? What good will it do?" He elevated his shoulders, let them drop again. "What do we owe him, after all?"

"Life," said Fredericks quietly. "We—that is, I—am responsible for this happening to him."

"No, you're not. Who told him to run off with her? Who told him to bring her down *here*, of all places?"

"I have a peculiar sense of duty, then. Indirect and roundabout. But a strong one. You go back if you want to, Cotter."

Cotter smiled crookedly, looked down at the floor. "I have a peculiar sense of duty too. Not toward them, but toward you. Anything you say, that goes for me."

The door had opened and the soldier stiffened to attention. A short, plump, bustling figure in beige linen emerged, mopping at the back of his neck with a handkerchief. He was saddle-complexioned. A tiny needle-pointed mustache and almost equally diminutive Vandyke beard suggested three black rays or spokes surrounding his mouth, which was rounded to clasp a projectile-like cigar. He struck off down the tiled corridor toward the stairhead with a quick-sounding, hard heel beat that was somewhat akin to the bite of castanets. An odor of mingled cigar smoke and expensive toilet water backwashed after him.

"That's him, now," Fredericks whispered hastily.

"That little—? No, it isn't. It can't be."

"It is, I tell you. He must be going out for his siesta. If we don't get him now, we won't get him again until four or five this afternoon." He jumped up, took a quick step or two across to the soldier, and whispered, "*El ministro?*"

The man didn't answer openly, fearful of being overheard by the receding figure, but he gave a surreptitious nod of the head.

Fredericks hurried down the corridor after him and overtook him at the turn.

"*Ministro*, a moment of your time. We have been waiting three days to see you."

His manner of speech was staccato, to match his footfall and other mannerisms. "A question of what?"

"The disappearance of four persons from Finca La Escondida on the twenty-fourth of last month."

The Minister of the Interior had halted, hand to iron-wrought stair rail. "Ah, yes. I remember now. I have a request on my desk, referred to me by my subordinate."

"Could you—could we ask you to consider it?"

"It means to go in there again, and it is very hot. I was just leaving." He sighted down the length of his cigar toward the sun-scalded patio below, to which the stairs led. Evidently his powers of making a decision were as rapid-fire as the rest of his personality. Suddenly cigar and head had both swung around and he was already on his way back toward the door from which he had just emerged. Fredericks hung behind for a moment, taken by surprise. Then he quickly rejoined him.

At the door the minister motioned him back to the bench. "Wait out here. I will familiarize myself with it a second time. The details have escaped me."

The door closed and some twenty minutes went lethargically by.

"What's taking him so long?" Cotter asked at last.

"I don't know. I suppose the original memorandum has collected a lot of additional reports along the way, like a snowball that keeps growing, and he has to read the whole batch of them. Bureaucratic red tape is pretty much the same the world over."

A blurred voice called out something from behind the door, echoing cavernously. The soldier took a quick side step, threw the door open behind him, and motioned them in.

The minister's mood had been affected for the worse by the delay they had caused in his personal plans. He let them stand before him for the space of several uncomfortable minutes, thick underlip pouting sullenly, while he completed reading the last of a litter of papers of all sizes clipped together before him. Then he looked up.

"The request is refused," he said briskly, and made a motion to shunt aside the accumulation before him.

Fredericks flashed a look of white-faced dismay at his companion. "But *señor*, these people's lives are at stake. Surely—"

"It is regrettable, of course. However, this is simply an accident of nature. They have become lost, and may have died of exposure. There is no objection to your organizing a private search party if you wish to do so, of course. But there is no necessity that I can see for providing a military escort, as you ask us to. I see nothing in this case to warrant it. There is the expense involved, and my department is not wealthy. Frankly, we have other things to do. This not a matter for us, *señores*."

"But a military escort, and a good-sized one, is essential if we hope to bring them back. It is the only way of saving their lives."

The minister swept a lazy hand back and forth before his face, as though brushing away insects. "I cannot take the responsibility of dispatching a detachment of soldiers inland to an uninhabited valley, as you ask me to do.

Against whom? Against what? When our men march, they must have something to march against."

Fredericks brought his palm down despairingly against the desk. "But the valley is *not* uninhabited. That is what I have been trying to tell everyone!"

The minister regarded him coldly. "*You* have been trying to tell us, *señor*? It is a well-known fact that it has been uninhabited for five hundred years. Do you two gentlemen, who have just arrived down here, think you can tell us things about our own country that we do not know ourselves?" He waited to let this sink in. "I have soldiers on the very premises from the regions lying closest to there. Just a moment, I will convince you." He raised his voice and shouted: "*Guardia!*"

The sentry stepped in, stood at attention just within the door.

"I believe you are from San Juan Obispo?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know the so-called *Tierra de los Muertos*?"

"Very well, sir. It is just on the other side of the rise from us."

"Is it inhabited? Does anyone live in it?"

"Not a soul, sir. Not a living soul."

"That will do. Back to your post." He waited until the door had closed, then he heeled his hands to the corners of his desk, about to rise and terminate the interview.

"Has he ever *been* in it himself, though, that man?" Fredericks asked quietly.

"Nobody has. Nobody goes there," the minister snapped, the seat of his pants remaining poised clear of his chair.

"I have," Fredericks said.

The minister's pants rejoined the chair. "What did you say?" he faltered.

Fredericks went on speaking quietly, though his hand, still on the desk, was trembling slightly, from some inner emotion.

"Tell me, it is necessary to obtain a permit to engage in certain archæological work, is it not? And a record is kept of the permits granted, the number of people involved, the destination, as well as the dates of departure and return."

"All that is true, but I have not got them here."

"But they are available to you, is it not so? Let me trespass on your time a moment longer. Inquire if there was not a permit granted covering a party of two, giving the names of Allan Fredericks and Hugh Cotter, in the late spring of 1946. And the date of return of the same expedition." He stopped a moment. "I urge you to do this," he added.

The minister stared at him a long moment. Then he executed another of his snap judgments. He decapitated the telephone on his desk with a slashing motion.

Cotter, who had taken no part in the interview, caught Fredericks' eye. "Look out," he cautioned under his breath.

"There isn't any other way," was the cryptic answer.

"Read it back to me," the minister was saying.

There was a wait. He picked up his cigar, then interrupted himself to set it down again, untouched. "And what record is there covering the return? Read that."

Suddenly he had replaced the phone as abruptly as though he had received an electric shock from it. His swarthy face had turned a shade paler. His collar bothered him.

"They have on record the fact that such a permit, to enter this valley, was granted to two men, Fredericks and Cotter, on April twentieth, 1946. In other words, two people, both males. The record goes on to indicate that the same party of two returned from there on September fifteenth, 1947, bringing out with them various relics, including a mummy case or sarcophagus, which they had obtained from a tomb they had excavated. All objects of intrinsic value, such as ornaments of gold or silver, they were compelled to turn over to the authorities, in conformance with the national law governing this matter. However, for the mummy case, after a brief official inspection, which showed that it contained nothing but the remains of a young girl, in a remarkable lifelike state of preservation, they were granted an export license, and allowed to carry it out of the country with them aboard ship, there being no museum or other such institution in this country, to take an interest in it."

"*That girl*," said Fredericks quietly, "*was not dead*. No wonder her 'remains' appeared to be in a lifelike state of

preservation. She was a victim of sleeping sickness, or at least a jungle malady very close to it in form. She was fed intravenously, not only during the whole trip down from the mountains, but also during the entire shipboard voyage to the United States. Furthermore, the 'official inspection' of the mummy case was quickened, you might say greased, by payment of five hundred American dollars to the various officials who granted the export license. The lid was just lifted, then put right back on again."

The minister poured himself a drink. It made a lump in his throat going down. His collar still bothered him. He found it warm; his forehead had a satin gloss.

"Wha-what are you saying?" he croaked. "How can you know this? Who are you?"

"Because I am the archaeologist involved, I am one of those two men who brought her out of there in that mummy case. She was not dead then, but she was at least comatose. And she is not dead today, and very far from comatose. She is as much alive as you are, sitting there, or as I am sitting here. Furthermore, I am here to report to you that she has gone back there, to where we first brought her from, and dragged with her a poor unfortunate devil who, according to the civil law of the United States, is her legally married husband!"

The minister was no longer sitting. The minister was very much on his feet, and in a state of gesticulating excitement almost bordering on frenzy. They had to keep switching their heads this way and that to keep his face and figure in front of their eyes.

"But my official capacity is involved!" he spluttered. "This comes under the jurisdiction of my department! This must not come out! This must go no further! A five-hundred-dollar bribe! A living girl taken out of a region that I have reported over and over to my superiors is uninhabited! Are you trying to get me dismissed? Are you trying to make me a liar, a grafter?"

"She's not the only one," Fredericks said, clenching his jaw grimly. "There's a whole tribe of others in there. Small but complete. Anywhere from three hundred to five hundred souls. If you didn't know it before, I'm telling you now."

"It's not true! It's a lie!" the minister thundered, banging his desk. "My department never took five hundred

dollars from anyone! Nobody living was ever brought out of there, because nobody living is *in* there! My department says so! *I* say so! I will back that up to the full extent of my authority!"

He dashed off something on a slip of paper, went to the door, handed it to the soldier standing out there, and came back again.

"Wait outside, Cotter," Fredericks said in an undertone to his companion. "I don't like the turn this is taking. I think one of us ought to safeguard his freedom of movement, to be in a position to help the other if it should become necessary."

"Who's he?" the minister demanded suspiciously, as Cotter made the move to get up and go.

"Just a traveling acquaintance," Fredericks said. "He's not involved. He doesn't know of the affair."

"He overheard this conversation, didn't he?" the minister suggested craftily.

"He doesn't understand Spanish." Fredericks signaled surreptitiously to Cotter to hasten his departure, while the chance was still available.

Cotter closed the door after him and sat down on the bench outside in the hall again.

Suddenly the soldier who had been sent with the message returned at a jog trot. Behind him, in grim intentness, came a number of other people, not soldiers, but wearing some less identifiable garb. Two of these were carrying a pair of poles between them, underarm, with furred canvas around them.

There was a brief, voiceless, but strenuous scuffle from the minister's office, moments after they had all gone in there. But when Cotter rose and tried to re-enter, the soldier suddenly presented his rifle, muzzle forward. "Keep out," he warned.

Suddenly the party came out again. The two poles had been expanded to the width of a stretcher, and within the canvas belly of this, strapped to the point of contortion, and even gagged, lay the helpless, heaving form of Fredericks.

Cotter tried to halt them, only to be violently shoved aside and flattened against the wall.

"What are they doing to my friend? Where are they taking him?"

"To San Lázaro," was the ominous, tight-lipped answer from the man trailing at the rear of the grim procession.

"What's San Lázaro?" Cotter caught him by the arm to make him stand a moment and answer. "The jail here?"

"Much worse. From the jail they come out again, sooner or later. From San Lázaro, never. It's the house of the one-way doors. The asylum for the hopelessly insane."

"But he's not insane!" Cotter cried out in desperation.

"He will be," the man said. "So what's the difference—now or later?"

"And him," said the livid-faced minister, who had been listening from the doorway, "you *can* take to the jail."

Two soldiers promptly pinioned Cotter by the shoulders. "For how long, sir?"

"That is difficult to say," admitted the minister. "Until he forgets the Spanish that he did not know when he was a witness to this unforgivable scene. Three years? Five? Who can tell? It takes longer to forget a language than it does to learn one."

"I'm an American citizen!" Cotter bawled in terror from the far end of the corridor.

"Just enter him under the name of some inmate who has already passed away," the minister added. "If he's not booked under an American name, who can tell whether he's an American or not? These little mistakes will happen."

Chapter Twenty

IT SEEMED as if this journey through darkness into the center of the earth had been going on forever, and would never end. And yet it might only have been an hour or less. The trend of the tunnel was steadily downward. The angle was not too acute to maintain equilibrium, but just enough to throw the upper body slightly off balance and give the effect of hastening the footsteps involuntarily, so that they had to be checked.

It was man-made, there seemed no doubt of that. Perhaps an original fissure or fault had been made use of

here and there; these had been broadened, hewn to rectangular shape, linked together to form a continuous passage.

The darkness wasn't absolute any longer. Those at the head of the procession had long ago, as soon as the aperture was closed behind them, lighted wandlike tapers, perhaps formed of some sort of slow-burning reeds or dried stalks. To Jones, from where he was, these small, separate petal-like lights blurred into one single haze of radiance, for they were borne single file and hence tended to coalesce. At least they lighted the way. Though they gave off very little smoke, still even that little was enough to alter the already stagnant air for the worse. He coughed repeatedly, but whether from the effect of these small flame tongues far to the front, or merely from the desiccated dust raised throughout this unaired passage by the trampling of the many feet before him, he could not tell.

Once there was a peculiar series of halts and starts thrown into the even progress of the party, each successive one traveling down its length, as when a string of cars is jostled about in a freight yard. He couldn't tell just what its cause was until he himself had finally reached the focal point of it.

In a groove worn down one side of the tunnel wall a thin jet of water was running steadily downward, almost like a solidified crystal rod, it was so silent and motionless. Each man in turn had stopped to scoop and drink a palmful or two at it, thus halting the entire line behind him. Jones stopped likewise when the figure before him had gone on, searching for it with his unaided mouth, for the binding of his hands denied him the use of them. He half expected to be thrust roughly ahead, but he was let be for a moment, long enough to find it, like an animal nuzzling for a drink, and to let some of the water run into his avid open mouth, and the rest of it by default run down his neck and chest. Then he was pushed on.

The first warning he had that the journey was nearing an end, or at least reaching some sort of climax, was when the cohered lights ahead began to fan out, so that they could at last be distinguished separately, as if the passage had widened down where they already were and the party's heretofore rigid single file was being broken up. Then the lights began dipping down out of sight one by

one, and when they came aloft again they had been transformed into more robust full-flamed torches. Every moment the light ahead grew brighter. The confined walls of the tunnel suddenly seemed to split open as he, in his turn, reached the latitude where this had taken place, and suddenly they were in a great stone burial chamber, hewn out of the living mountain.

It was honeycombed with niches hewn out of the rock walls, the great majority of them mortared up flush with the surface they were set into, so that they could scarcely be distinguished any longer. Others had been hacked open, a residue of telltale mortar clinging to their sides and giving them an irregular rough-edged shape, and peered empty into the torchlight, like eyeless sockets. One or two of the niches were in a midway condition; they had been broken open, or at least had had cavities made ~~into~~ into them, without being emptied out. In these last could still be detected grisly, age-old mummified forms, with little or no relation to the human cores they contained beneath the scarified linen bandaging. About their feet, when the mortar had been rent sufficiently far down to expose the entire sarcophagus, were ranged earthen bowls and jugs that must have once held maize and fruits.

Above all of these niches, the desecrated and the undisturbed alike, were affixed masks, each one representing the individual whose final resting place was directly below it.

On one side of this crypt, stone steps rose in slow gradation to form a sort of dais against the wall. The niches, in turn, followed this up, each one that gave out upon it being a step higher than the one before. The topmost one of all was unusually elaborate, the mask over it seeming to be of beaten gold, with rays striking out from it. The lineaments were those of a rather hawklike, forbidding old man. The sepulcher itself, in this case, had been undisturbed. On the far side of this the niches slowly descended to floor level again, as did the steps of the platform. So even death in this place, it seemed, had its ranks and honors.

About the floors of this communal necropolis, lying in the corners of it, was a litter of refuse. Broken jugs and pottery, of the same sort that still remained intact in some of the sarcophagi; rubble and chunks of mortar that had

been hewn out of those broken into; and even several complete skeletons, as well as numerous fragments of others. One skull, detached from its body, was propped squat upon the floor, its grinning teeth seeming to bite at the ground that supported it. A slender, gray-green amazingly long snake had died here, in one place, amidst all the litter, and lay in inert convolutions, just as it had last ceased to move. But then when his eyes had traced its intricate form along to one end, they came upon a small bulb-shaped appendage. It was not a snake, had never been. It was a section of rubber tubing, part of some sort of photographic apparatus for taking time-exposure pictures. His mind, already buffeted by too much strangeness, could give this no meaning for a moment.

Nearby was another baffling object. This was a large packing case of ordinary unpainted wooden slats. But slats of white, planed, *modern* wood. The sort of case in which supplies or tools or equipment are habitually packed. The sort of case that is to be seen on any railroad siding, on any pier, all over the world.

It was no longer intact. It had been badly battered and trampled upon. But one of the splintered slats still bore upon it the initials "A. F." in stenciled Roman capitals.

His mind kept alighting on this fact like an intoxicated grasshopper. Initials in Roman capitals. *In Roman capitals*. Here in this place of hieroglyphs. "A. F." Allan Fredericks.

It was as though strangeness, wearied of tormenting him in its own guise of strangeness alone, were now bringing to bear the added variation of familiarity-in-strangeness.

He told himself dully: He was here before me, in this place; that man from whose house I stole her, up in the faraway States. I stole my own death from his house that night.

And she belongs here, in this place.

And now she has returned to where she belongs, to where he found her, dragging me after her, captive, to be immured or sacrificed.

He turned to look at her. The torches made a ring around her, bathing her in quivering topaz light. She went slowly upward, step by step, while the rest remained below. None came after her; she ascended alone. The way

she moved was like a dancer. A rhythm of religious penitence. Head thrown back, arms stiffly extended rearward from her body. The grace of age-old ceremony, instinctive in her blood and not learned by rote, swayed her every movement.

Then she fell upon her knees and, bending, swept her hand across the stones she knelt upon. Then raising it just over her head, she let the age-old dust it had collected fall upon her glossy dark hair, in atonement. The dust of the place she belonged to, the dust of the mountain and the valley she had sprung from.

Then slowly she allowed her forehead to incline until it rested flat upon the stones, and stayed that way, arms outspread, as if to say, I am back, I have returned, to the sealed-up sepulchers of her tribal ancestors before her.

Chapter Twenty-one

THE MINISTER of the Interior was paying a private visit of inspection to the office of the director of the insane asylum of San Lázaro. A very private visit, strictly nonofficial, you might say.

"Bring in Two-twenty," the director ordered.

The director was a spindly little individual with a massive, partly bald skull, whose rimless glasses gave him the aspect of a mousy little clerk or pedant. From his appearance, it was hard to believe he held complete autocratic power of life and death over scores of unfortunate human beings. His feet barely reached the floor from the swivel chair in which he sat, and he was continually blowing his nose into a large cabbagey handkerchief, far more often than there could have been any real need for.

The office, furnished in a musty nineteenth-century style, was abnormally quiet while the two of them sat waiting. Not a sound penetrated it, either because of the distance at which it lay removed from the rest of the institution or because of the fortress-like thickness of the walls throughout the entire building, which had helped gain it its reputation of being a living tomb. And yet this very

silence defeated itself, made one conscious of the presence, close at hand but unseen, of dozens upon dozens of tormented beings, crushed and mute and agonized. The place was shot through with macabre undertones. It reeked of stealthy things, kept from the light of day. Souls dying inside bodies that went on living.

The director said, between nose blows, "This man was brilliant, no? An archaeologist? Too much brilliance is not good. Too much knowledge. It can soften the brains. Sometimes it may end up this way."

The minister fanned himself languidly with his panama hat. "You are right there," he said inscrutably. "Too much knowledge is a bad thing, in more ways than one."

There was a muffled knock on the door. The director interrupted his handkerchief-manipulating long enough to call out, "*Pase.*" The door swung back and Fredericks stood there between two guards. He seemed lost in thought, his eyes directed forward but at a moderately downward inclination that struck the floor just short of where the two officials sat. He failed to raise them in company with the opening of the door, which peeled a layer of shadow from his face, brightening it by that much. There was no pain in his face; it looked younger, if anything, as when all experience has been wiped out.

He had retained his own shirt and trousers, but they were discolored to a dirty greenish-gray. Straw slippers replaced his shoes. The buttons were gone from the cuffs of his shirt and they gaped open around his wrists like great bells, with his bony wrists the clappers.

They brought him forward a pace or two and sat him on a straight-backed chair that stood just inside the door. Then they stood one on each side of him, without taking their hands from his shoulders.

"Good evening, my friend," the minister purred sardonically. "You perhaps remember me? The department chief who takes bribes? Who misinforms his government about the localities under his jurisdiction?"

Fredericks didn't seem to see him. It was as though his eyes refused him further service. They maintained that lowered dullness, showed no cognizance of the room or anyone in it.

The minister extended one hand and snapped his

fingers sharply directly under Fredericks' face. The eyes never even blinked. They gave no reaction at all.

The minister turned to the director inquiringly.

"It is no use," the latter explained. "His mind is gone. He cannot understand what you say to him."

"How long has he been this way?"

"Off and on for about two weeks now. The lucid spells are becoming less and less frequent. I think they will disappear entirely in a little while. Of course, we prefer them this way. They give much less trouble."

"And how long do they last, once they are like this?"

"Sometimes many years. Sometimes just a few months." The director was watching the minister closely, as if trying to read his thoughts.

"But the expense, in such cases, must be considerable," the minister protested virtuously.

"It is true, they keep on eating, and keep on taking up space. We try to keep our bills down as much as we can."

"I believe in economy," the minister let him know firmly. "I will not only fight extravagance in every way, but I will even go so far as to *reward* economy, in certain justifiable cases."

The director looked at him hard and long, through his rimless glasses. Then he dropped his eyes demurely, in perfect understanding.

The minister got up and went over and stood by Fredericks. He leaned down and brought his eyes to within inches of the other man's, as if he were trying to peer into his very soul. "Nothing there," he remarked. He shook him by the shoulder slightly.

Fredericks spoke dully. "Baltimore. Stop them in Baltimore. Look for them in every hotel."

The minister straightened slowly, drew back. He was smiling, not altogether displeasedly.

The director made a sign. They stood Fredericks up, and the door closed. The chair stood there empty. There wasn't even the sound of a footfall. He had gone like the ghost he already was.

The director was watching his visitor closely for signs of approval. Or, perhaps, concrete indications of them.

"Satisfactory, sir?"

"Very." The minister smiled thinly. "I shall recom-

mend you highly in my next report. In the meantime, distribute this among your—" He opened a gold-rimmed alligator billfold and took out several banknotes of large denomination. "Well, put it wherever it is most needed at the moment," he concluded.

The director put it in his inside pocket, right over his own heart.

"And now," said the minister amiably, "I think I will go over to the jail and see how the other one is getting along."

"Bring in a pitcher of cold well water," the minister ordered, in the prison commandant's office. "Have it in a crystal pitcher, so that the water can be seen clearly through it. And an empty glass."

"Is this for the *señor ministro*?"

"Oh, no, no," the minister said disclaimingly. "I never drink water. This is for—interrogation purposes." He made a steeple of his hands. The large emerald on one of them gave out with a flash of green. "You have followed my instructions?"

"*Si, señor ministro*. He has had no water for three days. And the food has all been *picante*, highly seasoned, as you indicated. Chile, red peppers—"

"*Bueno*. This is a difficult case, you understand. It requires unorthodox methods."

Cotter was brought in between two guards. He had shrunk to waist-height, legs out behind him, dragging like a two-finned tail.

"Inmate Juan Gonzaga," reported one of the guards.

"—the second," supplied the commandant.

The minister waved his hand carelessly. "You don't have to be so technical. It is no one's business if there once was another inmate called the same."

Cotter's lips had a peculiar purplish color. They were thick and gave him almost a Negroid appearance. His tongue, which continually flickered forth, was swollen.

"Water," he said huskily.

"Now hold him carefully, while I put the necessary questions," the minister instructed.

He poured a glassful of water with painstaking precision. Not a drop too much, not a drop too little; not a drop spilled. The glass immediately steamed over with

the coolness of its new-found contents. It became attractive by that fact alone.

The minister allowed it to stand there, midway between them.

Cotter's already half-folded knees gave a still further dip.

"Just a drop. Oh, for the love of God—just on the tip of my tongue. Just one drop."

The minister sandwiched his hands across his own breastbone. "Now tell me. You have forgotten your Spanish yet?" The question of course, was put in the English language.

"Yes. Yes. All of it. Every word."

"You are sure?"

"I swear," Cotter panted. "Every word."

"What does *si* mean?"

Cotter shook his head violently. "I don't know. I've forgotten."

The minister craftily edged the glass forward a little, with the back of his folded knuckles. "*Quiere beber?*" he coaxed dulcetly.

Cotter moaned, shuddered all up and down his length, closed his eyes, didn't answer.

"*Tiene sed? Tome,*" the minister invited silkily. He edged the glass forward a little more.

Cotter grimaced, began to cry soundlessly, his eyes creased into slits.

The minister picked up the glass, came around the desk with it, held it in front of Cotter's face.

"*Pero tenga, hombre,*" he insisted, as if growing slightly impatient with a refusal he could not understand. "*Aqui está.*"

A sob of helplessness floated in Cotter's throat, like a gas bubble, and burst with a little clucking sound:

"Let him come forward a little," the minister instructed the two guards holding him, with a wink. "Slowly. He cannot reach it from where you are holding him."

But as they did so, he withdrew the glass, so that the distance between remained the same.

Cotter was sticking out his tongue, desperately trying to lick the side of it with that.

The minister dexterously kept a distance of approximately a quarter of an inch, or perhaps it was an eighth,

between the two. He had a very steady hand and eye.

"Say just one word, say the Spanish word for water, and you can have this. One word is not much, one word is not a whole language."

"Water," said Cotter insanely. "Water."

"In Spanish. What is it called in Spanish?"

"I don't know! I can't! I've forgotten!"

"It's here, so near you. It's yours. Just say it in Spanish."

"*Agua!*" bellowed Cotter, agonized.

The minister slowly tilted the glass in front of his very face. All the water ran out of it in a thin, even column, and splashed to the floor. Cotter hung limp in the guard's grip, as though he had gone down with the water.

"That was one word too many. You still haven't forgotten. Take him back to his cell. Even if it takes five years, you'll stay here until you have forgotten every last word."

Chapter Twenty-two

THE OUTLET from the rock tomb was less secretive than the entrance to it had been. Here was no mere crevice with a detached rock slab to conceal it, but an imposing foursquare portal, hewn out of the living rock and faced with deftly joined, intricately carved stone blocks. A well-worn path led down from it, losing itself in the panorama of the troughlike valley below, with diaphanous mountain outlines enclosing it on the far side.

This valley was longer by far than it was wide, both its extremities lost to view completely.

From up above where they were emerging now, a good third of the way up the mountainside, the bird's-eye view it presented was of flat, carpet-like green jungle. In one place, scattered about like grains of rice, were a handful of brownish-white kernels that must have been buildings or the ruins of buildings imbedded in the jungle matting. One, sharper in outline than the rest, as if pyramidal, thrust upward like a tooth. About these distant granules the green was lighter in texture than elsewhere, as

if the jungle were perhaps thinned by patches of cultivation.

They were in the open again now. There was still sun, there was still sky. But that was no conclusion to him. There had been sun and sky in dim, distant times too. He didn't want strange suns and skies, he wanted his own, the sky he belonged under. He was cold, in the full glare of the sun. Long after they had left the rocky tomb behind, he was still cold from what he had seen in there, numbed, his body and his heart refusing to warm.

They made their way down on this side in the same order in which they had made the ascent on the other, and the long journey between through the tunnel. Still single file. She was in the litter again, heading the procession, and alongside it, trudging terrifiedly along, one hand lashed to its nearest pole, the slim figure of Chris.

She was right there beside her, Chris was, head bobbing along next to her every step of the way, and that Mitty did not once turn toward her, take any notice of the agonies of fright the younger girl must be undergoing, was to him even more heinous than his own sudden oblivion in her consciousness. But then, the sixteenth-century barbarian, he thought bitterly, what pity could she be expected to know?

The trail, leveling off gradually to the horizontal, entered walls of jungle for a while, virgin and almost solid in texture, like a woven green, brown, and black matting.

The mountains behind them slowly thinned, those on the opposite side slowly thickened, as they toiled toward the midpoint of the valley floor. The sun was straight overhead now, as noon approached, and still they trudged on.

Then little by little a change began to occur in the thickets about them. More and more frequently they began to pass fungus-green, ant-swarmed monoliths, toppled blocks or hewn stone overthrown by upthrusting trees, others still standing upright in the shape of sightless doorways, with no walls remaining around or behind them. Vines and creepers draped from them, and occasionally snakes coiled on them in little knots, which unraveled and disappeared when the party passed too close.

And still in other places, where the remains had be-

come submerged entirely in the earth and no longer thrust above its surface, there were curious rounded mounds, like unburst air bubbles forcing their way up through molten lead or some other heavy element, to show what lay buried beneath.

The dead traces of some long-lost city, which must have once in its day been a rival to Cuzco and Palenque for size and splendor. This band was a little living core still remaining to it, a handful of living inhabitants still left to thread their way through its erased causeways, like an ember that still remains alive through presistent fanning in a pit of dead ashes.

Ahead, presently, a structure began to rear, topping the ebbing jungle sky line, a sort of tower or tiered edifice. It was the thing that had appeared like a jutting tooth when first sighted from the mountainside behind them. A temple, or some central structure of importance. The walls were stone up to a jagged, uncertain line three quarters of the way up, then finished or repaired with sun-baked mud that showed chocolate-colored against the early-afternoon light, as though there were no longer sufficient labor or ingenuity available to quarry any more of the immense original blocks of stone that had gone into its construction, or even set back in place those that had toppled down.

About its base, as the jungle finally receded from under their feet like an outgoing green tide, were set gray-white sugar lumps—lesser buildings. And about these in turn, piebald squares of cultivation—maize with which present-day mouths were fed, flax by which they clothed their bodies. Little thatched huts and lean-tos dotted them; not ruins now, but huts that were lived in.

The surrounding buildings became the size of child's building blocks now, with black ants moving about among them, coming forward to meet the procession, to form around it and accompany it onward. Tillers of the soil, shaven-headed priests in flowing linen robes, even women. It was as though an entire cross-section of the original race that had built the city had remained alive to people its vestiges, but in vastly diminished numbers, perhaps one out of every ten or twenty that had once swarmed here. They were a dying race. Nature was to have the last word after all, as it always does.

They stopped and broke formation in a sort of plaza or central space of hard-packed earth in the very center of all the buildings, with no sprout of green showing any longer, the jungle held back at a distance by communal life. On one side of this the temple now bulked clifflike against the sky, dwarfing everything else. Buildings of lesser height completed the enclosure on the other three sides.

The litter was lowered and she stepped from it. Slowly but with sureness of step, like one who returns to a place that she knows well, to a place where she belongs, she moved across the open space toward the looming temple walls. She turned her face neither to the left nor to the right. Her eyes were steady on the black-lined orifice waiting to receive her. She moved so slowly he had lots of time to look at her and take farewell. Her shadow followed her across the sun-white ground like a little pool of dark water. Which he wondered, was the shadow, which the actuality?

Priests, welcoming her into their midst, had made a little lane on each side of her. She entered this and her form was hidden from him, save for a flash of white peering between each two of them as she moved along. But they were old and curved, no longer held themselves straight, and her head still topped theirs for the brief span that remained before she reached the entryway.

A moment longer he saw her like this, a moment only. He saw the side of a face that he thought had been that of a wife. Familiar in its strangeness, strange in its familiarity. Eyes that he knew so well, that didn't know him any more. Mouth that he'd kissed a hundred times, dark scintillating hair that he'd caressed. What were they, what had they been? A moment longer, and then she was gone. The stone lips of the temple entry had swallowed her whole. A peculiar empty feeling took hold of him, the sort of sensation one has at a final, irrevocable parting.

That isn't Mitty, he thought, who just went in there. Where is Mitty, what became of her? Where did I lose her?

The priests turned and filed in after her, the last two dragging between them the resisting, cowering little form of Chris, who had been freed from her bondage beside

the litter and turned over to them by the warrior escort.

The forbidden entryway gaped empty once more. The daughter of the sun had returned to her own.

Chapter Twenty-three

A MURKY grotto-green twilight was the most that ever entered their dungeon, even at high noon on the brightest of days. It was below-ground level for about three quarters of its height, with just a single squat orifice, a sort of horizontal slit, high up on the wall near its juncture with the ceiling. This was on the outer side. Then on the opposite side, the inner side, there was a wooden barrier or slide arrangement that was lashed fast when it was secured, and heaved aside (they did not seem to have discovered the use of hinges or the wheel or pulleys) when entry was desired to bring them food. In this there was in turn a small squared opening through which they could be watched without the necessity for dislodging the entire cumbersome panel.

Here to this place they were brought, and here in this place they were left to their misery and despair.

"But why'd they bring us here?" Mallory kept asking over and over, the first few days. "Why didn't they kill us right away, down at the *finca*? What are they saving us for? What are they going to do to us, now that they've brought us all the way back?"

After a while he stopped asking. Jones couldn't give him the answer; he didn't know it himself. He used to sigh patiently and turn his face away against the wall, as a mute hint to the other to stop tormenting the two of them.

He knew the thought that was in the back of Mallory's mind, because it was also the thought that was in the back of his own mind: torture. But he didn't dare to bring it forth into the open between them. That was why he didn't answer the questions; that was why Mallory finally stopped asking them, too. Sooner or later, something unspeakable—

Each was lashed by his left wrist, by means of thongs, to iron rings bedded in the solid masonry of the walls. These rings or hoops had already been there when they were first thrust into the place, showing that it must have formerly been used for keeping captives in, just as it was now being used once more. There were about a dozen rings all told, riveted about three sides of the enclosure. All but the two they were affixed to were idle. Looking at them, he used to wonder how many human lives, trapped, held fast, as they were now, each one of them had to its credit.

They could stand upright, it was true, and even advance a short distance out from the wall toward the center of the cell, but only by dropping one shoulder lower than the other, for the hoops were imbedded at a low level, so that the only position they were allowed to maintain without bodily distortion was sitting, backs to the wall. At night they could lie down flat on their backs, but only so long as they stretched their legs out toward the center, at right angles to the wall. If they attempted to lie parallel with it, they interfered with one another, the hoops being set too close together.

They were fed liberally, if monotonously, on an unvarying diet of baked maize cakes, and water was given them to drink from a brackish-tasting pottery bowl. This was done twice a day, at about the time the slit up on the wall first started to glow greenish-blue with daylight, and again at about the time it began to darken over with night. The wooden barrier blocking the inward cell entrance, on the side opposite the vent, was slanted back at such times and the warrior who seemed to be on guard outside it at all times would come in. The actual carrying in of the food was done by a second person, the feeding of captives being perhaps beneath the dignity of one who made war. This food-bearer was a wizened old man, his head completely shaven, weaponless, and garbed in clinging linen garments, who gave them the impression of being a priest or religious attaché of some sort. The warrior simply stood guard in the doorway. Then both would go out again, and the barrier would be shunted back and lashed secure on the outside.

"I don't like the way that old one looks at us," Malory complained one time in a low voice, immediately

after the two had gone. "The fighter, he just stands back there and scowls and looks grim; that's all right. But the old one, he squats down close, right in front of us while we're eating, and keeps eying us and seems to be licking his lips the whole time."

Jones had noticed a sort of avid, unhealthy interest too, but he tactfully refrained from saying so.

"Did you see him reach out and grasp my biceps just now?" Mallory went on with a quaver in his voice. "They're not cannibals, are they? That's not what they're—"

"Of course not," Jones answered curtly. "Don't be a fool." Someone had to keep a stiff upper lip. He would have liked to feel as sure about that, or anything else, as he sounded.

They kept count of the days, as all prisoners have, from time immemorial. They had nothing to make marks on the wall with, so they kept count in their heads, keeping score with one another aloud, as day followed day. "Twenty-two today," Jones would grunt. "That what you get?"

"Yeah, that's what I get too," Mallory would answer bitterly.

It was still easy enough to do it that way, while their captivity was young and before the passage of time had begun to fog their ability to calculate.

On the twenty-fourth day of their imprisonment a spasm of fright coursed through both their chests simultaneously. The wall slit was glowing peacock green with advanced daylight, the barrier was freed and dragged back, the usual entry was made—but this time by double the customary number of persons. There were two warriors, and two of the shriveled-up priests. The platter of cakes and the bowl of water were conspicuously lacking. They hadn't come to feed them.

Both of them realized at once that some sort of climax was at hand.

Jones could hear Mallory's breathing begin to come faster, beside him. "Take it easy," he muttered, trying to steady him with a brief touch of the hand.

The four drew up before them and stood there studying them inscrutably, the warriors in the background. One of

the priests suddenly raised a bony finger and pointed to Mallory. The warriors immediately stepped forward, a knife was plied, and the thong attaching him to the wall was sliced apart. They stood him up on his almost unusable legs and led him to the center of the cell. They stripped him of the moldering rags that were all that remained by now of his former garments. Some sort of ceremonial kilt, like a sash of fine linen, was wound around him at the waist. His wrists were bound behind his back, and the heavy pressure of the warriors' hands upon his shoulders forced him down to a kneeling position. Then water and moss were brought in, and there was an ominous cleansing and symbolic purification of his left breast, about the region of the heart.

Mallory's suppliant figure cringed; Jones could see the sodden greenish-white of his flesh, dyed by the cell light, instinctively crawling away from under their macabre ministrations. His breath came gusty and strident as sandpaper.

"Why are they taking me and not you?"

"Pull yourself together," Jones tried to brace him.

They hoisted him to his feet again and turned him toward the dungeon entrance. His head remained pleadingly turned around toward Jones. "What are they going to do to me? Larry!"

Jones hung his head mutely. There was nothing he could do, and the other man knew it.

They had him halfway over to the entrance now, his legs stiffly locked against them like an automaton's. His breathing kept getting harsher and harsher, with terror and the will to resist.

"Larry, I'm not coming back."

Jones lied to him, trying to give him a little courage to face the next few moments, whatever they were to be. "Yes, you are. Sure you are."

They had him at the threshold now; he was trying to dig his nude heels into the sod. They wouldn't catch. "I can tell by their faces I'm not. Larry, they're going to kill me."

This time Jones didn't answer. He knew they were too. You could sense it. It radiated from them, in grim waves.

"Larry, Chris—"

They had him outside now.

"Take it easy, Mal," was all Jones knew how to say.

The wooden barrier crashed closed, and his captivity had become a solitary one.

He saw the thing by indirection, and that was almost worst than seeing it in full sight. Teetering on his feet, straining as far forward as the thong gripping his wrist would allow, peering upward through the vent that gave onto ground level outside, he saw it as one sees the lower part of a stage scene when the curtain has stuck on its way up, hangs there suspended, and only the lower parts of the performers' bodies are visible.

Opposite his jail, across the open space outside, and set far enough back so that perspective brought at least the lower half of it within his sight, rose a surface of massive stone blocks. It had always been there, staring at him, in all the time he'd been in this keep, but now he understood for the first time, as he watched them, what its purpose was. It was one of those horrid elevated altars of human sacrifice that had once dotted all Middle America, to be brought into lavish use at every recurrent solar equinox. It was foursquare, but from where he looked it appeared to be two-dimensional, with only height and breadth. One edge was unerringly perpendicular, straight as a ruler; the other was indented by a channel of ascending steps cut into it. These were set at right angles to him; he saw them only from the side. Up above there must have been, though he could not see it, a flat surface, an altar platform, broad enough to hold the participants, the sacrificial block, and whatever else attended the grim ritual.

It was nearly high noon when the death drum began to beat, somewhere close at hand, from some nearby rooftop, but not, to the best of his ability to judge, from the top of the altar structure itself. This was nearly six hours after Mallory had been taken from the cell. Where he had been kept in the meantime, Jones had no way of knowing.

Figures gathered about the base of the truncated pyramid, standing passively waiting, but his view of the steps remained clear, for they did not quite close in around the base but left a clear space. Next a line of six priests, of

the same wizened type as the one who had brought them their food, slowly began to ascend the steps single file. Their chanting made a thin high-pitched wail against the growing overhead drum, which filled the air like sultry thunder.

The fact that no warriors followed them upward was proof enough that this was no military or war execution, but a religious infliction of death, in honor of the sun.

The six lesser priests disappeared above. There was a brief pause, and then a solitary figure slowly ascended in their wake. The high priest, judging by his more elaborate but basically similar garb and accoutrements. He climbed with an almost cataleptic slowness that froze Jones's blood. That fact, and what he carried with him. He held his hands stiffly and extended out before his body, palms up and rigidly side by side. Across them, glistening in the sunlight, lay a curved, razor-edged obsidian scalpel—the sacrifice knife.

Jones remembered that ominous scouring of the region over the heart he had seen them subject Mallory to before taking him out. A shudder coursed through him.

There was another wait, while the drum rumbled on. The shadows of those on the ground were circular about them now. The sun was almost directly overhead.

An opening was made by them, and four stalwarts advanced slowly through their midst to the base of the altar steps, bearing on their shoulders a gilded litter. In it she sat. He knew her right away, in spite of the nunlike coif that half hid her face, shadowing her eyes. She was garbed in white. On her chest a flashing golden plaque was suspended, with rays standing out from it to simulate the sun, whose handmaiden she was. Golden bands were on her arms, with amethysts and emeralds blinking from them.

They set the litter down and she stepped from it and slowly mounted the steps. A strange figure in a strange, dark pageant, which the outer world thought had been abolished centuries before.

It was incredible that this high priestess, this sun goddess or whatever she was designated, could be a girl who had once— But it was she, come to preside over this sanctified butchery; he knew her too well, he would have known her anywhere.

He wanted to call out to her, to scream to her, but for once he couldn't. His mouth was dry; his throat seemed to close up into a pin hole and refuse him service.

Her head was gone now, up above into the sky, the sky where murder was to be perpetrated. Next her shoulders went, and then the slenderness of her waist. One golden sandal lifted and was gone, the other remained a moment longer, poised at the toe. Then that went too.

Presently, in the expectant silence, a gauzy swirl of faint blue smoke descended to the ground and trailed up again, leaving in its wake a sickly-sweet odor that even penetrated to where he was. She had cast a lump of aromatic gum into some censer or tripod burning unseen up above.

All was in readiness now, all the principals were waiting, only the victim was lacking. The drum suddenly stopped short, and high noon must have been reached at that instant. The silence was stunning.

Then a faint whimpering sound began to percolate through it, coming nearer; audible before the cause of it was visible. That half-tone sobbing by which man and the animals alike express their fear of imminent death, when they are unfortunate enough to be made aware of it beforehand.

Mallory's white, almost unclad body made a strange pale thing in the midst of all their darker ones. They were dragging him forward by a sort of halter arrangement around his neck, like a steer led to slaughter, and urging him on from behind with repeated bites of a leather thong into his shoulders and across his back. Every step was contested, was flinched, but he was too weak to be able to offer much resistance.

Jones, sickened, turned his head away, and shut his eyes for a moment.

Everyone should die bravely. It's so easy to say that, until you're the one to do it.

When he looked again—and he had to look, though he didn't want to—they already had the victim on the altar steps. Four of the priests had come down and taken over custody of him from the warriors, who remained below. Mallory had fallen prone on the steps, and was slowly dragged up them full length by their combined if somewhat faltering strength.

His thin legs disappeared, twitching and flexing, scissoring futilely against the slippery stairs.

Then he was gone. Jones couldn't watch the rest of it. He could only remember that scouring of the heart region, that wickedly curved obsidian scalpel, that golden ewer he had glimpsed being carried upward by one of the priests, in which to catch—what?

The silence seemed as though it would go on forever. Then suddenly it exploded into a piercing scream of agony that had already become death before it completed itself and winged thinly off into nothing.

The onlookers at the base of the altar dropped to their knees. A brazen gong crashed out triumphantly, just once. Then that trailed throbbingly away too, in the wake of the scream.

Something white fell inert, with a sodden thud, to the ground at the foot of the altar, cast over the side from above. The eyes only seemed to be fluttering closed now, but that might have been an illusion. Chevrons of red streaked out from a thin-lipped, puckered incision just under the left breast.

A deep groan of religious ecstasy sounded from those kneeling below. Scattered drops, as of thick dark rain, fell here and there upon them, as of something held aloft toward the sun, and then shaken out on those below. Another whiff of aromatic smoke came looping down and about, like a ghost snake.

Jones slumped to the ground of his dungeon and lay there in open-eyed despair.

To have to die is hard. To have to die as he'd just now seen this other man die was sheer horror.

Chapter Twenty-four

THE BADLY FRIGHTENED turnkey came hurrying back along the jail corridor, bringing the prison commandant at his heels.

"In here," he said fearfully, stopping short outside the last cupboard-like crevice of all.

The commandant was still chewing the last mouthful he had brought away from the table with him in his haste. He took his time, swallowed first, then ordered, "Well, open it, fool. Have I eyes that can see through this iron slab?"

Keys clashed and the cell was exposed to view.

"Oh," said the commandant. "I had forgotten who was in here." He said it almost with an air of relief.

"I don't know when it happened," the turnkey expostulated. "He was all right the last time I looked in."

"Well, I suppose we have to make sure," the commandant said unhappily, stepping reluctantly forward to go in. "And right on top of eating, too. I didn't even have my coffee yet."

The turnkey trailed in after him.

"We don't want any more mistakes, like that other time," the commandant continued. "Remember what happened?"

"The one from Eighteen. Yes." The turnkey crossed himself.

"We had him already lying out there on the ground, when he rolled his head over and his lips started to move."

"Well, luckily there was that shovel there handy, to quiet him with."

"As long as we were that far, why should we have the trouble of bringing him all the way back again with us—and then maybe the next day it would happen anyway?"

"*Sí, mi comandante*, you're right," the turnkey agreed judiciously.

"Bring in the lamp from the corridor," the commandant said irritably. "I can't get used to this dimness." While he was waiting, he lit a cigarette, to temper some of the foul odor in the cell.

The turnkey came back with an oil lamp, and rays of straw-colored light, spearing up the walls ahead of it, finally coalesced into a satisfactory patina of illumination.

Cotter's body lay laterally across the cot. His leg over-spanned it on one side, his head hung partly off the other. There was not room for it to hang down entirely. His arms lay spread out sideward.

His neck and throat and shoulders were all dark, as

though a sudden empurpled birthmark had overspread him there. There was something the matter with his throat. It seemed to yawn open, as though his mouth were lower down than where it belonged; as though he were grinning in the wrong place.

The commandant bent over a little toward him, blowing cigarette smoke away from between himself and the corpse, so that he could see clearly. He nodded. "We don't have to have any doubts this time," he commented. "But how—?" the turnkey faltered.

The commandant looked around briefly on the small area of floor space. He stooped, picked something up.

"With this," he answered. "Here it is, right here." It was a small sliver, about an inch long, about half an inch wide.

The turnkey goggled at it.

"It's one of those blades the *americanos* make so beautifully. They're very hard to get down here. I used to have some, though. They call them—ah—you know, shave-with-safety. You cannot cut yourself with them. That is the way in which they shave up there."

"But if you can't cut yourself with them, how could it do that to him?" the turnkey pointed out naïvely.

"Ah, you're very dense," snapped the commandant. "You can't cut yourself with it while it's in the holder. You can when you take it apart."

"I won't get in trouble, will I, *mi comandante*?"

"No, you didn't know he had it," the commandant reassured him.

"You did, *mi comandante*?" the turnkey gaped in astonishment.

"Naturally. It was sent to him through me. It came from the Minister of the Interior, no less. He said he wanted the inmates to look neat, he didn't like them with stubble all over their faces when he came here on inspection visits. This particular one, in any event."

The turnkey still didn't understand. He scratched his skull in bafflement. "But if it's supposed to be used in a holder, and if the *señor ministro* wanted him to use it, then why didn't he send him the holder with it? Why did he just send him this part?"

"Stop trying to figure out things that don't concern you," the commandant reprimanded him. "It's none of

your business and it's none of mine. The *señor ministro* is entitled to a slight fit of absent-mindedness once in a while, a man with all the heavy responsibilities he's got."

He suddenly caught sight of something, leaned sharply forward again, and thrust his whole arm down between cot and wall. He brought up a small piece of rumpled paper and smoothed it out.

"Wait a minute, here's a note he seems to have written. With a piece of soft charcoal, it looks like."

"I gave him that a few days ago," the turnkey admitted. "It was soft, he couldn't hurt himself with it." He craned his neck across his superior's shoulder. "Does it say why he did it?"

The commandant gave a shoulder fling of incomprehension. "No, it says the same thing over and over. It must be some kind of lesson, like they give little boys to do in school."

The words were:

"I have forgotten Spanish.
I have forgotten Spanish.
I have forgotten Spanish.
I have forgotten Spanish."

Chapter Twenty-five

ALONE now in the dungeon, he could sleep.

Human beings must sleep. Give them time enough, and they can sleep anywhere, in any situation. Even on the floor of Purgatory, even in the mouth of Hell, they will sleep. Night comes and they will sleep.

Sleep was friendly. It was awakening that was the cruel time. For in sleep he still dreamed he was back home, in his own country, in his United States. Voices spoke to him in English, sometimes he saw a car or two skim by in the background, women appeared in short swirling skirts and high-heeled slippers; once he was manipulating an automatic toaster, from which the slices of bread kept flying up without his being able to catch them.

Sometimes, for a minute or two after awakening, before he'd yet opened his eyes, the kindly illusion would prolong itself. Sure, on the other side of those closed lids was Baltimore. All he'd have to do was raise them, and—

And then his eyes would open, and he would be back in the greenish pallor of the dungeon around him. Inert on the floor, being punished for no reason, just for the sake of being punished. The tribal morality of the dim dead past.

The dream was in the waking and the waking was in the dream.

It wasn't the darkness of the dungeon. He could have borne that. It wasn't the fact of being fettered. He could have borne that. Devil's Island or Alcatraz, it wouldn't have mattered. It was the fact that outside the dungeon was a greater dungeon, over and above the immediate shackles on his wrist were vaster shackles. He was imprisoned in the wrong age.

He had suffered a solitary fate, which had never befallen another individual, which was too cruel almost to be borne. He used to wonder sometimes, in wry retrospect, if all the thousands of lads who, as they turned the pages of a history book or adventure tale, had fleetingly wished themselves back in some former, more glamorous time, would have still wished that if they'd known what it felt like as he did now. The sense of cosmic loneliness, greater than any marooned sailor ever felt on a desert island. For loneliness was not just lengthwise now, a matter of distance. It was on a more imponderable plane, a matter of time.

Yes, many times he cried, softly, to himself, deep in the night, where pain would not have made him cry, nor even excess of fear. But strangeness did; the lack of explanation, the withholding of reasonable understanding. Strangeness broke him down and shattered his restraint and courage to pieces, and he'd press his hands flat against his face to keep from hearing himself, and press his face in turn flat against the ground or against the wall, and breathe harshly and wetly into that self-imposed mask over his own weeping, till his sides ached and his teeth chattered and his throat was torn with the rebuffed breath. But the answer never came. Strangeness, things without explanation. Strangeness, taking away all props.

For what is courage, after all, but a reliance on the things that one knows, the things one is sure of?

But this was only sometimes. Then there were the nights he lay in sullen rage, planning plans that never came to anything. And there were the nights when he lay in dulled listlessness, not caring much. And more and more, increasing while the others diminished, there were the nights when he just slept, and dreamed of the past that was the future. Six months ago, but still five hundred years ahead of the present he was in now.

Then one night he dreamed he heard Chris speaking to him in the dark, back at the *finca*. He couldn't see her but he knew it was her voice. She was saying his name in the dark and afraid to make much noise. She couldn't seem to come to him, she was on the outside of some doorway or opening and he was on the inside, but he could hear her cautiously breathing his name. It was the slenderest sort of whisper, the merest skein of sibilant sound, repeated over and over, patiently thrown into the dark at him as one throws particles of gravel against a window pane until at last one of them succeeds in attracting the attention of someone behind it.

"Larry." And then, "Larry." And then, "Larry."

Just breaths of silkiness in the darkness of the night.

His head rolled over, and he slurred sleepily, "Be there right away, just wait a minute."

The sound of his own voice completed his awakening. A hissed warning to silence came, like something left over from the dream, that had escaped out of it. "Sh-h-h-h."

He lay there for a minute with his eyes still closed. He'd never dreamed of her yet. Only of Mitty, and once or twice of another girl from long ago, Jane Abbott. But never of this kid, whom he'd only half noted in the gathering clouds of strangeness those last few weeks down at La Escondida.

"Larry."

The whisper was still sounding, and yet the dream was over. He reared upright, pushed himself away from the wall in a sitting position.

"Larry."

He struggled to his feet, sawed the darkness around with his free arm, trying to split it into sections. "Chris! Are you in here with me?"

"No, I'm in the inside passage, up against the cell door. I'm right by the opening in it." Then, as the metal hoop gave a flexing creak with his attempt to draw away from it, she said, "Sh-h!"

"Where's the guard? Isn't he there by you?"

"He sleeps on the ground, outside in the open, right at the mouth of the passage. I had to—I had to step over him to get in here. I'll have to go back that way too, across his body."

He strained toward her at an angle, swaying off balance.

"I'm holding my arm all the way in through the opening," she whispered. "Are you near enough? Reach out, reach out and see if you can touch it."

He kept fanning the blackness with his unfettered arm.

"I've got something for you. I'm holding it. I'm afraid to drop it, he may hear."

Suddenly his splaying fingers touched something cold, the handle of an obsidian knife that she was swaying back and forth as sightlessly as he. A shudder of deep emotion ran through the two of them at the slight contact, the first friendly contact in months. His hands tightened on the knife and he took it from her. It was short, but it had provided the necessary extra length that just spanned the distance between them.

"Is it any good? Will it help you?"

"Will it!" he breathed with hot gratitude. "The hoop's metal, but my hand's attached to it with some sort of a thong or fiber. I can saw through that."

"I've had it on me for over a week. I've been trying to steal out every night to get to you with it. This was the first chance I had. Use it a little at a time. Free yourself from the wall first. Then later you can begin digging at this wooden barrier. Don't try to do it all in one night; you'll only be caught at it. I've got to go back now."

"Wait, Chris," he pleaded. "Don't leave me yet. Let me talk to you just a minute more. It feels so good to talk to someone again."

"I'll come tomorrow night. If I stay too long tonight, then I may never come again. I only have to be caught at this once, you know. She doesn't know what mercy is."

He hardly knew what he was saying; it was like a form

of delirium. "Say some more. Say anything. Let me hear the words. I don't care what they are. Oh, I'm so lonely it hurts."

"I'm afraid to stay too long. My place is on the floor right beside her. She may wake any minute and find me gone. There's a long flight of steps up into the temple, too. I carried down an empty water jug and left it standing there as an excuse. Tomorrow night. Will you be careful?"

"I'll be careful."

"Tomorrow night."

There was the slight rustle of her garb, out there in the gloom, and then he didn't hear her any more. He counted, with his heart, the steps that would take her back to the outside of the passage, and lift her across the recumbent guard. He lived that awful moment with her as she passed through it, his ears straining against the thick walls that still would not have kept out the disastrous sounds. A sleepy grunt, a growl of interrogation—and catastrophe.

But nothing came. The minute became another minute, the other minute became a third. She'd made it, she was safe. The night was still and empty.

He corkscrewed around on his hips, inward toward the wall, and began sawing away briskly at the thong that held him to the hoop.

Tomorrow night had come. The whisper of his name had come. She had come. He'd been free of his iron staple since just before dawn of the night before, but all day long he'd had to lie back against it with his arm under him. They didn't look at him very closely any more when they brought the food. His muscles were still fairly weak and uncertain from the strictures of his long confinement, but all day long he'd been massaging his legs endlessly, and ever since darkness had fallen and it was safe to do so, he'd been practicing motion, walking and flexing them, alone there in the cell.

He trod gingerly across the dungeon floor and put his face up close to the vent. He could feel the warmth of her breath coming to him from the other side. Now there was only this left between them.

"I worked all last night, after you left. I've been free

since dawn. I cried a little in the beginning, and I swore I wouldn't tell you; now that's the first thing I'm doing—telling you."

"What do you suppose I'm doing right now?"

"Let me feel your tears. Let me touch them with my hand." He traced his fingertips softly across her cheek, and something warm and wet dropped to one of them and clung there. He brought his hand back and put it to his own lips.

She was whispering, and he didn't want to miss anything she said.

"I found something they use. I don't know what it is. Powdered roots. Narcotic, I guess. I put a pinch in the water jug she drinks from. I was afraid to use too much, she might have noticed it by the taste. It makes it a little safer. She'll sleep a little deeper."

"Let me hold your hand for a little while."

He covered it with both his own, and then she added her other one to it, making a knot of longing and of hope. He placed his lips to it, and then presently she did hers too.

They both sighed deeply in unison.

"That feel so good. I'm not so lonely now."

"I'm not so frightened now.."

He sundered the knot, extended his hands through the opening. "Bring your face closer. Bring it nearer mine."

Their lips met, and he kissed her with an avid ferocity. With the kiss came the knowledge, the certainty, withheld until now: I love her. This is my love, my only love. There never was another, never will be any more. I know it now. Too late, but I know it now.

He held her face pressed to his like that for a moment. "I love you, Chris. Excuse me if I—sort of slop over, but I just now found it out."

"I found it out so long ago," she said with wistful simplicity, "that I can't remember when it was now, any more."

He pressed his mouth to hers again. And then again. And still again. "How strange it feels to kiss with real love for the first time. Am I doing it right? Is this the way? I don't even know, because I've never done it before. Am I frightening you, Chris?"

"No, you're taking all the fright away. All of it away."

You're making the bad dream stop. and the daytime come back again."

They lingered like that, on dangerous, knife-edged moments. She hadn't asked if her father were in there with him. He wondered if she knew. She must, or she would have tried to speak to him as well.

"Chris," he faltered finally. "You know—how it is I'm by myself in here?"

"I know about that. I keep pretending that he's still in there with you, only he's asleep and so he doesn't hear us."

"But when you had the knife yourself, didn't you want to—"

"No, I only wanted it for you. I wanted *you* to live. To have used it on her, that would have meant death for you, as well as myself. *You* be my knife. *You* be my right arm. I'll grieve later. I'll hate later. Right now there's only you to think of."

They made their final plans. "I'm at the halfway stage now," he said. "My arms are free. There's just the barrier. That means one more night. Because we must both go *the same night* that I pry that out. It can't be hidden in the daytime, like the iron ring was behind my back."

"Do you think you can loosen it?"

"I'm sure I can. I've been tying it up-and down all day, while I was lying there. Now that I can get up flush with it, and now that I have the knife. I can stretch my arm through the opening and across the outside, and whittle away the thongs that lash the two iron hoops together. That's all that holds it; I've seen them when they open it."

"Well, maybe I can do it for you from this side even better."

"No," he said, "that'll be my job. There's too much of tonight used up already; daylight would be here just about the time we got through. And we'll need the darkness for our getaway; that's the only headstart we'll have. I'll begin right at dusk tomorrow, and you slip out as soon as you see the moon come up."

"The moon's going to be full tomorrow night. Will that be good or bad?"

"Bad only in the beginning, until we can get clear of this built-up place. Good as soon as we're out in the open jungle."

"I'd better go back now. I'll be here when the moon comes up."

"You're not afraid, are you? It means going back again, for one more night and one more day."

"I'm not afraid, if you say so. Only, be careful. We're so close to it now, just a night away. For both of us, be careful."

"For both of us," he promised.

They parted with their lips.

"Just one more tomorrow night."

One more tomorrow night. Hope has so many tomorrow nights. Hope never runs out of tomorrow nights. That's what hope is, all hope is.

Chapter Twenty-Six

HIS TIMING was beautiful. Almost uncanny. Just a quarter of an hour before the rise of the moon, he felt the final sudden spring of looseness that told him the last of the thongs had parted under his untiring knife. The shifting back of the barrier could have been done in about two minutes' time, if he cared to risk having it creak or complain; he did it in twelve, in an absolute velvety silence. One shoulder to it, both his arms pressed tight to it; the latter holding it back against him, rather than urging it forward. He eased it a fraction of an inch at a time on its way, then stopped, keeping all unevenness, both of the wood and of his body, out of it, so that the wood had no chance to find a voice.

He stopped when the opening was little more than a foot in width. That was enough. He held it tight now, one arm on each side of it, and squeezed through side.

The realization that he was on the outside, that he was free, hit him all at once, as if by delayed action. He'd been too taken up with the mechanics of the act itself until now. It nearly made him dizzy for a minute, in a literal sense. He swayed, and had to plant both palms against the wall, to keep from teetering against the wood and perhaps undoing all his stealth after all.

His heart sang as it had never sung before. I'm out! I'm in the *open*! In the *open*, I tell you!

He hadn't noticed yet that she wasn't here. That is to say, he had, of course, but hadn't had time to worry about it yet.

He dropped to all fours like an animal, put the knife bladewise between his teeth, and started to pad in sinuous menace along the inner passage, toward its mouth, where the guard lay sleeping.

One palm, the opposite knee, the other palm, the opposite knee to that. Death down close to the ground.

There wasn't going to be any quarter given, there wasn't going to be any boy-scout morality or fair-fight ethics. He was among primitives, and he was going to kill according to their code.

He could see the guard's legs now, athwart the passage entrance; the trunk of his body must be to the side.

One last step, and then there was no room for any more; he was almost on top of him. But he couldn't get to him from this side, the inside; the wall was in the way. He rose swayingly against the side of the opening, knife still in his teeth. He arched his leg out widely, and put his foot down on the other side of the guard's legs. He swayed for a moment, off balance between the wall and the guard's leg. Then he gathered his weight, stepped lightly to the other side of the guard, and dropped down beside his sleeping enemy.

The man was on his back, nostrils pointed up, bared chest exposed in its serried gradations, which were like steppingstones downward.

Suddenly the moon came up, just in time to be in at the death. It came up in fitting hue for it, too; lurid coppery-red.

He put out his hand, opened it, and sheltered for a minute the place where the heart was. As if to mark it, as if to bid it stay there where it was for an instant longer. He put the hand toward his mouth, and it came back with the knife in it.

The bloodthirsty moon was paling into yellow now with impatience.

There was a middling-sized flat stone lying there (the guard was using an even larger one for a head rest). He picked that up in his other hand. He held the knife per-

pendicular to the heart now. He raised the stone high overhead, and swung, from all the way around in back of him.

There was a crack as it crashed into the knife haft. He let it roll off down the side of the man's body, and he sank prostrate beside him, spent by the blow.

The man slumped over a little more to one side, that was all, and then stayed that way.

When he raised his own head again to look at him, the only change was that his mouth was now open instead of closed. The haft was all that protruded of the knife; the rest of it had all gone in.

He got to his feet, and crossed the man's ankles so that he could get a good grip on them, and dragged him that way, a little at a time, around the turn of the opening, and into the passage, and down the length of that, and finally left him right there by the barrier.

Then he worked on the knife haft, and with the help of his foot against the body, finally managed to get the knife out again. It was dark in there, so he couldn't see it while he was doing it, only know it, which wasn't so bad. He whetted the knife this way and that against the hard-packed earth floor to dry it off, and then he sheathed it against him, and went back to the entrance to wait for her.

The moon had whitened now, as if from loss of blood.

He stood there straining his eyes and ears, watching for her coming, listening for the sound of it. Nothing moved. The night was still and empty.

She'd said she'd be here when the moon came up. The moon had already been up for ten minutes now, for fifteen, for who knew how long? Every added minute was a minute taken off their chances. A remark she had made one of the other times came back to him now in agonized foreboding: "If I stay too long, then I may never come again." They might have— They wouldn't, would they? Of course they would, why wouldn't they? If they had torn the living heart out of an elderly man, and he had seen them do that with his own eyes, why would they spare her? The distinction between the sexes, the sparing of women, that was something that had only come into being with feudal Europe, with knighthood. That wasn't known among primitives. And *she*, the other one— He'd

heard somewhere that women could be far crueler toward other women than toward any man. Maybe it was true and maybe it was not; he only knew she wasn't here, and the moon was high, and something must have happened to her.

He'd have to go look for her, then, and try to find her, and try to save her. If it wasn't too late. And then the thought occurred. But if I leave here, if I start out, she may come by another way, and I may lose her altogether. We may never find each other at all that way.

Three times he started out from the shelter of the inked-in doorway, and three times he lost his courage, his feet faltered to a stop within a few paces, and he slunk back again to wait some more.

The moon was far above the rim of the world now, and condensed to about the size of a tennis ball. The moon of the Mayas, haunted, lonely, come back to look for its own. A moon of the fifteenth century.

He did things that a year ago he wouldn't have done. But then a year ago he wasn't as he was now. The long solitude, the confinement, the impoverished diet had unmanned him. He breathed her name in desperation toward shadows that fooled him into thinking they were she. "Chris! Chris! Hurry, Chris!" But the shadows stayed where they were and didn't come on any closer after all. He turned and buried his face within his squared arms against the side wall of the passage, and his face writhed, and his body shook, but without tears. He pounded desolately against the wall with his palm, then stopped, for that made a sound that might attract attention.

Suddenly he left his place of concealment, and this time, he knew, there was no turning back. Either he'd die with her, or they'd find each other and escape together. Even freedom wasn't worth the price that he'd been paying the last few minutes.

The moon of the Mayas seemed to swell and gloat as he came out within its ken. Hungry for death, never tired of looking down on death, not even after five hundred years.

He tried to orient himself as best he could, after just one look at the scene many months ago and with his eyes glazed by exhaustion after the long travail through the mountain. And to make it harder, the whole world was

piebald now, patches of black, patches of white, with no in-between gradations.

But he remembered the direction from which they'd been brought toward the temple, into which Mitty had gone, and Chris with her. He could remember the shape of its doorway, broader at the bottom than at the top, like that of an ancient Egyptian temple. And peering ahead, he could see something like that right now, milk-white in the moonlight, jet-black in its recesses. Its upper tiers made shadowy cubes against the spangled sky.

He crept along, hugging the walls closely, staying deep within their shadows whenever he could, in case unseen eyes were awake in the night around him. Where there were gaps between the structures, he leaped quickly across the canals of white that these formed, into the sheltering dark again, like an animated chessman hopping from black square to black square, to keep from being checkmated in a game in which death was the opposing player.

He reached the pylon-shaped opening at last and stopped cautiously before it. Moonlight showed on the inside as well as the out. There must be a court open to the sky in there, with the lintel forming just a squared-off black bridge between.

This was it. He'd seen her go in here that first day.

He passed under the massive stone lintel. It threw a brief bar of black across him, no more, then he emerged into full moonlight again. Beyond there was a peripheral courtyard or compound, a sort of dry moat, separating the temple proper from the outer wall that ringed it.

A second, inner entrance faced him, smaller than the first, and black, black as doom, black as perdition. It was set higher from the ground than the first, steps going up to it. And at the foot of these, one on each side, were two things that made him quail for different reasons.

On the one side was a warrior sentry, sleeping huddled. Not across the steps, it is true, as his own guard had been back there, but at their side. And on the other side, discarded, lay an empty earthen jug, such as was used for carrying water. But it was not upright; it lay on its side, as though it had rolled over several times. As though the bearer, seeking to slip out with it, as a subterfuge for fetching water had been discovered and stopped and forcibly dragged back inside again.

He crept over toward the steps. For a moment he was going to kill the guard, as he had the other. But the slumbering figure never moved, and that gained it its life. It was more important to try to find her first. This could come later, on their way out, if it had to be done.

He went up the steps sideward, knife at the ready, face turned toward the sleeper, who was now below him.

A moment later, as if he were one of its own, the darkness swallowed him in.

The steps continued on the inside. He guided himself along with hand to one of the two facing walls, careful of each toehold, careful of each footrest.

Then presently a faltering dim light was seeping down to meet him. It strengthened almost imperceptibly. The black walls and steps shaded off into murky amber, then tan, then finally into a dark gold tint. It gave him a shadow that fell behind him. It gave him his eyes back, at least. There must be a lamp or something, up above.

He reached the head of the steps, and just beyond them was one more opening. It was through this that the low-toned effulgence was peering.

It was a shadowy chamber. At its far end he could see still more steps, rising palely into the night under the moon, for they were unroofed once more. They probably led to the very topmost part of the temple.

He didn't need to go any farther than this, though. They were here, they were both here.

A single lazy tongue of flame flickered from a vessel holding oil, a sort of lamp or censer supported by a tripod. He stood there rooted, taking in this incredible place of superstition and of shadows. Over against the opposite wall, on a low pallet covered with ocelot skins, lay a motionless figure asleep, one arm trailing along the floor. Jugs of varying sizes were ranged against the wall, but whether they contained water or cosmetics, or simply were empty, he could not tell. A spray of hummingbird feathers attached to a wand, with which it must have been part of Chris's duties to fan her, lay discarded beside the pallet.

And then, on the other side of the place, in a huddle against that wall over there, lay the contorted form of Chris, also asleep, but with her arms stiffly bound together behind her, as his own had been only a little while

ago. The ragged tunic or shirt she wore had been pulled down low over her back, and even at that distance he thought he could see angry marks there, as though she had been recently beaten.

He moved cautiously across the barren stone-surfaced flooring until he had reached her, and his shadow fell across her where she lay. He glanced over at the other one for a moment, as a precaution. She hadn't stirred.

He turned back to Chris again. He crouched down to bring his face more to a level with hers. It was important to wake her first, before he tried to free her. Otherwise she might wake herself and cry out. He put out his hand, and placed it lightly across her mouth, more in readiness than in actual pressure. Then he touched her lightly on the curve of her unclad shoulder. Then he breathed her name, lips to ear.

Her eyelids flew up and he was looking into the same candid aquamarine-brilliant eyes that he could remember from the *finca*. Nothing about them had changed. They could know everything bad and everything sad there was to know in the world, and they'd still be innocent. The eyes of youth, which have no shadows, hold no secrets.

He pressed down hard with his hand against her mouth for a moment. He could feel her lips close against it in a kiss. It wasn't necessary to hold it there after that.

"Larry," she breathed gratefully. A drop of excess brightness formed in the corner of each eye.

"Bend out of the way a little. Let me get at these thongs."

"I was at the foot of the steps, with my empty pitcher. He woke up and dragged me back to her. She is going to have us both killed today."

"No, we won't die today," he said in grim undertones. "Dont talk any more now."

Her hands, free, flew toward his shoulders. Then they fell back again as suddenly. "Larry!" She shivered warningly, and crouched down low against the wall.

He turned. Her head was reared, on the ocelot couch. If death could have flown out of her baleful eyes, it would have struck the two of them down right where they were, there was such hatred in them. The sounds that came from her lips were the gibberish that was their language, hissed viciously at him, snarled malevolently. She was

like one of the creatures on whose pelts she lay. She was afraid of him, and angered at the nearness of him. Outraged as at some unspeakable defilement.

"So you're awake," he said softly, with grim vindictiveness. He left Chris and went slowly over toward her.

She drew a little away from him, dragging herself along the skins, pulling them after her as a sort of wary defense.

He watched her expression closely. Her face showed no compunction, no leniency, no vestige of any emotion but blended fear and animosity. Yet she knew him; if she had shown no recognition, he could have forgiven the rest. But he could tell by the cast of her eyes that she recognized him.

A dull glow of resentment, such as one feels after an unspeakable betrayal, filled him in spite of himself.

Suddenly she had jumped to her feet with animal-like agility and run for the stairs. Not the ones from below, up which he had just come himself, but the inner flight leading to the temple roof above.

Chris cried out suddenly from the background, "Look out, Larry! The war drum! It's up there. She may—"

He sprinted after her, overtook her, gave her a circular fling around at the end of her extended arm that sent her crashing back onto the floor of the chamber behind them. She bared her white teeth at him, in a grimace of hatred more lethal than anything he had ever seen on a face yet.

"Larry," he heard Chris whimper, "there's no hope for us now. It means death to have put your hands on her."

He didn't turn his head to acknowledge the sacrilege. He kept his eyes fixed steady on Mitty, in a hatred that almost matched her own now.

She tried to rise. He put his hand to her shoulder and flung her roughly back again to where she'd been.

"Larry," Chris kept pleading in a stifled voice, "Larry."

Mitty spoke at last. Haltingly, in English, as though she had already lost the feel of the language. "Because of you, I lose my soul. Because of you, I go down into the underworld."

"And that's where you belong."

"I serve a god. You have desecrated a Virgin of the sun. And in the sight of that fiery eye above, nothing goes unseen."

His open hand cracked across her face like a cap pistol.

"I was the one desecrated by ever touching you, not you. I could forgive what you've done to me. But for what you've done to this kid here—and what you did to her father—" He backed his forearm at her, in a threatened second blow, and then didn't deliver it.

She strained backward, away from him. She averted her head, as though the sight of him were insupportable.

His arm dropped back to his side with a swing of disgusted futility.

"Larry," Chris whispered fearfully. "Larry, the moon's setting. In a little while it'll be too late." She tugged at his arm.

He still faced Mitty. "Why did I have to lose my way that night in the car? And having lost my way, why did I have to go and knock on the door of that house at the crossroads, to ask for directions? With you hidden in the window above, waiting your chance, and then dropping a little note down to me as I was turning away. That wasn't enough. I had to come back again the next night, and the next, and for a whole week of nights, and throw pebbles up at your window and stand whispering underneath it by the hour. Then I had to get the bright idea it was up to me to rescue you from your 'wicked guardian.' Rescue is good. I was the one needed rescuing, not you. Sir Galahad, that was me. Just like in the story-books. Falls for someone whose face he sees at a window in the moonlight. Because you whispered like a dove, and you leaned way over, and the neckline of your dress had a habit of— And I was young, and it was springtime, and apple blossoms were in the air."

"Strange ugly people in a dream," she said contemptuously. "Ugly people with their ugly houses and their ugly ways. Love—pah!" She spat toward his feet. "And pecking at each other with their lips, like a parrot nibbling a mango. Yes, I remember that bad dream, now that you have brought it back. But it will go again. When you die, it will go and never come to me again.

"We have met across a bridge, I don't know how. You from one side, I from the other. And now the bridge has fallen, and we are apart. I have my god to atone to. Let *your* god help *you*."

"It has been told to me what it was that happened. Two men of your kind came here and found us in our

valley. They broke open the sleeping places of our dead and brought them out one by one. They made many marks on paper, they made many quick flashes like lightning. I was sick with the fever that brings sleep. I had been placed in the coolness of a cave to die. They found me there, and found that death had not yet claimed me. In ways they had, that we had not. By feeling the weight of my wrists, by listening with long feelers to the voice of my heart.

"Then they emptied out one of the sacred molds of the long-ago dead, and placed me in instead. They fastened it to the back of one of the little gray-coated animals they had brought with them. Eyes watched them from the jungle, saw everything they did. They carried me with them that way, and my people could not stop them, for they had the iron fingers that point, and cough fire, and kill from beyond the reach of the farthest arrow or spear. Two of my people they killed that way, when they came too close, and one they withered the arm of, so that he had to be destroyed."

She had crept unnoticeably nearer while she spoke. Now she began to rise up, close to him. The hate in her eyes, if it were still there, was veiled; the lids drooped half closed over them.

He kept staring at her, unable to take his eyes away.

"Larry!" he heard Chris gasp.

This time there was a sharpness needling the cry that made him snap his head around.

The warrior, the sentry from the steps below, was right at his back, eyes twinkling malignantly, like black sequins sewn into his seamed face. The knife was already up, poised to fall.

Chris's scream and the knife both slashed the air simultaneously.

He swerved, with an instinctive, floundering loop of the waist, and the knife and the warrior's whole body came down on him. He went over backward against the pallet, and managed to deflect the knife by crossbarring the flat of his own arm to the arm that drove it, so that it glanced too far out and plunged deep into one of the skins just back of his prone shoulder, with a thrumming crunch.

The two of them sidled intermingled to the floor, and he had a horrid feeling for a moment of having a maniac octopus squirming upon him. The knife came free again, reared up a second time. But it never fell.

His own came out of his waistband, but in the wrong hand, and there was no room between their two bodies to aim it for a driving blow. Instead he just pointed it upward between them and gave a sudden nudge. It went in somewhere, probably the abdomen, with such effortlessness that there was no feel to it at all. For a moment he thought it had missed entirely.

Then the handle turned warm, almost hot, and as he let go of it with a sort of horror, the octopus-like arms and legs stopped their movements, and the whole mass slithered off him to the floor, leaving tracks of spongy red across his own body, as though a wet paintbrush had been streaked across him.

The warrior's mouth was open a little wider, showing more of the yellowed tusks than before, that was all. The indented sequin-like eyes had disappeared completely into two blind tucks of skin.

"The sun should try to save him now," Jones panted aloud, to no one in particular.

He turned and looked, and she was gone. He jumped to his feet. Chris was lying sprawled at the bottom of the staircase leading up, as though flung back in an unsuccessful attempt to hold her. She pointed upward in frozen fright, toward the temple rooftop. The rooftop where the war drum was.

He understood. He raced over to those stairs, sprinted up them. The stars burst into full flower as he emerged onto the flat superstructure above, and she was outlined against them like a darkling figure of doom. The drum was round and vast and shoulder-high. It reared there like an enormous caldron. A little block of stepping-stones, meant to gain sufficient height for the drum-beater, stood against it on one side, and atop this she already stood poised, arms flung overhead and back, a long-handled mallet-shaped implement caught in her double grasp, about to strike it.

Dark-outlined against the sky like that, she was like one of their own idols, something malefic, a Mayan god-

dess of vengeance. Though he couldn't see her features, her figure expressed it in every line, bent outward at the middle like a taut bow about to loose an arrow.

There was no time to do anything but fling himself bodily against her, hoping to overthrow her before the imminent blow fell. He ran at her crouched low, buffeted himself into her shoulder-first. The drumbeat never fell. Her arms scissored wildly, the mallet kited out of her grasp, glancing harmlessly off the side of the drum. She went toppling off the perch, and her body struck against the squat parapet edging the roof just on the other side of it. He went down on hands and knees, short of it, and she fell across it, her back curved over it. For a moment she lay there like that, helpless. But too much of her weight was too far out upon it.

She clawed despairingly, trying to bring herself back and upright. At the last moment he reached for her, trying to lock hands with her from where he lay prostrate. Instinct, more than the will to save her. The inborn teaching of his country and his race.

They came within inches of one another, the tips of their hands. A second's equipoise. They couldn't close the gap. And then they drew apart again, dream-slowly.

The bridge has fallen, she had said. I have my god to atone to. May your god help you.

He was still prone there, the hand that she had missed by so little still emptily out before him in a barren staying gesture. He stared upward at the pallid oval that was her face in the gloom, the moment more that he could still see it. And all she had ever done to him was in it, returned to her now in the death moment. It was going backward, out of his sight. Back and over, into the night. From out of the night, back into the night. Strange ending to fit a strange beginning. A face first seen in moonlight, in a window frame a story above his head. A face last seen in starlight, three thousand miles and five hundred years away, over a cornice dropping down into eternity.

She clawed futilely out on each side of her, seeking to retain a grip on the parapet top. That only hastened her leaving it by that much, sped the process on its way, by the added spasms of motion it threw into it.

It took only a moment to complete itself. It seemed to take the span of a night-long dream, unfolding in its

endlessness. She didn't cry out. She gave only a little sobbing moan at the last. And then the parapet was empty. She went as he had first known her, something covered up in shadows from first to last.

"Mitty," he whispered after her, and that was his farewell. He knew he'd never say that name again, not if he lived for forty more years. He knew he'd try never to even think of it, and he knew he'd never succeed.

He didn't try to look down after her. She was with the night, where she belonged. Let it keep her.

He turned and ran down below again to where the lamplight was still feebly playing in the chamber. He made a little hasty grab for Chris's hand, and it flew out to meet his, and they went on down the farther stairs to the ground linked together like that.

They came out into the temple court. Mitty lay there in the shadow, quite still and calm, almost as though she were asleep.

He bent over her for a minute and tipped her shoulder from the ground. Her head hung over strangely, swaying back too much, as though it were something loose, dangling by a string.

"Her neck is broken," he muttered.

He let her settle back again any which way.

"That's the end of her," he said bitterly. "She died too late. Too late to do me any good. She should have died before I ever met her. Or I should have, either way."

Chris just stood there by him, looking at him compassionately. She only had eyes for him, even now at this decisive moment.

He took her hand in his own again. "Let's get out of this cursed place! What are we standing here for? Why should we wait here to die? We still may be able to make it. Let's at least try!"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

THEY RAN toward the front of the courtyard and darted through the opening by which he had first entered, hands linked. On the outside of the temple wall

the dimly looming buildings were as silent as the moonlit mirages they appeared to be. But there was imminent death, they knew, lurking in every one of them. Her fall from the parapet had gone unheard, perhaps muffled by the encircling courtyard wall.

"We have until the sun comes up," she whispered. "They're bound to find out by then. That's when she always went up there and—"

"That's our head start, then. And how much we do with it is up to us."

He jockeyed her around to the front of him and they went one behind the other, to be able to hug the shadows more narrowly. They scurried along where it was blackest and leaped swiftly over the light patches as in a game of hopscotch. In a little while the peripheral hovels had come, and then the undiluted foliage again, and they were clear of the city, for what that much was worth.

They went in less silence now that they were this far, for branches hissed and spat and jittered at their brusque passage, but they went in less immediate danger also, for there were no sleepers around them any longer to detect these telltale tokens of their flight.

They went fast, at a sort of padding trot, but not too fast, for they both realized this was to be a long sustained test of their endurance, and to be too spendthrift of energy now would only rob them of it later, when perhaps it would be needed even more. Even this trot they didn't maintain evenly, but broke it at times to rest at a fast walk.

The moon had gone down long ago, while they were still in the temple. The night hung in a state of suspended blackness, waiting to break. They both looked up at it several times, as at a clock. It was the only one they had.

Presently he said, "Once they start after us, we won't be able to stick to this trail any longer. They'll shoot straight out along it and come up to us in no time. We'll have to jump off it into the jungle on the side."

"Then how will we be able to keep our bearings?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "Let's do all the distance we can while we can still use the trail."

She had started to flag a little already, he noticed. She spurted forward again now, as if spurred by the reminder.

"Tired?"

"No, not yet."

He wasn't sure she was telling the truth. He couldn't afford to disbelieve her, however, in the situation they were in. She was young, that was one thing in her favor. As young as anyone could well be and still have to run for her life like this.

They must have been going due west. She glanced back one time, not at him but at the sky behind the two of them, and even before she spoke, he was oddly disquieted to see that her face when turned that way was already paler than the rest of her. It was the first time in his life that he'd ever hated to see day come, caught himself wishing it would hold off for a while yet. Daylight, which usually spelled hope and an end to fear, to them spelled heightened danger and perhaps destruction.

"It's starting already," she warned, and they both sped on faster than before.

He looked back in turn. The first signs of dawn were in the east; the sky was smoked pearl back there and no longer black. It was as though it were being washed with some sort of powerful abrasive that was taking all the color out of it.

The bleach began to spill over from there onto other things as well. Branches and fronds and the trunks of trees became two-toned, lighter on one side than on the other. Chris's laboring form, ahead of him, began to stand out more clearly, particularly when there was any opening in the intermittent canopy over them. Then at other times, when there were completely tunneled spaces they had to pass through, it would blend into the misty foliage, still dark blue with night shadows.

She was slackening a good deal now. He could tell it mostly by the way he continually kept coming up abreast of her instead of staying at her heels. He didn't want to take the lead, for he was afraid that then he might outdistance her.

"Do you want to rest?" he asked her at last.

She could hardly draw breath any more. "Not yet," she gasped determinedly. "Later I—may have to. I don't want to waste any of this head start."

He put his arm around her waist. "Lean on me, it may take a little of the weight off your own feet."

It was an awkward palliative at best. They had to force a passage twice as wide through the interfering leafy web. It eased her a little, that was all, but slowed them much too much. They discarded it again presently, and went forward singly once more.

He looked back again. "It's nearly here," he said.

The eastern sky was saffron now, and beginning to fume as with some unseen chemical agent infused into it from below. The stone shapes of the building they had left behind still looked dismayingly clear and near at hand, whenever they could be seen at all through interstices in the jungle thicket. The temple in particular still bulked so large against the sky, like something immovable, that, no matter how hard they tried to get away from it, it still seemed to keep its same distance from them.

"They look so far yet," he heard her lament.

The mountains, he knew she meant.

They are, he thought; farther than we'll ever get to. We'll never make them, never. He kept that thought to himself.

A golden glint, like some sort of wet spray flung after them from the end of a paintbrush, suddenly splashed far ahead of them up the trail, dyeing it and the immediate leaves on either side of it.

"It's up!" They both said it together. They both knew it, without having to look.

They ran full tilt now, like two deer. No more trotting, no more uncertain slackening. They knew they couldn't keep it up for very long, but they knew they had to do it while they still could. That fiery eye, as Mitty had called it, was open in the sky now behind them, staring vengefully after them.

He began to count off in his mind, while his feet pounded ahead under him. One, two, three, four—

A great dull thud smote the air on the fifth count. It came rolling sluggishly after them, like horizontal thunder, from back there behind them. Then as the first wave spent itself, a second clap came. Then a third.

The alarm drum.

It quickened them still further, as though the ground were burning hot to their feet. She gave a wordless little whimper.

"It's all right," he panted reassuringly. "It had to come sooner or later. It's over with now. Just keep running."

"How much longer can we stay on here?"

"A little while. Not too long. It's taken us an hour to come this far. They can't catch up with us in five or ten minutes."

Full sunrise, with the lower rim of the flashing disk clear of the ground, already found them struggling through a solid wall of steam, temporary but blinding, as the night mists rose from the jungle in evaporation. He kept thinking of Mitty. It was the heat from the sun that was doing it. She'd worshiped that. Maybe it would destroy them. Maybe she was in it, had become a part of it. I'm going crazy, like she was, he told himself, and checked the errant train of thought.

In a little while the steam thinned again, drained off. A hot, invisible exhalation took its place, refracting things, warping them as though they were seen on a dripping wet mirror.

She kept looking back more and more frequently. He hated to make the decision to quit the trail, narrow and difficult and half obliterated as it was. Once they were off it their progress would be slowed to almost nothing. It was like capitulating, giving up their chance of reaching the mountains. But it had to be done; to stay on it meant an invitation to almost certain capture. She was staggering now, lurching, and she'd have to rest soon anyway or she'd collapse.

He held off as long as he could, until he felt that to delay any longer was dangerous. A good half an hour had already elapsed since they had heard the first warning growl of the drum. And maybe it was even more; he had no exact way of measuring time.

He tottered to a halt, and called to her, and she halted too, making a little groggy circle in her tracks that brought her around to lean up against him exhaustedly.

"Come on," he said tersely. "This is where it begins."

They left the trail and went stumbling and moiling through the matted growth offside, he now in the lead.

It was all that he had feared it would be and worse. The trail had been a passage already sundered for them, no matter how interlocking and entangling its accompanying vegetation. Here they had to burst their own

way through a veritable feather bed of green, making passage for the first time. Even at a hand span away from each other, they were at times entirely invisible to each other below the neck, so cut off were they by great pad-like leaves or curved, fringe-dripping scimitars of fernery. At times there was such a choked multiplicity of flora and prismatic colorings around them all at one time, filling every cranny of the three dimensions they were traveling through, that the whole thing became a blurred, maddening pinwheel, in which white butterflies starting up were mistaken for disks of sunlight on the leaves and disks of sunlight on the leaves were mistaken for the white butterflies, and the whole became just a confusion of spots in front of the eyes.

But it was not all this prolific. There were patches that were comparatively sparse, and even occasional dells and glades where the going was almost normal. The trouble was that these clearings were all isolated from one another, and in between were stretches that were almost impassable, where it was like walking through the upper branches of a dense, spreading tree for all practical purposes, save that they could not fall through it to the ground if they should miss a step.

For a length of time that seemed to equal the time they had spent on the trail—though since they were going slower it was probably only half as long—they lurched and wavered through this botanical spume, until they'd stumbled upon a place that was almost made to order to hide and rest in. To have gone beyond it would have been suicidal. Neither of them could have by now, even had they wanted to. A tree had fallen, whether shattered by lightning or from some other cause they could not tell. Even prone, its massive trunk was nearly the height of their waists. It was festooned by a curious vinelike growth, lashing it to the ground along its entire length, but this did not cling closely to the turn of the trunk but stretched out from it taut, like a sort of green spiderweb. Close beside the trunk, therefore, it formed what amounted to a triangular bower or lean-to. To make it better still, a little rill of water ran nearby, the first they'd come upon so far.

He wouldn't let her drink at sight, knowing what it might do to her. He dipped a corner of the rags he wore

into it, and sponged her lips with it and pressed it out against her forehead and the back of her neck. Then he let her have a few tantalizing handfuls from his own hand, and promised her more later.

Within this little tent of natural green they crawled, and then collapsed, lungs beating against the cages of their breasts like swelling bladders threatening to explode.

She cried a little when she felt better. He liked that about her, that she was a girl who cried and not a damned Indian jade without emotion. "It hurts too much," she whimpered, "even to stay alive."

"I know, I know it does," was all he could say.

They had been there about five minutes, and were only beginning to draw breath more slowly, when suddenly he tightened his hand on her wrist, holding it down and holding it taut, and she understood, made no move.

There wasn't a sound or the trembling of a fern around them to show anyone was approaching. And then suddenly the green façade walling them in split into two saw-toothed edges and a figure flashed into view, at a distance of not more than ten yards from where they crouched. Cinnamon-brown, crouched low in deadly quest, making its way with a swift, soundless dexterity they never could have attained.

He was stunningly near. For a moment the hard-pitted black eyes seemed to glance over the very coverlet beneath which they lay, in their whiteness and helplessness. He slithered on, with a snake's vertebral twistings. The saw-toothed edges of visibility on the opposite side interlocked once more behind him, and there was nothing to show they had seen what they had seen.

He let go of her wrist, but outside of that neither of them moved. She simply turned it over and left it there, supine on the ground.

"That was close," he breathed. "They're not sticking to the trail either. Not all of them, anyway."

"How did you know in time?"

"I couldn't tell you now any more. Must have been some variation in that chirping and twittering going on all around us."

Her head bent over dejectedly. "They'll get us."

"What's the good of giving up before we have to?"

Twice he left her after that, but for just a short distance, and not upright but creeping out on his hands and knees. Once to bring her more water—he dipped his entire shirt in this time, and they both squeezed it out into their mouths—and the second time to bring back some berries.

He tried them himself first, and made her wait a while. Then, finding that he'd had no ill effects from them, he gave her some.

Then after that they lay still; breathing, surviving, nothing else. Waiting for the friendly night to return. To lie hidden like that in one place was the safest thing to do during the daylight hours. In that way they had only one dangerous series of movements to guard against: their enemies'. Had they moved about themselves, they would have had two: their enemies' and their own as well, which might have worked toward one another when they least expected it.

He looked at her and her eyes were closed. She'd dropped into a sound sleep, head pillowed against his recumbent shoulder.

He was glad she could sleep. Only the very young could sleep that way, with imminent death all around them, with life hanging by a thread, hanging on the rustle of a leaf, the turn of a blade of grass.

His own eyes flickered, but he forced them open again. Someone had to watch.

The dazzling sun beating down on their leafy covering spilled through the innumerable little criss-cross, waffle-like gaps, and fell all over them in leprous disks that burned, almost like the centering of rays through a ground lens. It was like being covered with spangles.

Night came on slowly. He'd never wanted to see it before. Where was the vaunted swift nightfall of the tropics, which was supposed to drop like a curtain? It came on slowly, but at last it came. The sun began to redden for its landfall.

He waited, biding his time. The spangled disks slowly went out. Then the shell-like glow, reflecting from above on her upturned face, dimmed too. Cool green and blue shadows began to settle in the hollows of everything, like fungus. Light was leaving the world.

When a gas-green sky over the black jungle was the

only remaining vestige of daylight, he finally woke her. He woke her in a strange way. Or at least, it seemed so to him at the time. For when the whisper of her name close down beside her ear and a light touch upon her shoulder failed to rouse her, he put his lips on her forehead and woke her with a kiss.

She was frightened for a moment, upon first awakening in the dark and in a place she didn't remember, and stared up at the smothering leaves and clung to him.

"It's all right," he soothed her. "We're in here, don't you remember? That place we crawled into. We've got to go on soon."

He brought her some more water, and they waited just a brief while longer. Then he crawled out and helped her to her feet after him, and they started on the second lap. This one would have to decide their safety or destruction, he knew. Their strength and ability to stay on their feet wouldn't survive another night without food.

In a little while there was more light to see by. The process of extinguishment was arrested, even reversed itself partially. A coppery haze appeared in the eastern sky, like brick dust floating around in the night. A little open space and a rise of ground in one place gave them a direction finder. From there they found one pole, and by going opposite to it, that gave them the other. Off in the distance the shape of the temple was silhouetted against a late rising apricot moon. That meant that in a straight line from there, if they continued with their backs toward it, they were bound to find the mountains. The jungle closed around them again as they resumed their way, and blotted it out.

The going was hard. He hadn't the use of a machete or anything to cut with. He had to find other ways of getting through. He detoured around obstacles, crawled under them when they weren't too low, and often used his own body as a breastwork to give her passage through some thicket or bramble that was particularly thorny.

Once they had a bad few moments with some sort of spongy, fibrous creeper, about the thickness of a gas tube. It snarled around her throat and tightened, and she couldn't go forward and she couldn't go back. They even thought for a horrifying moment it might be something animal, a snake of the boa or anaconda variety, but it

wasn't, it didn't move, it was vegetable. He found he couldn't sever it with his hands, and when he tried to do so, that only tightened it more. He had her spade her hands in under it, as a sort of protective pad between it and her throat. He cursed his own witlessness in leaving the knife in the body of the warrior back in the temple. As it was, he had only one cutting edge about him to use against it, and so he used it, though she pleaded with him not to. His teeth.

"It may be poisonous. Look out. Don't."

"It won't be," he said, and hoped he was right.

He gnawed through it. Some kind of juice came out of it that was flamingly bitter and flowed around in his mouth, but he did the job. At last his teeth met through it, and it was in two.

They flung it off her and went on. He spent the next five minutes expectorating energetically as he traveled along.

They put on every ounce of speed the night and the jungle and their weakened, punished frames would allow them. The mountains, frosty blue along their tops in the moonlight and visible only when the curtain before them dipped low enough now and then, looked nearer than they had in the daylight the day before, but that might have only been because of the moonlight.

"We've got to hit that tomb entrance pretty accurately, don't forget. There isn't any other way out."

"Suppose they've already got there ahead of us, and are waiting?"

He'd thought of that himself, long ago, and hadn't liked the thought much. "We're not there yet. Don't let's worry about that till we are."

They had no way of telling whether their pursuers were ahead of them or behind them, or even dispersed all around them, so that they were advancing blindly through a sac of them. They never knew from one minute to the next when they might blunder into them, and once a racket of outraged parrots and monkeys, starting up spontaneously out of the slumbering jungle drone around them, showed they very nearly had.

They crouched low in sudden immobility and waited. It didn't come again, just that once, and then after a long cautious time they went on again.

"It might not have been," he whispered guardedly. "Some big cat, maybe, springing for one of those monkeys."

It took will power to keep pushing on; the brief tumult had come from ahead of them, rather than in their wake. They diverged a little, bypassing the exact direction as far as they were able to determine it.

He noticed something that he didn't like. Her mind was beginning to wander a little from time to time. He knew it was probably nothing more than excess fatigue, but it was a bad sign, a warning signal. Once she said unexpectedly, "Is my dad going to be waiting for us, where we're going?"

He didn't know what to say. And then before he could answer, she asked in self-startlement, "What did I say just then?"

The ground was already starting to rise under them. Not steadily, but by fits and starts that augured well. They should be out of the tangle sometime before the end of the night if they could hold out that long.

The moon set again—the same moon that had seen Mitty's death the night before—and now the night was on the wane. They kept going steadily for some time after that, to squeeze the last possible inch of distance they could out of the sheltering darkness. Then they had to drop down again and rest, even if it meant extinction on the spot. Flesh and blood couldn't possibly stand any more.

She didn't sleep this time. He wouldn't let her. He wouldn't let himself either. He kept digging his own nails into the soft underpart of his hands, so the pain would keep his eyelids up. He counted off ten minutes, and just when rest was beginning to penetrate their racked frames to a depth sufficient to take hold, he broke it off short again.

In pulling her up after him this time, he nearly toppled down again himself. They leaned against one another inertly for a moment, like two slanted poles that support one another by their very inclination, then tottered on. The stars overhead were flickering to contraction point, the sky behind them was turning pewter-colored.

Day and the jungle broke nearly simultaneously. Just as it got light enough to see by, they came out of the lush vegetation into an arid foothill region, dotted with occa-

sional clumps of stunted trees that dwindled as they went along and finally died out altogether.

"Look," he whispered almost in awe. "Look, Chris, the mountains." He saw her eyes brim with tears of exhaustion and thankfulness. He stroked her tangled hair inattentively, his own eyes sighted upward to their still remote, serried tops. "On the other side, Chris," he breathed, "on the other side of those mountains it's the twentieth century."

They stood there and they scanned the looming tilt before them for the tomb entrance, which was the only possible way through to the other side. They searched frontally first, and it was nowhere in evidence. Then over to the left as far as eye could reach. It wasn't there either; no sign of it. Then over to the right, the only direction left. Nor was it there either.

He swallowed and tried to keep his heart from going down too far. "It's got to be somewhere along there," he murmured. "We came out through there. We both remember that. That was no dream."

But what was? And what wasn't?

He tried to take bearings as best he could. "We went off the trail to the left," he said, speaking aloud to convince himself as well as her. "That means we've got the trail to our right, unless we recrossed it since in the dark without knowing it. So if we work our way back toward the right, we should come upon the tomb entrance eventually." He looked at her questioningly. "We'll take the chance, Chris, shall we? I don't want to fool you; it's just a chance. But I'm afraid if we go off to our left, we're liable to work our way blindly entirely around the inside of the valley without ever getting out again."

"Let's take the chance, Larry," she said feebly.

They retraced their way a little, first of all, to take themselves back a little deeper into the jungle cover, so that they wouldn't be so exposed to view. Then they skirted the jungle just short of the point at which it lost full density. Not that there was a hard-and-fast, razor-clean line where jungle ended and barren foothills began; sometimes the growth sent out tongues, crept fairly high up the inclined mountainside. At other times, by reverse process, there were arid strips where the jungle wall receded far back to the other side of them.

Tiredness had no meaning to them any longer, or

hunger, or anything else. If they were going to succumb to fatigue, they would have succumbed long ago, when it was still new and sharp. Now it was old and dull, so old they scarcely took account of it any more. Just a glassiness of the eye, a stricture of the stomach cords.

There was a fairly prominent outthrust shoulder of mountain they had to round, they found as they progressed. On the other side of this the succeeding line of mountains fell back considerably; there was a recession, more evident at first by a change of tint than anything else. The coloring beyond was more transparent, less opaque. Then as they drew nearer they saw the variation was one of proximity and not shading.

Then as some certain, invisible line of longitude on the slopes beyond worked itself clear to their advancing gaze, their hands flew toward one another and clenched tightly. They saw it. It was there. The flanking projection had covered it from them until now. There was no mistaking it. They saw the artificial man-made flatness of the grooved stones framing it, leaning slightly back in conformity with the tilt of the native rock wall. A slot, a window in the mountain. It looked awfully small, it looked awfully high up. But it was there. Every detail stood out distinct in the crystal-clear air.

They'd come out of the jungle a good half day's journey off their course. But they'd corrected it now. They were back again on course. They could see where they were going now. And they were still up on their own feet, they were still untaken, that was the main thing.

Slowly it inched abreast of them, until at last the trail itself, leading down from it, came into view. Up there it was just a rut, a fold, tucked into the mountain skin. But it could be seen, there was a lividness to it that revealed it against the topsoil pelt, as when a fine wire is drawn too tightly over something and leaves a shiny trace behind.

He stopped at last and dropped down with her behind a little hummock that looked out through spindly tree trunks. "We'll stay down below here, under cover, until we're ready," he puffed. "We're as close as we can get now without overreaching it and going too far to the other side." And this was their final rest before the final break, the dash that would carry them up, and in, and through.

The place he'd chosen gave good cover. Yet they could command the tomb entrance. And the downward trail from it had swung very close athwart their way now, entered the jungle almost directly ahead of where they lay. They were as close to it as he intended to risk going.

They lay there like two wilted, discarded tendrils, her head resting in the notch just above his hip. The safest thing of all to do, he knew, would be to wait until night-fall. But the law of diminishing returns was already in full swing against them. He didn't think their strength would hold that long.

She fell asleep, and this time he let her, wanted her to. His own eyes closed for the first time since the second night before, and it was as though there were mucilage on the lids. No sooner had they touched than they adhered. Not all the will power at his command could have pried them apart again.

It seemed they'd only been like that a moment, when she was already shaking him awake. She was frightened, cautioning him even as she did so. "Larry, don't move. Look. Look up there."

Three warriors were standing by the tomb entrance. Then suddenly four. Then five. Every moment there was another one. They were coming *out*, one by one. A party that must have entered it in search of them was now reappearing, frustrated.

He could feel her heart pounding wildly against him. She had pressed herself close. "Can they see us from there?"

They were obviously scanning the jungle rim from their lofty perch; he could tell by the way their buckshot-sized heads moved in deadly, slow-sweeping unison.

"I don't think so."

"But we can see them. I can even see the sun flash from their knives."

"They have nothing but bare rocks for a background, they stand out against them. We have leaves and tree shadows and all sorts of other screens to deflect the aim of the eye. But lie still whatever you do, don't stir."

They started down the trail single file, the first of them already well on toward the bottom before the last had finished emerging from the tomb orifice. He counted ten of them. The warriors made a slow zigzag coming down,

lengthily spaced, and at every moment danger increased, for as they descended they were being brought continuously nearer to their hiding place.

The warriors grew larger, too; from puppet size they swelled to man size, as each one passed close to them and went on to be engulfed in the static green tidal wave that was the jungle, poised but never shattering into spray high over all their heads. Brief patches of coppery skin would reappear, as if it were indeed green water they were being submerged by, and then they would be gone for good.

The last trembling leaf stilled, the last shuddering reed quieted, the downgrade trail coursed empty. Nothing but time still stirred. They were gone as though they had never been. But what reckless impunity to count on that!

Finally he gave her, indirectly, the signal that the moment had come. "Can you get all the way up there to it, do you think?"

She nodded bravely. "I can try. I'm ready."

"Once we start we'll have to go fast. We'll be in the open from here on up, no more jungle skulking. And some of them may have stayed behind, for all we know."

He stood up slowly, with an uneasy naked, defenseless feeling. "Stay down a minute longer."

She crouched submissive at his feet, flattening her hair back with both hands to get it out of her way.

Finally he nodded. She stood up beside him.

"Are you all right, Chris?"

"I'm all right, Larry."

"Say a prayer before we go."

"Out loud?"

"I don't care. I guess so."

She tilted her face a little, lidded her eyes for a moment. "Take us through, Somebody," she said fervently. "Oh, Somebody, whoever you are, be on our side for just this one time."

He stiffened his arm around her. "Take my hand," he said curtly. "Here we go."

They broke jungle at a tired sort of trot, which was the best they could muster. Again the process of exposure wasn't immediate; the jungle slowly thinned, opened out about them. Still at some indeterminate point, the area of their bodies that could be seen from

a distance was greater than the area that could not, and from then on danger had set in full force.

The going was immensely difficult for them, particularly in their weakened condition. Almost at once the ground left the strictly horizontal; at every step the angle was sharpened. It seemed to them that all the troubles of crashing through undergrowth were as nothing compared to this. Lifting the entire bodily weight taxed the wind and leg muscles far more than any intricate brambles could have.

The jungle rapidly receded behind them like an outgoing tide. Its texture seemed to knit itself together, and presently it had become a smooth green pile carpet spread considerably below, unruffled as far as the eye could reach.

At about a third of the distance up, their incoming diagonal brought them onto the trail. There was no longer any added danger to be courted in following it; they were already visible off it as they would be on it; so they clove to it from then on. It made for surer footing and swifter direction than the uncharted climb about it.

They kept looking back, not both together but alternately, first he, then she. Continued silence of the one told the other each time that nothing was as yet amiss. The halfway point, indicated by a sharp turn that they had marked from below, was rapidly descending to meet them.

He felt her hand twitch convulsively in his. She had no breath to scream with. She gave a sort of choked bleat, and he knew at once before he'd even glanced back below them. Immunity had ended, and the tomb entrance was still equidistant from them to the jungle they had left behind.

The jungle edge, innocuous only a moment ago, had spewed two fast-running figures, breaking away from it, starting up the serpentine trail in furious pursuit. A third broke cover in twice the space separating the first two. One or more members of the party they had seen returning not long before must have lingered behind the others, caught sight of them, raised the alarm.

They were spurred to a frenzy of threshing motion they had not dreamed was still left in them. Their one

remaining chance, they knew, was to get inside the sheltering darkness of the tomb entrance before they were overtaken by the winged furies down below. He shunted her in front of him and pushed her before him, sometimes using only a steadying hand, sometimes his entire shoulder when the going was particularly steep or difficult.

She wasn't breathing any more, she was sobbing. They couldn't afford the luxury of looking behind them any more, save where a differential in the trail let them do so automatically; every turn of the head cost too much in momentum.

The pursuers came on fast. Their legs seemed to work like pistons under them, blurred by their rapidity of motion. The gap between was closing inexorably. They were getting bigger every minute, like something onrushing in a bad dream. But the black-mouthed sanctuary above came nearer, nearer.

One last spurt to reach it. Breath a flame searing through their lungs, black motes fuming before their eyes like cultures seen through a microscope. A girl, an emaciated man, and the will to live. They couldn't have cried out. This was no time for crying out. This was only a time for living or for dying. They could only choke suffocatingly and flounder crazily upward, and upward, and upward.

Suddenly shade fell behind them, like a dark-blue guillotine blade that had just missed the backs of their heads, and they were in.

The coolness was so sharp it seemed to congeal their skins, curdle them, like some sort of etherized astringent sprayed on. They couldn't see for a minute. Gloom welled up about them like a sooty fog, and in their momentary safety was nearly their final undoing. But they had never broken contact with one another's forms, from the first moment of discovery of the pursuit, and his shoulder now was still pressed closely behind hers, carrying it forward, his arm circled to her opposite side. Joined together like that, they waded uncertainly forward through the shoals of dimness, a hollowness to their footsteps that showed they were enclosed on four sides.

Then in a second or two, salvation peered through at them again. A lamp had been left lit, apparently by

those who had just been in there before looking for them. It was a trivial, sparklike thing, lost in all that immensity of space. Yet for them it was a beacon brighter than the most flashing lighthouse. For it stood directly offside to the inner tunnel bore leading through the bowels of the mountain; it marked it, out of all the other niches, indentations, and cavities that honeycombed the walls.

A feeble stain came from it, like a smear of very dark amber honey, that scarcely tintured the floor before it or the rock wall backing it. But it gave them their lives for minutes more—for who knew how long more? It showed them the way out of this Stygian trap. It showed them the pear-shaped gap, the deeper darkness within the dimness, that led off from the tomb itself.

"Go in! Go in!" He shoved her through into the nothingness beyond, then stooped aside and snatched the thing up. It was a metal vessel of some kind, filled with fluid, but he had no wish or time to identify it. It was heavy. Not too heavy for an unspent, untired man to carry, perhaps, but its added ounces of weight now might mean the difference between life and death to him. Then too, it would have served as a beacon to their enemies, just as it had to them now, guiding them infallibly in their wake, had he attempted to take it with him.

So he raised it with both hands high over his head, and flung it forward out of the tomb to do away with it, to hamper them as much as he and she would now be hampered.

A strange, phosphorescent apparition marked its extinction. It left a comet-like luminous trail across the vault of the dark, which was its flame expanded behind itself in flight. Then it struck the far wall someplace over the dais. There was a sudden curtain of fire as the released liquid burned now unconfined, splashing out and down. And in the middle of this, for a single moment, no more, Mitty's face stood out, illumined. The twice-gone face, which he never wanted to remember again, never would forget. The mask above the burial niche was laved for a moment by the brightly flickering fluid dripping down over it. For an instant he had the illusion it was she looking at him like that, palely illumined, through the murk of eternity. Then the features dimmed, went out forever, as the tricking drops expired with their own downfall.

Farewell, the farewell of two who had never been meant to meet, by immutable laws greater than either one of them. Double farewell, across forty-eight hours, across five hundred years.

He turned and staggered into the passageway and found Chris by the sound of her hysteric breathing, lingering there waiting for him. He sent her on again before him, keeping his hand outthrust to her shoulder to avoid treading on her heels. She was invisible to him in all that density of darkness, close as she was before him.

They had to go circumspectly, unsure of any sudden turn the groove might make. They told off the sides of it with their hands, he on one side, she on the other, to keep from grazing them too closely. The confined air in here made breathing far more difficult; the only thing gained was that they no longer had the acute grade of the mountain slope outside to contend with. But their inability to see neutralized that advantage.

And already there was an echoing behind them of oncoming footfalls in the dark. Once the sound had set in, it dogged them with a maniac persistency that they couldn't shake off or leave behind, try as they might. It was as inexorable, as maddening as that nocturnal drum-beat at La Escondida had been a lifetime ago. It was the soft, slapping sound of bare soles trotting along the damp, rocky flooring, amplified by the nature of the place itself so that it carried forward to them only too well.

Their own harried breathing was magnified to a loud snorting, their own stumbling steps dinned in their ears, but nothing could drown out that nagging, vindictive underscoring murmuring in their wake, now close, now hanging back a little: *pad, pad, pad*.

They were goaded onward by it, in knee-twisting, groping flurries of haste that ebbed and flowed from them like valvular spurts, carrying them along the rock-rimmed conduit. They hurt and bruised themselves against the walls, for they couldn't run true, and when there were shifts in direction, and there were many, they could only find them out by trial and error. Not once but several times she stumbled and went down, and he was only saved from going down on top of her by the fact that they weren't going very fast any more, they couldn't. She would have lain here spent, but he drew her weakly up

again each time and supported her until her own legs could find themselves once more, and that remorseless *pad, pad, pad*, looming on them in these brief halts, drove her on again like a flash.

Their ears were no good to them any more. The blood was singing in them too much for them to be able to tell whether they were losing ground or maintaining the same distance they had started out with. They could only be sure they hadn't gained on their pursuers, for nothing still upright on two legs could have gone much slower than the reeling amble to which they were now reduced.

They came to the place where the water was. It gave a faint tinkling warning just before they reached it, and he dreaded its arrival, parched and expiring of thirst as they both were, for he was afraid they wouldn't be able to tear themselves away from it again, wouldn't have the strength of mind.

She went down on all fours and pressed her face flat against the rock, there where the water traced its way down, and he stood over her slantwise and let it find his own agonized face higher up. He felt as though he'd gone without water all his life. He felt as though death would be a cheap exchange for standing here a stolen moment longer.

Pad, pad, pad swelled out at them, like a trip-hammering of doom, every instant nearer, surer.

He took her by the back of the neck and pried her stubborn head away. "Don't swallow any more, hold the rest of it in your mouth," he warned her.

She struggled to get back to it for a moment, then her reason reasserted itself and she turned docilely away.

They went on again, the *pad, pad, pad* closer and clearer. Then it desisted for a moment, in the place where the water was. But faint and far back, even when it had stopped, a ghostly repetition of it could still be heard. The pursuit was multiple, but one member of it had far outdistanced the others. And the quickness with which he reached the water, following their own departure, showed how sickeningly close he was. Almost at their very heels.

A moment only this foremost tread relented, then it

struck out again. Swifter, fresher, for he had needed less restoring.

They could even hear his breathing now, hoarse and rasping, welling through the tunnel after them.

Suddenly she made an abrupt turnabout, and they collided with one another, and both of them nearly fell together.

"It's stopped, it's ended," she gasped. "I can't find the way."

He struck out with his hands, all over, up and down, and felt only rock. It blocked them off, sealed them up.

And then a little paleness revealed itself at the sides. A shadow of a gleam. A thread of grayness unraveling in the dark.

"The slab!" he choked.

He rammed his shoulder into it, and it wouldn't move. The gleam brightened a little, like a flame that is blown on, then dimmed again.

The *pad, pad, pad* was rising now to a crescendo of vengeful triumph.

He ran back a little, and turned, and rushed at the impediment, and it wavered, the foursquare gleam around its edges brightened further, only to contract again. It wouldn't go down, it wouldn't let them out. Safety lay so near and yet so far. Life was six or eight inches away from them.

He was crazed for a minute, clawed at it futilely with his bare hands. She had collapsed into a whimpering huddle somewhere in the dark at his feet.

Then suddenly he desisted and, as if stung to a berserk fury, goaded to self-destruction, turned and rushed headlong toward the oncoming *pad, pad, pad*.

He dropped to the ground, flattened himself crosswise on the floor of the tunnel, and lay there still.

It came on. He could feel the very rock floor under him vibrate to its approach. *Pad, pad, pad, pad . . .*

And then the last one never sounded, never fell.

Instead a bare foot gouged into his side, delivering an inadvertent kick that rocked him from head to toe. A body off balance, flying through the air in an arc, came crashing down, partly over but mostly beyond him. Only its futilely scissoring legs landed actually on top of him.

The thundering crash of the fall thudded through the vault. The savage must have been stunned by the impact; a reflex twitching was all the movement he made for a minute. And by that time Jones had reared up and was at his throat.

Then he found that he hadn't the strength of grip necessary to squeeze out life quickly. This was no time to give quarter or to fight up to a mere point of mastery, then desist. This was kill or be killed.

He shifted his grasp and caught the two coils of long, coarse Indian hair in a double-fisted grip, one at each side of the head. The heavy thud resumed again, but this time it wasn't feet running along the rock-floored passageway. He could feel the skull shatter and disintegrate somewhere in between the levers of his grasp.

He left him brained, and jumped up and ran back to her. Still others were coming, but they were still some distance off. A little time, a minute or two, had been gained.

"Push hard against it, with all your strength, as I go into it."

He made a sort of bumper of his interlocked arms, and careened into it. The light brightened almost intolerably this time, like flashlight-powder sizzling all around the rim of the slab. There was a moment while it stayed ajar against all edicts of gravity, and there was nothing but brightness and open space in front of their dazzling eyes.

They were back in the world again.

Pad, pad, pad was coming up behind them like a drum-beat. He pulled her through after him, scarcely able to see in the sudden new incandescence beating around them. The sun was low but it was still daylight.

They ran through the meandering gully, the cleft of Mitty's former longings and reveries. Its earthen ramparts were all that kept them on course for a while until their eyes became accustomed again to the light.

Then when they did, the vista of the downslope cohered before them like a slowly forming pattern on a photographic plate soaking in solution, strengthening, darkening, moment by moment. There was the little spring far below them, and standing motionless at it, two men on horses. Carbines were slung at their shoulders,

the sun winking back from their barrels. Perhaps they were drawn this far up by their duties of policing the outer side of the slope, or perhaps they had been detailed to search for someone who had disappeared.

He threw up his arm and swung it hysterically at them, even as he kept running, tumbling, scraping down toward them, sending jets of dust and ropes of little stones down ahead of him.

The men saw them; there was a sudden rigid locking of posture that told that unmistakably. They both became taller on their saddles. Their mounts' necks, reined up from the pool, remained suspended. They stared up at them, motionless, as if unable to make out where they'd come from.

He looked back, and one of the savages had come out into full sight past the mouth of the chasm. The sun was low in the west and it caught him squarely, in all his flaming hate and gaudy barbarism. Ruddy copper body, pulsing at the ribs with its long run; kilt about the waist, knife to hip; tuft of brilliant scarlet hummingbird feathers sprouting at his crown. A blue shadow, such as all men cast, was leaning awry behind him on the slope. His arm was back, balancing a poised javelin.

The javelin flew out, swift as a light ray, and she, not having turned as he had, would not see it in time. He caught at her, flung her aside so violently she crumpled to the steep-pitched ground. And he was left there in her place. It seemed to sunder his chest in two, and when he looked down with a sort of calm surprise, it was to find two feet of it protruding forward beyond his swaying body.

He went over and down with a sort of barrel-like roll, first upon his knees, then forehead pasted flat to ground, with a little spurt of dust flowering about his head. The shaft cracked and broke beneath his arched body. He curled over on his side, then flattened and lay still. There was pain, like current streaking through electric wiring, packed in his chest, then none, only tiredness and no regret at being prone.

His eardrums seemed to close up. As through a thick filter he could hear her screaming down to the two men on horses below them. "Shoot! Don't you see him standing there? *Mátalol!*"

He lifted his head a little and watched, with a sort of detached interest, as though none of this really concerned him any more.

They only needed one bullet. It was an easy shot; a dead certainty. He was in full view above them.

The rifle report, in that rock-rimmed area, had a strangely flat, crunching sound, like the collapsing of an inflated paper bag.

Stones and earth globules spilled downward, with an oddly looped, liquid effect, like successive tiers of a falling necklace. Then his body came down, coasting on its face, almost to where they were, with that blue shadow patch still skipping after it, like the air-borne tail to a ground-dragged kite.

The little tuft of scarlet feathers seemed to sprout straight up from the soil now, like some solitary mountain flower. For sap, it oozed a sluggish little thread of blackened red, which died out amidst the rocks.

She was kneeling there beside Jones, holding the broken-off forward part of the javelin in her two hands, dazedly, as though it were some sort of linear measure that she was trying to hold up to her grief and loss to see how immeasurable it was, when the horsemen finally reached them, dismounted, and crouched down over the two of them.

He looked up at them blurredly.

"You were just a minute too late," he said, "but thanks anyway."

He closed his eyes again, but whether in weariness or because of some sort of inward pang of realization, they couldn't tell. They gave the two of them water from their canteens, one from each, and he drank with his eyes closed, with his throat rippling, and a little water coming out at the edge of his mouth, tinged red.

"Help me get them up on the horses, Ramón. We've got to get them down to the lowland right away. He needs medical attention, and she needs rest and food. They've probably been wandering around lost for weeks back there in the emptiness on the other side."

"In the emptiness on the other side," Jones murmured wryly, without opening his eyes.

The second *charro* had been cautiously examining the fragment of javelin that he had taken from Chris's un-

resisting hands. He held it near his nose, then with slow precaution traced it across the heel of his hand, just under the thumb joint. Then he looked closely at his hand in the fading sunlight, for some gloss or telltale shiny track.

"We'll never get him all the way down," he said softly in Spanish to his companion. "It was poisoned." He flung it down curtly.

Chris picked it up again and looked at it dazedly.

"Put us both on the same horse," Jones said quietly, with his eyes still closed. "Let me hold her in my arms on the way down. We mustn't be apart any more."

Picking its way painfully, the little procession started out, the two *charros* on foot, one leading the carrier horse, the other supporting Jones on its saddle with his shoulder and encircling arm.

Riding slowly down the slope, holding her cradled in his arm, he spoke to her low, his mouth close to her ear.

"Don't be frightened, Chris. You'll have to finish this ride out alone. I'm going to leave you soon."

She answered equally low, unheard by the world around them. "You aren't leaving me. We're going to be together. To the very end of the ride."

She opened her hand, disengaged the javelin tip, which she had held imbedded into her own flesh and blood, and flung it off.

Their heads close together, they went slowly down the mountain, down into the deeps, as successive tides of evening and infinity washed upward and over them in ever darkening hue; first ultramarine, then indigo, then midnight purple, then starless black.

His name was Lawrence Kingsley Jones. He was just like any man, like you, like me; and yet, that is what happened to him.

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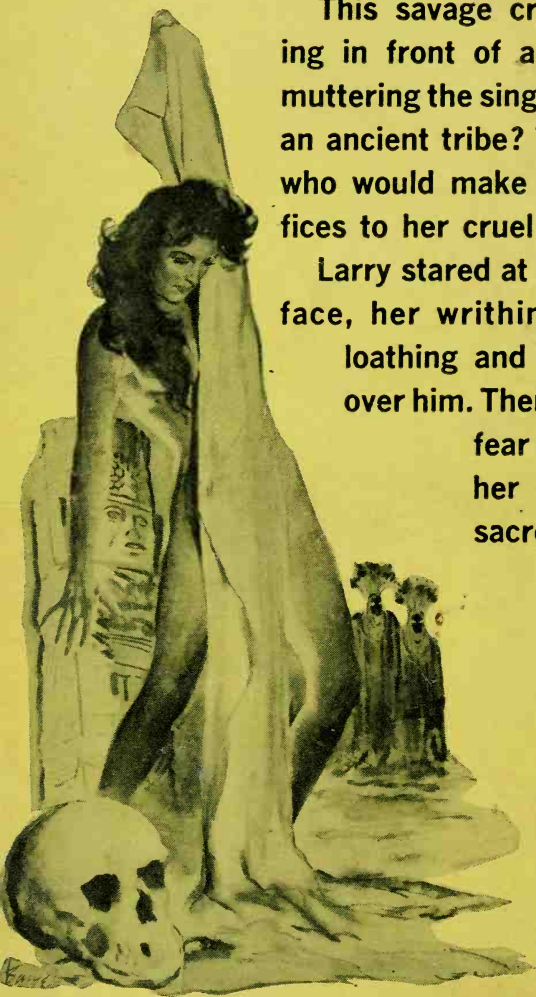
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