

THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E.



MAGAZINE

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**APRIL DANCER
MARK SLATE**

in
**THE BURNING
AIR AFFAIR**

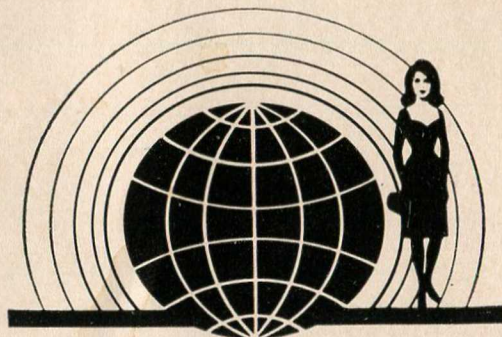
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to flaming death — and only one
girl stood in their path!

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THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

APRIL, 1967

Vol. 1, No. 3

NEW COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

THE BURNING AIR AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

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Hidden, deadly, a power-maddened creature held the fate of the world in his hands, as April Dancer and Mark Slate dare an impossible venture against overwhelming odds: "You must find and destroy this machine of death—or the very air we breath will sear our lungs to ashes!" 2 to 84



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THE BURNING AIR AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS



Shackled, powerless, April heard a madman boast of his plan to rule the world. And suddenly she knew—this man could sentence the entire universe to flaming death—and only she stood in his path!

ONE

THE MISSING AGENT

ALEXANDER WAVERLY, Section I member and chief of the United Network for Law and Enforcement, rubbed his hands wearily across his eyes.

For twenty-four hours he had not left his office in the headquarters of the great global crime-

fighting organization known from its initials as U.N.C.L.E. The long hours had deepened the lines in Waverly's rugged face. It was a strong face, capable of sympathy, yet possessing the strength of Gibraltar.

Teenage Randy Kovac stood beside the desk console with a sheaf of reports for the chief. But Mr. Waverly kept him waiting for nearly fifteen minutes while his

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STARRING

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APRIL DANCER and MARK SLATE

**"An Armful of
Dark-Haired Danger"**

**"The U.N.C.L.E. Agent
Whose Business is Death"**



strong fingers played on the multi-colored buttons on the console.

At his touch communications opened up in a dozen hot spots around the world as the chief contacted his agents.

Finally he cut the last channel and leaned back. Wordlessly he took the reports Randy handed him. He did not look at them. His mind was turning over an entirely different problem.

"There is something decidedly wrong," he said slowly. "Most decidedly."

"Yes, sir?" Randy said eagerly. "If there is something I can do, Mr. Waverly—"

A suggestion of a smile crossed the chief's face.

"You might tell me where April Dancer and Mark Slate are right now," he said.

Randy's face fell. He had had visions of being sent off on a dangerous mission.

"They are more than an hour late in reporting," he said.

"Incorrect!" Mr. Waverly said in a clipped, reproving voice. "They are one hour, three minutes and twelve seconds late. In our business it is important to be precise."

"Yes, sir," Randy said, abashed. "Maybe I could go look for them, sir."

"Maybe you could, but you can't," Mr. Waverly said. "I need—"

A purple light glowed suddenly

on the communications control console. The U.N.C.L.E. chief bent forward. At the same time he pressed a button that activated a recessed speaker.

"This is Number Four at the airport," a voice said. "I have checked on Miss Dancer and Mr. Slate. They came in on separate planes according to schedule and left in a cab. The cab number was checked out with the company. The driver is overdue checking in."

"Thank you," Waverly said. "Keep me informed of all developments. This is our top priority project."

He cut the connection and looked across at the boy. For all the stone exterior he found necessary to present to U.N.C.L.E. agents, he was at heart a kindly man. He understood the boy's curiosity.

"It seems we have something of a problem, young man," he said.

"Because Miss Dancer and Mr. Slate are lost?" Randy asked.

"Not because they are lost, no," Mr. Waverly said. He picked up an unlighted pipe. "Our problem is why they are lost."

"You see," he went on, "I have been picking up reports from our operatives all over the world. They all agree on one thing: there has suddenly developed a very disturbing agitation throughout the entire THRUSH network of criminal activity. Their reports indicate that this could be the greatest threat to

the world that this monstrous criminal organization has ever posed."

"Then it must be a whopper!" Randy said. "What are they up to now?"

"I do not know," Waverly said. "We have not been able to get a single lead. We only know that there is unprecedented activity in THRUSH right now. You can see why I am worried."

"I wish I could do something about it besides just carry messages," the boy said wistfully.


Waverly smiled. "Don't discount the importance of your work here," he said. "After all, you are still an on-the-job trainee, our first. Usually we do not accept any except college graduates who have then attended our U.N.C.L.E. academy."

"I know, sir," Randy said quickly. "I realize how fortunate I am."

"And we are fortunate to have someone with your interest," Mr. Waverly said. "There is so much for you to learn. Just bear with us for a few more years. I promise that if you continue as you have, you will one day take your place in the field, along with Mr. Kuryakin and Mr. Solo."

Before Randy could reply the purple light glowed again. Mr. Waverly cut in the voice communications. The same voice Randy heard before resumed its report.

"The missing cab was found two minutes ago by police. It was found on a side street near the East River.



THE Girl FROM **U.N.C.L.E.**
United Network Command for Law and Enforcement

The complete novels depicting the adventures of April Dancer and Mark Slate, with the rest of the famous U.N.C.L.E. cast are especially written, entirely new and, in magazine form, depict the "Girl from U.N.C.L.E." which appears also on television under the MGM-ARENA banner. Buy the magazine regularly at your news-dealers—and read the best of all!

The driver and his passengers have disappeared. There is some blood on the back seat of the cab. That is all anyone knows at this moment."

"Are they—" Randy asked, his face turning pale.

"Be quiet!" Alexander Waverly snapped. "There is something else coming in."

A different light gleamed on the console. Waverly cut in the sound. Randy leaned forward expectantly. He looked disappointed when the only sound that came out was the purr of a running car engine.

Waverly said, "Evidently April or Mark have succeeded in getting a pen communicator working. We are probably hearing their kidnaper's car motor."

Randy understood. He knew that U.N.C.L.E. operatives carry tiny

voice transmitter sets so minute they were concealed in the case of a fountain pen, requiring only the extension of a chromium antenna to put the agent in direct communications with U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

Minutes piled on minutes and they heard nothing but the rising and falling of the engine noise. Randy looked across at Mr. Waverly. The U.N.C.L.E. chief leaned back in his chair, listening with his eyes closed. He seemed completely relaxed. Then Randy noticed one tightly clinched fist and realized how much the wait and suspense were affecting the older man.

Randy glanced up at the wall clock above Waverly's head. Its ring of numbers told the time around the world. In his anxiety he had some difficulty picking out New York time. It gave him a jolt of surprise to note that it had only been fifteen minutes since they picked up the secret broadcast. To him it seemed like hours.

Then suddenly the engine noise was broken by a man's voice. It said, "What about that girl?"

"It was your fault that she got away!" another voice said savagely.

"Don't try to shove the blame on me!" the first voice snapped. "If you could have held him, then I wouldn't have—"

"Forget it! Forget it!" his companion replied. "What's done is done. I don't think she'll be able to

identify us, even if the police get a lineup on us. We'll be heading for Los Angeles in an hour anyway."

"I don't know," the other voice said. Randy could easily detect the growing uneasiness in the man's tones. "This thing scares me. Of all the messes we've gotten into, this is the worst."

"Don't worry. This is top priority. THRUSH headquarters is putting everybody on this thing."

"I don't know," his companion said. "It doesn't look good, especially now that U.N.C.L.E. is getting into the act. That could delay us. And if it does and we don't find that woman in time there won't be enough of this world left to—."

"Break it off!" his partner rasped. His own agitation showing in his voice. "We'll get her. We know this punk from U.N.C.L.E. met the woman in Los Angeles. We'll make him talk. After that, it will be easy."

"If he's the right man!"

"Stop worrying, I tell you! He's the right one. Mark Slate. I got his name off the plane manifest."

"That girl with him. I'm sure she was an U.N.C.L.E. agent too."

"So what? All we need is an hour with this jerk on the machine and we'll have all the information we need. After that U.N.C.L.E. can run around in circles chasing its own tail."

"Well, I hope we can— Oh! Look out, Fleming! It's—it's him!"

"Quick! Shoot the prisoner!"

Shoot Mark Slate! Don't let him get away!"

There was a crushing sound like metal twisting in a savage wreck. Then the communicator went dead.

"Oh!" Randy gasped. "Oh!"

He looked sick. Ever since he had joined U.N.C.L.E. as its first on-the-job trainee Mark Slate had been his personal hero and he had developed a schoolboy crush on lovely April Dancer. Their danger left him shaken.

"Both April Dancer and Mark Slate have been in tough spots before," Waverly said in a quiet voice that masked his own deep concern. "I am sure we can keep our confidence in them."

"If they could only have kept the pen communicator going a little longer," Randy said miserably. "We might have learned something."

"I think we learned a good deal anyway," Mr. Waverly said. "We learned that April Dancer escaped. We also learned that there is another woman involved—a woman these men seek desperately. We also learned that she has had some kind of contact with Mark Slate. And we learned that THRUSH is definitely involved."

"I wonder who the woman is?" Randy asked.

"Mr. Slate is the type of man who meets many women," Waverly said. "It will be extremely difficult to backtrack on ladies with whom he has been in contact."

"But the THRUSH man said this woman was the key to something that meant great danger to the world," Randy said. "We must find her."

"That is very true," Waverly said. "Now just one moment and we will get a report on the voice-prints."

"Voice-prints?" Randy asked, surprised.

"Yes," Mr. Waverly said. "When a person's voice is converted to electronic lines on an oscillograph, the lines make a characteristic pattern. Like fingerprints, the tones and nuances and timbres of our voices all have minute differences. No two are alike. I had this communicator report taped as it came in. The automatic computers are already searching our memory bank for comparisons with THRUSH agents. We will know who these men are in just a moment."

By the time he finished speaking, verification came that the men overheard were from THRUSH. Their names were recorded and a neatly printed dossier of each accompanied the report.

Waverly read it quickly and a flick of his fingers on his bank of communication buttons and a few quiet words started the vast crime-fighting organization's machinery to an intensive search for the two men.

Then he leaned back in his chair and thoughtfully caressed the bowl of his briar pipe.

"Odd," he said.

"Yes, sir?" Randy said hopefully. He realized, however, that the chief was speaking only to himself.

"Yes, very odd," Waverly repeated. "The hints those two dropped about a world danger indicated that this is something THRUSH fears."

"Do you think, maybe," Randy said uneasily, "that they got Mr. Slate's pen communicator when they captured him and are tricking us?"

"In this business anything is possible," Mr. Waverly said gloomily. "Anything."

His seamed face took on a more gloomy aspect. "Remember this, young man—when you are fighting criminals of the caliber THRUSH employs, it is fatal to take anything for granted. We must always seek the hidden meaning behind every action, every word, and if possible, every thought of our enemy."

"THRUSH intends to dominate the world. That much we know. We know the country which is supporting these arch-criminals, but that is about all."

"We have never been able to run down the real director of this infamous group. We don't even know what the letters in THRUSH stand for. But we do know that it is so powerful that only an international organization like U.N.C.L.E. can hope to combat its evil."

"And now something has hap-

pened that has made THRUSH afraid," Randy said. "Could there be a new organization so terrible that it even makes THRUSH tremble?"

"It must be something like that," Waverly said reluctantly. "But if so, why hasn't our operatives gotten wind of it?"

A flash of light on the U.N.C.L.E. chief's console caused Randy to hesitate. Waverly touched a switch and said, "Yes?"

"Carlson on number five, sir. We have a fix on April Dancer."

"Excellent!" Mr. Waverly said.

"She is walking, just entering the Fifties," the report went on. "She is dazed. She has some of her faculties, but doesn't recognize anyone. She failed to acknowledge any of our identification signals. When we tried to approach her, she used karate on Stevens. He has a broken leg. She almost shot Franklyn, and Singh is recovering from a blast of tear gas in his face."

"That is quite understandable," Mr. Waverly said quietly with only the slightest edge of sarcasm cutting through his English-sounding voice. "After all, this Amazon we've employed is all of five-feet-five and must weigh within an ounce of one hundred and ten pounds. We can hardly expect three mere men to handle her!"

"Well now—" the reporting agent began and then recognized the futility of trying to make excuses to the soft-speaking, but rock-

hard director of U.N.C.L.E. activities.

"Yes, sir," he ended lamely. "It will be necessary for us to render her unconscious. I'll—"

"Never mind," Waverly said. "If she is now walking in the Fifties, it means she is coming here."

"Probably, sir."

"I think she's like a boxer we often see in the prize ring. A stunned fighter keeps slugging just from pure fighting instinct after a blow numbs his conscious senses."

"Then we'll keep in the background and give her protection in case she should be followed," the agent said.

"Excellent," Waverly said and added, "Perhaps we had better send out a squad to protect you should she get angry again!"

"Now that's unfair! We could have used knockout gas on her but—"

"Yes?"

"Sorry, sir. No excuses."

"Very well. Carry on, but put as many people along her way as is needed to keep her under surveillance every second. She may be our only lead now to the most difficult job we have ever faced."

TWO

"FIND MARK SLATE!"

DESPITE HER disheveled hair, bruises on her face and her dirty torn dress, the girl who

paused on a street corner in the lower Fifties was extraordinarily attractive.

She ignored the stares of passing men and watched the light with impatience until it turned green. A young man leered at the tear in her short skirt. He turned to follow when she hurried across the street. Another man, tall and grim of face, stepped from a drug store entrance full in the young man's way. One look at his silent, warning face and the would-be masher went back the way he came.

Another light stopped the girl. She paused and leaned wearily against the corner of a building.

A police patrol car, cruising on the opposite side of the street, saw her.

The driver went down half a block until he could find a place to make a U-turn and started back. A man stepped off the curb. The patrolman had to brake sharply.

The pedestrian walked swiftly back to the car. A whispered word and a flash of an identification caused the police to drop interest in the girl.

Finally she turned into a small tailor shop on a certain street shadowed by the glass and steel bulk of the United Nations building.

A wrinkled gnome of a man looked up. When another customer came in right behind the girl, he said quickly, "Yes, Miss Dancer, your alterations are ready. If you will step back to the changing

room, I'll make any additional adjustments."

The customer looked curiously at the girl. She only nodded and walked past a pressing machine. The young girl at the machine pressed a hidden button as April Dancer went by. This activated a switch which would permit a lock to open.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. went into the small booth that served the shop for a changing room. She dropped the heavy curtain behind her and turned a clothes hook on the wall.

She waited for ten heartbeats and then the wall swung in, disclosing a short, dark corridor. She stepped inside. The panel closed behind her. For a brief moment she was in total darkness while electronic surveillance devices checked her identity.

Finally the end of the short corridor opened and April Dancer stepped into a modern office reception room.

The pretty girl at the desk nodded pleasantly to April. She did not appear surprised at the girl from U.N.C.L.E.'s disheveled appearance. After working for the great crime-fighting organization for nearly two years, the receptionist had long since forgotten how to be surprised at anything or anybody who came through the secret entrance to the New York headquarters of the international organization.

There was, however, more than a touch of envy in her eyes. For a second before she went back to sorting file cards, she envisioned herself on dangerous assignments instead of just sitting at a desk.

Behind the receptionist's desk were six small elevators, each marked with the name of one of the six subdivisions of U.N.C.L.E.

There were:

SECTION I: Policy and Operations

SECTION II: Operations and Enforcement

SECTION III: Enforcement and Intelligence

SECTION IV: Intelligence and Communications

SECTION V: Communications and Security

SECTION VI: Security and Personnel

The Girl took the one marked *Section II—Operations and Enforcement*. It deposited her on one of the top floors. She went straight across to the office with a plain nameplate on the door: MR. WAV-ERLY. She swayed slightly and paused for a moment to regain her composure before pushing the bell.

On the opposite side of the door, Mr. Waverly and Randy Kovac were watching her on a closed circuit TV screen recessed in the communications console on Waverly's desk.

"Maybe I should go help her," the youth said.

"You forget that the last men

who tried to do just that ended with broken legs, scalps creased by bullets and weeping from the effects of tear gas," Waverly said dryly. "Miss Dancer is obviously able to take care of herself."

His eyes betrayed his concern. But knowing April Dancer so well, he realized she would bitterly resent any implication that she was not more than self-sufficient. Waverly sighed. This was just another of several times when he was annoyed by the girl's fierce independence.

He waited with outward patience until the automatic security scanners checked her identity again and opened the door for her.

"Won't you sit down, Miss Dancer?" he said, motioning to a chair opposite Randy.

April lowered herself down gingerly. Her manner indicated that she had taken quite a bump on an anatomical portion of her body that made sitting down not exactly a pleasure.

"I know I look a sight," she said lamely.

Mr. Waverly fought down the impulse to be solicitous. Instead he said, "You are here as an operative, Miss Dancer, not as a woman. We are more concerned with your information than your personal appearance."

"Yes, sir," April said. "I—we—"

Her head fell forward. She would have plunged from her chair had



not Randy leaped to catch her. He looked uneasily at Waverly.

"Call Dr. Michaels," Waverly said.

He got up and walked over to look closely at the unconscious girl sprawled in the chair.

"I think she is only exhausted, but I do not want to take a chance," he said.

The doctor came quickly. He agreed with Waverly's diagnosis.

"I don't want to endanger her health," Waverly said. "But it is imperative that I question her as quickly as possible. Mark Slate's life may depend upon it."

"Well, she has the constitution of a lady Tarzan. She'll snap out of it quickly. I'll give her an injection.

Give her about ten minutes for it to get through her system. Then she'll regain consciousness automatically. It will be safe to question her then, if you don't overdo it."

It was a long anxious wait for the girl to open her eyes. Randy's face mirrored his relief, but Mr. Waverly acted as if nothing had happened. He picked up the reference to her appearance as if not a second had elapsed.

"Let us forget your appearance," he said. "What happened to you and Mr. Slate?"

For a moment April looked bewildered. It seemed to her that something had happened, but looking at Waverly's calm face, she doubted her impression.

"I don't—" she began.

She started to say she did not remember coming to the U.N.C.L.E. headquarters at all. But she caught herself in time to prevent such a show of what she stubbornly called weakness. She frowned, trying to recall what had happened since the attack on her and Mark Slate.

"Start at the beginning," Waverly said quietly. "This is very important because Mr. Slate is still missing.

"Oh!" April said and half rose from her chair. "I thought Mark got away.

"No," Mr. Waverly said. "Now what happened?"

"Mark and I had to leave Los Angeles when our suspect in that

United Nations spy case departed for New York. We traveled on different airlines in order not to arouse any suspicion that we were working together. We met as if by accident at the airport here. We took a cab together. On the way we were forced off the road by another car. It drove on and we thought it was only a drunk driver."

"I see," Mr. Waverly said, picking up an unlighted pipe and then putting it down again. Only by this unconscious gesture did he betray his concern.

However, April's sharp eyes caught the movement. She sat up a little straighter in her chair. She seemed to draw strength from Waverly's suppressed alarm.

"There were six men hidden in some bushes beside the road. They jumped us. Mark and I split to divide their attention. There was a battle."

"From your appearance, I'd say you put up quite a struggle," Waverly said. "You are a very tough young woman, Miss Dancer."

April smiled wanly at him. She was more flattered than if he had told her she was beautiful.

But her smile faded as quickly as it flashed up. "Mark?" she asked, her face mirroring her deep concern for the young ex-RAF pilot who shared her dangerous missions.

"We received a sort of communication from Mr. Slate," Waverly said. "He apparently succeeded in

getting his pen-communicator in operation without his captors knowing it. We received no word from Mr. Slate himself, but we were permitted to listen in on a conversation from two men guarding him."

He moved a selector switch on the console. The tape made from the communicator broadcast began a replay for April's benefit.

She listened intently. Her eyes sparkled with growing excitement. Watching her, Alexander Waverly thought he had never seen any girl who thrived so much on danger. A perfect U.N.C.L.E. agent, he thought.

When the tape ran out, Mr. Waverly said, "Is there anything you saw or heard during the attack which would explain anything we heard here?"

The girl shook her head reluctantly.

"No, and it also ruins my theory of what happened," she said. "I thought the attack was connected with the spy case Mark and I were working on. But THRUSH isn't connected with the spy ring. This is something new."

"And if the men we heard are sincere," Waverly said, "the world is faced with a terrible threat. This is more important than the spy case you are working on, Miss Dancer. You will devote your full time to finding out what THRUSH is so afraid of."

"But if THRUSH is afraid, it would seem to me that the threat to

us is nonexistent," the girl objected.

"No," Waverly said slowly. "I have fed all the known facts we have into the computer while we waited for your—arrival. We are faced with several alternative explanations. The one I favor most is that something THRUSH is developing has gotten out of hand. It is something so terrible it could destroy the entire world."

"Then the threat to us is as great as the threat to THRUSH," the girl said.

"That is correct," Alexander Waverly said. "Now the conversation indicates that a woman is the key to solving this problem. And that Mark Slate has some unexplained contact with this woman. So here is your first task: Find Mark Slate!"

"Yes, sir," April said.

It pleased Waverly that she did not ask how or for specific instructions.

"You were in contact with Mr. Slate in Los Angeles," Alexander Waverly went on. "Do you have any idea who this mysterious woman is?"

"Mark has a roving eye, you know," she said somewhat ruefully. "It might have been anyone."

"Finding her, next to rescuing Mr. Slate, is our number one project," the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. "This vital task must fall on your shoulders, Miss Dancer. That does not mean you are working alone.

Far from it. I intend to throw the full resources of our organization on this case. I believe it that important."

"Yes, sir," April said.

"However, I have been receiving world-wide reports of unusual THRUSH activity," Waverly went on. "That means I cannot bring our people back here. The key to this thing may lie elsewhere. We must attack on every front. Once we pinpoint the source, we will pull everyone in."

"I'll find the woman for you," April said.

"How?" Mr. Waverly asked curiously.

She smiled back at him. "Somehow," she said. April got up. "If I may go now—"

Waverly hesitated, mindful of the beating she had taken. In the end he thought it best to trust to April's estimate of her own capabilities.

"As you wish," he said.

"Maybe I could go along and take Mr. Slate's place temporarily," Randy said hopefully. "Until he is rescued, of course. I wouldn't want to try to beat him out of his job."

"A noble sentiment," Waverly said dryly. "But I fear, Mr. Kovac, that I need you here."

"There'll be another time, Randy," April said, amused, yet touched by the young man's disappointment.

A light glowed on the console.

"One moment, Miss Dancer. Perhaps—"

Waverly switched on the pen-communicator receiver. After an exchange of codes to prove the call genuine, April heard a voice say, "Karman Caine, a definitely identified THRUSH agent in Los Angeles, has inserted ads in both the *Times* and the *Herald-Examiner* seeking a Mrs. Felix Harvey-Lancer. Caine is posing as a lawyer seeking to settle a rich estate."

"Who is Mrs. Felix Harvey-Lancer?" Waverly asked.

"No one knows," the agent replied. "She checked into a hotel for a day and then left. No one knows where she went."

"Find her!" Waverly snapped. "She may be the key—"

He caught a glimpse of April's half-amused, half surprised face and stopped.

"Never mind," he said into the voice receiver. "I think I can find the lady myself. You cover Caine and find out what his interest in the lady is."

After he broke the connection, Alexander Waverly looked at April again. "Am I right in assuming that you are the mysterious lady with the hyphen?"

"Yes, sir," the girl from U.N.C.L.E. said. "I had to go to a place where there was a possibility of being recognized. So I got a red wig, some green contact lenses for my eyes and added something else which delicacy forbids me to men-

tion, but which put me definitely in the Jayne Mansfield class of figure."

"It was a good disguise?" Waverly asked.

"Well—!" April grinned. "I met a Mr. Mark Slate in a cocktail lounge and the line he handed me was definitely different from the one he hands April Dancer. I was flattered!"

"So you met Slate!" Waverly said speculatively. "Then you must be the one these men kidnaped Slate to find. Why are they so anxious to find you?"

"I don't know, sir," April replied. "But if they think I can help them blow up the world, they have a wrong number. I like it here."

"This is very odd. The taped conversation definitely indicates that this red-haired woman is a key factor in their fear. Yet that woman is you."

"Well, it looks like the best thing I can do is to dig out my red wig and other accessories and add a hyphen to my name," April said.

"Will you insert an ad in the personal columns of all the New York newspapers for me?" Have it read: 'Blackboard—I think our enemies can figure that out as meaning 'Slate'—'Blackboard, must get in touch with you at once. Call me Blackhawk Hotel. H-L.' "

Randy looked startled. "You're setting yourself up as a decoy to draw these men out!" he said. "You can't do that. It's too dangerous!"

April smiled. "So it is dangerous," she said. "Danger is my business, Randy."

The sparkle in her eyes showed that she loved that business.

THREE

CAUGHT!

A WILLOWY GIRL about twenty-three years old with flaming red hair and what Mr. Alexander Waverly would call—er—Jayne Mansfield attractions, picked up the telephone in the sitting room of an expensive suite on the seventh floor of the Blackhawk Hotel in Manhattan.

"Yes?" she said in a voice that carried a strong Down East accent.

"Mrs. Harvey-Lancer?" a pleasant voice said at the other end of the line.

"Oh, yes!" April Dancer replied. "Are you the gentleman who is going to assist me in finding a place?"

"No," the voice said regretfully. "I am calling in regard to the ad you placed in this afternoon's *Times*. The inquiry about Mr. Mark Slate."

"Oh!" April said. She hid her elation behind a mask of suspicion. "How did you know it was I who placed the ad?"

"I didn't," he said and from his tone she could almost picture his smile. As a woman she did not find it unattractive at all. As an U.N.-C.L.E. agent she sternly reminded

herself to keep her mind on the job. Handsome counter-agents have been the downfall of more than one woman spy, as Alexander Waverly informed her during her training.

"Then how—" she began.

"Mr. Slate, of course," the voice said. "No one else would have recognized the initials or understood the significance of that 'Black-board' opening. Mr. Slate is unable to call himself. He asked me to contact you and do anything—*anything* for you. Is there anyway I can be of service?"

"I don't think so," April said hesitantly. "I must see Mr. Slate. It is very important."

"That can be arranged," the man said quickly. "It will be about two hours before he returns. Let me see—it is just after dark now. Say—in two hours? If you could meet me at the Golden Ball Club—"

"I don't know about meeting a strange man," April said quickly.

"I understand," the voice said and chuckled. "Mr. Slate, of course, will be with me."

"Oh, then it will be fine," April said. "I'll be there and thank you so much. You don't know how much this means! It is so important that I contact Mark."

She hung up with a smile of satisfaction and opened her purse. Rummaging through the usual junk a woman loads down her bag with, she removed an expensive looking fountain pen. She twisted the end

and a thin antenna shot up several inches. A faint bleeping noise came from inside the pen-communicator, a marvel of miniaturized super-radio equipment.

Instantly a reply came directly from Alexander Waverly in U.N.-C.L.E. headquarters across town.

"Yes, Miss Dancer?" he said.

"The fish are nibbling at the bait, Mr. Waverly," she said. "I am to meet them at the Golden Ball in two hours."

"Good!" the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. "We will have the place surrounded. Carry on, Miss Dancer."

"Yes, sir," April said. "I—"

"What is it? What is it, Miss Dancer?" Waverly called.

"The phone call was just a trap to get my attention away from the window!" she said hurriedly. "They're breaking in!"

"Miss Dancer! Don't take any chances!" Waverly said. "If—"

But April, afraid the two men rushing her would discover the secret of the pen-communicator, slammed down the antenna which cut the connection. This left Alexander Waverly talking into a dead receiver.

She whirled to confront the two men who had crept along the building ledge to force her hotel window.

They split, coming at her from two directions.

April leaped back, jerking the phone cord loose and hurling the instrument at the nearest man. It

caught him in the chest. He fell with a muffled curse.

She leaped for her purse with its array of U.N.C.L.E. protective devices, but the would-be abductor grabbed her. She swung at him, a hard karate chop. It knocked him back and off balance. She grabbed the shirt front for a judo throw, but the cloth tore in her hands.

He swung a wild haymaker at her jaw. April ducked, but her foot hit the telephone she threw at the first man. She fell, sprawling back across the suite's couch.

Both men dived for her again. She kicked the heel of her shoe and a switchblade, thin, strong and murderous, shot out of the spike heel of her shoe. She kicked her leg, aiming the blade in a murderous slash at her opponent's throat.

He dodged back. April reached down and grabbed the shoe off her foot. Holding the toe, she hurled it at the second man. The blade just barely ripped his cheek as he ducked.

For a moment the movement left him off balance. It permitted April to dodge past him. She grabbed the edge of a table and upended it in front of the other man rushing her.

She darted around him as he fell, and grabbed for her purse. But as she raised her head she saw the man on the floor aiming a queer-shaped gun at her. There was a peculiar twang as he pressed the trigger. April felt a sharp sting in the

calf of her leg. A strange numbness flashed out from the tiny wound. Her leg gave way. She collapsed.

The contents of her purse scattered around her. They were all things which had saved her life at one time or another—all U.N.C.-L.E. protective devices.

There was the pen-communicator for instant contact with Headquarters, U.N.C.L.E.; a lipstick with a hidden hypodermic syringe to inject either knockout drops or sodium pentothol truth serum; a rat tail comb which made a murderous stiletto; candy mints that threw off a blinding smoke screen when dropped in water; a compact that was actually a super-miniaturized tape recorder; a perfume dispenser that had a secret tear gas compartment; and several other similarly useful items.

As the sickening paralysis flashed over her body with alarming speed, she tried to grab the tear gas dispenser. One of the men dropped to his knees and grabbed her wrist.

April seized at his jacket, but her body was paralyzed to her waist now. With only the strength of her arms, she couldn't flip him over.

The paralysis was creeping higher, moving more slowly now that its toxin was being diluted by her blood. But it was still moving. She knew it would only be a few more seconds before she lost control of her arms as well.

When the THRUSH man jerked

the tear gas dispenser from her hands she rolled over as if to get away. Actually she was covering some of the other items with her body. And under this cover, she grabbed the compact tape recorder, a package of the smoke bomb mints, and the stiletto handle comb. She managed to shove them into the pocket of the tailored jacket she wore. Then she tried to get the lipstick with its secret hypodermic syringe, but her rapidly numbing fingers couldn't grasp it.

She tried to move, but her body was immobile now. She could move nothing above her shoulders. The paralysis was creeping up her neck. She knew that she only had a few more seconds of consciousness before the end.

Already her mind was becoming hazy. She heard the two men speaking. It seemed to her that their voices came from a great distance, but she still had enough of her faculties to catch their words. The voices were familiar. It was the two men who attacked them before. She recognized the voices from the tape recording Mr. Waverly made of the pen-communicator broadcast from the kidnap car.

"You fool!" one snarled. "You were told not to use that damned numbing gun on her. It may interfere with the interrogation machine getting a correct answer from her. That thing is touchy. Any undetermined factor cranked in can upset its delicate balance."

"What could I do?" the other said in an aggrieved tone. "She was digging in that purse. I thought she had a gun in it. I couldn't take any chances."

"You are paid to take chances. This is serious. We must find out what this damned woman did with that 'trigger bomb' or we'll all end up shoveling coal to keep hell's fires burning."

"Let's argue tomorrow or next year. I want to get out of here before something goes wrong," his companion said.

"Okay, but just remember: you take the blame for numbing her."

"Sure! Sure, but give me a hand, will you?"

As they stooped to pick her up, one of the men felt the objects in her jacket pocket.

Very dimly she heard him say, "What's this?" His voice was sharp.

"A powder compact and a package of mints," his companion said. "And a comb. Nothing important."

"Wait a minute!" the other man said. "The handle on that comb looks pretty sharp and rigid. Yes it is! That thing is a genuine frog sticker!"

The two men looked at each other. "Just what I tried to tell you. This girl is a professional. Take a look at that perfume dispenser. When I took it away from her I thought she was just going to throw it at us. I'm not so sure now."

Then, so faint it was dreamlike to her numbing mind, April heard the

THRUSH agent exclaim, "The damned thing can throw out tear gas! This kid's no amateur. Take a look at those other objects."

"This one is just mints. Nothing there. And this—"

He snapped open the compact. He removed the tiny powder puff and looked at the powder cake. The printed circuit was a flat sheet behind the mirror and added only an infinitesimal thickness to the lid. The recording head with its wire-thin tape and drive shaft was also a flat sheet under the powder container. The battery, even smaller than the cell used in electric watches, was concealed in the hinge.

The whole assembly was not detectable without completely dismantling the ingenious device. The THRUSH man snapped the lid shut and stuck the compact back in April's pocket.

The girl's head sagged. She made one last tremendous effort to fight off unconsciousness and failed . . .

APRIL DANCER opened her eyes. She turned her head. For a moment she had difficulty placing where she was. Then the wild fight in the hotel room came back to her. She sat up, gingerly flexing legs and arms. Except for a curious tingling through her entire body, she felt no ill effects from the numbing pellet shot into her leg by the THRUSH agent.

She looked around. She was in a small room, tastefully decorated. She was on a couch under a large

oil painting of a Bavarian mountain scene.

There was a door across from her. April walked over to it. To her surprise it wasn't locked. She looked out. There was a long corridor. A man was coming down it. He saw her and smiled.

"Hi!" he said and waved his hand in a friendly manner.

"I hope you feel better, Mrs. Harvey-Lancer," he said as he approached.

April Dancer recognized the voice. It was the friendly soul who called her to the telephone to distract her attention while the two THRUSH men broke in through her hotel window.

"Yes, thank you," she said, looking at him curiously.

Surprisingly, his friendly, open face looked just exactly as she had pictured him after hearing his voice on the phone. It was a strong face, definitely not that of a weakling. From his friendly appearing face past his muscular shoulders to his athletic legs, he was the kind of man any woman would be attracted to.

"I deeply regret the inconvenience this has caused you, Mrs. Ha— Must I say all that name again? Can't I just call you Harve or Lance or something?"

April found herself warming to his friendliness despite her knowledge that he was a man from THRUSH.

"Well," she said with a smile as

bright as his own, "you may call me Cynthia, if you will permit me to call you Hank, or Pete or Steve or something appropriate."

"You are not even warm," he said with a sad shake of his head. "It's Mike, Cynthia. And you are welcome to it."

"Okay, Mike. Now that we are old friends, why don't you just tell me just as one pal to another what all this means?"

"Of course," he said. "You know of course, Mr. Slate's business and the danger he runs."

"So?" April said noncommittally.

"These men who kidnaped you were after him also. Fortunately we were able to overcome them," he said.

"Really?" April said. "And where then is Mr. Slate?"

"We will meet him presently," Mike said. "Unfortunately, he received the same numbing injection you did. Since he was struck later, he has not yet regained consciousness. At least he hadn't when I left. 'Would you like to go with me? We'll check on the young man.'"

"Thank you, but no."

"No? Why not?"

"Because, Mike, you are the most charming—"

The smile broadened on the THRUSH man's face and then froze when April added: "charming liar I have ever met."

"Liar? Really, Cynthia! I—"

There was a steely look in April's

eye that stopped him. He sighed and shrugged.

"Well, you can't blame a fellow for trying," he said.

"And what were you trying, Mike?" she asked, her level gray eyes boring into him.

"To put you at your ease," he said. "See, I can be honest when pinned down."

"So I would make a better subject under your interrogation machine?" She asked quietly.

Mike looked startled. His smile ebbed and it left his face with an entirely new cast. He no longer appeared so trustworthy or even so friendly.

"How did you know about *that*?" His voice was still quiet but it carried a sinister, even frightened undertone.

"Oh, I don't know," April said airily. "I pick up things here and there."

"It seems you do," he said in an odd voice. "We thought this machine was super secret. Less than six people know about it."

"Seven," April said. "You forgot me."

"No, Cynthia—if that is your name. I've not forgotten you. You are not the kind a man forgets, I'll assure you of that. Will you come with me?"

"No," April said.

"It will be a very simple matter to force you. Why make it hard on yourself? You are going. You have no choice."

"If you put it that way—" April said and smiled at him.

He gave her a questioning look and his puzzled uneasiness was reflected on his face. April took an almost gleeful pleasure in his uncertainty. She knew she had him off-balance. Her familiarity with the super-secret interrogation machine made him wonder what else she knew.

They walked down the hall together. Mike was deep in thought. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. preserved an outward calm she was far from feeling inside. She understood only too well her danger, and even more important, the danger to U.N.C.L.E., if the interrogation machine did successfully probe her mind.

Mike politely opened the door for her. The room was painted white and all the objects in it were white. Soft, indirect light helped make everything blend together. The machine reminded April of an overgrown dentist's chair surmounted by a fantastic array of dull white tubes.

As April looked around uneasily, another door opened. A small, nervous man entered. During the seconds the door was open, April glimpsed an extraordinarily long room jammed with rows of computing machines. She touched the tape recorder in her pocket, starting it.

"Where am I?" April asked Mike.

"In the headquarters of an or-

ganization as devoted to its ideals as any patriotic group," he said.

The little man came over to them.

"Is this the subject?" he asked shortly.

Mike frowned. "This is Mrs. Harvey-Lancer," he said.

The little man shrugged. His wrinkled monkey face looked unpleasantly at her.

"What difference does it make who she is?" he said in a sober voice. "Sit down, please."

April shook her head and the action made the room spin. Details were growing more indistinct. She realized that she had been drugged again, but had no idea how. She would have fallen had not Mike caught her. As she sagged in his arms, her last conscious recollection was the little man saying, "This may kill her, you know!"

FOUR

THE MIND DREDGER

THE GIRL from U.N.C.L.E. turned fitfully. She rolled over and for a moment hung precariously on the edge of the couch. She opened her eyes and looked at the walls of the room. It was where she first found herself after the kidnapping from her hotel suite by the two THRUSH operatives.

She felt strange. It wasn't weariness exactly, although kin to it. It was almost as if by some odd means

something had depressed her vitality. She moved her legs and the action made her tired.

April Dancer turned, not realizing in the fog of awakening that she was so close to the edge of the couch. She tumbled off. It wasn't a hard bump, but the effort to get up required too much for her depleted condition. She closed her eyes and continued to lie there.

Slowly her disordered mind started to pick up the shattered remnants of memory. She realized that the condition of her body came from her ordeal in the interrogation machine.

A sudden stab of fear cut through April. The jolt of adrenalin in her blood did something to counteract the sag of her normally splendid vitality.

April sat up with difficulty. Her initial jab of fear increased, but it was not for herself. It was for U.N.C.L.E. and those she worked with there. The fear came from considering what she might have revealed under the merciless probing of the electronic third degree.

She looked around. There was a decorator's mirror on the wall. She suspected that it was a two-way affair and that a THRUSH spy was watching her from the other side.

The girl agent caught a glimpse of her face. It was pale. Her hair was tangled. Her lipstick was smeared. There was nothing she could do about it, since she lost her lipstick and comb when they

brought her here. But she took her finger and smoothed out her lips as best she could.

Then, using her fingers for a comb, she succeeded in making her hair look attractive.

She was certain that a man was watching her. It gave her a perverse pleasure to suspect that he was smiling and making a sappy remark to himself about the vanity of women.

Well, it was some of that, she admitted to herself. A girl's appearance is part of her stock-in-trade and always has been. But there was far more behind her actions than just an attempt to look attractive to her enemies.

The improvised toilette gave April Dancer an excuse to search her pockets for something to help her. She removed the package of mints which exploded into a smoke screen when dropped in water and the powder compact with its sub-miniature tape recorder.

April inspected her lips in the compact mirror and made an additional touchup with her little finger. Her head nodded. She feigned a weariness even beyond what she felt. She leaned back on the bed, the open compact in her hand. She closed her eyes, but her index finger gently pressed a hidden button which activated the recorder's replay. She tugged her head restlessly, bringing her ear right against the compact so she could hear the very faint playback. She started to

breathe deeply like a person in a hard sleep.

"—may kill her, you know!"

It was the little monkey man who operated the THRUSH interrogator. These were the last words she consciously remembered before the THRUSH drug numbed her mind.

"It is a chance we have to take," April heard Mike's voice say.

It was no longer a friendly voice. It was hard, cruel and held a touch of uneasy fear.

"It is imperative that we find out what she did with that damned trigger bomb. I personally saw Franklyn Royce slip it into her hand bag there in the cocktail lounge in Los Angeles. But she definitely did not have the thing when she got to her hotel."

"This interrogator is not perfect. It has some serious flaws," the little operator said. "It has a deadly way of sapping vitality. It can kill."

"This woman is as strong as an ox," Mike said irritably. "You should get tangled with her in a fight. She almost whipped two men twice her size. She has vitality to spare."

"Well—" the little monkey of a man replied. "I don't know. Shall I push to the limit?"

"Push as hard as necessary to find out what we must know. We were closing in on Royce. He knew it and slipped the bomb to her. She must have been his accomplice, but she apparently double-crossed him.

She left with the bomb. I know Royce is moving heaven and earth to find her. He placed ads in the Los Angeles papers seeking knowledge of her. He used a fake name of a fictitious lawyer, Karman Caine."

"If she has knowledge of this, the machine will bring it out. It is impossible for anyone to hold back anything. However, you must frame your questions correctly. The machine does not think. It can find out only what you ask for."

"Can an exceptionally strong willed person overcome the machine's probing, as they sometimes can do with lie detectors?"

"No, nothing can be held back. However, as I told you, the machine still has numerous imperfections."

"I can't help that! We must know. Don't you understand?"

"No, I don't!" the little man cried. "You are forcing me to move before I am ready. If I had another week to make adjustments, I could guarantee results. As it is, I am not concerned with this woman's life. But I am concerned that the machine does not make a poor showing. It could mean cancellation of the project after all I've sacrificed for it."

"Damn the machine, the woman and you!" Mike cried. "Can't you get it through your fool head that we face the most serious threat the world has ever known?"

"But my machine—"

April, with her ear pressed against the recorder, felt a stirring of hope. If the two THRUSH men got to fighting, there might be a chance for her to turn the little man's resentment to her advantage.

She suddenly realized that her growing excitement had caused her to clench one fist. She relaxed slowly, fearful that the watching spy might realize that she was not asleep at all.

"There won't be a machine or a you or I if we don't get our hands on that damnable bomb before Royce recovers it," Mike's voice went on from the recording. "Let me explain to you:

"This man Franklyn Royce worked for the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. He is extremely brilliant, but completely unstable. He is suffering from a persecution complex."

In a rapid burst of words April heard Mike tell how Royce, angered at a fancied failure of his superiors to appreciate his genius, defected to Russia. Then, because he was not made chief of the Russian scientific teams, he defected again to join THRUSH.

Here again his instability was his undoing. He tried to organize a revolt to place himself head of THRUSH. In failing, he narrowly escaped with his life. But in doing so, he got away with the working model of a deadly weapon known as the trigger bomb.

"This bomb was developed to set

up a chain reaction in steel," Mike said. "But what we didn't know was that it is even more potent in air. The terrible thing is no larger than an ordinary .45 caliber bullet, but when fired in the air, it can set off a nuclear chain reaction. And nothing can stop it as long as there is air to feed it. And there is air everywhere! If this thing is fired, all the air in the world will burn in one tremendous global explosion. The earth will become a new sun!"

"This man Royce is trying to bluff you," the little scientist said contemptuously. "He can't fire this thing. It would kill him as well as all the rest of us."

"You don't know Royce," Mike said, his voice shaking with agitation. "He has a hunger for power worse than Adolf Hitler's megalomania. He is maniacally depressed when he is frustrated. Twice he tried to commit suicide. He wants this weapon to blackmail himself into power.

"How is immaterial. He just wants, craves, must have supreme power. When he fails, he starts thinking of suicide, as he did when he failed in his bid to become Russian chief scientist. And what more spectacular way for such a man to kill himself than to die with the world?"

"I can't believe—"

"Hitler was that way, you remember. He was willing to drag everyone down to death with him."

"Yes!" the little man said in a

strangled voice. "I remember Hitler. There are men who would rather destroy the world than to —"

"Now you see why it is so important that we learn from this girl what she did with that trigger bomb. We know Royce slipped it in her bag. We know she did not have it when she got back to the Los Angeles hotel. We know she did something with it. We know Royce is frantically trying to recover it. We must get that bomb—or *all of us will die!*"

"I—I'll do what I can," the THRUSH scientist said, shaken.

There was a silence and then some strange crackling and humming noises as the machine apparently went into orderly operation. April suppressed a shiver.

She distinctly recalled the incident Mike spoke of. At the time it seemed so trivial she dismissed it from her mind. She had taken the disguise of the red-haired widow, Mrs. Felix Harvey-Lancer, as part of her pursuit in the U.N.C.L.E. spy case. While waiting in the Los Angeles cocktail lounge, she saw Mark Slate enter. In a mischievous moment, she struck up a barroom flirtation with her co-agent just to see if her disguise was good enough to fool him.

During the evening, a drunk brushed against her. Looking down she saw that her purse was open. She thought it was a pickpocket. Fearful that one of her U.N.C.L.E. protective devices had been stolen,



she went to the ladies lounge to check. Nothing was missing, but she found what appeared to be a .45 bullet.

She thought it some evidence a gangster needed to get rid of before being arrested. Not in a position to get involved and delay her spy chase, April dropped it in the humus packed around the base of a potted plant in the lounge.

What had become of it? April shivered. Perhaps it was still there. If she betrayed the hiding place to the THRUSH men, at least they understood its danger. But there was always the possibility that Royce had gotten it back himself.

The strain was beginning to tell on her. It was difficult to keep from

shivering as she listened to the answers she gave under the stimulating rays of the new machine.

She heard the THRUSH man ask: "What is your name?"

She answered: "April Dancer."

"Are you a spy or counter espionage agent?"

"Yes." April noticed that her voice was low and strained.

"For whom do you work?"

"U.N.C.L.E."

There was an exclamation of surprise from both men.

"This is wonderful!" the little scientist's voice broke in. "We will be able to learn enough from her to destroy that infernal organization!"

"Later!" Mike rasped. "Right now the important thing is the trigger bomb. I must know what she did with it. If U.N.C.L.E. found it, they will destroy the monstrous thing. We will be safe. If she didn't—! Then there is the terrible possibility that Royce regained it."

"Then ask her!" the little man cried impatiently. "These rays penetrate and stimulate certain parts of the body. This causes frictions in breathing and heartbeat. Every minute you wait, the chances of the rays killing her becomes more certain."

"I'm trying to think!" Mike said miserably.

"Think later! We must hurry and get all the information we can before she dies!"

It seemed to the listening girl that Mike had been afraid to ask

the question. Now he said in a voice that shook slightly: "Does U.N.C.L.E. have the trigger bomb?"

April Dancer heard herself say no. The intake of both men's breaths was clearly audible on the recording.

"Then Royce either has it or has a chance to recover the thing," Mike said in a dull voice.

"Perhaps she is a double agent," the little scientist said. "If she had the thing from Royce, she may be his secret partner."

"It could be," Mike said. He addressed the girl under the ray machine: "Do you know Franklyn Royce?"

"No," April's reply on the recorder.

There was a dead silence from the two men. Then Mike said harshly to the little scientist: "What in hell is the matter with that stupid machine?"

"Ask her again."

"Are you working with Franklyn Royce?"

"No." April's voice was barely a whisper.

"She's fading out on us. It will kill her if we go much longer," the little monkey of a man warned.

"Haven't you even seen Franklyn Royce?" Mike asked, his voice growing desperate.

"No." The answer was so faint the recorder scarcely picked it up.

"That's all!" the little man snapped. "She will die if we go any longer."

"Then let her die!" Mike cried, his voice savage with desperation and frustrated fear. "I've got to get at the bottom of this!"

"We can get nothing more out of her. Let her rest. Give her a sedative and we'll try again under more favorable conditions."

"But every moment lost—"

"It can't be helped," the scientist insisted. "Believe me! I know this machine."

"It's a fake! I know she knows this man. I saw them together!"

"That is possible. I warned you not to get any of that numbing serum in her blood. It upsets the ray penetration and can give false readings. We may get an entirely different answer after it is expelled from her blood."

"What about the knockout gas you gave her?"

"That is a different material," the old man said. "However, just to be sure, we'll question her fully conscious next time."

"I suppose you are right," Mike said miserably. "But the situation is getting desperate. What about this man Mark Slate? There was definitely a connection between the two of them. Can't we question him now?"

"He is still under almost complete influence of the numbing serum. He attempted to escape. He had to be brought down with the serum gun."

Mike cursed. "Everything is going wrong!"

"I am sure that on the next interrogation we will get vital information about the U.N.C.L.E. setup. That alone will make all of this worthwhile," the little man said. "I am sure the division chief will be so pleased it will mean promotion for both of us."

"A fat lot of good a promotion will do us if we're all burned up!"

"We aren't burned yet," the old man said. "I worked with Royce. I know how he operates. He'll threaten and bluster first. He'll overplay his hand. You'll have an opportunity to trip him up."

Mike said something April could not catch. Then the old man said contemptuously, "What you are afraid of is that the division director will blame you for letting Royce slip through your fingers!"

"Damn you!" Mike said in a choked voice.

"Don't threaten me! I'll—"

"You'll what? I am your only chance to recover from your error and escape punishment for your incompetency! I suggest you treat me with a little more courtesy!"

"I—I'm sorry," Mike said bitterly.

"Good! You may wonder why I, Rottermund, the great scientist, even bother to worry with you. It is this. I am interested in what this U.N.C.L.E. spy can be forced to tell us about her organization. You see, I know Alexander Waverly. I know him very well. Many years ago in England, when we were both

young men,—well, I made a mistake. It was in his power to overlook it. He refused and ever since I have had to slink along the back alleys of life and the world.”

“If Royce isn’t liquidated, it won’t matter any more.”

“It matters to me!” the old man cried. “I want to kill Waverly with my own hands. You can help me if I can get the right information from this U.N.C.L.E. agent. Help me and I’ll help you get the information you need to keep the division director from handling your bungling in the manner it should be handled.”

“I’ll help you,” Mike mumbled grudgingly.

“Good!” the THRUSH scientist said. “Now get this hunk of clay back to her room. In three hours we’ll try again. And this time I am sure Miss April Dancer will tell us both what we need to know!”

FIVE

THE DESPERATE CHANCE

WHEN THE tape recording ran its course, April Dancer closed her eyes and tried to think. She realized full well how desperate her situation was. It frightened her that she was in a position where she could be forced to betray every U.N.C.L.E. secret she knew.

The recording had revealed clearly that it was impossible to keep back any thing from the prob-

ing, compulsive force of the interrogation machine.

U.N.C.L.E., of course, had thousands of secrets about which she knew nothing. But at the same time, there were plenty that she did know, had to know in order to do her job. For one thing, she could be forced to reveal every major office location U.N.C.L.E. had worldwide. Even worse, it was more than possible that they could dredge enough from her mind to set a trap for Mr. Waverly. She could think of several ways it could be done.

There was nothing April Dancer could do at the moment, but she knew that she had to do something. Even if she had to kill herself, she knew she was not going to betray U.N.C.L.E. and especially Alexander Waverly, who had given her the chance she wanted so badly.

Once this resolution was made, April felt better. As she lay back, resting and renewing her strength, her busy mind was turning over a dozen fantastic plans to escape. She had a strong, athletic body encased in her willowy form and it helped her recover rapidly from her ordeal.

As the strength flowed back into her, April’s optimism rose in proportion. She could see Alexander Waverly’s stern lined face lecturing to the U.N.C.L.E. academy: “No matter how desperate a situation may seem, there is *always* a way out. If you do not have the ability and ingenuity to find that way,

there is no place for you in U.N.-C.L.E."

As she thought of that, April smiled faintly as she also recalled what Illya Kuryakin told her when she asked him what to do about a problem presented to the academy students.

She remembered how he grinned at her.

"Honey," she remembered him saying, "When you can't think of a blessed thing to do, then roll up your sleeves, double your fists and go at them swinging. It may not be the smart thing to do, but it is better than nothing. Doing nothing will get you nothing but a lot more nothing. Anything is better than that!"

"Well," April said to herself. "We'll see how well Kuryakin's law works!"

Still sure that she was being watched through the two-way mirror, April went through the motions of waking up. She swung her trim legs off the couch and stood up. She was elated to find little evidence of her previous weakness. The many hours she spent golfing, riding and swimming were working to her advantage now.

However, she thought it prudent to go through the motions of staggering. A key portion of her rapidly forming plan of attack depended upon keeping the enemy thinking her too weak to furnish a physical threat.

After two years with U.N.C.L.E. she had begun to take the organiza-

tion's protective devices for granted. Now she realized how much they all depended on these wonderful and ingenious gadgets.

It would have been so simple to tune in the pen-communicator and report directly to Mr. Waverly. Then the triangle locator beams from the U.N.C.L.E. direction finder could have pinpointed her location from the transmitting beams.

For a moment she felt almost naked without them. She took a deep breath and thought wryly: "There's nothing left but to apply Kuryakin's law: Roll up your sleeves and wade into them."

For a long moment she stood in the center of the room, turning over the only possibilities left to her. She had the smoke screen mints left, but there was no one to blind with them but herself. The compact-tape recorder had served its purpose well in revealing what had gone on at the electronic interrogation, but was of no use now.

Then a sudden thought struck her. The recorder was no no help now, yet perhaps the information she gained from it could be the slim key to unlock the doors between her and freedom.

April was used to making split-second decision. Once the idea flashed through her mind, the girl did not hesitate. Her quick mind had instantly grasped the possibilities.

The details could be worked out as each succeeding emergency

arose. And she knew they would arise.

April Dancer turned and faced the mirror. She was positive that it was a two-way spy affair. It was not quite as bright as it should have been, betraying the fact that some of the light striking its smooth surface was not being reflected back. It was going through to provide a view through the glass for the spy on the other side.

"Mike," she said quietly, "I'm ready to make a deal with you."

There was no sound from the other side. For an anxious moment April wondered if she had made a mistake in assuming she was being watched.

She took a deep breath and tried again. This time she played an ace to see what she could drag in.

"Mike!" she snapped impatiently. "I don't have time to play around and be coy. I'll put it on the line. You want the trigger bomb. You won't get it except from me! You can see now how effective that third degree toy is."

The mirror shook and swung back on silent hinges. Mike's head and shoulders were framed by the hole in the wall. He stared at her. His face was drawn and white. He was no longer the handsome, friendly man she had known before. The friendly enemy had degenerated into a haunted, fear-gnawed shell of a man.

"You know about the bomb," he said in a furtive voice. "Then you

were able to beat Rottermund's machine!"

"Of course!" April said contemptuously. She tossed her head and the red shoulder-length hair swung provocatively about her face. She had not dared wear a wig as she had in Los Angeles, but had dyed her hair for this mission.

"You know where it is?" he asked in a choked voice.

April kept her face impassive, struggling to hide the contempt any vital woman feels for a weak man.

"Yes," she said.

"That's enough to buy your freedom," he said quickly. "Tell—"

"No!" she snapped. "I'm not selling out that cheap. I've got to betray U.N.C.L.E. The price for that is going to be high."

He hesitated. His face turning ugly. "Are you trying—?"

April Dancer broke into his suspicious outburst.

"I want to do what Royce is trying to do!" she cried, her dark eyes snapping.

He stared at her with his mouth slack.

"It's impossible!" he said.

"For me alone, yes," she said. "But you and I together. It has to be that way. We will be working against both THRUSH and U.N.-C.L.E. I understand my organization. I don't know enough about yours. Together we can do it! We can blackmail both of them into submission!"

His face flushed and then went

pale. "We couldn't do it!" he whispered.

"Of course we can! Royce is doing it, isn't he? THRUSH is not going to let him get away with this mad scheme to commit world suicide. They'll give in to him. They must, or die themselves."

Mike's pale face was wet with sweat. His features twisted in agony as he struggled in his mind.

April goaded him more deeply.

"You've got to do it!" she whispered, the urgency of her voice driving the words hard into him. "You've failed in this thing. And you know the price of failure in THRUSH. If they have to make an agreement with Royce, you'll pay for your failure with your life. You know that, don't you!"

"Yes!" he whispered.

"Then strike first! Let them make their deal with us! We can get anything we want! Power! Money! Anything! And they won't dare double-cross us. We'll keep the bomb. All we'll sell is a promise not to use it!"

"They'll know we'd be bluffing. We couldn't—"

"But if we could make them think we're as crazy as Royce, then they would believe!" she whispered. "They believe Royce is mad enough to burn the air if he doesn't get his way. They believe that, don't they?"

"Yes—they believe it!"

"And they'll believe you if you pretend to be as crazy as Royce!"

He licked his lips. He started to sweat heavily, the big drops running slowly across his forehead.

April watched him narrowly. She was sure now he would help her. His spirit and courage had rotted under the acid fear of THRUSH's reprisal for his failure to reobtain the trigger bomb. She was sure he would begin to work with her, but she was just as sure he would crack at the first tough resistance they encountered in getting free of the THRUSH headquarters building.

April Dancer knew that to be successful in turning his craven fear to her own advantage she must work fast.

"Of course it will succeed," she said, forcing a confidence into her voice to help stiffen the THRUSH man's sagging spine. "And we can force them to give us anything we want! What do you want?"

"Just to get from under this awful fear," he said weakly.

"I want to be Queen of England!" April said fiercely. "I want to sit on the throne! I want the crown jewels to glow on my head. I want the people to bow to me!"

"You're c—" he broke off.

"Call it what you will!" she snapped, closely watching his face for every reaction. "This is my price for your life! Going with me is the only way you can save yourself from THRUSH's vengeance!"

He shuddered and licked his lips. "I'll get you out of here."

"That's all I need," she said crisply. "The rest I can do myself, with your knowledge of THRUSH to guide me. There is one other thing. I'll need this man Mark Slate to help me. We must take him with us."

"No!" he said explosively. "You're trying to trick me! This man is your lover. You want to double-cross me! I'll be shoved out!"

Instantly April realized she had made a most serious mistake. Yet she couldn't abandon Mark. She thought for a moment.

"Forget him," she said crisply, deciding she would have to back-track for the moment. She was determined, however, not to leave without her co-agent. "It may be more difficult, but we can do it, you and I alone!"

"Just a minute," Mike said. Now that he had made a decision, he looked less fearful. "I'll come around and get you. We'll have to move fast. If that little devil Rottermund—!"

"Yessss—"

The word was almost a snake's hiss. Mike whirled around. April saw with despair that the little THRUSH scientist was framed by a suddenly opening door behind Mike. He held a weapon in his hand that looked to April like a futuristic model of a gun.

Mike opened his mouth and then closed it. The despair on his face showed that he knew his end had

come. In the final moments of his life the THRUSH traitor managed to find some remnants of courage left in his shivering body. He hurled himself at Rottermund. The weapon in the little scientist's hand hissed. A tiny missile leaped from the barrel, streaking a thin trail of fire.

It struck in Mike's belly and exploded. April's last chance to escape exploded with it as the renegade fell with a hole the size of a melon blasted in his dead body.

"Miss Dancer," Rottermund said, "I of course listened to your entire conversation with this fool. I must compliment you on your preception. You are quite an intelligent young woman."

April swallowed and tried hard to keep her voice steady when she replied, "Thank you, Dr. Rottermund."

"But you made one error, my dear," he went on. His little monkey face twisted in a sneer. "The machine is not a failure. It works perfectly. You see—"

He paused and laughed softly. "I made just a minute adjustment of the ray source halfway through the interrogation. I didn't want Mr. Michaels to learn anything which would restore him to favor with our THRUSH division commander, Miss Dancer. I wish to be the one who gets the credit for determining the hiding place of the trigger bomb."

April forced herself to smile.

"You are very clever, Dr. Rottermund," she said. "You are the kind of man I love to work with. Perhaps we could—"

"Yes, Miss Dancer," the little scientist said and chuckled as he looked down at the dead man. "It is not necessary for you to say any more. I understand you perfectly."

"Excellent, Dr. Rottermund," April said. "We—"

"I understand you *too* perfectly," the THRUSH scientist cut in. "You are very persuasive. You are very clever. You are very lovely. But unfortunately, Miss Dancer, your charms are lost on me. I am a woman-hater!"

"Is it necessary for us to like each other to work together?" April asked quickly.

"I do not need anything from you except a lead to the location of the trigger bomb, Miss Dancer," Rottermund said. "And I have the perfect means, of course, of finding that out."

Keeping the gun trained on her through the mirror hole, he stepped back and pressed a recessed button. The wall of April's cell slid back.

He made a motion with the gun. "If you will be so kind, Miss Dancer, as to accompany me—"

April hesitated. For one desperate moment she considered throwing herself at Rottermund, but she fought down the impulse. It would be suicide. Mike had been closer than she was to the little monkey of



a man and Rottermund had cut him down.

There was always the chance that he would hesitate to kill her and lose the only lead they had to the missing bomb. Rottermund smiled as this thought flashed through her mind.

"This is a very unique weapon, Miss Dancer," he said. "There are three adjustments I can make with a flick of my thumb. It can blast a hole like I made in this fool. Or it can fire a regular bullet. Or it can shoot a plastic pellet needle-thin with the power to stun."

"It seems, Dr. Rottermund, that there is nothing I can do," April said.

The THRUSH scientist smiled at the girl from U.N.C.L.E. "You are absolutely correct. Now if you will move ahead of me, we will find out what exactly is hidden inside that—I suppose some men would say pretty head of yours."

April Dancer hesitated only the briefest second. She turned and picked up the compact with its hidden recorder. She flipped open the lid and surveyed her makeup. She grimaced.

"I look a sight to be accompanying a gentleman," she said.

"Your appearance does not impress me. I am interested only in your mind," Rottermund said, grimacing with distaste.

April made a wry face as she turned to march ahead of the evil man to the interrogation room. Practically every man she met complimented her on her beauty and appearance. It had happened so often that it had come to irritate her. As she once informed Mark Slate, "I'm sick of men telling me I'm pretty. I know what I look like. I have a mirror. If somebody wants

to really flatter me, he could say I have a fine mind."

But now that she had at last found a man more interested in her mind than in her body, April was far from flattered. In fact, she found it chilling.

The lovely agent had difficulty suppressing a shiver as she marched ahead of him into the white room from which he never intended for her to come out of alive.

SIX

KURYAKIN'S LAW!

MARK SLATE was so close to April that he could have heard her had not the laboratory walls been soundproofed. As it were, he was in the dark, literally and figuratively.

There was not even a mote of light in the room where he was held prisoner. After regaining consciousness on a couch, he made a blind circuit of the room. It was totally empty, but for himself and the couch.

He sat down and tried to puzzle out his predicament. It was the oddest situation he had found himself in since leaving the RAF to join U.N.C.L.E.

He gingerly felt the lump on his head. It helped him decide that if he ever wanted to celebrate his thirty-second birthday, he had best find a way out of that dark cell fast.

Mark thoughtfully smoothed the waistcoat which would have been a loud color had there been light by which to see color.

Although a casual man in the face of danger, he was never foolhardy. He liked to know exactly what he was going into. This time he found himself at a blank wall. For the first time on any case he did not know what he was involved with or what motivated his enemies.

Methodically he stretched out on the couch and reviewed what had happened to him since he and April Dancer were ambushed after their taxi was forced off the road.

Mark Slate had been brought to this secret hideout. On the way, although bound and gagged, he managed to get his fingers on the pencommunicator. He extended the antenna sufficiently to—he hoped—provide Alexander Waverly and U.N.C.L.E. headquarters with an on-the-spot broadcast by his captors.

As best he could tell from the turns and stops of the car, Mark had been taken to a hideout somewhere in Manhattan.

An extremely friendly-faced man had attempted to question him, but when Mark made a break for freedom, had shot him in the leg with something that produced a creeping paralysis.

That was all the young man knew until he awoke in this lightless room. The attempt at interro-

gation had given Mark Slate a slight hint of information. Now he regretted trying to jump his captors too soon.

Had he let them question him a little longer he might have learned something.

As it were, all Mark knew was that he was supposed to be an intimate acquaintance of a red-haired woman who had stolen a bomb of some kind. And from the remarks passed by his captors in the car, this bomb was a source of great fear to THRUSH.

The darkness was oppressive. It seemed to close in on him with a crushing weight. Unable to sit still any longer, he got up, jamming his fists into the pocket of his tweed jacket. As far as he could see, the only bright spot in the picture was that April had apparently gotten away. This much he gathered from the conversation of his captors as they drove him to this hidden prison.

Once again he started an inch-by-inch exploration of the room. But this time, as he moved along the opposite side, the wall suddenly disappeared. He could feel its hardness beneath his outstretched hands, but it had suddenly become transparent.

He looked into a white room. In the center was what appeared to be a futuristic design for a dentist's chair. Suspended above it were shining white beam generators with dull white lenses. Beyond the small

room a partially opened door revealed banks of computers.

There was a man and a woman in the room. The man, small and monkey-faced, wore a white smock. The girl with him looked vaguely familiar. Then he realized with a start that she was the red-haired woman who had mocked his attempts at a pickup in a Los Angeles cocktail lounge just before he and April left Los Angeles.

The man removed his finger from a switch on the console box beside the chair. Mark suspected that this was what caused the wall's opaqueness to fade away.

Curiously, the visibility seemed to be only on his side, something like a one-way mirror effect. Twice the girl turned in his direction, but did not seem to see him at all.

When the girl turned he caught a full view of her face for the first time. He started. His heart began to race and a low exclamation escaped his taut lips.

It had been dark, low-key lighted in the cocktail lounge. Here in the brighter light of the interrogation room he detected a dozen telltale points that convinced him that the redhaired girl was really April Dancer.

Mark Slate leaned his hands against the transparent wall and chuckled softly.

"That girl is a marvel," he told himself. "I wonder how she managed to talk her way in here?"

Then the little man half turned

and Slate saw the strange gun for the first time. The chuckle died on Mark's lips. His changing expression showed his sudden concern for April. Ever since they had started to work together two years before, he had taken a big-brother attitude toward her. Perhaps it might have gone farther than that, but April was so wrapped up in her job with U.N.C.L.E. that romance had no part in her life.

Motioning April to move over where he could keep her in his view while he looked toward the wall that hid Mark, Rottermund pressed another button on the console. A hidden tape recorder began a replay of the interrogation of April.

When it was concluded, Rottermund said, "Did you hear that, Mr. Slate?"

April started at the mention of her co-agent's name. Mark noted the look of concern that flashed across her face.

"Yes," he said in answer to Rottermund's question. "I heard it."

"You realize then the utter futility of trying to fight me?" Rottermund said.

Before Mark could reply, April cried, "Don't believe him, Mark! He's trying to trap you! You still have enough of that numbing serum in your blood to partially counteract the machine's rays. You can upset the machine if you fight it. He is trying to convince you that fighting is useless!"

Rottermund turned with a snarl.

Horried, Mark saw him raise the gun level with April's breast. Then the wall went dark as the little scientist cut the connection.

Mark pressed against the wall, listening intently. The voice communication also died when the illumination failed. Quickly Mark jerked off his ring. The diamond was cut and set at the perfect angle to cut glass. It was the only one of the many U.N.C.L.E. protective devices that had survived his capture.

He made a wide circular sweep, dragging the gem across the formerly transparent wall. If he could score it, then it would be just a matter of kicking out the cut and leaping into the other room.

But the material, for all its transparency, was not glass. The diamond slipped across its smooth surface with a screech, but made no score. Desperate now, Mark tried again before he gave up. He had no way of knowing if this was a special glass or some new transparent metal. Whatever it was, it was too hard even for a diamond to cut.

He was still reluctant to acknowledge failure. He backed up, swung the couch around. Heaving it up on one end, he got a good grip and hurled it at the wall. It bounced back, catching him a glancing blow. He picked himself up painfully and stood in the center of the room, breathing hard. . . .

Beyond that impenetrable wall the girl from U.N.C.L.E. was

breathing just as hard as she faced the gun in the hands of the determined little man.

April saw his thumb slip a slide on the side of the gun. She knew he was switching to the numbing needle.

"Now!" he said quietly. "Sit down in the chair, Miss Dancer."

April hesitated, her mind racing through several possibilities. She was certain of one thing: She was not going to undergo the ordeal of the interrogation machine again. To her it had become a matter of life and death for U.N.C.L.E.'s Alexander Waverly.

No matter what she said, U.N.C.L.E. would go on. No one agent knew enough of its secrets to permit anybody to destroy the entire organization. But she did realize that she could be forced to reveal certain codes which could lead Mr. Waverly into an ambush. If Rottermund was as determined to destroy the U.N.C.L.E. chief as he claimed to Michaels, the vengeful little scientist could find enough in her mind to pull off his scheme.

This, she was determined, would not happen. Not even if it meant her own life.

"In the chair, Miss Dancer!" Rottermund repeated, his voice growing harder.

April had already given up the thought of trying to jump him. The distance between them was too great. Still there was a temptation. If he was forced to knock her out,

the drug serum would interfere with operation of the machine. This would delay the machine third degree for at least another four hours.

But delay galled her. Her entire life and philosophy were built on making a decision and following it through.

In the split second permitted her, she made a decision, a desperate attempt to follow 'Kuryakin's law,' and came out swinging.

"I'm warning you, Miss—" Rottermund began.

April stared at him. Her mouth went slack. Her eyes glazed. She swayed and collapsed. Rottermund stepped back quickly, afraid of a trick, but April huddled on the floor. She tried to push herself up with her hands. Her face, uplifted to him, was twisted in pain. She gasped for breath.

Rottermund looked at her coldly. "I'll not be taken in by any tricks!"

"I—I—can't—" April gasped.

The slightest suggestion of worry crossed the little scientist's face. "What is the matter?" he asked uneasily.

"My heart—" April gasped and paused. "I'll be all right, in a minute. The excitement—"

"Do you need something?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes," she barely whispered. "I—I have some medicine—"

She weakly removed the package of mints from her pocket.

"W-water!" she whispered, her

voice thick. "I—I must have some water—"

His face a convulsing field of mixed emotions, Rottermund backed to a white laboratory sink and filled a beaker from the water tap.

Watching him through half-closed eyes, April could tell that he was afraid. But it was not the panicky fear that Michaels had. It was the cold knowledge that his superiors in THRUSH would be ruthless to any man who lost such a wonderful opportunity to bleed the mind of an U.N.C.L.E. agent.

His manner showed that he was deeply suspicious of her "attack," but at the same time, he could not be sure. He brought her the water and set it on the floor near her. He was still too suspicious to get close enough for her to spring a judo attack on him.

Weakly April shoved the package of mints toward him. The round package rolled almost to the beaker of water.

"Please!" she whispered. "Dissolve it for me. *Hurry!*"

His face gray with anxiety, Rottermund stooped down. He was still taking no chances. He kept the gun trained in April's face. He used his teeth to pull the paper tab from the end of the package.

April stared full into the muzzle of the gun and shuddered. She knew what was going to happen. And when it came, she faced the chilling prospect of the gun going off under

the spasmodic jerk of the little scientist's hand.

She shook off the morbid thought. "It will work! It will work!" she kept repeating silently to herself. "Everything is going to be all right. *It will work!*"

April's breathing almost stopped. Her hands clinched. It was from anxiety, but Rottermund thought it pain. The effect added to the realism of her acting.

He shook a mint from the package. April caught her breath. The round disk missed the edge of the glass and rolled across the floor.

He had been so intent on watching April for any sign of movement that he had not watched the glass. April's taut breath was expelled in a sigh of disappointment.

Rottermund made an exclamation of annoyance and shook another mint from the package. April tensed, drawing every muscle taut.

The lifesaver-shaped chemical dropped into the beaker of water. Her fascinated eyes saw it sinking to the bottom. A thin line of tiny bubbles rose as it fell.

Then when the water dissolved through the outer crust, the water exploded in a blinding rush of smoke. It splashed up full in the THRUSH man's face.

April threw herself to one side as the little scientist's finger jerked the gun's trigger. The needle pellet zipped by April's cheek and smashed against the back wall. A tiny drop of a pale green liquid



stained the whiteness of the partition.

A blinding cloud of smoke was pouring from the glass. Rottermund had fallen on his back, coughing, strangling.

April crawled toward him. She was careful not to get to her feet. The smoke was rising, partially from its own lightness and partly because it was being pulled by the room ventilator. This left a clear air space near the floor.

Rottermund still clung to the gun with a deathly grip. April tried to jerk it from his fingers. Blinded, strangling as he tried to rid his lungs of the smoke, the little scientist tried to jerk away from her. Catching his elbow with one hand and his wrist with the other, April forced his hand back so the muzzle

of the gun rested against his side. She shoved on his hand. His body jerked as the paralyzing pellet ripped into his body. His hand relaxed. She jerked the gun free and moved back quickly.

Rottermund made one last feeble attempt to get up, but the paralyzing effect of the gun-fired injection had gone too far. He stretched out and appeared to be asleep.

The smoke was hanging like a storm cloud on the ceiling of the room. It was being pushed closer and closer to the floor despite the pull of the ventilator.

April crawled to the console beside the interrogator chair. She fumbled until she found the button the little German scientist had pushed to talk with Mark Slate.

As before there was no apparent change in the walls of the interrogation room, but Mark could see her crouched on the floor. The heavy smoke hung low in the room. He could barely see Rottermund's stiff body.

"April!" he cried, his voice shaking with relief.

"Mark!" April called back. "Where are you? Can you see me? I can't see you. And I'm so relieved to have found you again."

"I don't know where I am," he said quickly. "I seem to be in a room adjoining you, but I may be getting the effect from a TV type projection."

"Don't you have *any* idea, Mark?" April Dancer said. "Some-

body is going to spot the smoke coming from this ventilator. They'll be in on me any minute. I've only a short time to get you out."

"Don't risk it, April," he said. "I can't find a way out of this place. You can't find a way in. So forget me. Get away if you can."

Then, because Mark understood April so well, he added quickly, "you owe it to U.N.C.L.E., April. None of us is as important as the organization."

"Mark!" she cried in a stricken voice. "I can't go away and leave you to die here!"

"You know what will happen if you stay and they get you in that infernal interrogation machine. Nothing can prevent you from revealing secrets that will hurt U.N.-C.L.E. Which is the more important? It or me or even you?"

April steeled herself.

"Of course," she said. "I'm sorry, Mark. I wish it were me instead of you. I—"

"Doctor! Doctor? What is the trouble? The worst kind of smoke is pouring out the ventilator! Doctor, what is the matter?"

It was an anxious voice calling through a special speaker set in the outside door.

Mark could see April whirl about. He saw her lift the gun.

He felt a sick upheaval in the pit of his stomach. April could probably shoot down the inquirers since she had the element of surprise on her side. But the commotion would

bring out the full force of THRUSH's security guards, an insurmountable force.

April's chances had suddenly become worse than his own—and his were impossible!

SEVEN

THE MAN IN THE DARK

THE RECORDER, April!" Mark called anxiously. "They'll call for a minute before they attempt to break the door down. See if you can find something in the dead man's voice that will reassure them!"

April nodded. She shoved the gun in her jacket pocket and grabbed the compact-recorder. The touch of her finger on the hidden key sent its mechanism whirling. She listened intently to the playback, trying to find in the seconds she had something in the renegade German's voice she could rebroadcast over the door speaker.

Outside the voices were becoming more insistent. Fearful that an accident had occurred that might endanger the entire THRUSH headquarters, she could expect them to start tearing down the door at once.

Then April Dancer heard the faint voice of Rottermund saying to the now dead Michaels: "Wait! Give her some rest and everything will be all right!"

Gasping with relief, April turned up the volumes as she ran back the

tape a couple of feet. Holding the tiny recorder right against the door speaker, she restarted its forward movement.

The dead man's voice cried: "Wait!"

Before the rest could be replayed, April cut the volume so low it was inaudible over the speaker to those outside. She let the words "Give her some rest—" run past and turned the volume high so those outside could hear "—Everything will be all right!"

Then she stopped the replay, listening intently to the voices outside. She slipped the recorder back in her pocket and pulled out the gun. April Dancer stood waiting tensely, ready to shoot it out with them if she must.

She waited for a breathless moment. Then she heard a voice outside say, "Then back to your guard posts. He must know what he is doing."

Another said, "Shouldn't we take a look anyway?"

"No, we have orders never to enter this room under any circumstances unless with Rottermund's permission. Temperature controls, humidity and a dozen other things can affect that temperamental machine of his."

Suddenly, now that they were leaving, April decided that she didn't want them to leave after all. Quickly she reversed the tape to the word "Wait!"

Holding the recorder back

against the door speaker, she let the dead man's voice call: "Wait!"

Then quickly reversing and re-playing, she had it repeat, "Wait!"

On the other side of the wall, Mark whispered frantically, "April, you idiot! What are you trying to do?"

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. did not reply. She whirled around and ran to the recorder in the interrogator console which was used to catch the answers of the unfortunate victims of THRUSH.

She switched it on and then started her own compact-recorder. Then she kept backtracking her tape, selecting a word here and there in the dead man's voice. Each selected word was recorded on the other machine. Swiftly she patched together a complete sentence.

Watching her, Mark Slate sighed. After his first protest, he said nothing. He knew too well that stubborn uplift of her jaw. April Dancer was the world's most determined young woman when she set her mind to it.

Once April had jigsawed the new sentence together with her two recorders, it was but the work of a couple of seconds to retape the few words on her own compact-recorder.

"Okay, Mark," she said, facing toward the man she could not see but who was watching her with almost rueful admiration. "Here's where we sink or swim."

"April, my dear," he said softly,

"you'll never sink. You don't know how!"

April tossed a grin in his direction. Something about his presence, even separated as they were, gave her added strength. She had the same feeling she had often experienced before. It was that with Mark Slate as her partner it would be impossible to lose.

It had taken scarcely two minutes to make the voice patch, but April could not be sure that the men had waited. Her lips pressed in a tight line as she held the micro-recorder by the door speaker and tripped its forward advance.

The dead scientist's voice said, "Bring Mark Slate. I am ready for him."

"Okay, doctor," one of the guards replied.

April let her breath out in a relieved sigh. She dropped the recorder in her pocket and shifted the three-way THRUSH gun to her right hand. She moved back where she could cover the door with the weapon and waited.

A minute passed. Two. And then three. It seemed an hour, but her anxiety for Mark Slate kept her from attempting to leave.

Then through the speaker to his cell she heard the guards order Mark to come with them.

"Fasten his hands," the second guard suggested. "You know what happened the last time we tried to move this bully boy."

"Yeah!" the other said gloomily.

"I can't understand how anybody who looks so much like a rock-and-roll jerk can fight like a prize fighter!"

"Really, gentlemen," Mark said with a touch of irony in his voice. "It is in the hair. Never get a haircut, you know. The Samson idea, of course!"

"Put out your hands," the guard said grimly. "We'll see how tough you are with the cuffs on."

Then she heard a *swat!* It was the unmistakable sound of bone hitting flesh. Her heart leaped, but her reaction was fury rather than fear.

"If that crazy man has started a fight and ruins everything, I'll snatch his unbarbered hair out by the roots!" she muttered grimly to herself.

The next sound showed her it was not Mark Slate who started the trouble. She heard one of the men laugh.

"No hard feelings," he said with a sneer in his voice. "Just a partial payment on that lick you gave me when you tried to escape before!"

His companion said hurriedly, "The doc wants to question him in that machine. If you beat him too badly now, it may interfere with the questioning."

"Yeah," the other man replied. "I guess you're right. We'll be bringing him back though. I'll take care of him then!"

"He'll be unconscious," his companion said. "You know how that

infernal machine leaves its victims."

The other guard snickered. "So he'll be unconscious. He'll wake up eventually, won't he? Then he can *feel* what I'll give him!"

Evidently the door to Mark's cell was closed by them for the sound of their voices were cut off. April grimly faced the door and waited. Her only regret was that she did not know which one of the two made the threats to Mark. If she had to kill she wanted that brutal man to be the first.

The minutes ticked away. When they went to the cell the wait had seemed an hour. This one seemed longer.

The minutes continued to tick away. April shifted her position to eliminate strain and wondered if they would ever come.

As if in answer to her question, the door speaker crackled into life.

"Doctor?" the guard's voice said. "We have the prisoner Mark Slate."

There was a remote control switch on the interrogator console which opened the door. April had seen the dead scientist use it. However, she could not decide which button to press. None were marked. April ran quickly across the room to the door to open it by hand. This complicated her problems. It was impossible for her to open the heavy, soundproofed door by hand without exposing herself.

She had no choice, however. Once again it was not for herself

that she feared, but for Mark Slate. April Dancer expected to have to shoot quickly once she swung back the heavy door, but she had no way of knowing just how they held Mark. There was a distinct danger that a poorly aimed shot would slam into him.

Her eyes flashed with a stubborn determination. She had made a decision. It was too late to have doubts now. There was nothing left but to follow 'Kuryakin's law.' She was ready to come out swinging.

But the door was heavy and difficult to manage. It opened easily with the electrical switch, but was hard to handle by hand. April had to ram the gun in her jacket pocket and pull with both hands. She realized this would put her in a difficult position. Experience had long since taught her that THRUSH did not employ the "dumb cop" type for guards. They were men who could think rapidly and move fast.

The odds were two-to-one against her. And there was the possible problem of Mark Slate being in the way. She took a deep breath and grabbed the door handle with both hands. She jerked back with all her strength.

The door moved. She caught just the glimpse of the two guards and their prisoner through the crack. She dropped the handle and grabbed the gun. She jerked it up and fired. The needle-thin serum pellet struck the belt buckle of the

nearest guard and shattered harmlessly.

April fired again, raising the gun barrel. There was no answering reaction. She had fired the last pellet!

April dropped to the floor, frantically thumbing the catch on the side which switched the cartridge cylinder from pellets to bullets.

The guard already had his gun out. His hand jerked down, leveling the barrel directly at April's head. Behind him his companion hastily stepped to the side to get in line for a shot at her himself.

But before either could fire, Mark hunched his shoulders and rammed into the second man. The guard lurched forward, striking his companion just as the gun in his hand exploded.

The bullet intended for April smashed into the floor inches from her head and ricocheted off the hard tile with a whine of death.

The guard whirled around as April's bullet caught him in the chest. He hurtled back, upsetting the other guard. Before the second man could recover, Mark caught the man's fist with a savage kick. The gun flew from the THRUSH man's hand and skidded across the hall.

The guard whirled and dived for the gun. April raised her own weapon to fire, but held it, for Mark was in the way. Slate leaped for the guard. The man whirled, kicking viciously at Mark's legs. The U.N.-C.L.E. agent skirted the kick and

brought his manacled hands down with a hard chop on the guard's head. The man sagged.

"Quick, Mark!" April cried. "We've got to get out of here!"

"Excellent idea!" the Englishman said with a wry grin at the girl. "Where's the nearest exit?"

"Stop making jokes!" she snapped. "How do I know?"

"If we don't do something quickly, the noise of those shots will have every guard and THRUSH man in this place playing tag with us."

Mark Slate was on his knees, fumbling for the key to his manacles. April darted across the corridor and grabbed the guard's gun. She turned as Mark fished out the key. She opened the lock for him. He snapped the bracelets on the unconscious guard.

Then, to April's surprise, he grabbed the unconscious man's arm and swung him around in a fireman's carry.

Despite the gravity of their situation, April could not resist saying, "Collecting souvenirs, Mark?"

"I prefer to call it life insurance!" he returned. "Come on, April. The life we save may be our own!"

Mark Slate started down the corridor in a run that was surprisingly fast for the burden he carried. April followed. She wasn't sure Mark knew what he was doing, but she was certain that he knew at least as much as she did about getting out—and what she knew was absolutely nothing.



As they went around a corner, April heard the whine of an elevator's doors opening. She looked back, raising the gun. She didn't have to use it. The men running out of the lift were attracted by the dead man in front of the laboratory door. They did not come in the direction of the fugitives.

She followed behind Slate. Her co-agent ran with a purpose, as if he knew exactly what he was doing.

And surprisingly, he did. He turned down a short hall and stopped, puffing in front of a closed door.

"Push it open," he said to April. "It isn't locked."

As April stepped past him to obey, he said, "And please, whatever you do, don't speak a word. They'll be able to hear you."

April nodded, not understanding, but having complete faith in

her co-agent. She pushed open the door. Mark entered first with his burden. April followed.

The room was flooded with light. It was so bright after the dark hall that April Dancer was momentarily blinded. She shut her eyes for a moment to permit the irises to adjust.

Then when she opened them, she gasped. She found herself looking straight into the face of a man from THRUSH! Behind him were three others.

Everyone of them was staring straight at her stricken face. She took a startled step back and bumped into Mark. To her further bewilderment, her co-agent laughed quietly.

EIGHT

THE LONG WAY HOME

SUDDENLY she felt like laughing with him, but she stifled the impulse for fear the three men staring at her might hear.

In the first burst of surprise at seeing the men staring at her, plus the distorted vision caused by the brightly reflecting lights from the white laboratory, April had not immediately recognized where she was.

Mark had brought her and their prisoner back to the cell where he had been imprisoned. The brilliant projection on the wall was the interior view of the interrogation

room. The switch had been left on. It was like the communication between her and Mark. They could see from the cell, but the wall was blank in the laboratory. She suspected that the arrangement was set up in this manner in order to act as a war of nerves on prisoners before they were taken to the machine. They could see its effect on previous prisoners and their own resistance would be corroded.

Behind her Mark was stuffing his handkerchief into the prisoner's mouth to prevent him from warning the others.

Then silently the two agents from U.N.C.L.E. watched the worried guards search the laboratory and then rush out.

"I think we're safe enough here," Mark said. "I don't think they'll suspect we were crazy enough to run back into a prison."

"You may be willing to set up housekeeping and spend the rest of your days in this cell, but I'm not!" April snapped. "Let's start figuring a way to get out of here—fast!"

Mark smiled at her. Although always exasperated at the casual way he treated the most extreme danger, she, as always, took comfort from it. It was totally impossible to get that all-is-lost feeling around a man like Mark Slate. What he felt like inside, only he knew, but outwardly he always gave the impression that every difficulty would topple with the right kind of push.

He motioned to the guard. The THRUSH man had regained consciousness. He was sprawled back on the couch with his manacled hands behind him.

"This gentleman knows the way out of here," he said. "I am sure he will provide us the information for a consideration. A consideration—say—of being left in a condition of being able to keep on breathing."

He held out his hand. Wordlessly April passed him the extra THRUSH gun. He reached over and pulled the gag from the prisoner's mouth.

"You have it on paralysis," April said. "If you want to kill him, shove the slide to the last adjustment."

"Excellent!" Mark said lightly in a tone that did not match the cold stare of his eyes. "That is just exactly what I want to do."

"You—" the prisoner began defiantly.

"Please!" Mark silenced him by sticking the gun muzzle within inches of the man's sweating face. "I know what you are going to say. Why should you show us the way out to save your life when THRUSH will kill you if you do?"

He shoved the barrel of the gun deeper against the sweating THRUSH man's belly.

"I'll tell you the answer to that," Mark went on. "If you don't show us the way out, you die right now. That's the end of it and of you. But if you act sensible about this thing,

you will at least last a little longer. And in that time, who knows? Anything can happen. You might even figure a lie big enough for your THRUSH superiors to swallow."

The guard looked back at Mark with stubborn hate in his eyes, but he swallowed hard. He knew the quality of the men from U.N.C.L.E.

"As long as you are alive there is always hope," Mark said. You are as close to dying right now as a man can be and still breathe!"

The guard's Adam's apple bobbed again. He was sweating profusely. He looked from Mark Slate to April Dancer. He got no sympathy there. He shivered and nodded his head.

Mark reached down and pulled the gag from the man's mouth.

"Where are we?" he asked. "Is this THRUSH headquarters?"

"No," the man mouthed the word thickly through jaws that still ached from the gag.

"What is this place?"

"It is an industrial research laboratory attached to the KaTab Company. THRUSH gained control of the company to get the services of the laboratory staff."

"Where are we physically?" Mark asked.

"In the basement of the KaTab building."

"Then we are right in the center of Manhattan," Mark said. "The KaTab is a highly respected manufacturer of electronic gear for the U.S. Armed Services."

April made a grimace. "Yes, and they make the printed circuit for the tape recorders built in my compact and in your cigarette lighter. It will be a joke on THRUSH if we escape because of something its people made!"

"Not if we escape," Mark said reprovingly. "*When* we escape!"

"Sorry," April said with a grin. "When we escape. And may I ask when do we stop talking and do something about making that *when* a *now*?"

"A typical Yank," Mark smiled. "Always in a hurry."

"How many floors down are we?" April asked the guard. "Answer quickly!"

"Three," he said. "But there is no outlet on the elevator between here and the fifty-second floor. It goes straight up as a precaution against unauthorized entry and to keep the scientific staff from leaving unannounced."

"Where does the elevator open into on the fifty-second floor?" April asked.

"Into the guard room," their prisoner replied.

Mark looked at April.

"Now isn't that a bitter cup of tea," he said. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"How bout Kuryakin's law?" she said, her dark eyes flashing with the excitement extreme danger always stirred in her. "When all else fails, come out swinging!"

He grinned at her. "What better

routine for a couple of swingers?" he said.

"Okay!" April said briskly. "Do we take him or leave him?"

"I think we had best take him," Mark replied. "That way, if he has told us the truth, we can properly express our appreciation."

"And if he hasn't?" April asked.

"I also have a very fine technique for expressing my disapproval," Mark said. The lightness of his tone was belied by the cold stare he gave the uncomfortable guard.

The man shifted uneasily. He wet his lips nervously.

"Get up," Mark said.

April looked at him sharply, but Slate gave no indication that he noticed the prisoner's uncomfortable manner.

"Come along," Mark said to the man. "You will of course step out of the elevator first. If we run into a trap you will get it first!"

"I—uh—" the prisoner began and stopped.

"Yes?" Mark said coldly.

"I sort of got mixed up," the prisoner said hurriedly.

"And did you, now?" Mark said softly.

"I forgot, I guess, that there are two stops on the laboratory elevator. One is the guard room I mention. The second goes another floor up. There is empties out into the personnel office. It is empty this time of night."

"Very interesting," Mark said. "But we'll stop at the guard room."

The guard's mouth dropped open. "There are always five men in there," he said.

"That," Mark said in a curiously flat voice, "is their misfortune!"

He motioned for April to see if the corridor was clear. When she looked back and nodded, Mark prodded the reluctant guard in the back with the gun.

"Get moving," he said. "We're going home—the long way."

They moved out into the hall. April went ahead to scout the way. The prisoner came along behind her with Mark at his heels. Slate kept the THRUSH gun trained on the man's back.

They made the short distance to the elevator without trouble, and a second later were winging their way up the tall office building. They flashed past floor after floor, where late shift workers made electronic assemblies, completely unaware that the world's most sinister organization had gathered their company into its net.

As the elevator started slowing, Mark looked across at April. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. nodded to show that she was ready.

"I think we'd better throw these guns over to that THRUSH-type tranquilizer pellets," she said. "There won't be any explosions to attract attention."

"I agree," Mark said. "Have you enough ammunition?"

"Yes," she said. "I dropped the gun I had and took the one from

the dead guard. You have the prisoner's weapon."

"Good!" Mark said. "Suppose we modify Kuryakin's law to bring it up to date and 'come out *shooting!*' "

"I'm with you," April said.

And then there was no more time to talk. The door slid open silently. Mark gave the guard a shove. He stumbled out into the room. A guard supervisor looked up from behind a desk place in front of a case of guns. To his right a clerk was typing a report. To the left was a status board showing the placement of guards throughout the entire building.

"What the—?" the guard chief began and stopped with his mouth open as a well placed pellet from Mark's gun went into his throat.

The clerk fell across his typewriter as April's pellet zipped into his cheek.

There was a commotion in the opposite side of the room. Three men who were waiting to go on shift sprang up, drawing their guns.

The prisoner Mark shoved out to create a distraction squalled loudly, "They've escaped. It's that infernal pair from U.N.C.L.E.!"

Mark's gun snapped off a pellet. The yelling man spun around and toppled back into the elevator. Mark threw an arm about the rapidly numbing man and pulled the prisoner tight against him. With this feebly kicking shield he stepped

into the open. He raised his gun for a quick shot.

But before he could shoot a .45 caliber slug from one of the guards smashed into the prisoner's chest. The force of the bullet striking spoiled Mark's aim. His pellet went high.

April Dancer was flat on the elevator floor. Her head peered around the side of the door. The three men were intent on the tall figure of Mark. They did not notice April until the man in the middle of the three pitched forward.

The other two whirled to face the new danger. That was a fatal mistake. Mark's gun ripped into one. April caught the other full in the face.

Mark let the dead guard drop. April darted across the room. She put her head against the door leading into the hall, listening. When she heard nothing, she peeked outside cautiously.

She turned back to Slate. "I don't hear anyone coming. There wasn't a lot of noise. Maybe we got away with it."

"I thought we could," he replied. "If we had gone on to the top we would still have had to come back this way to get on the elevator to the lobby. I thought it best to hit straight for the heart of the mess."

April nodded her agreement.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"You recall that Hong Kong affair?"

"Of course!" she said. In spite of the gravity of their situation she managed a grin. "I distinctly recall that Chinese beauty who slapped your face just when you thought you were—"

"Please!" he said stiffly. "I was referring to the incident where we were caught in that fake exporter's office on Victoria Island. I believe it was your idea. That was when I first decided you were a good person to have around. In a fight, I mean."

"You aren't so bad yourself," she retorted. "In a fight, I mean."

He grinned at her. "Then let's disband our mutual admiration society and do a little fighting. What?"

Working rapidly, they pushed the desk and two filing cabinets against the door. The elevator switch was turned to emergency stop so a press of the button in the basement would not take it away at the crucial moment.

While April overturned the couch, Mark stripped off his jacket. After removing the stunned guard's uniform coat, he put his garments on the THRUSH man. Then, pulling him into the elevator, he used the guard's belt to lash him to the inside handrail in an upright position.

April helped support the man while Mark worked.

The unconscious man sagged too much. Mark took off his own belt, but was still unable to get the

body to stay in a completely upright position.

April stepped back into the room to survey the effect. Mark looked questioningly at her.

She nodded. "It will work. He looks like he's wounded and having difficulty standing up."

"Great," Mark said. "Are you ready, April?"

She nodded. They hurried over and slipped the catch lock on the hall door. April pulled the door open a few inches. Then she let out a piercing scream that echoed off the silent corridors like a soul in mortal torment. Mark began to shout in a thick, hoarse voice.

"She's getting away!" he bawled. "Shoot! Shoot, you fool! They're both from U.N.C.L.E.!"

From the opposite end of the corridor the floor guard shouted and a hidden bell started a wild alarm clamor. April whirled and dived back of the overturned couch. Mark slipped into the guard's jacket. He took a position at the elevator entrance with his hand inside on the down button.

Outside, in the corridor, guards were beating on the door. Mark watched intently as they pushed back the heavy furniture barricade. Just as the crack widened, he pushed the elevator button.

As the door swung open to the hall, he dropped to the floor, face down. He hoped that in the excitement the in-rushing guards would not notice that his trousers were



tweed instead of the uniform blue serge of the other guards.

The elevator door was just moving shut as they broke in. Mark's timing had been perfect. They glimpsed a sagging body of a man in a sports jacket and loud waistcoat through the rapidly closing crack. Then the elevator started to descend.

"Can't you stop the thing?" one of the men cried. "If they get away, it'll be our necks!"

"This is the express!" the hall guard said hurriedly. "It cannot stop anywhere except in the base-

ment laboratory. They can't get away. I sounded the emergency alert. They'll be trapped below."

"Come on!" one of the others said. "We'll take the service elevator down. Tim, you stay here and see if you can help any of the wounded. You other three come with me."

They went out the door, leaving it open. April Dancer turned behind her barricade and brought her THRUSH gun to bear on the man left behind. He walked toward Mark, who was still lying on the floor by the closed elevator shaft, pretending to be unconscious.

She slowly squeezed off the trigger. The gun snapped, but a broken serum pellet jammed in the cylinder. The noise of the hammer falling, slight as it was, caused the guard to whirl around.

He jerked up his gun as April hastily thumbed the gun from pellets to bullets.

Since the man had to draw his holstered gun and she had but to flip a switch with her thumb, April could easily have beaten him to the shot. But she hesitated, not daring to fire for fear of bringing the other guards back. The bullet cylinder made a loud report while the pellets moved quietly with a hissing fire.

April had seen Mark move and was gambling her life that he could bring down the guard before the THRUSH man could shoot her.

NINE

"WHERE'S APRIL?"

MARK LURCHED to his knees and hit the THRUSH man with a football dive just as the guard pulled the trigger of his gun. The bullet intended for April smashed into the wall behind her head.

Unable to shoot for fear of hitting her co-agent, she darted forward to help. But as she moved in, Slate landed a hard right that slammed the guard back into April. Both he and the girl fell.

The guard, deciding Mark was the greatest danger, snaked his body around to aim pointblank at the Englishman's chest.

April caught him with the sharp heel of her shoe. He doubled up and Mark moved in fast to finish him off.

"Come on!" April said breathlessly. "They will have heard the shot!"

She was off, racing down the hall with Mark in fast pursuit. They found an elevator marked *street level*, but as the door closed behind them, April saw two men running toward them.

"They'll call the lower level guards to head us off," she said to Mark. She was breathing hard from the run.

Mark grinned at her. "That will be their misfortune," he said.

April laughed. The old sparkle

of excitement made her face glow. "That's just exactly the way I feel," she said.

"They'll probably have fifty guards at the bottom to head us off," he said.

"Just take care of your twenty-five and I'll handle the others," April said in a positive-sounding voice.

"Let's not kid ourselves, April. This is the toughest spot we've ever been in. We can't let this elevator stop and them trap us in here. We can get some of them before they get us, but that isn't much consolation."

He spoke of their possible death as calmly as another woman might speak of a shopping trip.

"Well, if you have a better idea, I'll be delighted to follow it—no matter how crazy," she said. "It will certainly be better than what we probably face."

"There is no way to reverse the elevator and go back up," she said thoughtfully. "We can stop it, though."

"It won't help one bit to get off at any floor above the bottom. We'd be trapped."

"Let them *think* we got off at the second floor," he suggested.

"Punch the button," April said. "It's worth a try."

The revolving gauge already showed they had dropped to the fourth floor when April punched the number two button on the automatic controls. A couple of sec-

onds later the elevator stopped and the door swung open. The couple from U.N.C.L.E. pressed back against the wall, their guns ready to fight if THRUSH agents tried to rush them.

The floor was empty, however. April looked up at her companion.

"So far so good," she said. "If the stop fooled them into thinking we got off, then there is just the barest chance we might get out of this mess alive after all."

"If you're thinking of making book on it, save your money," he said lightly. "But let's not worry about it. Just hope there is something to this reincarnation jazz."

"You'll surely come back as a clown," she said. "Oh! What is the matter?"

"I don't know!" Mark said. His grin had vanished.

The elevator, after starting again from the stop, passed the second floor and then ground to a stop between the first and the ground floor. The light inside the cage went out.

"They've cut the power!" Mark Slate said. "We're trapped, April!"

"Not yet!" she snapped. "This is a standard Handley-Page elevator. There's an escape door in the top. Can you boost me up, Mark?"

"Sure thing, old thing," he said brightly.

"Stop that!" April Dancer snapped. "I've noticed that the worse the fix we're in, the gayer you become. You're demoralizing

me! Now start groaning and complaining and I'll know things are going to be all right!"

"Let's quarrel when we retire to our rocking chairs. Here, I'm making a saddle with my hands. Can you feel it?"

It was pitch black in the elevator cage.

"Yes!" April said as her hands touched his. She placed one shoe in Slate's cupped hands and he lifted her. She stepped gingerly to his shoulders, swaying slightly, but his strong grip on her legs prevented her from falling.

She got her hands flat against the small escape door and pushed it open. A faint light illuminated the cage.

"Can you pull yourself through?" Mark asked.

"Look out, Mark! Duck! April's cry was punctuated by a blast of gunfire.

She jumped from Mark's shoulders, missed her footing and rolled against the wall.

Slate leaped to one side to escape presenting a target through the escape hatch.

"They've opened the shaft door on the floor above," April said shakily. There's no chance of getting through the escape door and climbing the cables now."

"Well, think of something else," Mark said. "This is your day to be the knight in armor while I take the part of the damsel in distress."

"I wish you would take this se-

riously!" April Dancer said soundly.

"And I, my dear, wish I didn't have to take it so seriously," he said sadly. "They'll crank down the elevator to the ground floor with the manual controls. They'll have us covered from above and from outside."

"I—" she began and what she was going to say was drowned in a burst of gunfire from above.

April pressed back against the wall, drawing her legs up to make herself as small as possible. The danger was not from a direct hit. The hole through which the enemy was firing was too small for his aim to cover the edges of the elevator cage. Their greatest worry was from a bullet glancing off the hard tile floor.

But there was no whine of slugs. Round pellets, somewhat larger than buckshot, hit in the center of the cage. They smashed against the tile. A peculiar purple vapor rose out of the shattered plastic coating.

"Get your face right against the floor, April!" Mark called urgently. "Get your lungs as full of fresh air as you can. Don't inhale again until you absolutely must! The open hatch above will take some of the stuff out. We have a chance if the air doesn't get too thick and we can keep from breathing any more of the gas than we must!"

"What is it?" April asked.

"I don't know," Slate replied. "It's a new one to me."

April put her cheek against the floor. She could see the sinister-looking purple mist spreading. It had a slight iridescent glow that made its unpleasant progress visible even in the dark. She kept breathing as deeply as she could while the air at the floor level was clean.

The mist was rising, as Mark Slate predicted. It was very thick at the top of the cage as the natural draft pulled it upward. But in the inches above the floor it was only beginning to cast a faint touch to the air.

April could feel a slight tingling to her skin. She pulled one final burst of air into her lungs and held her breath. Just a tinge of the peculiar purple air tainted the air. She could feel it prickle the mucuous membrane in her nose. With the feeling came a slight feeling of nausea, a touch of giddiness.

Then as if the sound came from very far away, April heard the elevator door start to open. She tried to focus her mind on what was happening, but the slight whiff of the purple gas was sufficient to upset her mental faculties without actually rendering her unconscious.

Dimly she was conscious of Mark whispering across to her: "They will have to keep back to avoid exposure to the gas themselves. Keep still. Let them think we have been overcome. The gas will flow out of the open door. Then when they come in after us, we'll have the element of surprise



on our side when we jump them."

She wanted to acknowledge that she understood, but she was sinking deeper into a giddy lassitude. She tried to raise the THRUSH gun and in her condition it felt unnaturally heavy.

At the same time her lungs started to burn. The lack of oxygen from her held breath added to her dizziness. The cage started to spin. She was only vaguely conscious of Mark leaping to his feet. The crash of gunfire as he blasted at the enemy outside sounded to her like the roll of thunder far off in the distance.

Mark realized that the swirl of the air current in the cage had

driven a stiffer cloud of the purple gas to April's side of the cage. There was nothing he could do to aid her at the moment. His primary aim was to attack before the enemy knew he was still conscious. He also hoped that the sound of gunfire here in the street-level lobby would bring police attention. At the same time, air flowing out the open door of the elevator would prevent April from getting a larger dose of the enervating gas.

He came out shooting, crouched low almost against the floor. He saw one THRUSH man across the corridor. He fired, striking the man in the stomach. He turned, looking for another target, but the effect of the gas was beginning to tell on him. His vision blurred. Mark Slate shook his head, making a desperate attempt to keep his senses. He snaked his body forward. A bullet crashed into the elevator frame just over his head.

Mark ducked and shot back blindly in the direction of the shot. Then he turned as quickly as his rapidly deteriorating senses would permit and aimed at the looming hulk of a big man to the right of him.

But before he could shoot, the man let out a choked cry and plunged forward. For a moment Mark Slate stared stupidly at the fallen body. Then he realized to his astonishment that a man was crouched beside one of the marble lobby pillars, firing into the

THRUSH group. Mark Slate forced his sagging arms to lift the now cannon-heavy gun. His last two shots accounted for a man each.

He was dimly conscious that their rescuer was running toward him. He couldn't see distinctly anymore, but the man's general body outline reminded him of Napoleon Solo, one of the most outstanding of the agents from U.N.C.L.E.

The first reaction in his disturbed mind was surprise that Napoleon Solo could have gotten here from Europe so fast.

Mark tried to get up, but his feet slipped in the blood that streaked the lobby floor.

He was dimly conscious of the man bending over him. As if from miles away he heard: "Where is she? Quick! Where is the girl?"

"In the—the—elevator," he managed to gasp out.

Then his head fell forward. That was all he knew until he regained consciousness in a corner of the lobby where the police had lain him with two wounded THRUSH men pending arrival of the police ambulance.

Mark Slate tried to sit up, but a uniformed policeman warned him not to move. He let his head drop—not because he was ordered to, but because he couldn't hold it up.

Mark lay there for perhaps three minutes before he regained sufficient control of his senses to recall the nightmare in the elevator cage.

He struggled into a sitting position.

"I told you—" the angry policeman began, waving his service revolver in Mark's face.

Mark swallowed hard. The room still wasn't distinct to his unfocused eyes. Mark swallowed again, having difficulty getting words out of his tight, dry throat. Finally he managed to get out three words that produced a 180 degree turn in the policeman's manner. It was a secret code distributed to all metropolitan police to permit identification of U.N.C.L.E. agents when they were caught in a position where the usual identification was not available.

The policeman stooped and helped Mark lean against the wall so he could sit up without so much effort. Then he called the sergeant in charge of the squad which was trying to seal off the entire building. He knelt down beside Mark Slate.

"What's all this about?" he asked.

"THRUSH!" Mark said unsteadily. "I'll give you a report later. Where is the girl? Where is April Dancer?"

"Girl?" the sergeant said blankly. "There was no girl."

"In the elevator," Mark said, a touch of fear for April gripping him. "She was unconscious on the floor."

"There was no girl in the elevator when we got here," the policeman said positively.

"Then where—" Mark began. "If THRUSH got her back in the building—"

"Just a minute," the sergeant said. "We have some witnesses off the street. I'll ask if any of them saw a girl. I'll be right back."

Mark got up gingerly. His legs were still shaky, but he found he could stand. While the policeman was making his inquiries, Mark walked unsteadily across the lobby to a phone booth.

He dialed a number that would connect him to a blind where his message would be relayed into U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

"I have a message for Mr. Watson," he said, using the code for Waverly when they had to communicate over regular lines where there was some possibility of wiretraps.

"One moment please," a girl's voice replied. "Mr. Watson will speak to you direct."

Mark was surprised. Then he heard Waverly's voice, "I have been waiting to hear from you. We received the news report of a gun battle downtown and I assumed that you might be involved. I kept Mr. Kovac late tonight in case of an emergency. He has already been dispatched. You may report to me more fully after he arrives with the proper equipment."

"Yes, sir," Mark said and hung up.

When he came out of the booth, the police sergeant returned.

"You were right, Mr. Slate," he said. "There was a girl."

"Where is she?" Mark asked, still breathing heavily.

"She was apparently unconscious. Some man was carrying her. He put her in a car and drove away."

Mark breathed a little easier.

"Shall I put out an all-points bulletin asking for a pickup on the car?" the policeman asked.

"Not yet," Mark said. "She could have been taken to the hospital by one of our men. Someone helped us. I couldn't get a good look at his face, but his help definitely showed he was not a THRUSH agent."

"Well, if you need anything just yell. I got to get busy."

"Thanks, officer. You've been a tremendous help."

His legs were so shaky that Mark went over and sat down until Randy Kovac arrived, breathless from his headlong chase from U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

"What happened, Mr. Slate?" the boy asked eagerly. "I'm so glad to see you."

"We had to parry a thrust from THRUSH, Randy," Mark said. "Did you bring me a pen-communicator?"

"Yes, sir. Here it is. What about Miss Dancer?"

"She's all right, Randy," he said. Then after extending the antenna he said into the communicator, "Slate calling Mr. Waverly."

"Waverly here. Go ahead Mr. Slate. Is Miss Dancer with you?"

"No, somebody—I think Napoleon Solo—took her to a hospital."

There was a heartbeat silence and then Mr. Waverly said, "Mr. Solo is in Europe, Mr. Slate."

"Then who took April? Who was it who helped us?"

"It was no one from U.N.C.L.E.," Waverly said positively. "You had best tell me what the situation is, Mr. Slate."

"I wish I knew!" Mark said, fear for April gripping him.

TEN

"FIND APRIL DANCER!"

AS QUICKLY AS he could, Mark Slate sketched for his chief what had happened to them in the THRUSH-controlled building.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just didn't have enough on the ball to stop them."

"On the contrary, Mr. Slate," Waverly said, "you did a most remarkable job. I wish you would come here to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters for a special conference. I will have our entire resources thrown into this problem. What you have told me about this trigger bomb has convinced me that the world is facing what is perhaps the gravest crisis in its history. We must act fast."

"Yes, sir," Mark Slate said. "I'll come right now."

He closed the antenna and slipped the pen-communicator into his pocket. He stood thinking, a worried look creasing his face.

"I wonder—" he said, almost to himself.

"Yes, sir?" Randy asked eagerly.

"I was just thinking aloud, Randy," Mark said slowly. "I was thinking about April."

In the excitement young Kovac had forgotten that April was missing. He sobered.

"I want to do something to help," he said earnestly. "I—I want to do something myself to help her."

"You know how Mr. Waverly is," Mark replied. "He's a stickler for discipline. But this is something of an unusual situation. There's quite a crowd out here watching the police mop up. Circulate around and see if you can find anyone who got a good look at the man who carried April into the car. We need a good description to send out on the police bulletin."

"I'll get it!" the boy said.

"Okay then. Go at it," Mark said.

As for himself, he caught a taxi which deposited him on the little street about two blocks from the Del Floria's Tailor Shop. After paying off the cab, Mark Slate paused to light a cigarette, which gave him an opportunity to search for any sign of a tail.

Satisfied that he had not been

followed, Mark walked down to the shop. There was a closed sign in the door, but beyond the glass he could see a little man in a tailor's apron still puttering around inside.

Mark rapped on the pane. The little tailor let him in and after a friendly nod padded back into the shop. As Mark entered one of the dressing cubicles in the back, Signor Del Floria touched a hidden button on the pressing machine. In exactly forty-nine seconds, Mark entered Alexander Waverly's private office high in the modern building housing the New York headquarters of U.N.C.L.E.

Waverly was listening to a report coming over the recessed speaker set in the communications console on his desk. He nodded to Mark and waved his agent into a chair opposite him.

The U.N.C.L.E. chief finished his call and leaned back in his chair. He thoughtfully surveyed the lean, muscular ex-RAF pilot, ex-Cambridge student, and ex-member of the British Olympic team.

"I trust you are all right, Mr. Slate?" he said.

"Yes, sir. I did lose my jacket and waistcoat, Mark said quietly. "I suppose, sir, I can put them on my expense account?" he added hopefully.

"I wish you would take a tip from Miss Dancer about filing those things," Waverly said. "Even on jobs where you are together, her

expenses are much less than yours."

"Well," Mark said lamely, "she's smaller than I. She doesn't eat as much."

"The real problem now," Mr. Waverly said, leaning back and picking up one of his pipes from the desk, "is where is she eating right now."

"I don't know," Mark said. "When I first came here from the London office and was assigned to work with April, I confess that I often worried about her and the scrapes she got herself into. Now I am almost inclined to worry about her adversary instead of her."

Waverly rubbed his pipe bowl thoughtfully. There is more than a little truth in your statement. Miss Dancer is certainly a most capable and resourceful young woman."

"Yes, sir," Mark replied. "You know, there were a couple of times tonight when we were in a rather more than tight spot. Yet when I would look around at her, I'd see that she just thrives on that sort of thing. She actually enjoys danger. It is hard to feel that all is lost when you are with someone who is so obviously getting such a kick out of things."

"That is true," the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. "Miss Dancer wins because she is utterly incapable of thinking she could lose. Nevertheless, all of us reach the limit of our capacities. While the computers have not given us a definite probability, I cannot but feel that Miss

Dancer has been taken by Franklyn Royce."

"It is possible, sir."

"But we have no definite evidence at all. Computers must have human supplied data on which to work. We don't have and consequently these mechanical wonders are useless."

"I'm willing to stake my life on your hunches, sir," Mark said. "I haven't seen one of them yet that wasn't right."

"Well, I have," Mr. Waverly said gloomily. "I think my lifetime average must be about fifty per cent right and the same number wrong."

"That isn't bad."

"It is when I must consider that April Dancer's life may depend on the decision I must make on a basis of such incomplete information."

"You forget that we won't be doing it all. There's April on the other end, and you admitted yourself that she—"

"I know what I admitted," something of an edge coming into Waverly's usually matter-of-fact voice. "But there is something else here, Mr. Slate. April Dancer is so successful in getting out of tight spots because she has an uncanny and perhaps instinctive ability to judge exactly what her opponents will do."

"Yes, sir, I've noticed that myself," Mark said.

"But we are not dealing with a normal logical person in Franklyn Royce," Mr. Waverly said.



The U.N.C.L.E. chief picked up a small punched card from the desk. He slipped it into the slot of a reader hidden in the recesses under the desk top. The hidden speaker started to talk:

Franklyn Royce—Criminal record: Defected from USA to USSR to THRUSH. Three times arrested for assault. Four arrests for writing threatening letters to fancied enemies. Is not a criminal in the normal sense of the word. Is activated by grievances, fancied and real.

Personality: Highly unstable. Twice faced lunacy court after berserk attacks on colleagues, but judged legally sane each time. Broods constantly on failure of world to appreciate his

undoubted genius. Has hair-trigger resentment against society which flares on the slightest provocation. This resentment, rooted in childhood and early youth resentments and frustrations, has increased markedly in recent years. Must be considered an extremely erratic personality. He—

"That is sufficient to give you an idea of the type of man we are involved with," Waverly said, shutting off the card reader. "It is impossible to predict what such a man will do. If April Dancer is in his hands, she is facing the gravest danger of her life."

"Yes, sir," Mark said soberly. He swallowed hard.

Mr. Waverly leaned back in his

chair. He often wondered what his two brilliant agents thought of each other personally. April herself had always been too involved with her U.N.C.L.E. career to give much attention to men. And Mark Slate's outward attitude toward his pretty partner had always been big brotherish.

But these were surface indications, however. He often suspected that under that surface each had a higher regard for the other than just professional respect. He also suspected that neither of them was conscious of just how much they did think of each other.

Right or wrong as the assumption might be, Waverly could see that, for all his easy outward manner, Mark Slate kept betraying his concern for April's predicament in many little ways.

Waverly kept the impatient young man tied to his chair while reports kept filtering in. The car in which April was carried away proved to be a rented vehicle and had been left at the company's drop at the airport. The description gained by U.N.C.L.E. investigators tallied with that of Franklyn Royce. The report claimed Royce had a young woman with him and that she behaved as if either drugged or sodden drunk.

"Then that cinches it," Mark said. "Royce does have her. It is logical enough. He knew the inner workings of the THRUSH laboratory from his own service there.

And he had to get April in an attempt to regain the weapon. He followed her here from Los Angeles."

"It would seem so, Mr. Slate," Waverly said.

"Then I should see what I can do about finding Royce."

"Sit down, Mr. Slate. Royce drove this car with April to the airport. There are no planes leaving at this hour that he could have boarded. Our people have checked each passenger list. They also checked on any private planes taking off. There has been none."

"I see. That would indicate he is still at the airport somewhere," Mark said.

"Perhaps," Waverly replied. "But everything possible is being done. There is nothing else you could contribute. I prefer you here for the time being."

"Yes, sir," Mark said. "I—"

"One moment please," Mr. Waverly said. "We have something on the pen-communicator circuit—"

"Mr. Waverly, sir. This is Randy Kovac!"

Mr. Waverly looked around at the big clock which told the time around the world. He said somewhat severely, "Mr. Kovac, I believe your hours with us are from four to six—in the afternoon, not six o'clock in the morning."

"Yes, sir, but because everything was like it was I thought—"

"I guess I can take the blame for that, sir," Mark broke in. "He

seemed so eager to do something I told him to ask around in the crowd for anyone who saw April or her abductor."

Waverly ignored Mark's interruption. "And how did you come in possession of a pen-communicator?" he asked, his voice stern.

"I took two like your ordered, sir," the boy said quickly. "One I gave to Mr. Slate, but I couldn't deliver the one to Miss Dancer."

"I see," Waverly said, still displeased at Randy's involvement at this time of the morning. "Why did you call?"

"I found something, sir. You know I used to have an early morning paper route before you took me on as an U.N.C.L.E. trainee. I thought maybe some of the route boys might have seen the car. There isn't much traffic when we start throwing papers in the morning."

"That seems an interesting approach," Waverly said, his interest growing. "What happened?"

"I call the circulation manager. He called each district distributor to report to him when each boy came in. There was one who saw them, Mr. Waverly."

"Where?" the U.N.C.L.E. chief asked.

"It was coming out of the airport. He was driving a sports car with the top down. He had a girl with him who looked like she was asleep. The paperboy noticed them because he loves sports cars."

"Very good, Mr. Kovac," Waverly said. "Can you give us a description of the car?"

Randy rattled off a complete description, including the license plate number.

Waverly's bushy eyebrows raised in surprise.

"You have it down rather well," he said.

"Yes sir, I called the police to see if any sports cars had been reported stolen from the airport. I thought he wouldn't dare expose himself by renting another car, since he turned the other one in there to make everyone think he was taking a plane."

"I am surprised that the police gave you the information," Mr. Waverly said.

"Oh, I told them I was a copy boy for the *News* and that the editor asked me to call," Randy said.

"Oh!" Mr. Waverly said somewhat weakly.

"I figured he must be trying to get away. So I called all the private airports. I finally found one over in Jersey where a man left a private plane last night. He was just taking off. The airport attendant said he had a woman with him."

"I suppose you got the flight plan—say, by representing yourself as the nephew of the director of the Federal Aviation Authority?"

"No, sir, I said—"

"Perhaps it is better if I do not know," Mr. Waverly broke in. "Mr. Kovac, you have been up all

night. This will have a distinct effect on your school studies. I wish you to get the proper school necessary for the foundation to enter the U.N.C.L.E. Academy. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I—"

"Never mind that. You are not to go around acting like an U.N.C.L.E. agent any more. You are to work to prepare yourself to be such an agent."

"Yes, sir," the boy said in a voice so low it was scarcely audible.

"However," the grim lines of the U.N.C.L.E. chief's face relaxed. "However, if tonight's performance is any indication of the way you will work as an agent for us later, I have no hesitation in saying that you will make an excellent one. *Excellent*, Mr. Kovac."

"Oh!" the boy cried breathlessly. "Thank you, Mr. Waverly. You mean I'll be like Mr. Slate?"

"No," Waverly said. "There is only one Mr. Slate, as there are only one Napoleon Solo, one Illya Kuryakin, and one April Dancer. It will be sufficient if you are just one Randy Kovac."

"Yes, sir," Randy said. "And—oh, yes, Mr. Waverly, I spent some money making the phone calls and for taxi fare. Is it all right if I put in an expense account?"

Waverly grimaced. "Perhaps I was hasty," he said. "You might just be another Mark Slate after all."

"Yes, file an account, but use

Miss Dancer for a model instead of Mr. Slate. Our budget can only stand one like him."

When he broke the connection with Randy, Waverly turned to Mark. "This man is taking April back to Los Angeles. Presumably he is still trying to find this lost trigger bomb," he said. "We have a quite competent staff in Los Angeles. However, if you feel you have anything to contribute, you can join in the search."

"Yes, sir," Mark said quickly. "I'd very much like to go out."

"What would you do?"

"I think I'd start at the cocktail lounge where Royce planted the bomb in April's purse. It seems quite coincidental that she should have been the one woman of Los Angeles' millions that he picked."

"No, it wasn't," the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. "Miss Dancer filed a complete report while she was waiting for an answer to the planted ad. She made contact with Royce under her assumed identity. She was not aware that he had defected from THRUSH. She was looking for a lead on that spy case you two were on."

"I see," Mark said. "Then when the THRUSH liquidators closed in he had to get rid of it quickly. April was the nearest."

"He, of course, did not then know of her connection with U.N.C.L.E. When he eluded his pursuers he came back to recover the weapon."

"Well, if April dropped it into the dirt around one of the potted palms in the lounge, it would seem to me—"

"I am just a step ahead of you, Mr. Slate," Waverly interrupted. "I had one of our Los Angeles agents search for it. He found nothing."

"Did somebody else find it? If April said she put it there, then she put it there," Mark said.

"All I know is that something THRUSH scientists think capable of setting the air on nuclear fire is loose somewhere," Waverly said. "This must not fall into Royce's hands. In his present mental condition, this man is perfectly capable of carrying out his threat to THRUSH that he will commit suicide and take the whole world with him!"

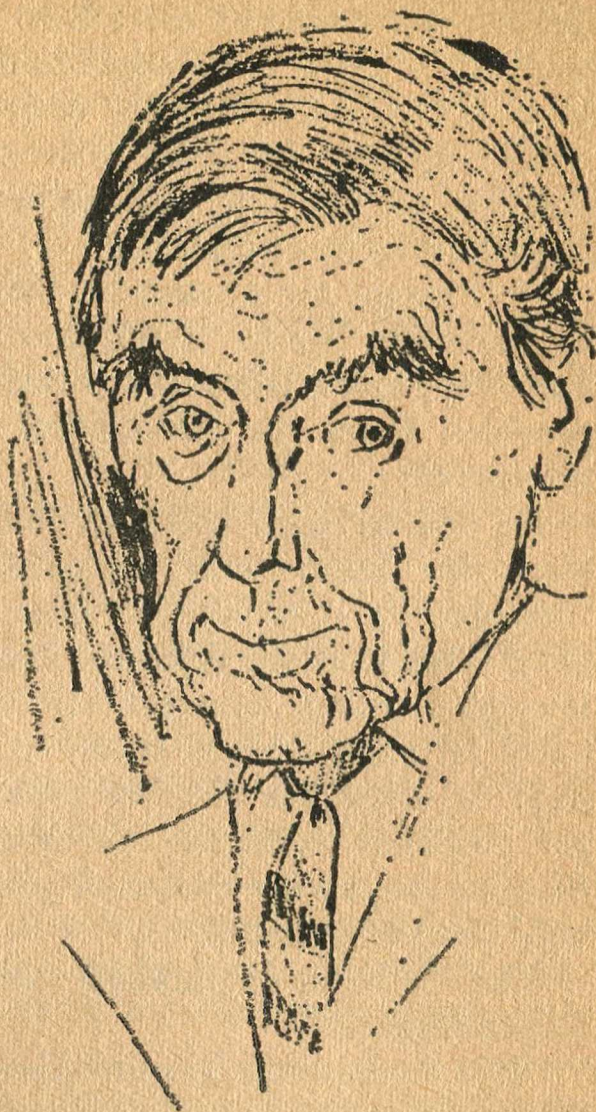
"Yes, sir," Mark said. The terrible gravity of the situation left him more subdued than Waverly could remember ever seeing the brash young man before. "Have you any special orders, sir?"

"Just find April Dancer," Mr. Waverly said. "She is the key to this whole thing. Find her!"

ELEVEN

"I'LL BURN THE WORLD!"

THE FIRST conscious thing April Dancer recalled was the voice of Franklyn Royce saying, "Doctor, is it necessary for me to get nasty?"



April turned her head. There was a heavy throb inside her temples. Her body was weak, leaving her with a drained feeling. For a moment everything was indistinct. Then she made out Royce sitting on the edge of a cluttered desk with a phone in his hand.

His not unhandsome face was twisted in an ugly, frustrated grimace. It was rapidly darkening with the rush of angry blood to his head.

Suddenly he broke in on the obvious protest at the other end of the line.

"I don't care if it kills her or not!"

"She has information I must have," he cried. "I know these stupid fools from U.N.C.L.E. Waverly brain-washes them to the point it is impossible to get any information from them by normal means."

He listened for a moment, then he burst out again. "I tell you I don't care if the treatment is fatal, provided I get the information I need first."

He paused again and then said, his voice heavy with contempt: "Murder? Is it murder to swat a gnat? That is all she is to me. I am through arguing. You get here at once! At *once*, do you hear—or I shall certainly see that the police get evidence sufficient to cause them to reopen the matter of your wife's untimely death!"

The receiver squawked and Royce laughed.

"It is my business to know about those who might be useful to me!" he said. "I will expect you at once, doctor. At *once*, do you hear!"

April closed her eyes as Royce jammed the phone and turned around. She did not think it a good idea for him to know that she had heard him write her off.

Royce paid her no attention. He hunched over the desk with a slide rule and a pencil, mumbling to himself as he worked.

April half opened her eyes. Then, seeing him engrossed in his work, she gently tested her bonds. Both her hands and feet seemed encased in police-type handcuffs.

The movement caused the ancient couch under her to creak.

Royce jerked his head around. He got up. April struggled to sit up. He stood watching her. He made no move to help nor did he object.

He sat down on the corner of the desk, drumming his knuckles on the top.

"You are a very clever young woman," he said.

"Thank you," April said. "I love compliments."

"You know why I brought you here, of course."

"Yes," she said. Then, suddenly deciding flattery was the best weapon against his egomaniac type, she added, "You were too smart for me."

"I am too smart for everybody!" he snapped, irritated by her omission.

"So it would seem," she agreed.

"Miss Dancer," he said. "You have something that belongs to me. I want it!"

He snapped the words out and settled his thin lips in a straight line. He reminded April of a rebellious little boy. She decided a denial would only trigger one of his maniacal rages.

"Mr. Royce," she said, giving him a steady look that he seemed to find disconcerting, "I also want to be more than just a cog in U.N.-C.L.E.'s machine. You are holding this weapon over THRUSH's head. I am holding it over yours."

"You are asking me to believe

you would betray your beloved U.N.C.L.E.?" he said with a sneer.

"Did you betray THRUSH?"

Blood rushed to Royce's face. His nostrils flared. For a tense second April thought he intended to attack her with his fists. But at the last second he managed to bring his temper under control.

April Dancer relaxed. She had hoped he would approach her. Although her arms and ankles were fastened with handcuffs, she could still swing her legs up together, and make use of the switchblade knives hidden in the heels of her shoes.

"No," Royce said in answer to the question which so infuriated him, "I did not betray THRUSH. THRUSH betrayed me!"

"You are a traitor!" April Dancer cried. "A professional traitor. You betrayed your own country. You betrayed its enemies. You betrayed THRUSH. You—"

But her attempt to goad him into coming close enough for her to launch a slashing attack with the switchblades in her heels failed again. This time it sunk on the shoals of Franklyn Royce's extreme egotism.

His cry "THRUSH betrayed me" launched such a flood of resentment and fury that he was physically unable to hear April's taunting. He broke into a wild tirade against those who failed to appreciate him.

"Who developed the nuclear bomb-in-orbit for the U.S. Govern-

ment?" he cried. "Who developed a way to neutralize it in space for the Russians? Who laid down the mathematics for the interrogation machine for THRUSH that this fool Rottermund is claiming credit for?"

He paused in his fury and beat himself on the chest with his clinched fists.

"I!" he cried. "It was I. And those insufferable fools had the gall to try and tell me what to do!"

"You're crazy!" April cried, trying to penetrate his fury and turn it on herself.

Again he ignored her. "But in the end it will be I who does the telling! They are afraid of me now. It is not like it was when they were pursuing me to kill me! Now I have the upper hand. They didn't know that I had the trigger bomb model. I couldn't let them capture me with it. That is why I placed the precious object in your purse. Then, when I escaped, I sent word to THRUSH headquarters that I had it. I told them my price.

"And that price—that price is to give me the directorship of THRUSH!"

He paused, a look of self-righteous dignity on his face. His voice trembled with what he must have thought was sincerity.

"I am not doing this for myself, you understand," Royce said. His manner was almost a burlesque of the cartoonist's portrait of a ham politician.

"Not for myself, but for the benefit of humanity!" he cried. "With the resources of THRUSH I will weld the world into a single government. This will outlaw war and bring equal prosperity to every former country.

"I, of course, will be the World President. Not that I aspire to any reward for my efforts to establish a planetary government. But I will be forced to take the job because there is no one else capable."

Royce's eyes flashed. His hands clinched until the knuckles were white. "Then I'll burn the world! I'll turn the earth into a blazing star!"

"I don't believe you can do it," April Dancer said, still trying to goad him into striking at her as he once started to do. "You are a fraud! And your trigger bomb is as phoney as you are!"

To April's surprise Royce laughed at her outburst instead of raging.

"It does not matter what you think," he said contemptuously. "THRUSH knows the bomb will work. That is why I decided to control THRUSH rather than U.N.C.L.E. They know I can send this planet of fools back to the primeval fire it came from! They know I can and will!"

On the desk behind him a phone bell chimed softly. Royce turned and scooped it up.

"Doctor Clermont?" he said. "Good! You are at the hotel? That

is the correct location. You hardly expected me to stay in such an exposed location. After all I am being hounded by both THRUSH and U.N.C.L.E. I must be more clever than both of them."

He paused to listen to the speaker at the other end of the line.

"I don't care!" he snapped. "Did you bring the drug? Excellent! Here are your orders: I am in my house. The one THRUSH built for me in Pacific Palisades. But what THRUSH does not know is that in the construction I had a secret private laboratory built under the split level. It is not accessible from the main house. Do not go there, for THRUSH has men in the house. They think I must return to the regular laboratory to get my secrets. I planned too well for them. They are all here!"

"Now leave the hotel and go to the cocktail lounge known as the Golden Cock on Sunset. Call me from there. I will give you further instructions. By all means be on the lookout for any person trying to follow you. Do not panic if either THRUSH or U.N.C.L.E. agents are following. I'll take care of them."

He hung up the phone and smiled pleasantly at April.

"You see," he said, "I am too clever for these fools. I happen to know from the private detectives I have employed that this man who was with you in THRUSH

headquarters—this Mark Slate—has a stakeout at the Golden Cock.”

April's eyes narrowed. This was the lounge where the Burning Air Affair began. Lacking any kind of lead, Mark would naturally have gone there. Knowing that April had ditched the trigger bomb in the lounge, he would assume that as soon as Royce learned of this, the logical thing would be for him to try to recover it.

She—not knowing that U.N.-C.L.E. agents had searched the potted plants without finding the bomb—thought they would recover it. Then it would only be a matter of Slate keeping a watch for Royce. Once Royce was captured, any future threat from him would be eliminated.

Sure now that she would never be able to entice the criminal close enough for her to attack with the shoe knives, she switched to a new plan.

If Royce's information about Mark watching the Golden Cock was true, then the heart of her plan depended upon getting the would-be world-destroyer over there himself. This she hoped to do by telling him where she hid the trigger bomb.

She thought there was no danger in this, for Mr. Waverly knew where she hid it. She was certain someone from U.N.C.L.E. had long since repossessed it.

The problem as she saw it now

was to reveal the hiding place without making Royce suspicious that she was leading him into a trap. She knew that it must be done under some kind of pressure.

Unfortunately for April, Royce was seemingly not interested in it any longer. He hunched over the desk, covering page after page with complicated mathematical formulae. Several times she tried to talk to him, but he was so engrossed in his work that he did not act as if he was aware of her presence.

April took heart from this. Although her hands and ankles were secured with the handcuffs, she could maneuver herself slightly. She got up slowly. The play in the linking chain between the leg cuffs permitted her to shuffle forward an inch a step.

The girl hesitated after she got erect, intently watching the working scientist. He still paid her no mind. April measured the distance between them, making a mental calculation of how long it would take her to close the distance.

April's hands were cuffed behind her, but she thought this would be an advantage. If she could get to the edge of the desk, she could lean back, grasp the corner to pivot on, and swing her long, strong legs up to drive the twin knife blades into Royce's sides. A tap on the shoe heels against the desk leg would expose the knives.

When Royce paid no attention to her, April shuffled forward a few inches and stopped. Then a few inches more. And a few inches more.

When she first got up from the couch she was tense, uncertain as to the probable outcome of her desperate attack on the dangerous criminal. But the closer she came to success, the more her excitement grew. Her face glowed with the sheer enjoyment of danger which Mark Slate had observed so often when they were in tight spots together.

But as she moved closer, April realized that she could not approach the right position without the overhead light casting her shadow across the busy scientist's working papers.

April Dancer hesitated, her mind working rapidly. There was no way she could avoid the shadow betraying her without working her way completely around him and approaching from the other side.

This, she knew, was impossible. There was no way she could bring the heel knives into play without something to support her body. She had to lean her hips and hands against the desk, since both feet had to flash up together.

April inched a little closer. Her shadow cut across the edge of the desk. April paused, again mentally calculating the remaining distance and her chances of success.

While many of her actions often struck her U.N.C.L.E. co-workers as bordering on the foolhardy, such was not the case. She carefully evaluated every situation. She took some amazing chances, but every one was done only after she assured herself that she had at least a slim chance to win. April's complete self-confidence caused her to see more of a chance than was sometimes there.

This was the case now. There was no way she could prevent her shadow falling across the pages Royce was scribbling on. It would be impossible for him to be so absorbed that he would not notice that. Her only chance then lay in moving as rapidly as possible and hoping that surprise would delay his reaction long enough for her to strike.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. half stooped, gathering strength. Then she jumped, half-twisting in the air. She fell with her back to the desk. Her clutching fingers caught the edge. She gripped hard. Her legs flashed up. The naked knife blades caught the light and glittered.

The warning shadow fell, as she knew it would. Royce jerked his head up and half rose. He caught her movement. He threw his body back.

The chair overturned. The knives protruding from the spike heels of April's pumps ripped into the edge of the seat upholstery.



Royce rolled free and leaped to his feet, unhurt.

April Dancer leaned her back on the desk and flexed her knees with the wicked looking knives pointed toward Royce. The scientist circled to the left. April shifted to keep the knife barrier between them.

She shouted at him derisively, trying to goad his explosive temper into an ill-considered attack. It might have worked for his face was growing redder with the rush of raging blood.

But the phone rang on the desk behind her. The sound broke through Royce's rage, recalling him to the problems he had outside of April Dancer.

Some of the color receded. April knew she had lost, but still she twisted, keeping the knives aimed at him as he tried to circle around to reach the phone.

Royce retreated a few steps and picked up the overturned chair. Holding it in front of him, he ad-

vanced. April twisted and tried to shoot her weaponed shoes over the top and into him.

He was too fast. The chair came up. The knives jammed into the upholstery.

Before she could pull back and strike again, Royce shoved hard on the chair. April slipped back off the desk. The chair fell half across her. Royce threw his weight on the chair, pressing down so she could not move. He reached down and jerked off her shoes, threw them across the room.

Then he jumped up to grab the still clamoring phone. April painfully pushed the chair off her. April Dancer was down, but not yet out. She looked across at the knives protruding from her shoe heels. They were too far away for her to hope to retrieve them. April looked back at Royce on the telephone. The idea of trying to ram him in the stomach with her head also had to be abandoned. His keen, hateful eyes were on her. She didn't have a chance to inch her way close enough for such a rush to be effective.

She still had not given up the idea of fighting back. But for the moment, April abandoned her rapid-fire evaluation of escape methods to listen to Royce's phone conversation.

What she heard sent a stab of fear shooting through her aching body. But it was fear for Mark Slate rather than herself.

TWELVE

DEATH TRAP

THERE WAS NO doubt about it. Royce was leading Mark Slate directly into a death trap.

April heard the embittered scientist say: "Dr. Clermont? Are you at the Golden Cock? Excellent! Make sure that this man Mark Slate follows you. I know he is there. The receptionist is in my pay. She called me. Get her to point him out to you."

He listened and then said impatiently: "Do it any way you can? Must I write a formula for every movement you make? If nothing better comes to mind, stop a waiter where he can hear you. Ask if anyone has come inquiring about a woman named April Dancer. That will bait him."

He listened again and a look of extreme satisfaction crossed his face.

"Yes!" he said eagerly. "Now here is what you do: Come directly here. It is that former movie star's estate. A high wall surrounds the place. Come to the gate. Don't try to shake your shadow. The gate is open, but get out and close it behind you."

"This is just to slow your pursuers for a moment. Park in the lot just inside the gate. Make sure you are not observed. There is an entrance behind a terrace of pyrocanthia climbing the inside of the

wall. This will take you inside the wall and down a narrow set of stairs. This leads you here.

"If Slate does not see you enter, he will assume that you went up the curving path to the house. Now here is the gimmick. There is a closed circuit TV monitor installed in a tree just beyond the curve. I had it put there when the house was remodeled. In addition to a laboratory for me, it was intended to be THRUSH'S West Coast headquarters.

"Slate will walk right into a THRUSH trap!"

He put down the phone and smiled satanically at April.

"M-Mister Royce!" April tried to put a shake of fear into her voice. It sounded forced, even to her ears. "I'm ready to make a deal!"

He gave her a contemptuous look. "You are the worst kind of a fool!" he snapped. "You are trying to trick me. I've tried to bribe men from U.N.C.L.E. before. It's impossible. Waverly has all of you too badly brainwashed!"

"Try me and see," April Dancer replied.

"Dr. Clermont is bringing a truth serum, Miss Dancer. I will obtain everything I need from you without any risk. You see, I am too clever for your little tricks!"

"Are you?" April suddenly shifted to new tactics. Her voice was as contemptuous as his. "Are you, Mr. Royce? Did you know

that an U.N.C.L.E. scientist has developed an antidote for sodium pentothal? We have an inoculation against the truth serum and all of us have taken it. If you doubt me—"

"I do not doubt you," Royce broke in. "I know about it."

"Then you should know there is no way you can get anything from me unless I want to give it to you! I'm willing to make a deal with you. Not for my life, but for Mark Slate's. Stop him from walking in on that THRUSH trap upstairs and I'll tell you where I hid the bomb."

"And if you told me you hid it in—say, a potted plant in the lounge, I'd exclaim with surprise!" The heavy sarcasm turned to rage. "Do you take me for a fool? Me? I have personally had that place shaken down. Men from U.N.C.L.E. searched it. None of us found a thing. Do you know what that means, Miss Dancer?"

"No," April replied firmly.

"It means that you are trying to outwit THRUSH, U.N.C.L.E. and me."

"A girl can't have everything," April said quickly. "I'll settle for outwitting THRUSH and U.N.C.L.E. I am still willing to deal with you."

"I'm sorry. I don't need you," he said. "I have about me the few people I do need. And as for your puny inoculation against sodium Pentothal, the serum Dr. Clermont

is bringing is not SP. It is a new and more powerful means of chemically inducing truthful answers.

"Your inoculation is worthless. This drug is so powerful you'll answer every question I ask. Unfortunately, for its general use, it sets up reactions in the body which lead to blood cancer. Those unfortunate enemies it is used on always die. Nothing can save them."

April stared at the disturbed man. It seemed ironic that this one man could succeed single-handed in doing what a powerful international organization like THRUSH had failed to do: Bring the world to its knees.

And Royce could do it if he regained control of the monstrous trigger bomb. He was so disturbed mentally that he would either rule or destroy everything.

The terrible danger facing herself did not disturb April Dancer. But the fate waiting for all humanity caused the young girl an apprehension beyond anything she had ever known before in her life.

Mixed with April's fear was an angry bitterness that the solution to the whole problem was so near, yet so far. Royce was the key to the whole thing. Kill him and the menace disappeared. Find the trigger bomb and dismantle it, was the final step. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. was sure that even THRUSH would never dare to build another model of the terrible

weapon. It would all end if she could just cover the ten feet between them and destroy the frustrated egomaniac threatening them all.

Royce interrupted her furious thinking with an impatient: "What is keeping that fool Clermont? He should have had the serum to me by now."

"You'll never find what you're looking for," April said. "I told Mr. Waverly where I hid—"

"Waverly doesn't have it!" Royce snapped. "That I know!"

"You don't know anything about—"

"Hush!" he snapped suddenly as a hidden speaker started to crackle. Royce's eyes glowed as he leaned forward to listen. He looked across at April.

"You will see now how I know so much about U.N.C.L.E.," he said. "You forget that I am considered a very brilliant physicist by those who know the field. But even they underestimate me. What you are hearing, Miss Dancer, is the extension of an U.N.C.L.E. pen-communicator antenna. I have determined the secret broadcast wavelength and constructed a decoder. It unscrambles the code which this ingenious U.N.C.L.E. broadcaster automatically converts the voice into before transmitting it."

April Dancer paled in spite of her almost iron self control. She knew from Royce's dossier that he was a brilliant man. He had a mind

capable of breaking the U.N.-C.L.E. code if anybody could. Such an instrument would hit U.N.-C.L.E. operatives a hard blow. Of more immediate concern, it might well prove the last nail in Mark Slate's coffin.

The thing she feared most proved true. It was Mark's communicator cast that Royce was tuned in on.

April heard Mark say, "Mr. Waverly? Come in, sir."

"This is Waverly," the U.N.-C.L.E. chief's voice said.

Royce looked across and laughed softly at the dismay April could not prevent showing on her face.

"Sir," Mark said. "I followed a man who apparently has an appointment to see Royce. As I understand it, Royce was smuggled back into the U.S. by THRUSH agents and set up in a private laboratory here in the Los Angeles area. This was before he betrayed the organization by stealing the first working model of the trigger bomb."

"You have the location of this laboratory?"

"Yes, sir, but the FBI checked the place earlier on a tip that Royce had reentered the U.S. The laboratory has been taken over by a private group. They seem to be clean. No sign of Royce was found."

"Give me the location, if you are going there," Waverly said. "If

there is trouble I can dispatch help at once."

"Yes, sir," Mark said. "I got the lead on this man from hearing him inquire in the Golden Cock about April Dancer."

"Could this have been a trick to gain your interest?"

April clinched her fists and leaned forward, fearful of Mark's answer. Royce's face hardened. He seemed scarcely to breathe as he also waited to hear April's partner's reply.

"I don't think so," Mark said. "I asked the receptionist at the Golden Cock about him."

April's taut breath came out in a deep sigh. She knew from Royce's previous statement that the receptionist was in his pay.

"She told me," Mark went on, "that the man's name is Clermont. He is a nuclear physicist who switched to that field after losing his license to practice medicine. He was formerly associated with Royce."

"And he is headed for this former laboratory Royce used?"

"It is located on a large millionaire-type estate," Mark said. "He entered the gate. I am just getting ready to follow him."

Mark went on to give the exact location.

"Excellent," Mr. Waverly said. "It is possible Royce has a secret hideout on the estate. If so, we can take definite measures. Continue to follow this Dr. Clermont. If you

lose him, or if you think there is a possibility of Royce hiding on the estate, I will arrange with Los Angeles officials and utilities companies to cut all power, water and gas lines into the estate."

"Yes, sir," Mark said. "This is assuredly an underground hideout, if there is one. Loss of power would stop any ventilation system. Royce would be forced into the open."

"Exactly," Waverly said.

"He has April with him."

"Do all you can to protect Miss Dancer. But this man's threat to the world is so great that—"

"I understand, sir," Mark said. "And April will too."

"Very well. Carry on, Mr. Slate. I will rely on you."

The communication cut off.

"They are going to sacrifice me," April said quickly. "Now you see you can trust me. I'll tell you where I hid the trigger bomb. But I want my price."

He looked at her uncertainly. His indecision and growing alarm was plainly evident.

"What is this 'price'?" he asked slowly.

April hesitated, wondering what she could say that would most impress him.

"When you form your new world government, you will still have to break the earth into states. I want to head the English state. I want to be Queen of England!"

He nodded thoughtfully. This was something he could under-

stand. But he did not immediately answer.

April waited, her tenseness growing, but she managed to maintain an outward calm. Watching him, the girl from U.N.C.L.E. was struck by the complete lack of resemblance between him and the traditional mad scientist concept. He was a handsome man, and except when he triggered one of his rages, normal looking. All the records agreed that he was a brilliant man also. But like Hitler, this brilliance was tainted by two demons that drove him in the wrong direction.

One was his consuming hunger to be at the top. The other was the eroding complex that his genius was not appreciated. This was triggered, she thought, by his inability to take orders from any one. He bitterly resented anyone telling him what to do. If he could not control, then he would destroy.

Finally, Royce's face hardened. April Dancer knew before he spoke that her bid to trick him had failed again. It did not surprise her. She threw out the suggestion as an act of desperation because there was nothing else she could do right then.

"No," Royce said slowly and thoughtfully. "I cannot trust any one who has been brainwashed by Waverly. I think you are playing for time. You would send me off on a wild goose chase to give U.N.-C.L.E. time to go through with

Waverly's threat to drive me out of here."

"But—" April began.

"It is safer my way," he said impatiently. "It is absolutely sure. You will tell me everything I need to know."

She tried to argue, but he refused to listen. He kept pacing up and down the room while he awaited Dr. Clermont's arrival.

Time dragged. April knew it could not be long, since Mark's pen-communicator broadcast to Waverly said Clermont had already entered the estate grounds.

Then suddenly the hidden speaker in Royce's desk crackled again, indicating another pen-communicator broadcast. Royce whirled to listen.

April's heart felt like a giant hand had reached in her chest and was squeezing as she heard Mark say: "You were right about a hidden layout here, sir. Clermont tried to trick me into thinking he was going into the mansion. Instead he took a hidden doorway set in the estate wall. I am about to follow him."

Just the suggestion of a smile crossed Royce's face.

"This pen-communicator decoder is the most important tool I have," he said. "I built it for THRUSH, but when they betrayed by promoting a man without half my ability, I took it with me when I left. It has been worth a hundred agents to me, for it per-

mits me to sit by the side of Waverly himself!"

He stopped to listen to Waverly's reply.

"Very good, Mr. Slate," the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. "I am alerting our other operatives to come to your assistance. Keep in touch with me as much as possible."

"Yes, sir," Mark said. "I will report in whenever I can."

"Good," Waverly said. "Anytime we do not hear from you within two hours of the last report, we will assume you have failed. Otherwise, we will hold back, waiting for you to do what you can. We cannot afford to alert the enemy by putting in too many men unless we must."

"That is fine, sir," Mark said. "At this stage I can work best alone. I will call for help just as soon as it will do any good."

"Excellent, Mr. Slate. We will be waiting."

"And I will be waiting also," Royce said as the communicator cut off. "We have two hours before U.N.C.L.E. will launch its concentrated attack. That is plenty of time for what I need to do. Once I have that weapon back in my hands no one on earth will dare attack me!"

"Why can't you just skip out and build another one?" April asked, again playing for time.

She did not know why the idea had not occurred to Royce before, but if he could be persuaded, it

would delay his threat to the world by months. That would give time for someone to find and destroy him. At the moment he was being pursued by the FBI on a charge of treason to the U.S., by the Russians for defecting from their employ, by THRUSH, and by the agents from U.N.C.L.E. It would be impossible for Royce to evade such a determined and efficient group of men for long.

An expression of frustrated regret crossed Royce's face.

"I did not develop the bomb myself," he said shortly. "It was theorized by a renegade Red Chinese scientist who sold the secret to THRUSH. It was supposed to set up a nuclear reaction in steel. But fortunately just before it was test fired—and maybe it was unfortunate—a computerized review of the basic formulae showed that it would also set the air on fire, consuming all the air in the world.

"They gave me the formulae for review. I immediately realized the possibilities," Royce went on. "I saw the opportunity to force those fools and the rest of the world with them to give me the appreciation I deserve!"

He opened the desk drawer and took one of the three-way THRUSH guns. He snapped the catch from bullets to the paralysis pellets.

"Now," he said with satisfaction, "I am ready for this Mark Slate!"

THIRTEEN

FINAL FURY

MARK SLATE closed the antenna on his pen communicator and steps leading to Franklyn Royce's underground retreat.

His soft crepe rubber soles made no noise, but he could hear the shuffle of Dr. Clermont's shoes ahead of him. He had his U.N.-C.L.E. gun in his hand. Then, uncertain of the immediate future, he extended the antenna of his pen-communicator. He left the transmitting unit in his pocket, however. He only wanted to insure that Waverly was tuned in on what happened if something went wrong as he tried to rush his way into Royce's hiding place.

After a short distance, the narrow corridor widened into a room. Mark suspected that this was an anteroom which opened into the secret laboratory.

To reassure Waverly at the other end of the pen-communicator circuit, Mark Slate slipped one hand into the pocket with the transmitter. Gently he tapped his thumbnail on the speaker cover, spelling out Okay in Morse code.

Mark could now hear Clermont stumbling across the room in total darkness, but he did not try to follow. He expected light to flash out when the inner door was open. He pushed his way along the opposite wall. He kept straining his ears to

keep Clermont's position pinpointed. His gun was trained at the spot where he thought the renegade scientist's back would be. When the door opened Mark hoped to get a shot past Clermont and into Royce. Clermont was a minor danger compared to the world wrecker.

He heard the former medical practitioner say, "Royce? Royce! It is I, Clermont. Open up."

Mark stiffened. He knew the man's call had been picked up by the sensitive speaker of the pen-communicator. He tapped a Morse okay on the case again and waited tensely for something to happen.

What came was totally unexpected. Brilliant lights flashed beams from each of the four walls. It was as if he had been dropped into the sun. There was light everywhere, totally blinding. Mark Slate could see nothing and the brilliance sent stabs of pain through his tortured eyeballs.

He heard Clermont squall in fear. "Royce! Royce! "What are you doing! You're blinding me."

"You are no longer necessary to my success," Royce replied in a calm voice.

Mark fired blindly at the sound of the embittered scientist's voice. He swept the gun in an arc, spraying explosive bullets over a wide area to make up for having to shoot blindly.

He heard Clermont scream above the din in the closed room. He stopped shooting. The blinding

light still blotted out all sight for him. He could not determine its sources so he could shoot them out. The light seemed to come from everywhere.

Mark Slate stood there, his head and eyes throbbing from the piercing pain.

He thought he heard a noise and shot at it.

Then Mark thought he heard a sound behind him. He whirled. Abruptly there seemed another noise to the side. He jerked around again. He kept turning until he lost all sense of direction in the room.

Bewildered, he continued to turn. He couldn't see the floor anymore. Mark Slate felt suspended in a ball of light.

But only for a moment. Suddenly the light went out—for him alone. He pitched forward on his face. Franklyn Royce, his eyes protected by extra heavy welder's goggles, stooped over his stunned body and dragged Mark Slate into the laboratory. He took the precaution of clapping handcuffs on the U.N.C.L.E. agent's legs and wrists as he had April.

Mark was not unconscious long, but he had difficulty seeing. Everything in the room was a blur that would not focus. He was conscious of Royce speaking.

"There is nothing you can do!"

Mark knew that the words were carrying back to Mr. Waverly in U.N.C.L.E. headquarters. But he also knew that it would be impos-

sible for anyone from U.N.C.L.E. to reach this place soon enough.

"I will!" he heard April cry. She was still trying to buy time by persuading Royce that he had to make a deal with her. "This is your last chance! If you don't, I will kill myself before you can use that truth serum!"

"How?" Royce asked, his voice heavy with contempt. "There is no way you can do anything except sit right where you are! Clermont brought the serum. I'll get it off his body. Then, Miss Dancer, I guarantee you will talk!"

He walked across the room and through a small door. Mark was sprawled on the floor near her feet. She called softly to him. He raised his head.

"I can't see a thing," Mark said feebly, his voice strained.

"We've got to do something fast!" April said hurriedly. "If he gives me that truth serum, I can't keep anything back. It's not sodium penothal. Our immunity won't protect me."

"Don't worry," Mark replied. "The thing isn't in any potted plant at the Golden Cock. We searched. THRUSH searched. It isn't there."

"I know," she said hurriedly. "And I think I know why. That's what frightens me, Mark. When Royce told me he searched there, I wondered why he didn't find it. I thought you got there first. Then when I found out you didn't have it, I wondered where it was. That

was my mistake. The truth got in my mind. He'll find out what I thought when he questions me."

"And what is that, April? Speak quickly. I've got my pen-communicator going. Mr. Waverly is listening to us."

"It won't do any good," she said. "Royce knows you have it on and he didn't even bother to shut it off when he knocked you out. He has a pickup decoder. That's how he knew you were following Clermont."

"Really? That's too bad for us, April. But we must talk fast now."

"April, tell us where you think the trigger bomb is hidden," Waverly's voice came seemingly from Mark's pocket. "Perhaps we can beat Royce to it."

"Yes, sir," April said hurriedly. "It is—"

The rest of her words were drowned in a buzz of machine noise. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. jerked her head around and saw Royce standing in the doorway. His hand was still on the switch activating the machinery that drowned her report to Waverly.

Royce, his lips tight, walked across the room and reached down to cut off the transmitter. As he did, Mark lunged.

He struck Royce in the stomach with his head.

The renegade scientist squalled and fell back. Mark tried to follow up his attack, but he couldn't move fast enough with his hands and feet

secured as they were. Royce rolled back out of the way.

April Dancer struggled to her feet when Mark launched his desperate attack. But like her co-agent, she couldn't move so fast as Royce.

He scrambled back away from them. He was shaking, unnerved at how closely he had escaped Slate's attack.

"I kept you alive because I thought you might know something if this woman died under the truth serum. But I see that I can't take a chance with you any longer."

He raised the THRUSH gun and pointed it at Slate's chest.

"Don't!" April cried. "If you kill him, I'll kill myself! You'll never learn where the trigger bomb is!"

Royce asked April the same question he previously demanded when she threatened to forestall his questioning by killing herself.

"How will you destroy yourself?" he asked with contempt.

"This way!" April cried defiantly.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. took a deep breath and held it. Her face turned red and then pale. Royce watched her uneasily. His face was a study in mixed emotions. He doubted that she would voluntarily suffocate herself, but what the scientist knew of the girl's stubborn determination made him wonder.

Royce stood there, gun still pointed at Mark's chest, waiting to see if April was bluffing. Mark was

as dumfounded as Royce by April's grim determination to sacrifice herself.

"April!" he began in an agonized voice. "Don't do it for me!"

She ignored him. Her face was starting to turn blue for lack of oxygen.

Royce's nerve broke. He was



sweating badly. He could see his only chance to bend the world to his feet was crumbling under the stubborn will of the girl from U.N.-C.L.E.

"I'm willing to make a deal with you," he said lamely. His body was shaking as badly as his voice.

April Dancer scarcely heard him through the roaring in her ears. Her lungs burned. Her throat felt raw. Stiff jabs of pain ripped through her body as she broke her self-induced suffocation and started to breathe again.

A little color came back to her face. Royce leaned weakly against the desk. He was still shaking. He had the THRUSH gun in one hand and the vial of truth serum in the other.

"You'll never use it on me!" April gasped out. "Are you convinced now that I can and will kill myself first?"

"Yes!" Royce said.

"But I promised to make a deal," April went on. Her voice was scarcely intelligible because of the way her chest heaved as her tortured lungs sucked hungrily for long delayed air. "I—I—"

She broke off, unable to continue. His face twitching, Royce started toward her. Then he caught himself and stopped. His eyes narrowed. He glared at her suspiciously, suspecting a ruse to bring him into a position where she might jump him as Mark Slate had.

"I'll agree to whatever you want," he said. "And I'll do whatever is necessary to—"

"I—I feel an attack—" she gasped, her voice going weaker. "I must—I must have—one of the mints—in my purse . . ."

He picked up April's purse and took out the package of mints. Royce looked at it suspiciously. Watching him through half-closed eyes, April abandoned her idea of asking for a glass of water. It might feed his suspicions and ruin this last desperate chance.

After a slight hesitation, Royce took a single mint from the package. He did not approach her too closely, but tossed it in her lap.

"I can't pick it up," April gasped. "My hands are behind my back."

Still Royce refused to come near

her. He said, tossing another on the couch beside her, "Pick it up with your mouth. For all I know this might be another of those cute U.N.C.L.E. chemical tricks. It could be a bomb you want to throw in my face!"

April realized then it would be useless to ask for a glass of water. She would never pull off the trick she used on Rottermund in the THRUSH laboratory in New York.

But continuing the subterfuge and keeping the smoke mint handy if a chance did present itself, April bent over. She tossed her head as she bent so that her shoulder-length hair hid her face. She pushed the mint under a wrinkle in the couch, using her chin.

When she straightened up, April said in a stronger voice, "I'm feeling better already. These mints work fast."

From the floor, Mark said, "I feel like hell too. Give me one."

"You'll get one," Royce said through clinched teeth. "You'll get a bullet!"

"You're shaking worse than April," Mark said quietly. "You had better swallow one of them yourself."

He ignored Mark's suggestion, but its tremendous significance caught April's imagination.

She nodded toward the package of mints still in his hand. "Take one," she said.

"Look what it did for me," April

went on. "I'm feeling better already. Remember, the men from U.N.C.L.E. are on their way. You're still trembling. You need something to steady your nerves."

He hesitated, looking now at her steady hands fastened behind her back with the handcuffs.

"Hurry!" she said. "We've got to get out of here. I'm serious when I say I want to go with you. I meant what I said about wanting to be the Queen."

He half closed his eyes. He reached over and picked up the vial of truth serum.

"There is another secret way out," he said unsteadily. "I'll take you with me. If you lead me to the bomb, I'll make you Queen of England."

But the way his hand gripped the truth serum gave away his intention of using it on her just as soon as he had allayed her suspicions.

"Then take a mint," April said urgently. "And give me another."

He made a visible effort to control his shaking, but was not successful. He had been too unnerved by how closely he came to losing his last lead to the bomb when April tried to suffocate herself.

He tore back the paper on the mint tube. Mark watched in fascination. It was all April could do to control her surging feeling and to appear unconcerned.

Royce tossed one of the mints in his mouth. All he tasted was the

disguising sugar coating. He swallowed.

He took a deep breath as it went down.

"Feel better?" April asked.

Royce nodded, apparently aided by suggestion. Then suddenly he half doubled up. A look of shocked surprise twisted his face. He tried to raise the gun and shoot April but he toppled. Smoke, activated by his stomach juices, boiled from his mouth and nose.

"Come on!" April cried to Mark.

Together they crawled from the room as the smoke, caught in the narrow confines without adequate ventilation, jammed every corner.

Slowly inching along, they made their way up the tunnel and into the night. As they waited for help to come, Mark asked April: "Where did that thing go?"

She said, "If you remember, there was a fight between two drunks there in the lounge that afternoon."

"Yes but it was broken up after one knocked the other down."

"I remember that he broke one of the fronds when he fell against the potted plant," April said. "I think all we have to do is find the florist who leases the plants. He probably replaced it and has the injured one at his nursery."

"Why didn't the searchers find that out?" he asked.

"You were one of them. Why didn't you?" April asked. "Because no one wanted to arouse any sus-

picion. No one went to the management. Each conducted a secret investigation and search. An official police search would have involved going to a judge and getting a search warrant. No one knew the plant was substituted because nobody asked."

And that is the way it was. When the trigger bomb was recovered, a careful analysis by U.N.-C.L.E. scientists verified that it would indeed have turned the earth's air into one giant blaze of nuclear fire.

While April and Mark made a verbal report directly to Waverly, they were still required to make a written report for the record.

As they finished it at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters after a four-hour jet flight back to New York, Mark said to April, "I'm a little sorry Royce didn't give you some of that super truth serum. Then maybe I could have asked you what you really think of me behind that businesslike exterior of yours!"

April Dancer gave him a roguish look and then dropped her eyes demurely. "Well, I did absorb a lot of rays from that truth-forcing interrogation machine of Rotterdam's," she said. "Maybe enough residue collected to force me to tell the truth for a while."

"Great!" Mark Slate said with a grin. "What do you think of me—personally, that is?"

April smiled cryptically at him. Then assuming a dream-like

drugged manner, she said, "I think you are the most wonderful person in the world—to have around *when there is a fight!*"

Mark grimaced. "Yeah, but what about between fights?"

April got up. Her hair was now restored to its normal brunette. Sleep on the plane had erased the fatigue in her eyes. They sparkled with her usual joy of life. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. had changed into

a tailored suit that displayed her physical charms to devastating perfection.

"Between fights?" April Dancer repeated, smiling at Mark Slate. "Why then I'm so busy looking for another fight that I just don't have time to think about you at all!"

Mark grimaced again and April said, "Hurry up and finish that thing. And then let's go look for another fight!"



Complete in the Next Issue:

THE DEADLY DRUG AFFAIR

The New GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E. Book-Length Novel

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Somewhere deep in the Ozarks men were nodding gently at every command, obeying, smiling—and dying! April Dancer had one day to find that village of the living dead—or join them in oblivion! And only Mark Slate knew the key that could bring her back alive!

He had found the door
to a dead man's gold—
but who had the key?

THE LEGACY

by
MARTHA HOKE



NEWS OF his uncle's death caught up with Horatio Jones in Hong Kong. He would have received the letter sooner, had he not been in jail in Brisbane for trying to sell an off-duty policeman a phoney ticket on the Irish Sweepstakes.

It was only a terse note announcing he was mentioned in his uncle's will. However, it bucked him up considerably. Horatio lived by his wits and not very well.

To his knowledge he was a sole heir.

Of course, his only acquaintance with Uncle Bill was a negative reply to a wire asking for money. This was sent on a postal card. Horatio was sure Uncle Bill had man-

aged to keep his small fortune intact.

On the strength of his imminent inheritance, Horatio Jones gleaned enough money for his trip to his uncle's hometown, deep in the delta country of Louisiana.

"Blood is thicker than water," Horatio reminded himself often on his circuitous trip home.

A flat tire on the second-hand car he had purchased, contributed to a late arrival in Circo, Louisiana. Quite anxious to know the contents of the will, Horatio found the lawyer's house on the outskirts of town and rang the bell.

"I am Horatio Jones," he introduced himself, maintaining a somber attitude, although by this time

Uncle Bill had been heavenly bound for some eight months. "I understand I am mentioned in my uncle's will."

The lawyer looked at Horatio over his glasses. "Please come in, sir." He pointed to a chair. Then he locked his hands behind his head. He almost smiled.

"Just as I wrote you, your uncle's will does mention you. You may look at it at my office later." He cleared his throat. "You, Horatio Jones, have inherited your uncle's fishing camp." He fumbled in a drawer and brought out a key. "I will point it out to you on the map. Perhaps you will want to stay there, as there's no hotel in town."

Horatio gulped and stared at the man.

"Fishing camp!" he said in a high voice. "I thought my uncle was rather well off. I am his only living relative."

The lawyer struggled from his chair and surveyed Horatio coldly. "Your uncle was indeed well off. He was a very industrious man who traveled in hardware all over the South." He looked at Horatio shrewdly. "His instructions were that his money would go to an organization called S.H.O.A. According to his will this money has been turned over to them."

Horatio felt sick and looked sicker. "How much money?" he whispered, sweat popping out on his brow.

"Fifty thousand dollars." The

lawyer shook his head. "I would not advise you to contest it. The will is quite valid. Eccentric he was but not insane."

Horatio sputtered, forgetting his role of bereaved. "I certainly will contest it. I will contact you at your office. Please show me where the fishing camp is located."

With some difficulty Horatio found his way amid the marshes to the fishing camp. He let the old car pant to a halt and switched off the ignition. With his flashlight he could see a haggard, unpainted facade with tipsy shutters and a yawning porch.

He opened the front door and fought great cobwebs as he looked for a lamp. Creaking a door open to a store room, his flashlight stopped on the west wall. Horatio took a deep breath.

"Well, well!" he finally said aloud.

A cork board covered half the wall. On it were hooks, methodically spaced up and down and across, some half a hundred of them. On each hook hung a key, a hotel key.

Horatio found a lamp, lit it, carefully locked the front door, and went back to the board. He put his hands on his hips and whistled. His eyes went to the key at the upper left hand corner. Hotel Sonora, Gulf City. Horatio had been in Gulf City, a luxurious play place on the Gulf of Mexico.

So Uncle Bill had been a collec-

tor, a collector of hotel keys! Good old Uncle Bill had one larcenous vein!

"I beg your pardon, Uncle Bill!" Horatio offered aloud. He repaired to the front room, shook dust and spiders from a cot and slept.

The next day he rested and consulted maps and received a visit from Uncle Bill's lawyer. Seeing the dust of the car across the marsh, Horatio was aware of his visitor long before the lawyer heaved himself from his car. The keyboard was locked up in the back room. Horatio was carefully repairing a shutter when the man appeared at the front porch.

"Hello there, Mr. Jones. I came out to ask you about your contesting your uncle's will?" the visitor asked.

Horatio put down his hammer and gazed across the marshes. "Perhaps I was upset at first, sir. But I am glad you came. I want to apologize for my behavior." He sighed. "Of course I am disappointed, but I am not a greedy man. I think I can become fond of this camp. I have decided to abide by my uncle's wishes."

The lawyer nodded in relief. "I told you the will is quite valid. I am glad, Mr. Jones, because court costs are high and the outcome might not be what you would expect." He looked dubiously at the unpainted shack. "I am sure you will find living here healthful. Good day, sir."

Horatio watched the dust recede. "Healthful it will be, my friend," he said aloud. Not a bad place to stay with some repairs and enough money to make it in to the races in New Orleans. He allowed in a few years he would realize the fifty thousand dollars in loot without taxes and court costs.

In a few days he set out to seek his fortune with a dozen appropriate keys in his brief case. Cash, maybe, he thought, but mainly jewelry, clothes and personal items which could be turned into money, concerned him most. He had lined up half a dozen towns along the Gulf Coast where there would be no vacancies and a golfing, playing guest list.

At the Hotel Sonora at Gulf City in room ten, Horatio did very well. Reading a paper at the end of the corridor, Horatio watched a plump man and his equally plump wife lug golf clubs from the room. His loot here was fifty dollars hidden in a train case, a very respectable amount of costume jewelry, and some rather expensive men's clothing, size forty-four short. He also managed to remove the portable television set to the car through the side entrance. Humming, he headed East to his next venture.

However, at the Gulf Oasis, he came upon a chambermaid in room thirty, but was none the worse off for this encounter. He left before she could look around.

All in all he felt he had done well in the ten hotels he visited. He returned to the fishing camp with quite a lot of money, half a dozen television sets, men's and women's clothing, and various jewelry, some of it rather good. Storing it in the back room, Horatio locked the door and went to the front porch with a bottle of Scotch he had picked up at the Alamis Hotel three days before. He drank a silent toast to Uncle Bill and lit a cigar he had exported from room forty-five at the Sea Scape that afternoon.

The next day he rested, consulted maps, and went to town for groceries. On the way back he found himself dreaming of years of plenty. It was entirely premature.

Turning the corner into the camp he came upon a little man awaiting him on the front porch. Busybody from town, Horatio decided. He had not been seen on his ventures and the expression on his face was disarmingly innocent. Horatio drove close to the house, got out of his car and stood near it.

"How do you do?" he asked politely. "What may I do for you?"

The little man crossed his seer-sucker knees.

"Mr. Jones?" he asked, and when Horatio nodded, he cleared his throat and said, "My name is Henry Clinton. I am president of the organization S.H.O.A. to whom your uncle left his money."

Horatio was becoming exasper-

ated. "Mr. Clinton, I have informed Uncle Bill's lawyer that I will not contest the will. You and your organization may rest easy. The fifty thousand dollars belongs to you. Isn't that enough?"

Mr. Clinton shook his head and stared somberly at Horatio. Finally he said, "The lawyer informed us of your decision. No, Mr. Jones. It is not enough!"

"What do you mean?"

"I do not think you understand the reason for the fifty thousand dollar donation. Have you seen the will?"

"Not yet, but it's hardly necessary as long as I do not intend to contest it."

"I am president of the Small Hotel Owner's Association, in short S.H.O.A."

Horatio pushed his hat to the back of his head and stared at the little man, who went on.

"We are an organization of fifty hotel owners whose establishments your uncle visited at some time during his life. He explained in a letter which I received after his death, that during this time he had deliberately and literally collected keys from each one of us after staying at our hotels. He collected keys, as you know Mr. Jones, like some people collect stamps. However, before he died he had an attack of remorse. He left each one of us a thousand dollars as compensation."

"But . . . but . . ." Horatio leaned limply against the old car.

"Just a minute, Mr. Jones. I haven't finished. Your uncle visited each of us many times. However, we could hardly put new locks on each door. Many people take keys and forget to return them. He only wanted one key from each hotel. We considered his donation adequate and chose to regard him as an eccentric collector. For the eight months since his death we have had no trouble un-

til you arrived. The lawyer told us you will not contest the will. We are aware of the reason you will not do so."

Mr. Clinton coughed loudly. Two out-size deputy sheriffs came lumbering around the house. They looked very businesslike.

"We have a search warrant," Mr. Clinton said gently. "Would you be kind enough to lead us to your most important legacy?"

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THE GRANDFATHER CLOCK

IRVING GREER'S thick, plump lips twitched in a semblance of a smile. A warm glow, half excitement and half pleasure, filled his ample insides, and his pudgy right hand trembled when he inserted the key in the front door.

His heart skipped when his left hand fumbled the package it was clutching. Good Lord! If he dropped it—Uncle Franz would never forgive him!

Visions of the fiery scolding clouded his brow into a worried wrinkle.

Not that the clock would be hurt much. It was a master-crafted Black Forest wall clock, *circa* 1730, with hand-carved wooden movements. Even the case was of some solid, sturdy hard wood. How Uncle Franz had longed for that one small link in their collection! And he, Irving Greer, had found it. Oh, Uncle Franz would be proud!

He pushed open the heavy oak door. It closed behind him with a barely heard, well-oiled click.

by
GORDON R. PRESCOTT

The huge clock was ticking away the seconds—the last seconds of her evil life . . .



Then it struck him—the house was silent.

It was impossible, of course. A momentary hallucination, a slight pressure on the eardrums, as when one has a cold. But Irving didn't have a cold, and the silence was real. Every one of the two hundred or so clocks was stopped.

He paused before the grandfather clock in the hall, his pudgy face clouded. Tall and stately, the ebony case dominated the hall, standing guard over it, reaching to its ceiling. But the shiny pendulum was stilled, the cogs and gears motionless. He glanced up anxiously at its face. It had been stopped for nearly an hour.

"Irving?" The word bit out at him from the kitchen.

It was his wife's voice, and a vague, uncertain tremor bickered though him. Something was wrong. Stella never yelled. In all the years she and Irving had been married, she'd never raised her voice. And she knew how Uncle Franz hated noise. Almost frightened, he lumbered down the hall.

She was sitting at the kitchen table. A coffee mug stood before her, as did the remains of a bottle of uncle's favorite sherry. Her bony fingers clutched at a cigarette.

"Stella!" he exclaimed in his customary almost-whisper, his eyes wide as he glanced from the forbidden cigarette to the even-more-forbidden sherry, then to her harshly angular features. "You

know Uncle Franz disapproves of smoking. And why are all the clocks stopped?"

"I stopped 'em. Couldn't stand 'em another minute!"

His eyes widened in disbelief. "But you know you're not supposed to so much as touch the clocks. Some of them are quite delicate. You might have harmed the mechanism. What will Uncle Franz say?" he added, more as a reproach to himself, squirming uncomfortably.

Her tone was acid. "He won't be caring about the clocks any more." She gestured vaguely with her cigarette toward the gaping cellar door.

The stairs were steep and dark, and his uncle was in his eighties. But the grotesquely twisted figure Irving saw at the foot of the steps, its head all pulpy and bent, and the crimson smear on the flagstone wall—he covered his face with his broad hands and shuddered.

"I knew he'd have an accident like this some day," he sobbed, tears suddenly trickling between his fingers. "Oh, I warned him, over and over again."

"It wasn't an accident, you fat fool!"

She was grinning witch-like, her craggy, stained teeth flashing, her eyes glittering with an alien fire. She bent down, tracing with a finger the length of piano wire stretched a foot or so above the second step. Irving hadn't even no-

ticed it in the gloom of the passageway.

"He tripped. He didn't see it either."

Slowly he placed his forgotten package on the oil-cloth-covered table and let himself sink into a chair opposite her.

It was all a jumble. The clocks stopped, Uncle Franz dead, murdered, by this—this— His hands knuckled into fists that rubbed at his eyes, almost knocking off his thick glasses.

"Stella," he began slowly, as through reproaching a naughty child, "he was our uncle, one of the best—"

"Oh, shut up! And stop looking at me like I'm some kind of a monster!" Her voice softened, but it was still raspy like a coarse file. "He was an old man. Besides, just think," she nearly whispered, leaning confidently close, her eyes glittering, "just think of all the clocks you can buy with your half of over a hundred thousand dollars!"

His eyes widened and he shrank back from her as he would from something nasty, horrid, unclean.

"The money? You killed him for the money? If there's any money, it's for the clock museum, you know that!" His words were harsh, spoken in a grating whisper. "It's not yours, not mine, not anybody's, It's for the museum that—"

"Irving!" Her hand struck at the table, rocking the bottle of sherry

dangerously. "That money is as much mine as anybody's. Twenty-seven years of bowing and scraping, waiting on him and you hand and foot, cleaning up after him. The mighty Prussian inventor and his slave nephew, and not one red cent, not a word of thanks did either of you offer—" Her face grew livid, contorted.

"Now, Stella—"

"Don't you *now*, Stella me! I earned that money, every nickel of it. And I want what's mine."

"There just may not be any money, you know." His face grew innocently blank. "You never saw it, and neither did I. And Uncle Franz never talked about it, except that one time."

She bent over him, her eyes narrowed, jaw set.

"There'd better be! Because if there isn't, this house, and everything in it, goes up for sale. And those damn clocks are worth a pretty penny!" She flopped back in her chair with a toothy grin of triumph.

He looked at her, awe-struck, his mouth gaping.

"Sell the clocks?" It was beyond comprehension, even beyond reason. The collection they'd amassed so painfully all these years—

"You just think about it for a while." She pushed back her chair and stood over him. "And when you're done, start thinking about where the old goat hid that money. I have to call a doctor and report the accident." She stomped from

the room and slammed the door behind her.

"Sell the clocks—" He shook his head.

"And while you're thinking," she said, sticking her head around the door behind him, "get off your fat seat and get rid of that wire. And don't leave any marks." The door slammed again.

He tried to think. It was so unlike Stella. Always quiet, unobtrusive, never complaining, always willing to undertake the lesser chores while he and Uncle Franz worked at their restorations, building the collection.

True, Uncle was a little short with her at times, like when the meat was a trifle overdone or the beer not quite chilled enough, but that was just his way. Hardly reason for—for murder! And to think that they'd given her everything anyone could want—food, shelter, a weekly allowance, even her own T.V. in her room. And this was how she showed her gratitude! He sighed deeply. She must be punished.

Irving pushed himself up and rummaged in a drawer for the pliers. He fumbled with the wire, trying not to look at the grisly sight at the foot of the stairs, fighting back the tears and the loneliness that was spreading through him with the heaviness of molten lead.

"He'll be right over," Stella announced, her shapeless form materializing almost from nowhere.

"And mind what you say, Irving Greer! In fact," she added, "you just shut up and let me tell him."

It was not like her to talk to him this way, either, but for the moment he said nothing. He stuffed the wire and pliers into a pocket already filled with bits of clock mechanisms, and he grunted himself to his feet.

Stella sat down again, refilling her coffee mug with sherry, thrusting yet another cigarette between her thin, colorless lips. She reminded him of one of those crones that used to be painted on some seventeenth century astrological clocks.

She was wearing her customary shapeless black dress—he scarcely recalled seeing her in anything else—that drooped well down her bony calves, and it was difficult imagining that the shapeless black shoes she wore had ever been new.

Now, with Uncle Franz gone, he wanted only to be rid of her. He didn't care that much about the money. He had a little of his own, enough to maintain the collection and even add a little to it. She could have whatever amount they might find, and welcome to it, but she must leave him and this house.

He remembered, with a twinge of ancient longing, when she was once soft and young and pretty, but that was long ago, and the Stella who lived for Uncle Franz's money was not the Stella he'd married.

No, he decided, she was a dis-

pensable convenience. The clocks were the important thing. Best she leave, as soon as possible. That would be her punishment.

The doorbell sounded with a harsh, grating clatter.

Stella quickly stabbed out her cigarette and whisked away the bottle and cup.

"Just remember. I'll do the talking."

He watched it all as in a dream. The kindly, solicitous grey-haired doctor and his simple, almost apologetic questions, and then later an ambulance and two attendants with their stretcher, a sheet covering the shapeless form of what had been his uncle.

It was soon over, too soon and too easily, and he waited anxiously for one of them to see through Stella's sham tears, to look for he didn't know what. Only no one did, and no one ever would. Uncle Franz was gone.

There was still the matter of the simple funeral two days later. Uncle Franz had no other relatives. There were just the two of them, and Irving wept unashamedly at the sight of what looked like his uncle peacefully sleeping. Stella, of course, showed no emotion, and the handkerchief she'd armed herself with for the sake of appearance was still dry when they returned home.

Irving stopped in front of the grandfather clock with a yearning spasm of sorrow.

"If you've harmed this—" he began.

"You and your damn clocks," she snapped, and she stamped off into the parlor.

She had no feeling at all. His hands caressed the ebony case, and he promised himself that he would soon again hear its reassuring click-clack and the deep boom of



its chimes. He opened the glass door and anxiously examined the massive weights, chains, and pendulum. Gently he flicked a speck of dust from the pendulum with his handkerchief.

"Can't let you get dirty, can we?" he whispered, and softly closed the door.

"Irving!"

He loosed a long, deep sigh and went to her in the stuffy, clock-filled room. The Louis XVI lyre clock on the table, its melodious tone cruelly silent, the Vienna music box clock with its minueting Dresden figurines— He uttered a

hoarse cry. One of the lady's hands was broken!

"See what you've done. We've told you never to touch them!"

A lump filled his throat as he diagnosed the damage with a surgeon's minute care. It just might be cemented.

"If you can tear yourself away from your toys—" Her voice was like coarse sandpaper, and in her eyes he saw only contempt "—the money isn't going to find itself!"

"Out of respect for Uncle Franz—" he began.

"The hell with Uncle Franz. Now you put that fat idiot brain of yours to work. Where, Irving?"

At least she'd been a little civil to him in front of his uncle. Another deep sigh escaped him. So many things were changing: Uncle, the clocks stopped . . .

"Well?"

"Why, I might start with the basement, and you could start up in—"

Her jaw snapped like a vise.

"Oh no you don't. We look together." Her toothy grin became a leer. "Just to keep each other honest." Her skinny frame snapped upright. "And we start with the old geezer's bedroom."

They marched up the narrow, dim-lit staircase, Stella in the lead. She pushed open the oaken door and stood, thin hands on bony hips, surveying the room with its heavy carved furniture, braided rug, and unmade bed.

Lacking was his uncle's fanatic Nordic penchant for order. The room had not been straightened since his death. It had been one of Uncle Franz's daily tasks—airing the bed, dusting and rearranging the few simple personal belongings on the dresser, chest, and in the massive wardrobe.

Stella strode to the wardrobe first, throwing open the thick, carved doors, almost wrenching them off their hinges. Irving winced.

"Stella, you needn't wreck—" he began softly.

"Open these boxes!" The command came with a flurry of suits and shirts flung viciously to the floor, and a cascade of shoe and hat boxes clattered onto the tumbled, untidy bed.

Uncle Franz wouldn't have cared for it at all! He didn't like for anyone to be in his room, especially when he wasn't there, and Irving found himself listening half fearfully for his tread on the stairs.

He peered into each box, neatly snapping the cover back on, and making an orderly pile. They contained only clothes.

"It's not here!" came the banshee wail. "The dresser! It's in the dresser!"

She brushed past him as though he weren't there, and he watched with contempt as she dumped each drawer onto the floor and pawed through the growing pile of clothes. With the last drawer emptied, she

looked up at him, narrowed eyes blazing.

"A lot of help you are, you fat slob!"

"I'll look in the chest of drawers," he said finally.

Carefully, meticulously, so as not to disturb the Spartan neatness, he examined each drawer, replacing each bit of linen to within a fraction of an inch of its former location. He gently closed the last drawer and turned to her, shaking his head.

Stella clamped her lips into a tight, ugly grimace, and let her eyes sweep the room.

"Help me with the bed."

Impatiently she swept aside the carefully stacked boxes, and together they stripped the bed. Sheets, pillowcases, featherbed, all rained to the floor. She probed every foot of the thin mattress before wrestling it off the bed.

Nothing.

Her face was a twisted, hideous storm of anger.

"All right, uncle *dear*," she said, and Irving backed fearfully away from her. She closed her eyes and shuddered, and when she opened them again, her face was a cold mask, her raspy voice low and deliberate.

"Look behind the furniture, Irving."

He opened his mouth to say something, but realized the uselessness of it. Best to humor her.

"If you insist," he shrugged.

He tugged each heavy piece carefully away from the wall, and they both poured over the backs, bottoms, and even the walls behind. Even the heavy wardrobe came under almost microscopic examination. No telltale bulge of wrapped bills.

"All right," she snapped, "the storage room next."

Besides their bedrooms, the only other chamber on the second floor was a room for trunks and disused furniture.

He paused for a second at the door of his uncle's room, sadly estimating the chaotic jumble, wondering how long it would take him—

"Irving!"

"Yes, yes, all right," and he hurried down the hall.

But the trunk room yielded nothing save more of Uncle's personal things: a medal or two, an ancient photograph album, discarded clothing, all dumped unceremoniously on to the floor.

She forced him up into the loft, a dusty cobwebbed three foot space under the roof.

"It must be downstairs," he said wearily, patting away some of the dust with his pudgy hands.

She nodded, and he was surprised that for once she thought he was right.

But the tiny parlor yielded nothing, nor did the outdated kitchen and dining room, though each piece of furniture was emptied and

moved. Even the floors and walls were minutely examined for tell-tale cracks and crevices.

Stella stood in the middle of the wreckage, smoke from a cigarette curling up over her face, hair askew, looking more and more the harridan from some unknown bedlam. Ashes trickled unseen down the front of her wrinkled black dress and spilled onto the floor.

"I might suggest," Irving said softly, "that there is no money."

She ignored him, her brow creased in a fever pitch of concentration.

"Bedrooms, loft, kitchen—" She ticked off where they'd searched. "There's the hall and the cellar," she mused. "Come on." She whirled sharply, tearing open the hall door.

But there was no furniture, and only one shallow closet for coats and umbrellas. She emptied everything onto the floor.

Nothing.

"It has to be in the cellar—What are you doing?" she asked, astounded.

"Just wiping off a smudge." He was scrubbing vigorously with his handkerchief at a smear on the glass front of the grandfather clock.

"You nincompoop! Is that all you can think—" Her voice trailed off and her eyes widened. "The clock—it's in the clock!"

Irving's hand stopped, and he stared at her, wide-eyed.

"Take it apart," she ordered.

"Look, there's enough room in the base—" She drew toward him, hands outstretched like grapnels.

Quickly he thrust himself between her and the clock and spoke in a voice that was dangerously soft.

"Stella, you don't just take a clock apart. It's a thing of precision, of great delicateness."

"So that's where it is! And you knew all the time." Her face was black with rage. "You knew, Irving Greer, and you wouldn't—"

"Stella! Don't touch the clock!"

His sharp injunction surprised even him. She stopped and drew back. Their looks clashed, and then she turned and almost ran down the hall. He heard her clump heavily down the cellar stairs.

The clock was safe, that was the important thing. No telling what she might have done to it. Besides, her whole idea was absurd—money in the clock! His hands fondled the dull ebony surface, and he gazed wistfully at the polished but motionless pendulum, lonely for the sound of the deep chimes.

"Now we'll see about your precious clock!"

Stella reappeared, her eyes wild, a hatchet clutched in her hands.

"For the last time, do you open it, or do I cut it to pieces?" She raised the hatchet menacingly.

He tried to shield as much of the case as he could, but even he was dwarfed by it. The hatchet flew before he could stop her, gouging an ugly chip out of the side.

"Stella! For God's sake! I'll show you." He swung open the glass door. "See? Up here! The mechanism. The pendulum—no, please don't touch it," he was begging now, "the oil on the fingers, the weights and chains. There's no room."

Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead as he pointed out the empty, cavernous interior.

"What's under there?" She indicated a sort of shelf a little way up from the floor.

"The chains and the weights. They go in these holes as the clock is wound or runs down," he chattered feverishly.

"Lift it out."

"It doesn't—"

"I'll get it out!" She bent forward, hatchet poised.

"No, no. I'll see if—" He grunted forward and tugged at the platform. "It's coming—never been removed before." Wood grated on wood "There, it's—what—"

She shouldered him aside and peered into the shadowy interior. There they lay, four neatly tied bundles carefully wrapped in brown paper, nearly filling the cavity.

"It's the money! Oh, I can just feel that it is—"

She pulled out the bundles and ripped one open.

Packets of green bills cascaded to the floor. Irving watched her, open-mouthed.

"All that money and he never told me—and he wouldn't let me

buy that Breguet Empire clock—" Greedily he reached down.

"Don't touch it!" She gathered it to her protectively. "I have to count it." She somehow collected it all in her arms and carried it to the kitchen.

With an impatient shrug he watched her go. Thank God. Now she'd leave him and the clocks in peace! He fingered the ugly gouge on the side of the clock's case. The chip could be glued back in. He retrieved it from the floor. A careful patching. . . . He wondered gloomily if he could duplicate the stain of the finish.

As gently as he could he replaced the flooring, carefully rearranging the weights and the chains. Then he closed the door, wondering if he dared set the mechanism in motion.

"Irving!"

He hurried into the kitchen.

Stella had opened all the packages, dumping the string and wrappers to the floor.

There the money stood in neat, even piles.

"One hundred and eight thousand, seven hundred and eighty four dollars," she announced in triumph. "You know, though, with all those inventions of his I thought there'd be more."

"Which comes to—" Irving figured rapidly.

"Fifty-four thousand, three hundred ninety two dollars apiece," she recited rapidly.

She reached out and covered the piles protectingly with her arms.

"Do you know what that means?" she mused, her head cocked, her eyes on some invisible point on the ceiling.

Irving didn't answer— He stood tapping the tips of his fingers together, watching her with a kind of patient reculsion. Now if only she'd leave.

"It means security. My security. A nice house for me somewhere, like in Florida where it's always warm. No more arguing with the grocer—" She sighed contentedly, her crooked smile a crazy leer. "New clothes, going places, fix myself up a little." She primped at her hair. "I wasn't bad-looking when I was younger, you know."

"Stella—" He wanted to ask her if he could start the clocks again. Maybe not all of them, just one or two, now that she was finally going.

"Fifty-four thousand. It doesn't seem like much for twenty-seven years. Two thousand a year. Irving," she announced with a grim finality, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to take it all."

"But Stella. The museum, the clocks—" His eyes clouded.

"Oh, didn't I tell you, Irving?" She smiled up at him. "I sold the clocks yesterday. Mr. Morrissey gave me twenty-six thousand dollars."

"You sold the—" He sat down, suddenly drained. Slowly his hands

clenched like vises on the chair arms, until his knuckles whitened, became numb. First the heartless murder, then the money. Those were almost forgivable. But not the clocks. She must be punished!

She prattled on, something about the clocks being picked up in a day or two, and a train she could catch in less than an hour. But he didn't really hear her, or even see her clearly as she rose and gathered the money in her bony arms and went upstairs to pack.

With a sigh that was almost a sob turned to the parlor, trying not to look at the ugly gouge on the grandfather clock. His fingers touched gently at the music box clock, and his eyes clouded again when he realized he'd never again hear its dulcet tinkle, or see its figures dance their minuet every hour. Just one turn of the key, a simple little twist.

But no. His hand drew away sharply. She'd hear it, and no telling what she'd do. He anchored his hands into his coat pockets.

It just didn't seem right. The clocks, the money—how he wished Uncle Franz were here. He'd know what to do. With a grimace of distaste he heard her rattling around upstairs, slamming drawers and closet doors.

His hand fingered a cog or something in his litter-filled pocket, part of some unknown clock—

It was true. Even he expected there to be more money than that. At least another hundred thou-

sand. Maybe it was still somewhere in the house, and after she left—

But the clocks would be gone. What was the use?

His fingers fumbled the cog and it dropped deeper into his pocket. His hand groped for it, even without command, but something alien kept intruding. Then the idea burst upon him.

Quickly he made the simple preparations and returned to his chair as she clumped down the stairs. Beads of sweat again stood out on his forehead.

She stood in the doorway, a crooked smile twisting the features that were almost hidden under a broad-brimmed black hat.

"I'm leaving. After a while you can get a divorce, start all over again, do whatever you like," she shrugged.

"You—won't even leave me the clocks. You surely know what they mean—"

"Not one," she snapped. "And don't try anything funny, Mr. Morrissey has an exact inventory."

"Then," he said, as if to himself, "I won't be needing the rest of the money. I'll go away too, somewhere, I'll—"

"What money?"

"It doesn't matter to me without the clocks."

"What money, Irving?"

She strode the width of the room and bent over him, her hands tearing at the lapels of his coat.

He sat there, large and ungainly,

watching the look of fey triumph in her eyes.

A corner of his mind was saying, *this—this I once loved*. The very thought made him ill, looking at the evil that was in her.

Sensing his revulsion, she laughed, and somehow that was even worse. Then her eyes narrowed.

"I knew there was more," she cried, "and you held it back. Now for the last time—" Her hands slapped mercilessly at his face.

"In that copper chest under his work bench—said he could keep an eye on it," he whimpered, cringing into the seat, his hands covering his face.

With a cry of triumph she stormed from the room and to the kitchen.

"Mind the stairs," he warned softly, gently winding the music box clock.

But she didn't hear him. The words were drowned out by the scream and the thump-thump of her scraggly form, and finally there came the eggshell crunch of bone against fieldstone.

The tiny Dresden figures came to life as the clock struck the hour—an elegant old-world porcelain lady and gentleman and their minuet.

Uncle Franz would have been pleased. But Irving still reminded himself to remove the length of piano wire stretched across the second step.



Illya and

(David McCallum)

Napoleon

(Robert Vaughn)

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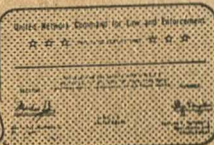
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How STEFANIE POWERS

You've seen her in jungles, menaced by savages. You've met her in action—cool, confident, deadlier than most males—and a lot prettier. What is the real "April Dancer" like? This provocative article will give you some new, unusual answers . . .

by **NORA EPHRON**



UNBEARABLY cool in her red Paraphernalia dress, net stockings, large round sunglasses pushed up to her forehead, new gold wedding band, and English intonation, Stefanie Powers blinked twice and calmly exhaled as the outdoor umbrella came crashing to the ground, barely missing an innocent bystander and scattering glass around Rockefeller Plaza.

Miss Powers could hardly be ex-

pected to react more violently. As the star of the new television series, "The Girl From UNCLE," she is suffering from the occupational disease of UNCLE agents: like Robert Vaughn, the man from UNCLE, who is reportedly considering running for President of the United States, she has lost her grip on reality.

It is, you see, difficult to muster a raised eyebrow over a fallen umbrella when one's life has been in

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Came to U.N.C.L.E.

Knowledgeable, discerning Nora Ephron, famed by-line feature writer for the New York Post, has written a behind-the-scenes story about Stefanie Powers, "The Girl from U.N.C.L.E." Our thanks to the Post for its use.



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danger so often. Miss Powers has been suspended over a tank of piranha fish, her head has been dum-dummed with persistent drips of corn oil, and Boris Karloff has attempted to waxwork her permanently.

In the new series, which can be seen Tuesdays at 7:30 on NBC, Miss Powers plays the part of April Dancer, a relentlessly intrepid young thing, who is saved from fantastic clutches by fellow agent Mark Slate, played by Rex Harrison's son Noel.

"The Man From U.N.C.L.E." opened, two seasons ago, and rose to the tops of rating charts, thanks to teenage adherents.

The formats of "Man" and "Girl" are much the same: both use the same sets, the same boss, Mr. Waverly, played by Leo G. Carroll, and the same opponent, THRUSH.

"Most of the stories can best be described," said Miss Powers, "by saying that Noel Harrison and I play two characters who are as hopefully real as they can be in ludicrous situations. In one show, 'Mother Muffin,' it's Boris Karloff in drag as Madame Tewkesbury, who wants to get us into her waxworks. The show is highly styled and campy—I think you could safely call Boris Karloff-in-drag campy."

Becoming the star of the first distaff spinoff television series ever is a statistical honor analogous to

living in the second largest city in Guatemala or working for the third largest broom factory in the United States. But it has—as Miss Powers would say—other remunerations.

For one thing, the show plucked her from a perfectly wretched movie career and a perfectly horrid long-term contract. "I consider television to be my savior," says Miss Powers. For another, it saved her from a tentative decision to give up everything she had—her several cars, her motorcycle, her Mexican ranch interests, her houses and her plans for a boat on the Riviera—for art.

"As far as I was concerned," Miss Powers said in the course of her recent wind-swept interview, "my career was going nowhere. It was becoming stagnant. It wasn't that I was making B movies—they were multi-million-dollar productions. They just weren't any good.

"I kept making trips to London and I began to think of going to work for the National Theater, which pays 27 pounds a month. Many of my friends are actors over there and we had chats, and I realized if I wanted to go to England the remunerations—the financial remunerations—are not anywhere near what we have in the United States, but the artistic remunerations are much greater.

"Anyway, I didn't want to leave with the image I had. Well, the television show rang me up in Eng-

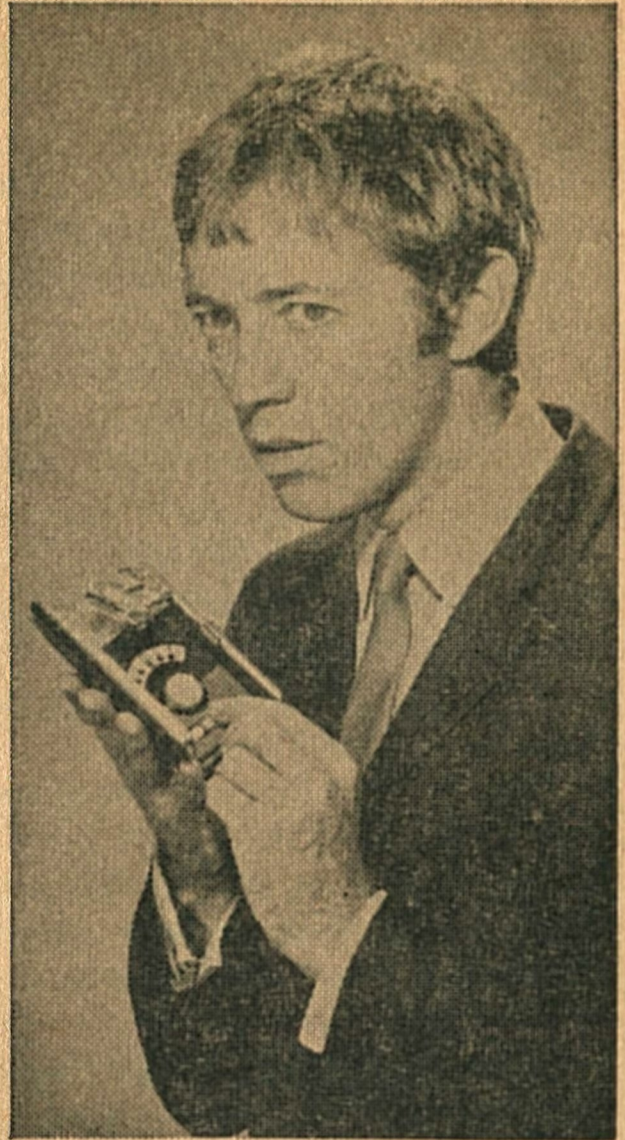
land and it seemed the best thing to do at the time. And it got me gracefully out of a contract I was very unhappy with, with a studio that is progressing at snail's pace, and you can quote me."

In fact, Miss Powers' previous stagnation is a situation common to a number of young actresses in Hollywood. They are known as the faceless wonders, the starlets who work frequently, date Eddie Fisher and manage to accumulate vast amounts of material possessions.

Their romances, their ups and downs, their trials and tribulations, their opinions on what they find attractive in the opposite sex, are chronicled for the benefit of movie magazine readers everywhere, but they never quite emerge as individual personalities. This position occasionally drives some of them to do nude layouts in *Playboy Magazine*.

Stefanie Powers began her career at eighteen, after graduating from Hollywood High School. She was born in Hollywood 23 years ago of Polish parents and named Stefania Zofja Federkievicz. She spoke Polish before she spoke English, a fact she uses to explain her broad-A English accent.

Her parents were divorced when she was quite young; she has an older brother who is a writer, and she prefers to say nothing more about her early years. "I don't like to talk about my family," she says. "It just opens up a



NOEL HARRISON

can of peas." Several years ago, newspaper articles on Miss Powers said that her mother was her manager, but the other day Miss Powers denied this had ever been true.

At Hollywood High, Miss Powers was a cheerleader, but the post was taken away from her the day she was kicked out of high school. It all had to do with a prank she and four boy friends had pulled on school property.

"We cut down a tree and paint-

ed a bench green," said Miss Powers. "I was running for student body vice president when I was arrested. Very subtly, four police cars pulled up in front of school during lunch hour, right? We were arrested for . . . I think they call it mischievous mischief."

The school allowed her to return to graduate. During her first summer out of school, Miss Powers went to audition for a dancing part in "West Side Story" and, to her surprise, she got the part of Anybodys, the tomboy Jet. "I was one of Jerome Robbins' whipping boys," said Miss Powers.

"Every day I'd go home and cry. It was absolutely mad. They'd brought all these people out from New York but no one was signed. We didn't know from day to day who was going to be canned."

As it happened, Miss Powers was canned. But in the course of rehearsals, she had been discovered, in a manner of speaking, by Tom Laughlin, an independent producer, who cast her in something called "Among the Thorns." It was never released.

A contract with Columbia Pictures and twelve movies followed rapidly. Among them were "Love Has Many Faces" ("I don't even want to talk about that"), "Tammy Tell Me True" ("Just a way of doing a screen test for Ross Hunter"), "The Interns" and "The New Interns," "Stagecoach" ("Wasn't it terrible?"), "McLint-

ock," and "Die, Die My Darling" with Tallulah Bankhead ("It was made by a British movie company responsible for 'Rasputin and the Mad Monk.' They were trying to branch out with more quality. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough quality").

During this period, Miss Powers managed to accumulate a variety of interests. She is fanatical about Mexico and is an honorary member of the Bullfighters Union, having fought one bull and 18 cows in Mexico and Colombia. She is now part-owner of a ranch outside Mexico City, where people can pay for the privilege of a mock-bullfight with a small cow.

Miss Powers is also interested in archeology, having gone on a dig in Dorset, England. She races cars. She water-skis. She shoots. She speaks four languages—Polish, Spanish, French and Italian.

She has considered opening a boutique to sell the kinds of Mod clothes she wears. "I must do everything," she said. "I have this compulsion about everything. I don't ever want to go to my grave saying, 'Dammit, I wish I'd done such-and-such.' I don't think there's anything that doesn't interest me."

At the moment, what interests her primarily? "The bulls, Mexico, England. Well, first of all, my marriage, I guess."

Four years ago, while playing third base in a female entertainers

softball league, Miss Powers met Gary Lockwood, an actor who had the lead in the television series "The Lieutenant."

"Jimmy Garner and John Casavetes started a men's football game, and the wives and girl friends of that team formed a softball game," said Miss Powers. "Keely Smith was second base and I was third base when Gary walked over. We were both going with different people. We drove the same kind of automobiles. Porsches. We used to race. I used to drive it in rallies. Don't get me wrong, I'm not any Pat Moss.

"My new car—Stirling is a good friend of mine, and he was consulted on the design. It's a little two-liter race car called a Marcus 1800. It's not a Grand Prix car. It runs in the class of Triumphs, Porsches, AC Bristols. It's won 18 out of 20 races. Steve McQueen is dying to get hold of it."

Anyway, to make a long story full of motors and gas tanks short, they got married recently in an old church on Catalina Island. The bride wore a dress by Mary Quant. The groom chartered a 100-foot yacht for the weekend. "It was super," said Miss Powers.

"We're going to live on a boat," she continued. "We're having a 70-foot schooner designed which we're going to keep in the South of France. With a car on it. We're going to solve all our problems. We have an Austin Mini Cooperess,



a fast little number. It won first, second and third in the Monte Carlo rally. We're trying to rig it so we can keep it on the boat.

"I think it'll last," she said of the marriage. "That's stupid to say, I know. Anyway, we're bound and determined to stay together even if it doesn't work. We're never getting a divorce."

The Lockwoods live in her house in Benedict Canyon and his house at the beach, with their four automobiles, two motorcycles, two cats, two dachshunds, and a puppy whose father is Harrison's Tibetan dog.

For the time being at least, her pre-yacht period, Miss Powers is finding her work hard and intensely rewarding. "I've never really not gotten along with other actors," she said, "but I've never found anyone like Noel. He's my soul-mate."

PHOTO FINISH

by V. A. LEVINE



I STEPPED into the cool of the secretariat building of the United Nations. Outside was the desert.

I took the fluted aluminum escalator up to the second floor and crossed into the Conference Building to report to Inspector R. Akutagawa, Chief of UN Security. He was brewing his usual pot of tea as I walked in.

"Ah, Lowry," he said. He half bowed. "Please sit."

"Another scorcher today," I said.

Yesterday, Sunday, had been 105, the hottest July 4 in history. Today, it was supposed to go up to 101.

Akutagawa looked up from his teamaking. He said: "Someone caught Simon Wace in the Gardens at two-fifteen this morning. Tried to smash his head in. Two guards

intervened. The assailant unfortunately escaped."

"Wace?"

"He is in the New York Infirmary with a severe concussion." Akutagawa poured me some tea. He was a compact man with a deeply lined face, who owned a black belt in judo. His age appeared indeterminate. He could have been thirty—or sixty. I happened to know he was fifty-one.

"You'll want to talk to the guards," Akutagawa continued. He gave me a slip of paper on which he'd printed their names: Richard Bonhomme and partner, Jorg Kolodny. "Incidentally," Akutagawa said, "there was a camera taken. A Hasselblad."

I nodded. That suggested plenty. Wace was EXPOSE's man at the United Nations. Scandalous news, with the emphasis on scandal, was

A collector, he had been. A collector of juicy secrets—which he would sell if the price was right. But now he was fighting to stay out of hell—and I had to find out who had tried to put him there!



his line. Wace was just right for the job—amoral, pocked and pimply and pathologically inquisitive. He'd led a charmed life up to 2:15, July 5. The wonder was, no one had caught up with him before.

"The grounds were searched," Akutagawa said, anticipating me. "There was no sign of the camera."

I said: "So, the motive could have been robbery. A fully equipped Hasselblad sells for at least five hundred dollars."

"It could also have been ignorance," he said. "Someone was after the film. Didn't know how to detach the film magazine from the unit. It looks complicated. It isn't, of course. You just have to know the Hasselblad." The corners of his mouth moved slightly upwards.

I said: "Could be it was both. When can we talk to Wace?"

"Tomorrow maybe. The doctors are sanguine." He checked his watch. "I have an appointment with the secretary-general," he said. "You'll keep in touch?"

"Yes." I dialed the guardhouse and spoke to Bonhomme. Kolodny was out. Bonhomme agreed to meet me in the Gardens in fifteen minutes. He was on time, a large open faced man in his late twenties, with flaming red hair. A Belgian national. He had served with the UN in the Congo in 1960-61 and was part of external security at the world court at the Hague before transferring to UN headquarters six months ago.

He asked about Wace. I told him the doctors were sanguine. He didn't seem overjoyed, but there was no reason why he should be.

"I read your report," I told him. "You're sure it was a man?"

He sounded surprised: "You mean, could it have been a woman?" He had a deep, pleasing voice, with barely a trace of accent. "I saw his back only. He was twenty-five yards ahead of me, almost at the car. You know how the lights are."

I did. Low wattage and strung out tenuously, even along the promenade which gave onto the East River.

"You didn't see the car?" I said.

"Not really. It was behind the line of pin oaks at the north end of the Gardens. Sounded like a sports job. Come to think of it," he added, "I heard the engine running. You know how sound carries."

I asked: "There was a driver, then?"

Bonhomme nodded: "There had to be. The car began moving before the—er—man was completely outside the Gardens."

There wasn't much else. The assailant was running with his elbows close to his sides, which indicated he was carrying the camera football style. The light situation ruffled me. I'd have to talk to Akutagawa about it. Maybe he could drop a hint to the secretary-general the next time he went hobnobbing on the thirty-eighth floor.

I asked Bonhomme to send Kolodny out. Meanwhile, I examined the spot where Wace had been found. He'd made a bad mess of the rose garden, a donation from the wife of the Dutch Ambassador to the UN., according to the white lettered sign. Yellow Beauties they



were, or had been. Wace and his assailant had cut a wide swathe through them. Someone cleared his throat. I looked up.

"Is a great pity," Kolodny said, his sad eye focused on the crushed flowers. He was squat, dark and immensely powerful in the shoulders. He'd lost an eye in 1956, during the revolution in Budapest. He was saying: "For this, gladly would I strangle—"

"Wace?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

I grinned. As Akutagawa might say, it looked like Wace was at the nadir of his popularity.

"Relax," I told Kolodny. "Someone got there ahead of you. Besides, we look bad enough as it is. Just tell me what happened after you came on with Bonhomme."

He told me: "I do not apologize. At two-fifteen I hear this cry. Bonhomme is patrolling the Gardens. I go running. There Bonhomme is, bent over Wace, examining. We call the ambulance."

"You didn't see anyone running?"

"No."

"You hear the car pulling away?"

"No, I arrive too late. This Bonhomme afterwards tells me."

I thanked him and, after confirming that he and Bonhomme were off duty from eight to midnight on July 4, returned to the office. Akutagawa wasn't back yet, so I made a couple of phone calls.

I called EXPOSE first. Maybe Wace's assignment would give us a clue. I spoke to Mondial, the editor. We'd built up a nodding acquaintance over the years. He couldn't tell me much. All he knew was that Wace was doing a UN story, something that began July 4. Wace was something like their star reporter, so they gave him a long rope.

I told him we needed his help and he sighed gustily.

"What do you want to know?"

I said: "You were in contact with Wace on the fourth, right?" He was. Wace was in the field all day, but he reported in periodically.

"Think back now," I said. "Did anything unusual happen? Like someone asking to see Wace, or

maybe asking questions about him? Anything at all?"

There was a silence.

"Now that you mention it," he finally said, "someone called around five. Wanted to know where he could reach Wace."

"Man?"

"Yes. Sounded like he'd been drinking. Muffled voice. I told him to leave his number and Wace would call him."

Whoever it was wouldn't tell Mondial what it was all about. He left a number, said he'd be there between five and seven. That was the only unusual thing that happened. Mondial gave me the number: EX 4-9700. Sounded like it was in the UN area. Mondial also gave me the address of Wace's wife—they were separated—but I had to drag it out of him.

I called EX 4-9700. Antony & Cleo's Bar & Grill. I knew it. 47th and Second. Wace's wife had an unlisted number.

I decided to go to Antony & Cleo's first. It was closer; also it was about lunch time.

So Akutagawa wouldn't worry about me—an unlikely prospect—I left him a note telling him as much as I knew. Only, knowing him, the chances were he'd know more than me. I didn't let that worry me. After all, he's got twenty years experience on me. He came to UN Security, as they say, well recommended: superintendent of the metropolitan police in Tokyo

for twelve years, wide recognition as an outstanding if at times unorthodox criminologist.

I ended the note with the promise to keep in touch, washed up, and took a stroll over to 47th and Second. The temperature had climbed steadily. It was now 99. I could feel the heat of the asphalt burning through my shoes. The shade was just a little less intolerable. At least, I figured, Antony & Cleo's would be air-cooled.

It was and then some. I sat at the bar and ordered a beer and a turkey sandwich from Orlando, who had bought out Cleo and Antony some five years back. Orlando was bald and round as a beer barrel. And as hard. He was one barkeep who didn't need to hire a bouncer.

"Hey, Miro," he said—my full name is Casimiro Lowry. "I hear it's gonna up to a hundred and one. That true?" He waved a thick finger under my nose. He smelled of garlic.

"Maybe," I said, still chewing. "Why don't you stick your big head outside and take a reading, if you must know?"

"Not me." He finished polishing a glass and held it up to the light. "I leave that to the customers. I ain't dumb." He chuckled away.

I chuckled with him. We sounded like two obscene old men.

"Listen, Orlando," I said finally, "I need your help." I started on the second half of the sandwich and

took a swig of beer. "You have a busy day yesterday?"

"So so. Why?"

"Five in the afternoon. How was it?"

He screwed up his face. He was thinking. I'd seen him do it before. He repeated the question: "Five in the afternoon? Let me see." He unraveled his face after while. "Yeah, I remember now. We was busy. Real busy. I turn around and all of a sudden there's twenty guys in here, yammering away."

I asked: "Regulars?"

"Nah. I never seen them before."

They were all together, cracking jokes, kidding one another. Mostly beer drinkers. From what they said, he gathered they had been at the UN. Picketing. They brought a sign in with them that read: UN RUN FROM KREMLIN. GET KREMLIN OUT OF USA.

One of them said something about the guards being afraid to let them in the buildings. I guessed these were the people who had spent Sunday afternoon outside the filigreed gates of the secretariat. Yes, a couple of them made phone calls. Several received phone calls. There was nothing unusual about any of them.

Except maybe for one guy, small and skinny, with a big voice, who they treated with deference. One call had been for him. Orlando called him "Greasy Dan" because of his long, slicked back hair. Or-

lando's from the old country. He's pretty conservative, I guess. I asked if Wace had made it in. No. When did Greasy Dan and his boys leave? Around 6:30.

So far as he knew, no one else used the phone around five. Not that that proved or disproved anything. The call to Mondial could have come from anywhere. Maybe none of the incoming calls had been from Wace. I'd just have to keep digging.

I had time, so I figured I'd try Wace's wife before making it back to the office. She lived at 350 East 51st Street. According to Mondial she worked somewhere in the UN area. I hadn't asked him why or how long she and Wace had been separated, nor did he volunteer the information. Mondial's funny that way. It wasn't always his most endearing trait.

I got to the house—it was a clean, ivy-covered brownstone—and rang the bell above the name, Priscilla Wace. Prissy Wace! I shook my head. I must have sighed because the woman who materialized behind me told me not to fret. She was Mrs. Wace. She asked if I was from Atlantic & Pacific Life Insurance Co.

The voice was a rich contralto, beautifully controlled. She matched the voice—pale oval face, shadowed by a floppy white straw hat, deepest blue eyes, a taut, slender woman dressed in a simple but expensive white sheath with match-

ing gloves and shoes. She looked thirty. She was probably older. Wace was in his late forties.

I told her who I was. She hardly blinked. She said simply: "Of course. Mondial mentioned you."

I couldn't place the accent. Her English was too precise to be natural. She appraised me openly. Then, as if deciding I'd pass, she invited me in.

"I don't know whether I can help you," she said. We were seated in beige contemporary armchairs facing one another. "You see, Simon and I haven't been in close contact since the separation. That was almost three years ago. Simon drops in, but not frequently. He has his interests"—she said it with some bitterness—"and I have mine. You know, the twain—and all that."

She last saw him about a week ago. No, she didn't know what his July 4 project was and furthermore she wasn't interested. I backed up a bit. I didn't want to lose her. I said, "He must have built up a backlog of hatred over the years." I made it a statement rather than a question.

"Oh, yes, indeed he has." Her voice sharpened, then flattened out. She added: "But this is the first time it has led to violence."

"You see a definite connection?"

"Of course. Don't you?"

"Can you pinpoint the connection? I mean, threats, promises of revenge? **Something** a little more specific?"

She shook her head. "There were so many threats. We both learned to discount them, even the more violent ones."

I shifted impatiently. "What about promises of revenge? The kind of thing that would come after an expose was published?"

"I really couldn't say." She captured a strand of hair and pressed it back in place. She wore a wedding band. It wasn't much, just a plain flat gold circle, but it was a wedding band. She wore no other rings or jewelry.

I asked pointedly: "Have you seen Wace? They tell me it's a severe concussion."

She colored. "You have no right—"

"Look," I said, "Wace was attacked on UN ground. That gives me the right. Think. Someone must stand out as a likely suspect."

We sat staring at one another until she finally shook her head.

"It's no good," she said, "I can't think. You'll just have to give me more time."

I'd had enough. I stood up, one hundred eighty lbs of frustration at a height of six-one and said: "Call me tomorrow morning."

I left my number and lit out of there. I walked back to the office, sorting things out in my mind. The day was pretty much shot, but there were a couple of things I could do before I knocked off.

I called the district manager at A & P Life. He promised to call

back as soon as he had the information I wanted. I knew him from way back. There would be no problem there. I also called the guardhouse and had them put Bonhomme on special duty. I talked to Bonhomme briefly and detailed his duties. I then went in to see Inspector Akutagawa. He was brewing a fresh pot of tea. I sat down after making my report.

"The secretary-general is worried about the Wace incident," he said. "It's in the papers, you know."

I made a sympathetic noise. I told him about the light situation in the gardens. He promised to do something about it. I then asked: "How's Wace?"

"There is no change."

"The doctors still sanguine?"

"They are hoping for improvement by tomorrow."

I watched Akutagawa pour the tea, his small body moving with deliberation and grace. He bowed slightly as he handed me a tiny cup. His hand was steady as a block of oak.

I said: "Wace could maybe clear everything up."

"I'm afraid we shall have to do without him for the moment." Akutagawa shrugged. "Fortunately, there is his wife."

"Separated wife."

He ignored the correction. "There is also this highly interesting character who on July 4 appeared at the head of a select group of pickets protesting the

Kremlin's capture of the UN. Oh, yes," he said, responding to my open mouth, "they are one and the same."

He handed me the field report for July 4. There was no question. The description tallied. Here was Orlando's "Greasy Dan." Also, there was a record of an interview he'd given a reporter. His group was called the Independence Day Ad Hoc Committee for the Abolition of the Kremlin and the UN. He's identified himself as Daniel Webster.

"A nut," I said.

The report closed with the words: "Identification of group and leader unverified." Which meant roughly that a fast check with the New York Police Department and the FBI regional office revealed nothing.

Akutagawa said: "Highly interesting, nevertheless. I would not overlook him. More tea?"

"Thank you."

"Finally," Akutagawa said, "there is the witness." He studied my reaction from under half-veiled eyes.

"Ah, yes," I said, with extreme politeness. "The witness."

"You are not surprised?" He leaned forward, then relaxed with a grin. "You are not as inscrutable as you would appear," he said. "In fact, you are quite surprised."

"Not at all." I was determined to have the last word. "There's always a witness."

"Perhaps so. But that in itself is not surprising. That such a witness should step forward, that is the surprise."

"Who," I asked, "was so obliging?"

"A lady," he said, "who happened to be looking out of her fourth floor picture window—"

"In the UN Towers—"

He nodded. This was the twin towered luxury apartment of recent vintage which overlooked the UN from the north side of Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza.

Akutagawa continued: "She saw the assailant running for the car, a black Volkswagen. The light was poor, but she's sure it was a man."

I asked: "Did she see who was driving?"

"No."

"But she got the license number?"

"Unfortunately, no."

I glared at the teapot.

"I hate witnesses," I said. "Especially, old ladies who peek from lace curtained windows after midnight. And whose testimony later turns out to be less fact than myth based on poor vision."

"Nevertheless, I think you should talk to her," Akutagawa said. He added: "In all fairness I must say that she did not sound decrepit."

I SPOKE TO the lady the following morning. Elaine Carruth was her name. Akutagawa was right. She

wasn't decrepit. In fact, she was under twenty-five, about five ten, with sea-green eyes, hair like flowing champagne, and curved like a showgirl.

She also had a blueblack bruise beneath her right eye.

I apologized for barging in so early in the morning—it was tenthirty. She fielded my apologies graciously and told me how happy she was to cooperate with UN Security. I thought she was going to climb into my lap but she held back at the last minute. I declined a cup of coffee, with and without brandy. She told me I was staring. I told her I was Lowry and that drew an excessively polite smile.

She repeated her description of last night's scene.

Her voice was light, almost girl-like. It was meant to be disarming, but there was a level of strength beneath it which dominated it. She was sure it was a black Volkswagen and that two people had driven away in it.

She had called Akutagawa, she told me, soon after she'd read the story in the paper.

I stared out of the picture window, south onto Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza. I wondered how the lighting was at two-fifteen in the morning. Beyond the Plaza stretched the UN gardens, with its guardpost in the southwest corner, then the domed general assembly building and, finally, the towering forty-storied secretariat. It was a view

you couldn't buy for less than \$30,000, plus yearly expenses.

I turned and stared at the lady. She was something else again. Cool. A lot cooler than Priscilla Wace. Frozen, maybe.

"The doorman," I started to say.

"There is no doorman after midnight." She stared right back at me. "A closed TV circuit takes over till six—"

"That's when the day man comes on?"

"Yes." She sipped her coffee.

I nodded toward the window. "Must be quite a view at two-fifteen in the morning." I said.

She shrugged.

"I'll have some of that coffee," I said. She obliged. I took a rain-check on the brandy.

"What made you look out the window at that ghastly time of night?" I asked.

"I should object to that question," she said. "Let's just say I couldn't sleep, and let it go at that." She drained her cup and took some more coffee in her brandy.

The phone rang. It was Akutagawa. He had a couple of items of news for me. He'd located Greasy Dan Webster and assigned Kolodny to watch him.

I took down the address: 523 Hudson. That was downtown, about 10th Street. Also, A & P Life had called. Wace was insured for \$50,000. The prime beneficiary was Priscilla.

I asked about Wace. He was

conscious. We had a date with him at four. I told Akutagawa I'd report back before two. I thanked Elaine Carruth and headed downtown. I made a note to myself on an old envelope as I rode downtown on the Lexington Avenue local: 1) Get fix on Elaine Carruth. Who is she? What does she do? Married, divorced, separated? On the town? 2) Get a report from Bonhomme.

I got off at Astor Place and took the bus west to Hudson. Kolodny was parked on the southeast corner of 10th Street, diagonally opposite 523 Hudson, one of several six-story redbrick houses which probably had one apartment on each floor when they were built, in 1893, but now had at least four, and housed maybe ten times as many people as originally. They were spilled out of the doorways and ranged on the fire escapes. Mostly women and children. Lots of children. A few guys.

I didn't see Greasy Dan around. He'd come out for groceries an hour ago, Kolodny said—there was a supermarket directly opposite—and had returned shortly thereafter. I told Kolodny to hold on. If I wasn't out in half an hour he was to come get me.

Daniel Webster lived in 4 Rear South. There was no elevator and I was feeling nasty by the time I got to the fourth floor. It wasn't just the exercise. The hallways smelled of urine and stale beer and the tem-

perature inside must have been 105. I rapped on 4 Rear South.

Someone called out: "Yeah?" Bedsprings creaked. Now he stood behind the door. "Who is it?" The voice was rough edged and deep.

I said: "Open the door, Dan. I want to talk to you."

"Who is this?" The voice was getting curious.

I said nothing, waited, readjusted my balance. The door opened maybe half an inch. I kicked it hard and burst into the apartment. The momentum carried Webster ten feet into the single room, with standup shower. Wedged him between the radiator and sagging sofa. I picked a Colt .45 automatic out of his hand and cocked it.

"Wait." His voice was a croak.

I sat down. His eyes bulged. Orlando had described him pretty well. Only the voice surprised me.

"Thought you were the fuzz," he said.

"Get up." I motioned him toward the sofa.

"Say, what is this? You got no right—"

"Shut up." I looked around the apartment. "Where's the Hasselblad?"

He stared at me. "Huh? Where's the what?"

"The Hasselblad, wise guy. The camera you took from Wace after you flattened him."

"Listen, you got it all wrong—"

I said: "So, you know who Wace is?"

"Yeah, sure I know who he is. He's the so-and-so who trades in dirty stories. Someone should have flattened him after he wrote that dirt about General Ellender."

Ellender was a conservative general who had been retired from active duty because of over-active politicking during a presidential election year.

But that was almost two years ago.

I said: "So, you bided your time. Came July four and you figured you'd take care of two items—by picketing the UN and coshing Wace for Ellender. Very symbolic." Webster shook his head violently. "I admit I picketed the UN. All right, that was my idea. No crime against that. Lots of people picket the UN. But that was as far as it went. I didn't touch Wace."

"You saw him taking some pictures—"

"Sure. So did a thousand other people."

"You call his office?"

"No." His voice rose to a shout. "I wouldn't dirty my hands on that bloodsucker."

"You met him in the UN Gardens at two in the morning—"

"Huh?" He blinked at me, then started laughing.

"Knock it off," I snarled. I waved the .45 at him.

He stopped, his eyes fixed on the pistol.

"You're making me nervous with that iron," he said.

"Talk, mister." I held the .45 steady on his chest.

He sighed. "Okay. You can check this out. Sunday night, me and the boys decide to go to Philly. You know, to march outside Independence Hall. We got to Philly at ten. We marched for awhile. Some joker tried to break us up. The cops came and threw us in the wagon." He grinned: "I spent the night in the tank, from eleven till nine the next morning."

I said: "I can check it out."

"That's the idea," he said. "Now, please, the gun."

I called Akutagawa. He promised to call me back in ten minutes. He did. Webster was clean. The whole story checked out. That was that. I took the pistol with me, told him he could claim it when he got himself a license. Kolodny I met charging up the stairs.

I guess I cut it pretty fine. He was snorting like an enraged bull. I calmed him down, bought him a drink at the *White Horse Inn*, and then let him drive me uptown to the office.

Akutagawa had made a fresh pot of tea. He also had some rice cakes his wife had made. So we shared rice, tea and information.

Bonhomme had reported in detail. He'd followed Priscilla Wace around and had done some background investigation on her.

The sum of it was very little. She still carried a torch for Wace. Mondial was interested in her, but there



was no reciprocation. Since Wace had been injured she had been to see him frequently. Her business with A & P Life was normal under the circumstances and particularly since there was a disability clause built into the life insurance coverage.

Bonhomme had also checked Mondial out. He was a bachelor who had competed unsuccessfully with Wace for Priscilla. That sounded interesting, but it had been ten years back. There was no evidence of discord between Mondial and Wace. They obviously worked well together. Mondial was also the publisher of *EXPOSE*. Bonhomme thought Mondial was a good bet for further investigation. I doubted it.

Akutagawa suggested we hold off on Mondial, at least until we talked to Wace.

Finally, there was a message from Priscilla Wace. She'd called and wanted me to call her back. I dialed her number. The phone

rang awhile before she answered it. She was slightly breathy.

"I just this moment came in," she explained. "I've just come back from seeing Simon."

I asked: "Everything all right?"

"Fine. He's feeling very much better. He's looking forward to seeing you this afternoon."

"You called earlier," I reminded her.

"Yes. The strangest thing happened. I was thinking about what you said, but nothing would come. Then, last night I saw this man on the street. He looked familiar. I felt sure I'd seen him before, or someone like him. It finally came to me this morning."

I asked: "Who?"

"Marcel Vignon."

It took awhile for the name to click. When I had it I said: "Vignon's dead. He committed suicide back in the fifties." He'd been a French career diplomat, as far as I could recall, and there had been some scandal or other attached to his death. I said the name to Akutagawa and he nodded slowly.

Mrs. Wace continued: "Yes, but you see, Simon's expose of Vignon led to an investigation and Vignon was recalled and summarily retired. A week later he shot himself to death in a Paris hotel."

"Go on," I said.

"Simon gave testimony at the inquest. I accompanied him to Paris. Vignon had a brother who swore revenge on Simon. He was carried

out of the courtroom screaming something like: 'You murdered him just as surely as if you'd squeezed the trigger.' I don't remember his exact words. He looked mad enough to carry out the threat. Simon shrugged it off, but I don't think he ever quite forgot Vignon or his brother."

"It wasn't the brother you saw?"

"No. This was a much younger man. Someone in his twenties."

I said: "That happened back in fifty-nine?"

"August of nineteen fifty-eight."

"Eight years," I said. "I don't get it. Why wait that long? I take it, you heard nothing from the brother during that time?"

"Nothing."

I told her I'd check it out. I thanked her and said we'd be in touch with her. Then I hung up and turned to face Akutagawa. His black eyes were unfocused. He sat Buddha-still. I waited. Finally, he snapped out of it. He said: "I will wire the *Surete* about Vignon and the brother while you talk to Wace."

"I thought—" I started to say.

He shook his head. "I will be more productive here. There are some phone calls"—he spoke vaguely—"and I wish to spend a little time in the Gallery." The 'Gallery' was in the third basement of the Secretariat and housed photopix of present and past delegates, employees and news personnel, including those *persona non*

grata, as the diplomats like to put it.

As I was leaving—it was 3:30—I said: “Anything special you want me to ask Wace?”

“Yes, Miro-san. Ask him how Elaine Carruth got a black eye?”

I laughed. He didn’t. I thought about it all the way to the hospital. I couldn’t see where it made any sense at all. What’s Carruth’s private life to UN Security? She was only a witness, a casual observer. It could have been anyone else.

WACE WAS IN a private room at the New York Infirmary, his head swathed in bandages. He was propped up and writing on a lined yellow pad when I walked in. He was a large, ungainly man and the bandaged head made him look twice as grotesque as he normally looked.

The pocked face didn’t improve his looks. Only his eyes, a clear and penetrating blue, were attractive. They burned mesmerically, yet he had no fever. I checked his chart.

I said: “You look like you’re doing okay. You had your wife worried.”

“Priscilla worried? That’s a laugh.” He laughed weakly. “If she’s so concerned with my welfare, let her give me a divorce. We’ve been separated for three years. Hell, I can’t get rid of the woman.” He placed the yellow pad on the dresser by his bed.

“The hell with your private life,”

I said. “Just tell me what happened July fifth. Who hit you?”

“I don’t know. Someone called me in the press room late that afternoon, July fourth. Said he had some information. I agreed to meet him in the UN gardens at two the next morning.”

“You didn’t suspect anything?”

“I get a lot of stuff that way. Besides”—he flashed a sharp look at me— “Where’s there a much safer place . . .”

“What did you have in the camera?”

“Film.”

I said: “You’re kidding.”

“So help me.” He raised his right hand.

I said: “You wouldn’t like to tell me what was on that film?”

“Sure, I’ll tell you. I was doing a piece on a right wing protest group.”

I said: “Not the Independence Day Ad Hoc Committee?” I got it out in one breath, but it was a mouthful.

“Why, yes.” He sounded mildly surprised. “I interviewed their leader. Say, you don’t suppose—” His eyes widened.

“Maybe you got something there,” I said. “I’ll look into it.” I waited for more. This was something I had learned from Akutagawa. It came.

“The guy was an obvious nut,” Wace continued. “You’d think he’d have enough sense to choose an ordinary name. Uh uh. Not him. He’s

got to call himself Daniel Webster." He began to laugh. "A right wing fanatic by the name of Dan Webster. That really takes the cake." I let him laugh it up for awhile.

Then I sprang Akutagawa's question.

Wace stopped laughing. He stammered, "What?" His face went slack. "Who'd you say?"

I let the silence build. It was a nice, quiet room with excellent acoustics.

When it came his voice was thick: "What is this—some kind of crazy game?"

"Sure," I said. "I ask a question. You answer it. Elaine Carruth's the name. She got a black eye. How?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm warning you, this Lowry—"

"Yeah?" I had an inspiration: "Maybe you want to play Marcel Vignon, Paris, nineteen fifty-eight?" This time I didn't have to wait so long for a reaction.

Wace's eyes bulged. He raised himself on one elbow and the veins corded in his neck.

"Get out of here," he screamed. "Get out." He rang the bell by his bed table. He sank back onto the bed. A nurse came to escort me out. An angry nurse. She told me a few things. I didn't argue with her. I got out fast.

AKUTAGAWA took my report calmly. Every once in awhile he would nod as though receiving con-

fimation of something he knew or suspected. At the end, he asked: "Why did you mention Marcel Vignon?"

The question stumped me.

"I don't know. It just seemed like the right thing to say. I had him going. I wanted to see how far he'd go. Why?"

"It looks to me," Akutagawa said, pouring tea for both of us, "as though the Vignon affair is the key to everything."

"The *Surete* replied?"

"Yes. Vignon's brother died in nineteen sixty. Vignon's wife and child disappeared. There were no other relatives."

"But—"

He held up his hand. "Patience, please. That is not the end of the story. Do you remember what Vignon looked like?"

I shook my head.

He slid an eight by ten shot across the desk to me. "From the gallery," he said. "This one was taken in fifty-seven, and this one"—he slid another one across to me—"this was taken in fifty-eight, a few days before Vignon returned to Paris."

I studied them closely. Vignon was no beauty. His face was grossly round and his eyes set far apart. He was bald, except for a little hair on the sides. There was some difference between the earlier and later photograph. In the later one, his face had lost its grossness and you could see the shape of his

bones. The eyes were more candid, less studied. If you believed that suffering purified, you would say it had done its work here. I hold no brief either way. The main thing was, I couldn't see what Akutagawa was driving at. I looked up at him and shrugged.

He said: "The resemblance is in the eyes." He handed me a magnifying glass.

I studied the eyes in both shots. Then, it came to me. I had it, but I wasn't sure I wanted it. I said: "But the name . . ."

Akutagawa said: "The wife remarried. Moved to Belgium with her new husband. The child took the stepfather's name: Bonhomme. Logical enough under the circumstances—"

"But you just said the French *Surete*—"

"I too had an inspiration. I cabled the Belgian *Surete*."

I said: "So it was revenge, the son avenging the father?"

Akutagawa shook his head. "I do not think so." He poured some more tea. "Revenge is a simple crime. This was not a simple case. I did some further checking. The outstanding fact was that I could not find another person who saw or heard that Volkswagen pull away at two fifteen on July fifth. I asked myself: 'Who reported the Volkswagen and the two accomplices?' Two persons only: Bonhomme and Elaine Carruth. Perhaps that was not conclusive, but it was high-

ly suggestive, I think you will agree."

He peered at me out of half-closed eyelids. "One is a UN guard with a record of conspicuous service to the world organization. The other is a young woman, rather beautiful, but unhappily married to a highly placed person in the US Government. For reasons of state the husband refuses to permit a divorce, though they maintain separate residences."

"This was Wace's project?" I said.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. But there was more to it. I got the rest from Elaine Carruth while you were at the hospital talking to Wace." He grinned. "*A quid pro quo*. She told me all she knew. I promised her Wace would not prosecute."

I goggled at him. "You what?" It took me a little while to recover my calm. I said: "You weren't serious, of course."

"I was never more serious," Akutagawa said. "Wace compromised himself badly. We've got enough evidence against him to discourage any action against Bonhomme or Elaine Carruth."

"Poor Elaine," I said, conjuring up a picture of the black eye and the showgirl curves.

Akutagawa waved his hand negatively.

"Misplaced sympathy," he said. "She's the one responsible for the mess."

That stopped me. "I thought Wace—"

"Wace started it. He was doing an expose on Elaine Carruth. You know he specialized in diplomatic and society people. He discovered she wanted a divorce, met her, became infatuated with her. He offered her a way out: he would set before her husband the evidence of an affair she was supposed to be having with Bonhomme, and threaten to publish the account unless the husband came across. In exchange, she agreed to a liaison with Wace."

"But why would Bonhomme agree?"

"Ah, yes." Akutagawa brought his hands together and pursed his lips.

"Wace blackmailed him. He had recognized Bonhomme as the son of Vignon. Bonhomme hadn't forgotten what had happened to his father. His mother was still alive and the shame of rehashing the old affair, he felt, would be too much for her."

"That was Wace's ace in the hole."

Akutagawa nodded.

"But the worm turned," I said, meaning Bonhomme.

"Yes," Akutagawa said. "Or, rather, he was turned—"

"By Elaine Carruth."

"Exactly. She tried to back out of her agreement with Wace after she realized she was falling in love with Bonhomme, and he with her.

"Wace insisted on his rights. Elaine demurred. Wace punched her in the eye."

I sighed. "And Bonhomme evened up the score at 2:15 the following morning."

"Yes." Akutagawa reached into his desk and clicked off the portable tape recorder. He said: "I'll arrange to have Wace see a copy of this. I don't think we'll have any trouble with him." He grinned. "After all, he couldn't use the bar in the delegates lounge if he were declared *persona non grata*."

I reached across for the teapot and filled both our cups. I raised my cup, then lowered it. "What happened to the Hasselblad?"

"Ah, yes," Akutagawa said, "the Hasselblad. That was also part of Bonhomme's story, that the assailant made off with the camera."

I held up my hand: "Permit me," I said most courteously, "to have the final word. Wace did not have the camera with him when he met Bonhomme in the gardens. The camera was a red herring Bonhomme thought up in connection with the story he and Elaine concocted. Actually, Wace left the camera in the press room for safekeeping, and it has been sitting there for the past three days. However, in order to safeguard the property and prevent the film from falling into the wrong hands, you have locked it in the office safe."

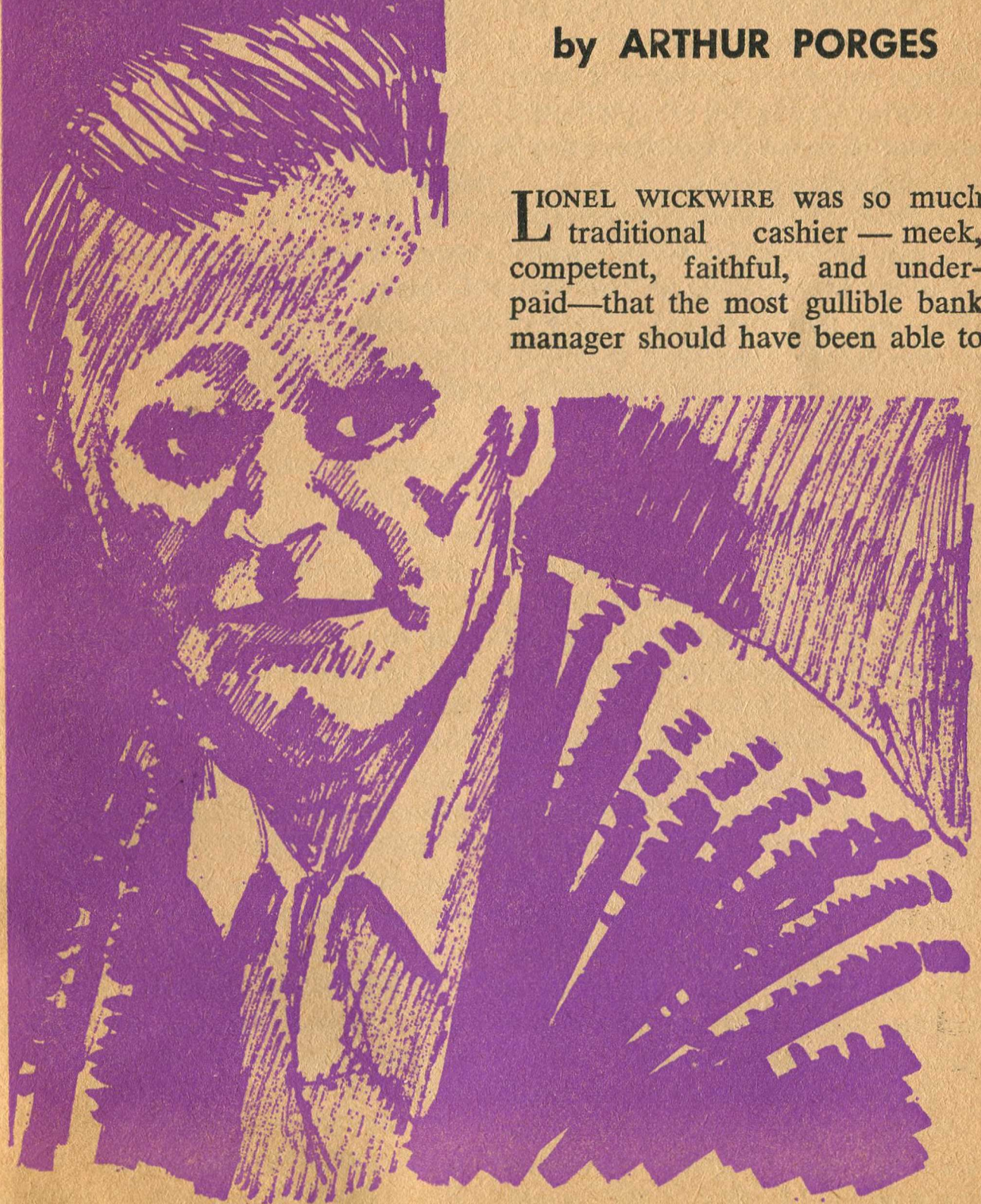
"Precisely," Akutagawa said, and drained his teacup.

The Cunning Cashier

Try your hand at the riddle of the bashful till-grabber, who stole, hid—and wouldn't tell!

by ARTHUR PORGES

LIONEL WICKWIRE was so much traditional cashier — meek, competent, faithful, and underpaid—that the most gullible bank manager should have been able to



predict criminal activity as inevitable. Yet, when the theft came, "Old L. W." broke from the norm to display a kind of brassiness not in character at all.

Ordinarily the culprit turns out to have spent the money on a blonde hussy, or gambled it away on horses, and is full of repentance, anxious to make reparation, even if too broke to manage it.

Clearly, Wickwire had not spent a dime; he hadn't had the chance. One day the money, all one hundred and five thousand dollars of it, was in the vault; and the next, it was gone. Nobody else could possibly have taken it, and yet the man boldly denied his guilt.

Captain Gregg explained all this, quite ruefully, to Julian Morse Townbridge, who slumped behind a huge, littered desk, almost lost in a sagging armchair that seemed upholstered with dirty leather over quicksand.

Once a child prodigy in mathematical physics—among other things—at Harvard, Trowbridge had developed too much intellectual horsepower for his youthful chassis. After a complete breakdown, he had vanished, to reappear—secretly, years later, as a recluse living in a big house in a near-slum neighborhood.

There, maintained by a small annuity from a grandfather, he increased his already immense knowledge of practically everything to be found in books, and

acted as a kind of general consultant to people living in the area, and a few wise ones who came long distances to get his advice.

As a former resident of the neighborhood, Gregg knew the old man, and had discovered him to be a useful criminologist at times.

"He's a plump, soft-spoken little guy, this Wickwire," the detective continued. "Like that man-size rabbit in the play a few years back. Except that he's not invisible—he just makes money disappear. But he's putting us all on; set up the whole business; I'm sure of that."

"Why do you think so?" Trowbridge asked, in his deep, slow voice, so surprising from a man who looked more like a gnome fresh from the Black Forest.

"You'll see in a minute, when I tell you the story. The funny thing is that until about a year ago, Wickwire could have qualified as cashier least likely to steal. Not that he was overpaid; but he had such simple tastes. He's a bachelor of forty-six, but if he had any wild oats to sow, they long since came out as oatmeal, he has no more sex life, for example, as far as we can tell, than—" He groped for a suitable comparison, and the gnome helped out, smoky grey eyes twinkling.

"Try a giant tortoise. They're said to be slow and unenthusiastic. But then they live a long time, so there's no hurry."

Gregg blinked. The love life of anything, even a big turtle, was one bit of esoterica he didn't quite expect from Trowbridge.

"Anyhow," he went on hastily, "Wickwire's idea of real fun is an evening of TV and a bowl of jelly-beans—black ones. But then his half-brother, who was loaded, died of a coronary, and L. W. inherited a terrific showplace: a lovely, modern house on an acre of the most expensive land in the county. A fine estate, with privacy. One side backs up against a sheer bluff, part of the National Forest. The others are bordered by really huge places, millionaires' property. I mention this because you should know that Wickwire could operate pretty well unobserved on any darkish night."

"Doing what?" the gnome demanded, sinking another six inches deeper in the sagging chair.

"Hiding the money," Gregg said grimly. "A lot of bills stashed in a small area, presumably, but we can't find 'em."

"Why are you so certain he's guilty?"

"I'll lay it out, and see what you think. You're a logic expert. After he inherited the house, everything changed, including his personality. To begin with, the tax people took quite a bite, even though he used every deduction possible. He had to pay up with most of his savings—you don't save much on six thousand a



year, even with his simple habits. But that was a one-shot deal. However, property taxes are another story; you have to pay those twice a year. Forever, and always going up.

"Now, on the open market the place is worth almost eighty thousand dollars. It's assessed accordingly. Wickwire griped all over the bank that he didn't see how he could afford to keep up, or even keep, the property. Obviously, he should have sold, or rented, or shared. But he fell in love with the place, and got more depressed every week wondering about the inevitable pinch.

"I imagine that's what made him steal. He wants to put away enough to maintain the estate, and doesn't much care if they do lock him up a few years, just so he can pay taxes from his savings, and then get to the loot on release. And maybe he hopes to beat the rap, since we can't find any money near the house, and he had no chance to hide it elsewhere. Or so it seems."

"You have a motive," Trowbridge said gravely. "But is that all? Where's the evidence, other than opportunity?"

"Coming up," Gregg said, smiling in a bleak way. "He arranged a nice tableau. On Tuesday, the ninth, he invites two friends who work with him to come for dinner on Thursday. He's a good cook for a bachelor. Wednesday afternoon he leaves his car at the agency for an overdue check, saying he won't claim it until Saturday. So one of the two guys picks him up, and all three go to Wickwire's for the feed. That's about six-thirty.

"When they leave the bank, Wickwire's lugging two heavy briefcases. Remarks he's cleaned years' accumulation of junk from his desk. And get this: when the guard asks jokingly if he's cleaning out the vault, damned if the nervy guy doesn't grin sort of sickly and say: 'I left just a little, Sam!'"

The gnome frowned and scratched his head.

"That's not a serious confession."

"Not exactly. But it's what somebody might say in the circumstances, if he was quick, figuring a joke would be less suspicious than a sober denial. He couldn't risk having those cases searched, that's obvious."

"If they were full of cash. But the behavior hardly fits a timid,

withdrawn character of the sort you started with."

"Ah," the detective breathed. "You see! His personality changed with that damned house. Owning a fancy estate put iron in his tired blood, all right!"

The gnome nodded gravely. Gregg had a point. Change the environment, and you change the man.

"Okay," the detective continued. "He fed his two friends, spent the evening with them. When they left, around midnight, that was the first time out of their sight for more than a few minutes. Next morning one of them picks him up—he had no car, remember—and at the bank, the moment the vault's open, Wickwire reports a hundred thousand plus dollars missing. He brought the two cases back empty.

"Now the point is, he had just that one night alone, with no means of transportation, in which to hide the dough. It was in unmarked fifties and hundreds, and pretty bulky—it takes two thousand fifties to make a hundred grand; not that I have to tell you. And so the question is: why such old behavior? and where did he hide the money?"

"You're implying," Trowbridge said, pettishly shoving a dusty tome aside so that he could see Gregg's face, "that he wanted it quite clear the stolen bills had to be near his own house."

"Exactly," Gregg said. "You seem to confirm my reasoning. Couldn't figure it any other way, but wasn't sure I hadn't overlooked something."

"Still, a man can go pretty far on foot in one night."

"Sure, but all those manicured estates around him—no place there to bury anything bulky. Sure to be found by gardeners or somebody. And the National Forest isn't really available, either. It's up on that bluff behind the house, and on top, camping is allowed. Nothing would stay hidden long there, even if he could climb the cliff, which wouldn't be any cinch."

"What does Wickwire say about your theory?"

"Having made his point—no time to hide the money—he's working it to the limit. 'If I stole anything,' he says, 'where is it? I had no chance to dispose of such a bundle.' Hell, he even talks about suing the bank and the police! The rabbit is suddenly a raging tiger, roaring to eat us all up. That's what an estate did to a meek clerk."

The gnome's full lips twitched briefly. Most people can suffer with equanimity a bank's loss of money, particularly if the thief is only that, and hasn't shot up the customers while making his coup.

"You've ruled out his house, I suppose," Trowbridge said.

"That and everything else,"

was Gregg's bitter retort. "Which is why I'm here again."

"Remember," the ex-prodigy said, "he did have months, I infer, to prepare a good hiding place inside."

"True, but it's a modern house, well built by today's ticky-tacky standards, but no Victorian mansion with thick walls, attics, a cellar, and maybe secret chambers. He might rig up a safe spot for a diamond, but not two briefcases full of fifties. Not in that building."

"If his neighbors' estates are out, too," the gnome said, "and the National Forest, that still leaves the highway, although it's rather busy for such a stunt."

"You bet—like a freeway. He'd be spotted in some car's headlights almost continually all night long. We did check the shoulders carefully. Nothing. If the loot weren't so bulky, we couldn't rule out so many places—but that wouldn't help much, either, would it?" he added glumly.

"Is the fellow particularly handy? I mean, with masonry, carpenter work, things like that?"

"Not at first; but when you own a house, you learn, or else. In the beginning, having lived in furnished apartments for years, he would even call the plumber to change a washer. For a homeowner, that's slow suicide! Mi-gawd, with a house, you'd better

be able to build the place yourself, or get nibbled—gulped, rather—to death by repair bills. So he did learn quite a bit, from love as well as necessity, I hazard a guess."

"Hmmp. You've given him no chance since the theft to put the money in a better spot, if any."

"Once he was out on bail, we've had the house watched constantly. Wherever he put the stuff that night, it's still there."

Trowbridge pointed to Gregg's attache case. "Got some photos of the estate?"

"Naturally." Gregg opened the case, took out a sheaf of eight-by-ten glossies, and passed them to the gnome, who opened a packed drawer in the desk, rooted in its tangle of junk, and produced a magnifying glass. With it, he surveyed the prints.

"Very good," Trowbridge said. "You seem to cover the whole place quite thoroughly."

"I saw to that, or tried to," the detective assured him. "By now, I know what you need to work with. I'll leave the rest of the dossier, too," he added wistfully. "Maybe you'll come up with some angle I've missed."

"Can't imagine what, Trowbridge grunted. "But I'll give it a whirl. Come by tomorrow, when you have time, and we'll talk about it."

"Right," Gregg said. "See you

then—unless I hear from you earlier, I hope!" He left.

Like any theorist in science, Trowbridge enjoyed a good puzzle. If it was posed by Nature herself, fine; if by mathematics, and divorced from applications, even better; and if a matter of crime—well, that was a pleasant change occasionally, since its human interest added vitality. Now he put his keen, probing mind to work on the problem of the missing bills.

He was not vain enough to expect an instant victory, or to rule out total failure. Nevertheless he was a bit annoyed to come up with a blank. He could think of nothing Gregg had missed, and the most careful study of the fat dossier suggested no possible hiding place for so bulky a parcel.

Shortly after one in the morning, he sighed, picked up a photo of the grounds, and muttered petulantly: "Not a lot to give the poor guy, but it's all I can think of. Worth a try, perhaps."

Whereupon he yawned noisily, and headed for bed.

The next morning he phoned Gregg. "No," Trowbridge said, in reply to an eager query, his voice testy. "I don't have a thing. Unless he buried the money in several small packets, which is most unlikely. But what I'd like from you, if feasible, are pictures of the estate taken some months back. Any around?"

There was a thoughtful pause on the other end of the line, then Gregg said: "Come to think of it, the local paper did a spread on the place after the inheritance fight. You know, because of the human interest—low-pay cashier gets valuable white elephant. I should be able to get prints from the paper. But what's wrong with ours?"

"Nothing. In fact, I'll want some more, taken to my specifications, after I work with the paper's photos."

"I don't get it. Three sets!"

"I'll explain later; for now, just cooperate, yes?"

"Yes," was the prompt reply. No point in fighting the gnome once his mind was made up.

The newspaper prints came next day, and after working on them for some hours, Trowbridge asked Gregg to come over. He then gave the puzzled detective exact specifications for a new set.

"I've made some basic calculations," he explained tersely. "If your lab man will set the camera as indicated—by the various fixed places, like gatepots and such—his shots will duplicate, as nearly as possible, the paper's. I'm matching angle of sunlight for the season, and all the rest. He must follow directions on time of day and location very carefully."

The detective was boiling with questions, but kept the lid on. Do first, and the explanation would

come later; that was often the gnome's way.

Because of cloudy weather, it was several days before he could bring Trowbridge the photos, but the old man purred over them.

"Good man, your photographer," he said.

There was a clear space on the desk, perhaps for the first time in a decade, Gregg thought wryly, and on it a device made up of mirrors and prisms.

"The basic idea's quite simple," Trowbridge said. "I've built a kind of blinker device, well-known in astronomy. It shifts the gaze rapidly from one photo of a given area to another taken at a different time. If there's any difference—if anything has moved, for example—you get a blinking effect that makes the difference very obvious. Most of the flicker here will be due to expected things: the grassblades; portable stuff, like the mower, and that carton. But we'll look for something unusual—a cache of some kind—while circling the others with red to eliminate them."

He had a print in each holder, and the eyepiece clicked up and back.

"Taking any special sequence?" Gregg asked.

"Yes. From the front gate back to the bluff. If that doesn't turn up anything, then I fear we're licked."

As the detective watched

eagerly, Trowbridge made a methodical progress through the two piles of prints, one of the old ones, from the paper, on the left; a new one, taken by the police technician, and matched exactly on size and aspect, on the right.

"So far, nothing," Trowbridge grumbled later. "Hmm. Looks bad."

He adjusted the last pair, and Gregg's face was gloomy. Trowbridge had rarely failed him in the past. Was this one of the bad days?

The scientist flipped the lever: left, right; left, right. Then the detective saw his big Adam's-apple bob. "What is it?"

"I can't believe it," Trowbridge said, mainly to himself. He snatched the new photo from the holder, scrutinizing it with the magnifier. He drew a hissing breath.

"Mower, boxes, tools, grass, shrubbery—they can flicker; fine," he said. "But the top of a telephone pole—brother! Your rabbit's a genius! What did he use, I wonder. A can? No, it's just painted stovepipe, I'll bet anything. Here, take a look."

Gregg seized the glass, and studied the top of the pole as the gnome's finger indicated. "It looks okay to me," he objected. "Like the rest of the pole."

"You bet it does. But after the blinker gave it away, I can see it's about a yard taller than the

pole was in the old picture. Dead wood doesn't grow, my boy! What Wickwire did, obviously, was fix a stovepipe, painted the same dirty grey, to the top of the pole. Weights inside, or nails at the edges, to hold it against any wind. Then, that night of the dinner, all he had to do was take the money from his briefcases and drop it into the hollow top."

Gregg snapped his fingers, swearing luridly. "We found a real long extension ladder in the garage. I thought he might've used it to dig a hole in the bluff, and we examined a million yards of dirt up there. But it was the pole, blast it!"

"Me, too," Trowbridge grinned. "His dossier mentions he did a stint in the Signal Corps in World War II. That might have given us a hint, but I goofed."

They looked at each other, grinning hugely.

"You know," the detective said, "I'm almost sorry for the little idiot. Me, a cop!"

Later, when the money had been recovered, and a crest-fallen Wickwire returned to custody, Gregg, still wide-eyed, reported to Trowbridge.

"He didn't miss a thing," the detective told him. "Bills wrapped in plastic film; a tight-fitting metal cap on top of the pipe to keep out water or insects; even some taper to match the way a pole narrows up there. And he used

the best marine enamel to stand long weathering, in case we put him away for a long time."

"From the photo, I'd say he even painted dark mottlings to simulate woodpecker borings," the scientist said. "That shows excellent planning."

"Convincing, too; I was up there. I doubt if even a repair man, unless very alert, would notice it from the cross-arm level a yard or two lower. No wonder I

almost hate to see the guy caught."

"Yes," Trowbridge said. "It is rather pathetic. Thoreau was right in stressing the problems of ownership. If Wickwire had been cut out of the will with the proverbial dollar instead of being so 'lucky,' he'd still be a contented rabbit rather than a miserable lion."

"A caged lion," Gregg said, on a note of compassion.



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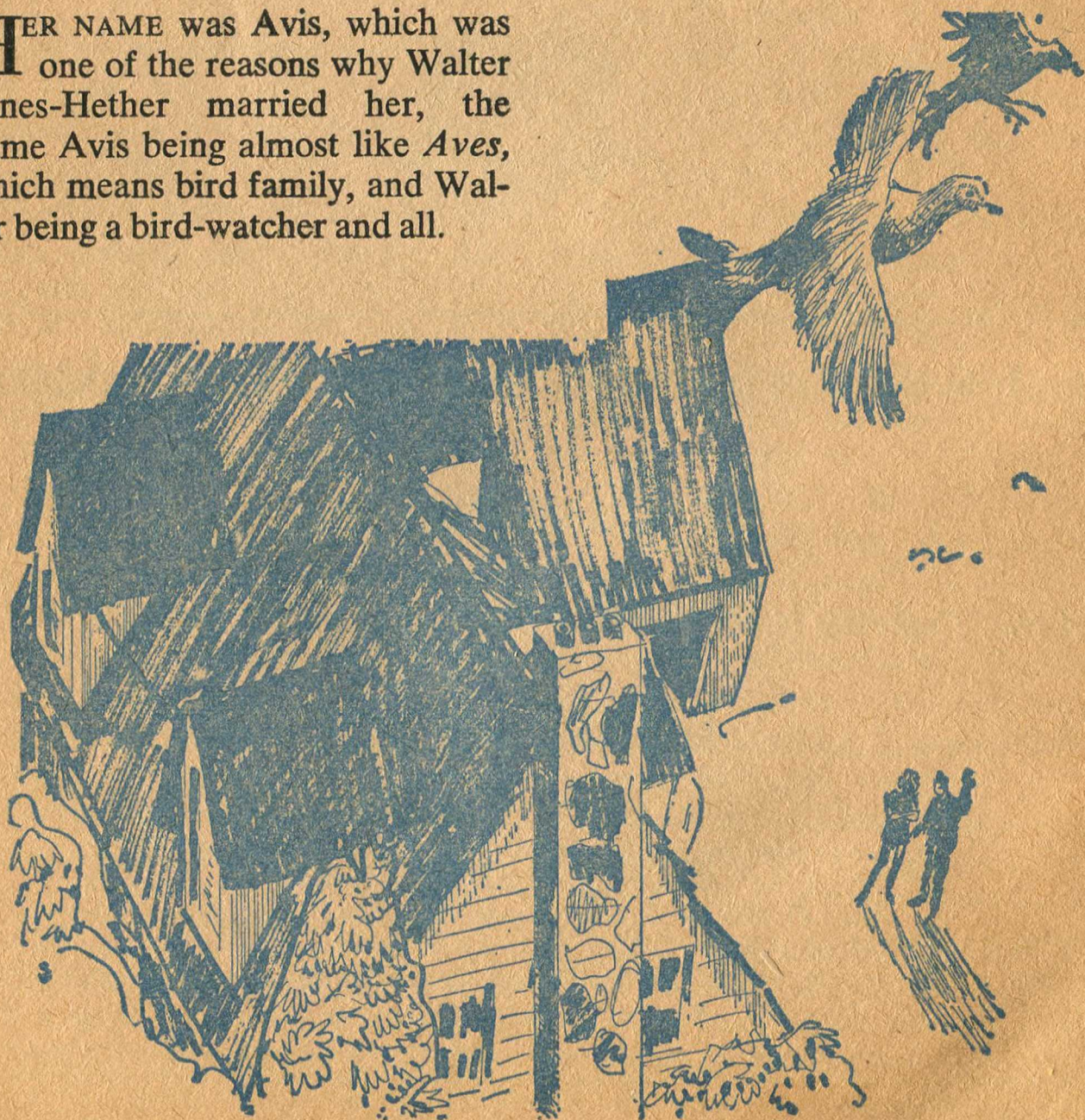
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Everything she hated was in that boat. The hot sun . . . the stinging bugs . . . the man. Soon there would be only two.

the third bird

BY RICHARD O. LEWIS

HER NAME was Avis, which was one of the reasons why Walter Jones-Hether married her, the name Avis being almost like *Aves*, which means bird family, and Walter being a bird-watcher and all.



She had red hair that was clipped rather short, bright, bird-like eyes, and a little nose that came to a point almost exactly like a beak. She flitted about here and there, putting her little nose into things in precisely the same manner as some birds do in their quest for nectar. That was another reason why Walter married her. She reminded him so much of a little bird that he called her his Little Chickadee.

Avis knew that Walter had at least a hundred thousand dollars in his own right and that he was busily engaged in writing a book. She knew the value of a hundred thousand dollars, and she also knew, or thought she did, that all authors sooner or later become millionaires.

Avis figured that she would have no difficulty in handling the mild-mannered Walter in such a way as to get out of life the many and varied things she had always desired. That was the third, and most important, reason why Walter married her—because that was the way Avis had *planned* it.

And so they were married that bright morning in June, went on a short honeymoon—to watch birds, mostly—and should have lived happily ever after. Which they didn't.

Avis immediately wanted a new car, a mink coat, an ultra-modern apartment, and time to go places and do things. Walter wanted only his camera, a cabin in the Maine

woods, and time to take notes and bird pictures for his book.

"But, dear," Avis pouted, "to spend a whole summer in some lonely old woods would not be much fun!"

"Little Chickadee," said Walter, "you just can't imagine how much fun there is in watching birds!"

"No," said Avis, "I can't."

"Anyway," said Walter, "there is the book to think about. I must collect material. I can't finish the book until I get all the information and pictures I need."

Yes, there was the book to think about. Walter would have to finish the book, of course, before the royalties could start rolling in. And after the book was finished, Walter would have no further need to watch birds. She would get him started on a book about something else—Paris, maybe, or some such place. Well, the sooner the bird-book bit was over, the better.

And so Avis went along to the cabin in the woods that Walter had selected for his purpose.

It was a long drive around lakes and up and down hills over rutted roads, and they got to the cabin late in the evening, weary and dog-tired. They went to bed immediately after canned tomato soup with crackers.

Avis became suddenly aware that Walter had his hand on her bare shoulder and was shaking her gently. She was mildly surprised. It was so unlike Walter to awaken

her in the middle of the night. "No, Walter," she said wearily. "I'm—I'm tired . . ."

"But you must get up immediately!" he said, urgently. "There is not a moment to lose!"

She opened her eyes and saw him standing over her against the dim light of the window. He seemed to be fully dressed. "Come quickly!" he urged, wheeling about and starting toward the kitchen door.

She whipped off the covers, spun to the edge of the bed, slid feet into slippers, flung a robe about her shoulders, and hurried after him. "What is it? A forest fire?"

"Oh, no, Little Chickadee!" said Walter, his round face beaming in the glow from the lighted lamp on the table. "It's nearly dawn! Nearly bird-song time!"

Avis clutched the edge of the table for support and sank weakly into a chair.

"Here," said Walter, handing her a glass of juice he had just poured from a can. "Drink this. It will snap your eyes open and chase the sleep away."

She took the glass and gulped down some of the contents. Her eyes snapped open and became watery. Her throat constricted and her stomach tried to turn over.

"What is it?" she gasped, now thoroughly awake, her body shuddering.

"Apple juice." Walter took a long drink from his own glass. "Un-

sweetened. It will set you right on your toes!"

It didn't exactly set Avis on her toes, but, goaded by Walter's urgency, she finally got into brogans, shorts, a blouse, and sweater and followed him out into the pale, pre-dawn light.



A light breeze, drifting in from some invisible source of refrigeration, smote her and brought goose flesh popping out of her thin legs as she hurried after him down what might have been a path before the weeds had taken over.

He stopped abruptly and she almost ran into him.

"Listen," he said, placing a hand on her arm.

Avis listened. All she could hear was a silly screeching from the direction of the lake.

"Loons," said Walter.

"They must be," said Avis. "Anything else wouldn't be up this earl—"

"Shhh!" Walter put a finger to his lips. "Listen."

Another bird-like sound had started up somewhere, but Avis wasn't listening. Something was crawling up her leg. It was the biggest black spider she had ever seen. Even in the half light, he was

plainly visible, crawling about this way and that.

She stamped her foot to rid herself of him, but he persisted in whatever enterprise he might have had in mind. She quickly broke off the top of a tall weed and began swishing at him. Prickly fire instantly broke out over her fingers and along the side of her leg, and she let out a piercing little yelp that was quite unbirdlike.

"Nettles," said Walter, taking in the situation at a glance. "*Urticaceae*. You can identify them by the long, crinkly leaf that comes to a point and the little hair-like stingers on the stems and the under sides of the leaves that contain a mild poison which, on most people, remains active for only an hour or two . . ."

Avis fled back up the dim path and into the cabin. Innumerable little white spots speckled the leg that was rapidly turning red. She put some cold cream on them, which, of course, didn't do a bit of good. She sat down at the table while her leg and hand burned, and a deeper burn began to glow within her.

She dismissed the idea of flight; that was not the answer. She couldn't reach her goal in that manner.

She would have to stay and goad him until the book was finished and the royalties began rolling in. Then she would come into her own!

Walter came in that evening, his blue eyes lighted with elation. "I got several shots of a pair of Baltimore orioles!" he exclaimed. "Fine shots! Excellent shots!"

"It seems that you could have done better than that back in Baltimore where they live," said Avis pointedly.

"Oh, no," Walter explained. "The Baltimore orioles do not necessarily live in Baltimore. In fact, the city of Baltimore has only an indirect relationship to the bird.

"Actually, the bird was named in honor of Lord Baltimore, who founded the colony in Maryland around 1730 and whose colors, like those of the birds, were orange and black. The species actually winter in South America, then fly north in early spring . . ."

"Fine," Avis broke in. "And just how many more pictures will you have to get before we can—well, before you have what you need?"

"As many as I can get," beamed Walter. "The more pictures, the better the book!"

"But you can't take pictures *forever!*" said Avis. "There must come a time when you have *enough!*"

Walter's round face became serious, and a frown almost appeared on his smooth forehead. "Actually, I need to take pictures of only two more species," he said. "*Colymbus auritus* and *Cathartes aura*."

"Good!" said Avis. "We'll go out tomorrow and get pictures of both of them! Then we'll be up and

away, back to civilization, and you can finish the book!"

Walter shook his head, and the frown tried to deepen. "Little Chickadee," he said patiently, "it is not quite that simple. "If we are fortunate, we may be able to get a picture of *Colymbus auritus*, the horned grebe; he frequently strays this far south. But we can hardly hope to get a photo of *Cathartes aura*. He is not of this area. He ranges far to the southwest. We'll have to wait until next summer—"

"Next summer!" Avis sprang from her chair, her face and neck becoming as red as that part of her leg where the nettle had attacked her. "You mean to say you need pictures of only two more birds and you came 'way up here to this God-forsaken place where you might not get a picture of *either of them*?"

"There's more to it than just getting those two photos," he said. "You see, I want to make the reader *hear* and *see* the birds as they go about their daily lives. I've got to get enough material."

"And just how long have you been collecting this material?" Avis wanted to know.

"Well, I don't know exactly," Walter said, reflectively. "Maybe about five years."

"Five years!" cried Avis. "You mean you have been sitting around watching birds for *five years*?"

"Oh, much longer than that," said Walter. "I guess I have been watching them for as long as I can

remember. They are fascinating little creatures. Very interesting. You'll learn to love. . . ."

"Tell me!" shouted Avis. "When will the book be *finished*?"

Walter became lost in speculation. "Well, if I take notes this summer and get a good photo of *Colymbus auritus*—Then if I can get some good shots of *Cathartes aura* next summer—You see, I've never met him face to face, have seen only pictures of him, must make a close study—Well, after that, it will take maybe a year or so to assemble all the notes, get the actual writing under way, and—"

Avis closed her eyes tightly, then opened them again. "If—if you think I am going to stay in this jungle all summer while you watch birds! If—if you think I am going to sit in some other jungle next summer!" Her neck and face were growing redder by the minute, and her little eyes glared down at him. "And if you think I'm going to wait then another year or two—"

"But, Little Chick—" Henry broke off. At the present moment she certainly did not resemble the blithe creature to which he had once likened her. She looked more like a frustrated red-headed woodpecker that had just mistaken an iron pipe for a hollow tree.

"We're going out tomorrow and get a picture of that *Colym*—horned grebe!" she said, bobbing her head up and down for emphasis. "Then we're going to get out of

here and get a picture of that *Cathartidae*—”

“*Cathartes*,” corrected Walter politely.

“Then we’re going to get an apartment where you can write the book!” Avis’ pointed beak of a nose had gone white, making her, Walter thought, look more woodpeckerish than ever.

He considered for a moment. “Well,” he said, finally, “perhaps it would be best. The sooner I finish the book on *Aves americana*, the quicker we can go into Canada and start a book on the ornithology of that area.”

Avis slumped weakly down into her chair. “Oh, no! Oh, no!”

“But I want to write a series of books,” Walter explained. “It’s my life’s ambition.”

Avis was silent, her hands clinched on the table before her.

“*Colymbus auritus* is an aquatic bird,” Walter said, finally. “If we get a picture of him, we’ll have to go out on the lake in the boat.”

“I don’t care if we have to swim to get it!” said Avis, pounding the table with clinched fists. “Just so we get it!”

The boat was a battered, round-bottomed affair. Avis seated herself in the stern with a basket of lunch. Walter got a pair of worn oars from the little boathouse, got in, and shoved the craft away from the narrow pier. The sun had almost succeeded in burning the morning mist from the lake, and

the air was calm. It was like starting a glide across a gigantic mirror.

“We’ll stay close to the shore,” said Walter, seating the oars, “just out a ways from the reeds. And we mustn’t talk,” he cautioned. He began sending the boat along with slow, silent sweeps, his head twisted over one shoulder, his eyes scanning the shore.

By mid-morning, the sun was a molten ball of gold in a silvery sky, a slight breeze had sprung up, and the surface of the lake had come alive with dancing ripples.

Avis squirmed about uncomfortably on the hot, hard seat. Each sparkling wave now seemed to be a mirror directed purposefully at her. She took a sandwich of minced ham from the hamper and offered Walter a drink of milk from the thermos. He refused, and she began munching the sandwich dejectedly.

Walter suddenly ceased rowing and shipped the oars. “Shhh!” he warned, clutching up the camera from the seat beside him. He got excitedly to his feet, stepped on the anchor, which rolled crazily beneath his foot, and sat quickly down again to keep from being tossed over the side of the boat.

“I don’t mind getting myself wet,” he whispered, somewhat shaken, “but I don’t want to ruin the camera.”

He got to his feet again, more carefully this time, and Avis leaned forward to pull the anchor out of his way. It was a crude affair, a

round, cement-filled can with an imbedded ring-bolt to which a sturdy chain had been wired.

Walter adjusted the telescopic lens and clicked the shutter. He adjusted and clicked again, and again. Then the reeds became suddenly alive with threshing wings as the birds took to the air.

Walter sat down again, pleased with himself.

"Good!" said Avis. "Now we got old horned grebe in the box! Only one more bird to go!"

Walter shook his head. "But that wasn't *Colymbus auritus*," he said, quickly. "That was *Gavis immer*, the loon. It was such a perfect shot, such a perfect setting, I couldn't resist . . ."

"Oh, hell!" said Avis. "Take me back to the cabin!"

Avis was not at all happy with what she saw in the mirror. She creamed her burning face and neck gingerly and sat down at the table where Walter was munching sunflower seed.

"You're going to get a picture of that grebe-bird if you have to sit out on the lake for a week!" she said, determinedly. "Then we'll get a picture of that—that *other bird*! The sooner the royalties begin rolling in, the quicker we can live like civilized people!"

"But, Little Chick—" The bird word stuck in his throat. She had certainly lost all resemblance to a chickadee. Her sunburned face and neck made her look more like a



red-headed woodpecker, *Melanerpes erythrocephalus erythrocephalus*, than ever, except for the nose, which had now taken on the contour and hue of a red chili pepper. "But—well, there may not be any royalties," he stammered, finally.

Avis' eyes and mouth popped open. "*No royalties!*" she croaked.

Walter shook his head and cracked open another sunflower seed. "The book will never be a best-seller," he explained. "No sex or things like that in it. And the printing will be quite expensive, considering all the color plates, drawings, and such. I doubt if a publisher would want to take it on."

Avis leaped to her feet, her face flaming. "You mean you won't be able even—even to sell it?"

"I may have to publish it myself, pay for the printing."

"You mean use the money—*our* money—to pay for your own book!"

"Oh, I'll be able to sell quite a number of copies, no doubt. To libraries, interested individuals, various—"

Avis flung herself away from the table and began storming about the room. "Of all the —the bird-brains!" she breathed. "Of all the bird-brains!" she said, again and again.

Walter got up and went out into the woods, where the late afternoon sun was casting long shadows and where there was peace. Before their marriage, she had seemed to share his fondness for the redheaded seemed to hate them. He couldn't understand her. And now he began to wonder how he would ever find the necessary peace and tranquility to do anything at all with the book.

From somewhere in the tree above him, a rapid tattoo broke out. Walter knew what it was. He had always loved birds, all kinds of birds. But now he began to feel his fondness for the redheaded woodpecker going into a rapid decline. He didn't even bother to look up.

Avis tossed about in bed and hammered her pillow with a tight fist. And the bed tossed about beneath her like a crazy, unstable craft. She felt trapped, betrayed. The money she had hoped for would not arrive. And what money Walter did have would be squandered away, year after year, as he published his silly books.

Eventually, there would be none left.

Hatred for Walter flamed higher and higher within her. It was

his fault; he was the one who had betrayed her!

The craft rocked again, and Walter went overboard with a great splash. As the waves closed over his head, she felt a great sense of relief. Her troubles were over! The money was now hers! All of it! And she was *free*.

Avis suddenly found herself sitting bolt upright in bed, the dream still filling her mind. If only the dream had been real! If only Walter had fallen out of the boat that day when he had tripped on the anchor . . .

Avis sat on the edge of the bed for a long time, staring into the darkness, her brain clutching at straws. Maybe, some day Walter really would fall out of the boat. It was certainly wobbly enough. But, so, he might be able to swim back to the boat or to shore. But if something should happen to prevent him from swimming! The whole thing would have to look like an accident, of course . . .

She placed a hand on Walter's side of the bed. It was empty. He had probably gone to sleep in the other room. The thoughts continued to roll about in her head until, suddenly, she knew exactly how to keep Walter from swimming, how to prevent him from squandering the money and denying her the kind of life she had always wanted. And she felt quite certain that she knew precisely where to find the materials she would need.

She dressed quickly, picked up the flashlight from the night table, and went quietly out of the bedroom. The living room was cloaked in darkness and silence, but she could hear the sound of deep, even breathing coming from the direction of the other bedroom. She tiptoed across the floor and silently opened the back door. Then she was out into the night, her flashlighting the way.

It took her only a few minutes in the boathouse to find the things she wanted, and then she went to the boat.

A half hour later, she was back in bed, her parched lips set into a firm, grim line.

Walter was surprised and not a little elated next morning to find that Avis, in spite of her red and peeling neck and face, was ready and eager to accompany him on his quest for *Colymbus auritus*. Maybe things were going to work out all right, after all, he thought as they got into the boat together.

"We'll go in the opposite direction today," he said, shoving off. "Try the other shore of the lake."

Avis had pasted a strip of adhesive bandage down the length of her nose to save that organ from further ravishment. She also wore a large straw hat as further protection. Even so, the little wave-mirrors began their destructive work almost immediately, and he could feel her face and neck grow steadily hotter. But she didn't care. This

was it! This was the last day of it!

The morning wore slowly on, and Avis became restless. She closed her eyes against glare of the sparkling water and felt a moment of dizziness. Sun sickness? Water sickness? A mild case of *mal de mer*?

And then a terrifying thought struck her. What if Walter didn't see anything to take pictures of today? Or tomorrow? What if it went on like this, day after day? She shook her head and closed her eyes tighter. NO! The word screamed through her head. NO! It had to be today! She could not endure even one more . . .

Her eyes snapped open as she felt a sudden change in the rhythm of the boat. Walter had shipped the oars, had clutched up his camera, and was quickly getting to his feet, his round face radiant with excitement.

"At last!" he whispered, hoarsely. *Colymbus auritus!*"

While Walter's entire attention was focused upon the camera and the little clearing in the bullrushes where a small group of waterbirds floated leisurely, Avis bent quickly forward and busied herself with the anchor and the booted foot nearest to it. There was a click from the camera as she regained her posture.

Then she began leaning slowly toward the side of the boat over which Walter was pointing the camera. Walter shifted his weight auto-

matically to compensate for the tilt, and there was another click of the camera. . .

Avis swung her weight to the opposite side of the boat. Walter's arms shot up in a quick attempt to regain balance, the camera fell to the floor, and Walter went out over the side of the boat with a great splash that was precisely like the splash he had made in her dream of the night before. But this time he had the anchor with him.

Walter gulped in a lungful of air just before the water closed over his head and began to lash out with arms and legs in an effort to swim upward. But something was wrong. One leg was not functioning properly. He opened his eyes and reached downward with his hand, realizing that he was sinking steadily.

Then he felt the sharp point of the fishhook with his fingers and saw the way it was snaked through the leather thongs of his boot and out one side. He knew even before he began tugging at it that he could not hope to extricate it.

He tried to jerk the hook loose from the anchor but found that it was knotted securely to the ringbolt with tough strands of nylon that resisted his every effort.

The crude anchor dragged him slowly and relentlessly downward and finally sent up a puff of sand as it struck bottom. And Walter found himself sitting awkwardly beside it on the floor of the lake.

It had already dawned upon him what had happened. Avis had undoubtedly rigged the trap the night before while he was asleep. Then she had hooked him and rocked the boat. It was as simple as that. She was trying to get rid of him.

He looked upward through the clear water and saw the red bottom of the boat lurking some fifteen feet above him, as remote as the moon. And he could see the shadow of Avis as she leaned over the side of the boat, trying to peer down at him.

In a half hour or so, she would drag his body upward by the anchor chain, feet foremost, snip the hook from his boot, put the anchor into the boat, and let his body sink back into the depths. It would be a clear case of accidental drowning; there would be no way to prove it otherwise.

The rippling of the surface waves sent little shadows dancing across the sandy bottom of the lake. There were a few stones scattered about in one direction, and beyond them was a thin growth of seaweed where tiny fishes played. It was, indeed, a peaceful scene. He had some good shots of *Colymbus auritus* in the camera and needed but one more picture . . .

Stark realization suddenly swept over him. He would never get that last picture, never get a chance to see *Cathartes aura* face to face, nor finish the book or do anything else, not by sitting here on the bottom

of the lake with his lungs threatening to burst asunder.

He quickly gathered his feet and legs beneath him in a crouched position and then surged upward in a slow-motion leap. The effort was fruitless, and he grasped frantically at the anchor chain as he started downward again. The chain slithered sickeningly over the edge of the boat and then jerked suddenly taut. There was a great splash above as the boat tilted in sudden response to the jerk and sent Avis flying overboard.

Walter began pulling himself up the chain, hand over hand, the weight of his body and the anchor being somewhat nullified by the natural buoyancy of the water. He saw Avis floundering about, above and to one side of him, her arms

flapping like the wings of a bird that hadn't as yet mastered the art of flying.

As he climbed upward, she sank lower. He reached out a hand to her, but he couldn't touch her. And if he let go of the anchor chain to try to catch her, he would simply plummet to the bottom again. There was not a thing in the world he could do but watch her drift slowly past him on her way down, her red face and neck strangely bird-like and her bandaged nose hook-shaped.

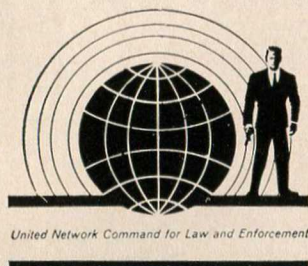
Odd, he thought, as his head broke the surface of the water, how much she resembled a hook-beaked, scrawny-necked turkey buzzard—the turkey buzzard called *Cathartes aura*, the true American vulture.



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