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# the diamond boomerang

A novel of violence  
and robust action by  
**LESTER S. TAUBE**

*Hyter*



Dan Baldwin is an ex-colonel whose life has crashed. Rescued from a gutter in North Africa, he is forced to join a trio about to raid a secret diamond field in South Africa. Baldwin contrives to locate the diamonds, and, for his pains, the gang's treacherous leader leaves him for dead.

Dan has to battle with a vulture before he can barter and bribe his way back to civilization. And, in a furious climax, he must clash with a tempestuous blonde before finally meeting his cunning and merciless enemy.

**The Diamond Boomerang** is a robust action tale for those with strong palates and an adult sense of humor.

**The Diamond Boomerang** was originally published by W. H. Allen & Company.



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*THE  
DIAMOND  
BOOMERANG*

(Original British title: **THE GRABBERS**)

**LESTER S. TAUBE**

PUBLISHED BY POCKET  BOOKS NEW YORK

## THE DIAMOND BOOMERANG

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*THE  
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BOOMERANG*



# 1

That little Arab bastard must have thought I am drunker than hell to have started that roundhouse swing. Quick as a flash, I shift my head. The instant his fist explodes against my temple, I come to the groggy conclusion that he is absolutely right—I *am* loaded to the gills. I probably banged my face on the table when I spun off the chair; there is no other reason for my eyebrow to begin bleeding.

As bleeding all over is somewhat contrary to my religion, I start crawling away, but the little bugger, who isn't more than 5 feet 7, and maybe 150 pounds dripping wet, grabs my foot to pull me back.

For an Arab, he isn't very smart, grasping just one foot, because I immediately kick him squarely in the face with the other. There is the pleasant sound of his nose squashing under the worn leather of my shoe, and he lets go, quickly. I have to chuckle at his altered appearance, but that comes to an abrupt halt when I suddenly receive a bone-cracking thump on my ribs. A monster of an Arab, the second bouncer in the Moroccan saloon, has come in and joined the fracas.

Now I stand, or lie, 5 feet 10, and once weighed in at 170 before I began drinking too much—which was four years ago—but as that gigantic brute is not my favourite brand of meat, I crawl beneath the table. He doesn't bother grabbing a foot—he merely picks up the goddamn table like it is a child's toy and flings it to one side. I try sliding under a chair, but they have me cornered.

After a while, I become tired of them kicking me, especially since a few of their blows are being directed at my kidneys, the condition of which organs stands between proper drinking and perhaps having to become a non-alcoholic, and frankly, they are pounding the hell out of me. So I peek from under my arm until the little bouncer is lined up in my sight, then I turn quick as a flash, slip one of my feet behind his leg, and slam the heel of my other foot against his kneecap.

So-help-me, I have never heard a patella crack like that one does. It makes medical history. He rolls on the floor howling, but, in fact, he doesn't scream for very long. At least I do not hear him, for within seconds Hassan, the owner of the joint, waddles up with a half-full wine bottle in his hand. He snaps out something to the monster dancing around me, and the big ballerina stamps a leg on to my chest which pins me to the floor more securely than a needle through a butterfly. Immediately, Hassan crashes the bottle down on my head.

I guess it is a couple of hours later—I am not sure because I had sold my watch a few months ago—that I open one eye. I don't care for what I see, so I close it. A half-dozen Arab urchins are squatting on the edge of the kerb staring at my body sprawled in the gutter.

Finally I build up enough energy to lift my butt on to the kerb and sit there, huffing and puffing, feeling as I usually do after one of my daily exercises. I can't help noticing the girl seated on the stone wall at the far end of the pavement, for she appears so disgustingly clean that she would have stood out anywhere in this Arab dump. I



focus the eye which is not split open and conclude that she is not a helluva lot to look at. But one glance at the mountains thrusting out against the starched front of her cotton blouse is enough to inform me that she is wearing a brassiere with steel bands in them—to keep her tits from sticking out a mile further. She is eyeing me as though she hasn't quite decided what I am.

The guy next to her, leaning against the wall with his arms folded across his chest, says something out of the corner of his mouth, straightens up and starts towards me. He is a handsome devil, about thirty, big, blond, and his manner of walking tells me two things: he is American or English, and a novelty trooper—a commando or parachutist. It's in the way he is balanced on his toes, with his shoulders swinging just a little bit, and the 'I can beat the shit out of anybody' air.

Now take me, I'm the infantry type. I should be, I've had more years in the doughfeet than that kid has on his toes. I'm the real unexciting, plodding kind who doesn't become all shook up when somebody points to the highest goddamn mountain in view and says, "Climb it." Right away, I don't want to. Not because some meathead has ordered me to do so, but because it's always so bloody high. By and by, I do start climbing it, but quit as soon as I can. When someone comes along to kick my butt, I go up a little higher. Et cetera. Nothing like those novelty troopers who hop up and down, exclaiming, "Whee! A mountain to climb."

"Need a drink, old boy?" he asks, and I see that I am one-half right.

As I am terrified he might withdraw the offer if I speak too quickly, I make one feeble effort to stand before saying, "Yeah."

"Well, come along," he says.

I know he wouldn't dream of giving me a hand up. I wouldn't have done so either, if I had seen such a filthy cookie as I am. Not unless I already had leprosy or

something. However, he doesn't have to; the word 'drink' is enough. The way I feel, I would have got up for a drink even if I was completely dead.

The girl with the steel-bound tits falls into step beside him, and I stagger along behind. She turns her head a couple or three times to sneak a look at me, and I am fully convinced that she would never take beauty prizes, even on a Pacific island filled with women-starved rapists. She has straw-blonde hair, parted in the middle, combed back more severely than a spinster's in a country school-house. Her nose isn't too bad except that it juts out a little too far. The eyes are sorta grey. But the jaw! Kee-rist, it is a firm one! Like a rock. She is maybe 5 feet 6, weighs in at 150, and although only a moderate part of that poundage is in her butt, her legs are stocky enough to break a man's back. But, boy, is she clean! I can smell the soap on her even against the wind.

The novelty trooper finds a comparatively reliable cafe a block or two away where you wouldn't be murdered for less than two weeks' pay of a New York plumber. He takes a table at the rear, settles the girl, gives me a so-so look to sit down, shoos off the waiter, then walks over to the bar. He's been around, that trooper. After dickering with the Moroccan cafe owner, he buys a pint of rot-gut brandy for half the asking price, orders two bottles of beer, and returns to the table. The girl wipes the mouth of her bottle with a soap-smelling handkerchief before taking a swig.

The trooper is pretty slow pouring a quarter glass of brandy for me, and I am drooling and trembling like a wild-eyed mare ogling the stallion rearing to cover her. Finally he passes it over to me and I gobble it down. It burns the hell out of the wounds inside my mouth—as it is acid—but I swallow it too quickly for any permanent damage to occur. The trooper is all right; he pours another quarter glass and that immediately disappears.

Ordinarily, such as a few years ago, I wouldn't have al-

lowed an embalmer to inject that stuff into me, even if I was fully deceased. But for the past month, specifically, I have regarded those who drank it with the same degree of awe as I once looked upon multi-millionaires waiting for more rich aunts to die.

I can tell he is getting down to business when he takes a sip of his beer and leans back.

“Quite a bit of a to-do down the street,” he opens with. I nod complaisantly as I eye the bottle and lick my lips.

“My, it’s warm in here,” says the girl, moving her chair away from the table and fanning herself rapidly with her soapy handkerchief. I almost grin. It isn’t hot at all—it’s me stinking. I haven’t washed for so long that I can even smell myself. It doesn’t faze the trooper though. He seems rugged enough to have intercourse with me, if I was a girl.

“You’re a bit of all right,” he says, beating about the bush. “We were passing by and put our heads through the door when you tussled with those Arabs. A bit of all right, yes.”

I smile my most enchanting, electrifying smile, making somewhat of a half-ass attempt to conceal the gap where my left bicuspid was a few months ago, and rub my chest with a horny, snag-nailed, filthy hand, still eyeing that bottle. It isn’t at all difficult to rub my chest, for my shirt is torn in a dozen places and doesn’t have any buttons. In fact, my pants are that way too.

He comes awake long enough to pour a few, miserable drops into my glass.

“I was attacked,” I manage to choke out as the shot goes down. “Had to fight,” I whisper, when the brandy begins eating the lining of my throat.

“Looking for a bit of work?” he asks, casually.

“Sure,” I say quickly, trying to build up some enthusiasm. “Yeah. Absolutely.”

“What kind of work can you do?”

I am afraid of that. "Most anything," I hedge.

"Soldier?" he asks, knowing damn well I was, from the fight.

"Somewhat."

"Have a spot of work," he says. "Bit of walking and digging. Interested?"

"Yeah, sure," I reply. I'd say most anything to hang around until that lovely, life-giving bottle was empty. I sorta cough and glance at it with what I hope is not a pasty smile.

"All right," he says. "We'll meet here tomorrow. At noon. Right?"

"Noon. Right."

He gives me another quarter glass, caps the bottle, then stands up. The girl stands up too. I don't really mind them getting up, but he has that vital bottle in his hand. I drink the shot quickly, then look up as though I can't think of anything more important in this wide, wonderful world than being here tomorrow—at noon.

"Would you be able to spare a bit, sir?" I ask in that beseeching, whimpering tone I have learned the last couple of years. "For a room and a meal," I add hastily. "Till tomorrow," I throw in for good measure.

He starts out like I have suddenly become overripe. Then that goddess, that stately, magnificent queen, grabs his arms and whispers loud enough for Mohammed V at Rabat to hear, "Give the poor blighter a bit, Tom."

Tom the Trooper whispers back. I cannot hear, but I know what he is saying. "He's a damned rotten drunk. He'll drink it all up."

She eyes him. Without a word, he returns to drop a few coins on the table. "Tomorrow. Noon," he says, and he isn't kidding.

I sweep up the money instantly without wasting any breath on an answer, and when they leave, I count it. It's only about eighty-five cents American, but it's more welcome than a big, fat, expensive birthday present to me.

I didn't keep the appointment I had never intended to keep the next afternoon. In fact, I was moving so fast that it took them two days to track me down, and, to be frank, the only reason they did find me was because I had traded the last twenty cents for some home-made rot-gut which was so deadly that even I became ill. They come sneaking up as I am sitting in front of a crummy cafe bringing up that lethal combination of rusted nails, arsenic and monkey droppings. With them is a tall, whip-lean Arab.

"Coming along?" asks Tom the Trooper, without even saying hello.

"If you get me one drink," I say. "Just one drink. I swear."

He nods at the Arab, who passes over the bottle of rot-gut brandy the trooper had bought a couple of days ago. I manage to belt down a beauty before the Arab tears it out of my hands.

They lift me to my feet and drag me into a taxi which, an hour later, lets us off at a deserted beach about thirty miles from Casablanca. It is an ugly, desolate spot containing a rickety hut standing alongside a rotting, wooden dock that is holding up a crummy twenty-eight-foot boat which has been painstakingly splattered with grey and green paint, and which should have been converted into low-grade firewood a dozen years ago.

The trooper doesn't horse around. "Wash," he says, pointing to the sea. I walk in just under calf high to splash a drop or two of water on my face. "Take those clothes off and wash," he says, and he isn't making conversation.

I stumble back to the beach and begin undressing. The woman doesn't blink an eyelid—at least not until I take off my tattered pants. My old man had left me a few things before he died. You'd never believe it, but one was an appointment to the Military Academy at West Point, the second, a bank account big enough to choke a full-grown horse, and the third, which actually gave the most trouble, was a pecker a mile long. She takes one earth-

jarring look, then rushes around to the side of the hut. Tom the Trooper gets up enough spittle to whistle, and I eye the Arab not to get any ideas, just in case.

I am not permitted to wash like a normal drunkard; no, the trooper makes me use soap, shave, and even brush my teeth. Kee-rist, I need a drink. The Arab uses a stick to carry my clothes into the bushes, then gives me a new outfit. The shoes are good ones, and later on I find out the reason why. The soap, however, which is supposed to lather in salt water, is itching worse than poison ivy, and as I am not able to stand it, I swallow enough of my pride to ask for a drink. I almost flip when the trooper lets me have a couple of swigs.

In the meantime, the two bravos are loading all kinds of crap on to the boat. The flimsy hut is a bulging storehouse full of tarps, shovels, water canteens, jerrycans, tinned food, and other junk too numerous to mention. I give them a hand, and in a few hours we have it all aboard.

I don't say anything when I see the two lovely, scope-mounted rifles and the Sten gun, with a case of ammo for each. I knew this walking and digging jazz was a crock of crap from word one, even as soon as they had picked me up, and the sole, single, only reason I had come along was that I would have died in a fatal manner if the trooper had not appeared with that vital bottle of rot-gut.

All this notwithstanding, I manage to corner the trooper. "What does this pay?" I ask. "And how long?"

"Two hundred pounds, sterling. Six weeks."

"How much whisky?"

"Bottle a day."

"Rot-gut?"

"Bonded scotch."

"You're on." It is too good to be true, so I say, "Thanks."

In the meantime, the woman hasn't been sitting on her nice, solid butt doing nothing. Just before dusk, she yells, "All right, now," and everybody goes around to the side of the hut to eat stew, canned peaches and hot coffee. The



trooper, though, doesn't go for the coffee; instead, he heats water into which he pours a can of homogenized, pasteurized, sterilized condensed milk. I almost begin liking him when he gives me a carton of cigarettes after we eat.

Once the odds and ends are aboard the boat, the Arab starts the motor, tunes out a few of its hiccups, and off we go. We have been put-putting along for a couple of hours when the trooper comes over to where I am sitting on deck.

"What's your name, chappie?" he asks. Even in the darkness I can see his bulging muscles.

"Dan," I say.

Then he throws the book at me. "Had a bit of a mix-up on the stores," he says. "Forgot the scotch. Nothing on board to drink."

I know the bastard is lying like a hairy Arab. "I want off," I say.

"Can't, chappie. Not for six days."

"I'll take the rowboat," I say, motioning to it trailing behind on a rope.

"Sorry," he says, without the least bit of sorrow in his voice.

"I'll be climbing up trees in a couple of days if I don't have a drink," I say, scared witless.

"Have to sweat it out, chappie."

He's no fool—he is on me before I can belch. I try every dirty trick in the book, but that Tom the Trooper knows them all. He and the Arab have me handcuffed to a steel rail quicker than a blink.

I am able to remember only brief snatches of the next four days, one of which was during the second day when Miss Steel Tits complained that she could not sleep because of my horrible howling, so the trooper stuffed a gag in my mouth, then he and the Arab took turns to see that I didn't suffocate. I also recall that he always gave the night watch to the Arab when the girl went below to sleep

—so he could go down and join her. I guess they enjoyed it better at night than in the morning, like me. Anyhow, they finally took off the cuffs on the fourth day, and as much as I hate to admit it, the trooper must have been a genius because I hadn't died after all. In fact, the following morning I even went to the john more smoothly than a well-brought-up boy, something I hadn't been able to do since becoming wedded to the bottled joy.

On the sixth day at sea, we pull in along the Spanish Sahara, and it is evident that they have selected a place to land which is a hundred miles from anywhere. Hidden away in a vast cave are enough cans of gas to sail all the way to the tip of Africa. We spend the morning exchanging empty jerrycans for full ones, take an hour's stretch, then start off again.

A week later, I am a new man, so-help-me. I even get to steer the crummy boat, and once, when it stops out at sea a million miles from nowhere, I tell Tom the Trooper it's because the gas tank is dirty, then gleefully watch them break their balls for two hours learning I am right. It is hotter than a bitch; that is the only reason why I show them how to hook up a jerrycan directly to the put-putting motor, get the sow going again, then siphon out and clean the gas tank at our leisure.

After that demonstration of mechanical supremacy, Ahmed, the Arab, starts talking to me. Even Miss Steel Tits loosens up enough to ask me my name. Tom the Trooper, however, doesn't say much, but every now and then I catch him glancing at my forty-eight-year-old body, and wondering. I am getting brown as mustard, eating like a plough-horse, and feeling more content than I have for years.

It is a lazy, infantryman's life. At sun-up, the trooper locks the wheel on course, and Miss Steel Tits, who answers to the name of Amy, juggles up breakfast. I had never fallen into the loathsome habit of eating canned fish in the morning, but she and the trooper gobble it up as

though it puts lead back in their pants. Thank God they brought along some chipped beef; I'd have starved to death without a wake-me-up of shit-on-the-shingle, even though I have to eat crackers with it. Ahmed the Arab takes only coffee and crackers.

After breakfast, the trooper goes below to sleep. I cannot figure it out. Each time Miss Steel Tits heads for bed, around eleven or twelve o'clock at night, he trails her into the cabin quicker than a hound chasing heat, and when the motor is cut back, I can hear yelps—so I conclude that they are either learning a new way of signalling together or somebody is really tearing off a good one. Actually, what I cannot understand is that every hour throughout the night Tom the Trooper comes topside to check on our course. It strikes me that either he does not trust anybody, meaning Ahmed, who takes the night watch, or he is participating in certain activities every hour on the hour. However, as Miss Steel Tits sleeps on deck between meals, it appears to be a combination of the two.

Due to all these confusing combinations, they allow me to steer the boat during the daytime, but at intervals the trooper or the Arab carefully inspects the compass to make sure I have not accidentally changed direction towards Brazil.

It is good sitting behind the wheel. The trooper says, "292 degrees," and I sail 292 degrees. He says, "284 degrees," so I spin her to 284 degrees. Frankly, it does not take me more than two weeks to realize that we are heading towards South Africa.

I decide to parley with him one afternoon while Miss Steel Tits is sunning herself on the front end of the boat. She is lying on her belly, her halter strap untied. I would make a book on the fact that there is a nine inch gap between where her mountains press against the deck and her belly makes contact—all straight up. She is wearing shorts, which reminds me at intervals that she does not

have the worst looking tail on the boat. Furthermore, as a fact, after the second week, I keep finding her butt somewhat attractive.

Anyhow, I sidle up to the trooper and give him a wide, co-operative smile.

"Any chance of being let in on the big secret?" I ask.

"Like I said, chappie, we do a bit of walking and a bit of digging."

"We're not going to do much of a bit of walking and a bit of digging unless this boat gets to where we can do so damned soon. You said six weeks. I already count two and a half. Divide six in half and you get . . ." I do not want him to think I am smarter than he, so I hesitate a couple of seconds, ". . . three weeks."

"Bit of a problem there, Dan," he says, and I know the manure is on the point of flowing when he calls me Dan. "The boat's gone a bit slower than I've expected."

"How much slower?"

"Just about half." His square, white, strong, even, well-tended teeth shine with a smile.

"Tough luck," I gurgle out. "My contract expires in three and a half weeks."

"Have to extend, you know. You're part of the pack."

"You also extending the two hundred pounds?" Then I add, "Sterling?"

"Bargain's a bargain."

"Contract's a contract."

He sees that I am not bulling. "Well, chappie, perhaps an extra fifty."

"Can't afford it. I work by the hour ever since I gave up drink."

"Wel . . . l . . . l." He lets it stretch out as though he is doing me the greatest favour since the chubby girl down the block showed me the major difference between sexes when I was twelve years old. "Perhaps we can squeeze out another fifty." I think his heart will break with generosity.

"Five hundred," I say, "or I won't walk or dig."

"Bit up in the air, aren't you?" he says. It isn't the comment he makes, it is the way he looks at me.

"Okay," I stammer. "I'll take the extra hundred." I have been around death at least a couple of million times, but that look of his is the most obvious hint of death I've ever seen coming out of a man's eyes. "Where we heading?" I ask, as casually as if I had deliberately blown up the pilothouse of the boat.

He is still sore as hell. "Mind your business, chappie!" he snaps, so I rush around searching for something to mend.

Frankly, Tom the Trooper has the evil horns on me, and I can sense that sooner or later we will have to discuss this in the only way two people like us can talk, and I am as eager to have this confrontation as I crave a gigantic hole in the middle of my stomach.

None the less, even though I'm the sweet, amicable, somewhat cowardly kind of person who goes far out of his way to allow sleeping dogs to lie in peace, this fat mystery regarding our destination is bugging the devil out of me. Talking to Ahmed the Arab is exactly the same as talking to a corpse. I have learned his name only because the trooper calls it out about three hundred times a day when he says, "Ahmed, come below," and they go into a huddle downstairs. If I hadn't heard Miss Steel Tits yelping at night, I'd have thought that Tom the Trooper and Ahmed the Arab were real close friends.

Later in the afternoon, after our amiable chat together, the trooper says, "Ahmed, come below," and immediately the deck is empty. At least I think so until Miss Steel Tits drifts up to the pilothouse holding her halter strap together behind her back with one hand, carrying an elephantine straw hat in the other, and stops as if she is waiting for the Long Island ferry.

"Bit on the warm side today," she says.

"According to whom you're with," I answer, quick as a

flash. I am about to laugh, but I suddenly see it has gone over her head. Later on, though, she gets it, and we laugh.

“You’ve been a wee bit different since you’ve stopped the nipping,” she says. For a moment I thought she was going to add, “and a bit of all right.”

I flex my muscles to show off because she is looking squarely at my chest through the pilothouse window. She leans on the sill.

“That’s a mean one, that,” she says, eyeing my right side. I am not wearing a shirt, so I don’t have to look down.

“Got it when I was a kid,” I say. “Ran into a steel spike on a fence.” It is a crock of crap—a 9-millimetre slug had pierced it, but saying ‘steel’ makes me look straight at her beauties.

She takes a deep breath to show off, too, like when I had flexed my muscles, and I wait lasciviously for the halter to come shooting loose.

“And that one?” She starts to take her hand away to point, reconsiders, then nods with her head.

“Another spike,” I say, feeling the twinge in my left shoulder.

“You’re pulling my leg,” she finally says, grinning.

I figure I have nothing to lose. “I’d like to pull more than that.”

“For example?”

Boy, are those mountains heaving away! “Back and front, the whole caboodle,” I say.

I never saw eyes pant before, but hers do. So does her mouth. And those beauties are almost making me sea-sick, hopping up and down like Mexican jumping beans.

“Which would you choose?” she asks. If she had added, “if you could,” I would have written her off as an absolute waste of conversation.

By this time, she is leaning halfway over the window-



sill watching me struggle manfully to keep the front of my pants from sticking out a foot or two.

"Tough choice," I cough out.

She isn't the least bit inclined to let it go at that. "Which would you choose—if you only had one choice?" she asks, eyeing the bulge as though it is the only thing on the boat.

I stop fighting, and I think her teeth will break, she is grinding them so hard.

"Chink style," I say, breathing as if I have run uphill four or five times.

That brings her awake. "What's that?" she asks, looking back up at my face.

"I'll show you some time," I say. If I was to explain it there in any kind of detail, I would shame the bulge by having it shrink like that of a sixteen-year-old boy who has just finished reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

"Tom would rip you," she says a little sorrowfully. Then shrugging her shoulders, she walks to the hatchway and down the steps into the cabin. Two or three seconds later, Ahmed the Arab comes racing up as if he has been shot out of a circus cannon.

Tom the Trooper, however, does not come up—that is, not for an hour at least, and when he does, I know I could have licked the bastard with one hand tied behind me.

## 2

When Tom the Trooper swings the boat due east, I conclude that we will soon reach land. We have to, for the whole, dark continent of Africa is in our way. Also, being in our third week at sea, we are having trouble finding full jerrycans of gas.

After a couple of days, Ahmed snatches up a pair of binoculars long enough to reach shore, looks round, then wiggles his hand. The trooper immediately cuts back the motor and turns south again, remaining at a speed somewhat slower than an old, fat, pregnant snail until sundown, at which time he once more turns east and accelerates the old sow to top speed.

I could never figure out why Ahmed the Arab is being treated as a halfway honoured guest, but it soon becomes evident, for just before dawn—and nobody has gone to sleep during the night because we are all standing watch at the front of the boat like Viking figureheads—he guides the sow into a cove which cannot be seen twenty feet away. On shore is a cache containing enough jerrycans of gas to fill a freight car.

"We'll lie over," says the trooper, so I pick up my sleeping bag—that I use on deck, rain or shine, for there are only two bunks in the cabin which Tom the Trooper and Miss Steel Tits are adamantly disinclined to share—carry it to a fold in the ground and go to sleep.

Somewhere about noon, we get off our butts, have brunch, and begin loading. In addition to the freight car of gas stored under the tarpaulin-covered cache are kegs of water and a dozen crates of food. When the trooper orders us to load on three-quarters of each, it tells me everything I want to know—the next stop is our destination.

"Where we at?" I ask Ahmed, as we row a stack of jerrycans to the boat.

"Don't know," he replies, which is two words more than I expected.

"Angola?" I throw at him, quickly.

I never knew an Arab you couldn't catch with his pants down, and Ahmed appears ready to visit the bathroom. A minute after I have seen from the expression on his face that we are in Angola, he says, "Don't know," again.

As I had once won a geography contest in school when I was seven years old by naming the capitals of nine states out of the whole bloody union, I mentally add up jerrycans, divide by two to cover the return trip, multiply the number of knots the tub can make by breaking her back, subtract ten percent for emergencies, and come up with the big, fat coastline of South-West Africa. Nobody in his right mind could miss it, for the damn thing is a thousand miles long. Then I start thinking, and after considerable pondering I can't for the life of me decide what the hell anybody would want in South-West Africa except, perhaps, a few sex-starved female South-West Africans.

But an hour later, all this deliberation vanishes quicker than a stray wisp of smoke caught up in a raging gale, for while I am lifting a couple of jerrycans to carry to the rowboat I see this package at the far end of the cache.

Now, I possess a unique instinct which permits me to recognize a bottle of whisky even if a veterinarian had secretly slipped it into an elephant's belly and sewed up the hole, so one swift glance brings me to the point of nearly having a fit. As nobody is looking over my shoulder, I pick up the bottle, which is wrapped in burlap, and quick as a flash, I hide it.

From then on, I carry jerrycans as though they are feathers. When we are just about loaded, I see Tom the Trooper, Ahmed the Arab, and Miss Steel Tits go into a huddle, and it doesn't take more than five or six years to figure out what subject they are discussing. The trooper breaks away from the circle, searches the cache again, then rejoins the council of war to inform its members that one of their submarines is actually missing. Knowing the trooper by now, I realize that he has also concealed a bottle on board ship, for even novelty troopers are aware of the fact that booze is sometimes used as medicine. The bottle at the cache is probably a reserve, and the three of them are eyeing me, not because I am holding out on their medicine, but because they already know me.

Anyhow, at sundown, we load our personal gear into the rowboat and return to the sow. Tom the Trooper is up on deck first, so full of bubbling expectancy and effervescent zeal that I am sure he will dirty his pants.

"All right," he says, as Ahmed and Miss Steel Tits dance from side to side waiting for the floor show to begin. "All personal stores here."

I act as though I am about to give him an argument, which makes the three of them shiver in ecstasy. The trooper is a real dime-thriller private eye. Not only does he frisk me personally, but he first checks all the sleeping bags and crap belonging to him and the other two quiverers with joy before, with a big smile, starting to go through my effects.

I raise hell when he unrolls my sleeping bag, and they almost have an orgasm at the way I am trapped. Actually,

the smirk remains fixed to the trooper's face right up to the fourth time he searches my effects, then he walks clear round the boat two or three times trying to figure it out. Completely shattered, he comes over to me.

"All right, chappie. Let's have it."

"Have what?" I ask, the picture of virginity.

He is afraid to say 'the bottle', because if I don't have it, he knows I will dive overboard the instant he mentions whisky.

"You know," he says, and it is the lamest 'you know' I ever heard.

"What?" I ask.

The three of them go into the football huddle again, heads popping up at intervals to peek at me, then back into the pile. Finally they concede defeat, and we get the boat under way.

It takes two days to find the jerrycan of gas in which I have hidden the bottle, for there are over seventy stacked on board, and locating it isn't merely poking round with a stick until I hit pay dirt. Everybody thinks I am the soul of co-operation, rushing to fill up the gas tank. On the contrary, I am just scared witless that someone else will run upon the loaded can by accident.

I am sure my fingers will turn into claws before I recover the whisky, and when I do, the first swig is better than stumbling on to a gorgeous nymphomaniac after being isolated on an island for a hundred years. Furthermore, after that first swig, I could have kicked the shit out of Tom the Trooper, and his whole goddamn battalion, without one single bit of effort. I take a couple more, then stash the bottle.

It is shortly thereafter that Miss Steel Tits smells the fish floating around in Denmark. It is a replica of the last time, maybe that's why it happens. Tom the Trooper has sounded his clarion, "Ahmed, come below," and within seconds, she is leaning over the window-sill of the pilot-

house trying to hold those mountains under the halter and looking hard at the bulge when I breathe.

"Coo," she says. "So you have got it."

As you can't be a virgin once the sheet is stained, I don't try. "I've decided that Chink style is the best choice," I say, getting her mind off the fish in Denmark.

"I said that Tom would rip you," she warns, not really giving a damn.

"Maybe worth it," I say, knowing that as soon as I have said it, the bulge might push a hole in the pilothouse wall.

"No place on the boat, even for a nippy one," she says, and the way I feel, it would have been the nippiest one, maybe less than one thousandth of a second before I shamed myself.

Now that the fact is established, and only the time and place are lacking, I turn my attention to what is bugging me. "What are we going to do in South-West Africa?" I ask, as if I want to know if the sun is shining.

Bulge or not, she is no blockhead. Her eyes narrow and she spins, taking those mountains with her, then she makes a wild dash for the cabin. An instant later, Ahmed the Arab comes racing up as though he is pursued by an angry mamba, but this time the trooper and Miss Steel Tits (Big Mouth) are right behind him.

Tom the Trooper doesn't even open the conversation like a gentleman.

"How do you know where we are going?" he snaps, in that voice which brings to mind the picture of cutting out a man's stomach, injecting embalming fluid, laying his head on a pillow in a coffin, and hearing dirt drop on the wooden lid.

"I guessed," I stutter. "It doesn't take a helluva lot to look at the sun and see where we're heading."

The trooper doesn't rub his jaw while thinking as a normal person would, but his mind goes clickity-clackaty anyhow.



"Come below," he finally says, and I know I'm home.

The cabin is pretty big, with a wide space between the bunks, one of which is so badly battered that I don't have to guess where the trooper and Miss Steel Tits do their homework. He opens a folded map, lays it on the floor, and we kneel to inspect it. He points at a spot about one-third of the way down the South-African coast.

"We will land here, and march to there." His finger moves in an L. I lower my eyes to the distance scale and see that the little movement of his finger is eighty miles. "Then we dig for diamonds."

I would have probably fallen over on my ass in amazement, or at least have asked a question or two, but suddenly the trooper raises his head and sniffs.

"Where is it, chappie?" he asks.

As a drunkard can lie better than any other professional man, I say, "It's all gone."

He doesn't even shake his head, but he does lift an eyebrow. "Drink it tonight," he says, in a voice as soft as a baby's bottom. "All of it. I won't have you gush up the project, you know. We reach target in four days, and I want you fit to march."

"All right," I say. "Sure."

He peers closely at me, like in the slaughterhouse when they weigh the beef.

"How much soldiering, chappie?"

"Enough."

"None of your chin," he says, and he means it.

I shrug. "About twenty years."

He lifts his eyebrow again to look closer at the scale. "Officer?" he asks, and it kills him to do so, for he knows goddamn well I was and it riles his guts to have maybe one sonofabitchen equal in the whole bloody world.

I am unable to resist the temptation—I have to shove it in.

"Colonel," I say. Then I hesitate that delicate fraction

of a second which gives it such lovely emphasis. "Full Colonel."

He settles back on his haunches as though he has heard that his best friend, if he ever had one, has been hit by a truck.

"Oh . . . h," he says, and I think of the time I heard a constipated cow trying in vain to relieve herself. "Well, 'chappie'," he finally gets out, stressing the word with fiendish satisfaction. "I might as well explain the whole project." He goes to the staircase and calls, "Ahmed, come below." While he is doing this, I am looking furiously round the cabin for the bottle I know he has stashed away.

Ahmed comes flowing down the stairs like the slippery Arab he is, and pretty soon I am as replete with knowledge as a sexless, female schoolteacher.

There is this big group of diamond fields, explains Ahmed, and each of them is so chuck-full of diamonds just lying on top of the ground that the members of the Cartel, a bunch of mean, pernicious, grubby, selfish, money-idolizing, blood-sucking, tight-fisted, murderous, treacherous, back-stabbing sons of bitches, go into fits every time they think about it. They've got so much of the stuff that they have even attempted to rid themselves of a part by dumping a hundred billion dollars worth of the junk in the ocean. But every time a chicken pecks away at the ground it exposes another pipe containing a couple more hundred billion dollars of diamonds.

One twerp of the Cartel, who had a different house for each day of the year, decided to solve the problem. He told the Board of Directors of the Cartel that they should atomize the fields. When another twerp, who had more houses than he, asked how, he said to drop atomic bombs and blow up the whole goddamn works. They almost raised the first twerp's salary, except that somebody first discussed it with a \$90-a-week engineer, who said the bombs might crystallize the fields and make even more

diamonds. The Board members were trembling and shitting in their pants for a month afterwards.

They have good reason to be terrified, for if a few toddling infants were allowed to pick up diamonds undisturbed for a week or two, the whole market would be shot to hell. Diamonds aren't like whisky, damn it; you can use them over and over again, and they can't be consumed so you can sell more of them. Therefore, the Cartel fights desperately to limit their output.

Their miners are herded more rigorously than permanent members of a Georgia chain-gang, indentured longer than Greek whores in an Arab harem, and kept under closer observation than reigning movie stars. Every few years or so, the slaves are permitted to visit their families, but before being released they are stripped, have fingers shoved up all the holes they possess, and inspected as carefully as a mother scrutinizes her new-born baby. Then they are treated to a massive dose of castor oil and watched until everything they have swallowed in the past week comes rolling out.

The fields are so closely guarded that it makes the security at the Manhattan Atomic Project seem like an open house tea party, and the guards are so mean that Hitler's SS troops were choirboys by comparison.

When I ask Ahmed how he knows all this jazz, he doesn't even blink an eye while confessing he was formerly a guard patrol leader.

They live the kind of life that any Arab would gladly die for; eat steak for breakfast, have the latest movies flown in, and whenever they want a woman, they have only to say how many, the dimensions, duration, and the broads are rushed in before they can even drop their pants.

A guard never goes home, really. If he tries to play patsy, he disappears. If he is seriously ill, he is sent to a top-notch hospital—in South America. If he wants to quit, he can do so, but a Cartel agency shadows him more closely than a suspicious wife for five years, as though he

has cancer and will be dead or cured after that time. Ahmed has been out six years now.

“So,” says the trooper, “we go into a field and carry out the diamonds.”

“So,” I answer, “what are the very slight cliffs we fall over while executing this gambol?”

I quickly learn that Ahmed hasn't waited all his time just shooting erring miners. Patrolling up to twenty miles from the coast, he explains, are gunboats and observation planes. Anyone entering the area is immediately attacked, and the Cartel has a committee which specializes in writing excuses to the next of kin in case any of those killed are innocent bystanders. Jeep and air patrols scour the fields.

I interrupt to remark that it is a crock of apples that they can watch over it fully; it's like trying to prevent country kids from sneaking under the Big Tent.

Then Ahmed lowers the boom. All over the place are steel cages, concealed in such a manner that a mother steel cage couldn't find her baby steel cage even with the wind in her favour, and in each of them are locked a couple of guards who observe their area around the clock. They are provided with radios to call headquarters in the event a poor simple bastard ever wanders by. Every two months, a guard vehicle, escorted by a watchful officer, brings up replacements to relieve the guys in the cage.

To assure themselves that the men would not attempt any tricks, the Cartel had experimented by locking half a dozen of the best escape artists in the world in cages, offering a wad big enough to choke an elephant if they could break out. They were taken back to Europe in straitjackets, suffering from frustration.

In addition, says Ahmed the Arab, they have radar, snooperscopes, infra-red ray units, periodic flares lighting up the area, and the cute little gadgets we first employed in Korea, microphones, lying in the fields, sensitive

enough to pick up the sound of a sperm going into a womb.

"How much ground do they cover?" I ask.

"About five thousand square miles."

"Bullshit," I say, and it comes out like a bark. "Nobody, not even Gimbels in New York, could guard five thousand square miles." My mind calculates faster than an IBM. "It would require . . . ah . . . aw . . . four infantry divisions."

"They use roving patrols and strong points."

"Okay," I say. That stuff doesn't shake me one bit, especially when I'm looking at a map. On the ground, though, I usually have bladder trouble. "What do we do?"

Tom the Trooper takes over. "We will land thirty miles north of the fields—just beyond the range of the exterior patrols—march south about fifty miles, then east to the diamond diggings."

"How far is that?"

"Thirty to thirty-five miles."

"Okay," I say, getting up to leave.

"Chappie," says the trooper, in that tone which makes me feel like hiding under a bunk. "Don't gush up the project."

Miss Steel Tits is still hanging around the deck, and when I am in the pilothouse checking the compass, she leans through the window.

"What did Tom say?" she asks, her attention temporarily diverted from the bulge.

"I'm an accepted member of the community now," I say, my thoughts turning to another member, or rather two of them, which are pointing straight at me.

"What do you think of the project?" she asks.

I tear my eyes away, and mentally my hands. "It's all right. Just a bit of a stroll and a bit of digging, like your tomcat says." For the first time, I look at her as being

something more than just a bed-mate. "You related to the tomcat?"

She tosses her straw-coloured head of hair. "We're friends."

"You know him a long time?"

"Long enough." For an instant I think it is Ahmed the Arab who is answering, so I give up and turn back to the wheel. She acts a little as if her sex appeal is becoming tarnished, then tries to get friendly again. "Tom find the bottle?"

"Nope."

"I heard him tell you to drink it up, all of it."

"So I'll drink it up."

She doesn't beat about the bush, such as going through a couple of hundred medical books before getting to the main point.

"Are you all right when you drink?" she asks, and even though the meaning is as clear as daylight, she has to make sure I'm not a complete idiot. "I mean, can drunks do it the same as when they're sober?"

"Why don't you slip up tonight for a nippy and find out?"

"Coo, Tom would rip you." The smoke pours out of her ears, she is trying so hard to figure out a way. "I yelp real loud," she admits.

"Well, we'll take another look at it after we get ashore," I say, squeezing my stomach muscles to stop the bulge.

"Yes," she says, and she isn't kidding.

### 3

I don't know how the Arab is able to pin-point the second cove like he does, but it is a beauty. We come put-putting in just before dawn, then Tom the Trooper goes to the rear of the sow and uncovers the heaviest most massive barbed anchor I've ever seen—bigger even than on an aircraft carrier. It takes everybody, including Miss Steel Tits, to push it overboard. Once it has hit bottom, the trooper puts the boat in gear and slowly drags the anchor along until the old sow stops in her tracks as though she has hit a stone wall. Now, I'm fundamentally a land animal so no bells start ringing right away, but when he backs off and put-puts the sow forward again until she hits that stone wall a second time, I suddenly see daylight. He is making a 'dead man'—sinking the anchor so it can be used to winch the boat offshore later on.

After unhooking the anchor cable, the trooper bolts on a buoy which he drops in the water to bob around for future reference, then runs the sow right on to the sandy beach.

He jumps ashore first, Sten gun at the ready, and moves quietly into the small grove of trees to make sure

we have not landed accidentally in the middle of a Cartel picnic, then returns to supervise the unloading. He caches a couple of boxes of food that is just enough to get us back to our last stop—if we don't eat more than once or twice a week—and distributes the stuff we are to carry.

Although I am fully convinced that Tom the Trooper is a first-class, blue ribbon skunk, I have to admit he knows his business. He has thought of everything, including toothpicks in case we find a bottle of olives along the way.

We sleep until noon, eat, roll our packs, then the trooper checks us over as if we are preparing to take our first parachute jump. I never did think much of haversacks that bounce on the butt, but I don't say anything—it's the trooper's show.

"How about a gun?" I ask, with the absurdity of an inmate in a nuthouse.

He doesn't even grunt no; instead, he loads a few more things on my back which sink me into the ground another three or four inches. I estimate that I am carrying at least one hundred and twenty pounds. The trooper starts off, Miss Steel Tits follows, Ahmed gives me a little shove that gets the momentum going, and we begin marching.

I cannot recall the name of the nit-wit who once gave a long lecture at the Army War College about Africa; how the poor, little lizards are all terribly shrivelled from the searing heat, and the dense rain forests in which the starving Pigmies dine on each other, and the deadly jungles where he-man Tarzan is gleefully goosing all the female apes, but that terrain is strictly a facsimile of the Desert Training Centre in Arizona. There is a stretch of needle-pointed rock, with here and there a patch of burning sand, then a stretch of burning sand, with here and there a patch of needle-pointed rock, and draws and gullies and ravines, and up and down—and I am an imbecile to keep going for more than fifteen minutes without giving up.

Tom the Trooper, however, is really clipping it off, as



if that eighty pounds he is toting is full of muscle. Miss Steel Tits isn't doing too badly with her fifty pounds, except that the haversack straps are pulling back on her shoulders and shoving her tits out another five or six yards. Ahmed the Arab is trailing along with his eighty pounds, quietly cursing every inch of the way.

Forty minutes later, when the trooper stops to give us a breather, I topple to the ground. Let us get one point straight; I said topple, and I am not kidding.

"We've . . . got . . . to . . . take . . . it . . . a . . . little easier," I am absolutely unashamed to gasp out.

I expect the trooper to sneer and say, "Bit out of condition, eh, Colonel?" so he sneers and says, "Bit out of condition, eh, chappie?"

I consider answering, but am unable to do so, because I am rolling my eyes and turning my head in a circle trying to breathe.

After resting for what seems eleven seconds, the trooper begins marching again, snapping at me continually to keep up during the infinite doses of exquisite torment and bone-shattering agony I am experiencing, turning a deaf ear to my pleas for a bullet of mercy through the brain.

When we make camp, after fifteen miles of hiking, it is everyone for himself—or herself. No sweet maiden in a sparkling white kitchen to prepare the meal for her lord and master. I drop my pack and take out a tin, hands shaking so badly that I can hardly squeeze the can opener together to get at the food. And when the tin is finally open, I find I am too broken-back tired to eat. Instead, I lay my head on my pack and go to sleep.

Tom the Trooper is awake at the crack of dawn, blowing his bugle and flapping his wings, while I am trying to find one muscle in my entire body which doesn't ache. The trooper makes a big deal of inspecting his Sten gun, like he is going to lead the marines in on Tarawa, then draws out a revolver with a 12-inch barrel from a hip

holster and gives it a careful going over. Miss Steel Tits fumbles a pass or two at the honey of a scope-mounted rifle she is carrying, which tells me right off the bat that it will be a miracle if she doesn't kill herself with the first shot. Ahmed the Arab handles his scope-mounted rifle as though it had come out of his mother's belly with him, and flicks his revolver in such a fashion that Wyatt Earp would have fallen on his knees begging for his life.

"How about a gun?" I ask again, as if I have just been transferred to solitary confinement in that nut-house.

"Won't be needed, chappie. No spares anyhow." Then he flashes those etc., etc., teeth to remind me that I am along only as a two-footed pack mule.

"I don't like going around naked," I say, without smiling back. "Especially when the other people are loaded for bear."

"No weapon, chappie. We're not looking for a set-to, but we can take care of you if something pops up." He stops smiling, so I shut up.

Smoothing out a level spot in the sand, the trooper unfolds his map. Ahmed gathers round, Miss Steel Tits elbows her way into the huddle, and I crawl over.

The Arab picks at his nose for a while, then, when it is all cleaned out, he says, "We reach boundary eight, nine miles. Guard patrols start maybe five miles after."

I say, "Just out of sheer curiosity," and I am curious, "why go in an L? Why not go diagonally across?"

The trooper taps a dark brown spot on the map. "Mountain, chappie. Bad country. Have to go around, y'know."

I lean over the map to study it, and the trooper surprises me by not saying anything. Then, straightening up, I pull out a cigarette.

"I'll wait for you people here," I say.

I should have remembered that being a prick doesn't preclude a prick from being a good soldier. The trooper asks, real quietly, "What's up, chappie?"

I lean over the map again. "If I was the one setting up security for the area, I'd cover the avenues of approach. Your direction of march is like following a main highway—right between two mountains, then across flat ground."

"We'll be marching at night," he says, dropping off the chappie bit.

"Where would you put the microphones? They pick up sound a hundred yards away, even a foot brushing grass. And where is the best place to site snooperscopes? On flat ground, with clear sky in the background." I sit back. "I'll wait here."

Ahmed and Miss Steel Tits are watching me as though I am a gipsy fortune-teller waving my hands over a crystal ball.

Tom the Trooper doesn't need a hole in his head to understand. He weighs it up in an instant. "What would you do?" Again no chappie bit.

"I'd select the worst terrain a person could walk or climb on. I can't imagine them running mikes up to the top of a mountain."

"Righto," he says, after a second's thought, and that is that.

He starts off, and I see he has changed course, heading south-east, towards the mountains. The trooper marches well; he chooses ground I wouldn't bother to show on a map, and whenever he hears shrubs or grass rustling from the breeze—when there is a goddamn breeze—he aims right for them to muffle our steps. He is a pleasure to watch, taking advantage of the best natural routes to walk on which prevent us from being overly exposed, like a dyed-in-the-wool Daniel Boone.

After four long hours of such foolishness, and feeling as if I'd never complete the first one, the trooper halts the regiment.

"We'll rest until dark," he says, so I topple again.

He removes a ten-pound bundle from my pack, opens it to take out eight short poles and two nylon sheets that

are stained the light-brown colour of the terrain, and promptly forms them into two shelters, each ten feet square by three feet high. Then he orders the Arab to stand the first watch, and slips under one of them with Miss Steel Tits, leaving me to guess with whom I am to cuddle.

Picking up his rifle, Ahmed assumes a prone position at the lip of the depression we're in and commences sentry duty while I wriggle under our shelter to catch a little shut-eye. It's hotter than Joan of Arc's farewell, but I don't toss around too much—at least not until the Arab is relieved from watch by the trooper, slides underneath our shelter, and I grab him like I did that Jap one night on Okinawa. The trooper finally unlocks my fingers from around his throat, wakes me up, and I roll back over, snoring again with my usual gusto. Ahmed crawls to the furthest point from me, and appears not to have got very much rest when we rise at sundown to eat supper.

It is a bitch of a night to travel. There isn't even a hint of a moon, and the only one who doesn't bust his butt by falling a couple of million times is Tom the Trooper. It is rough country, wrinkled with gullies and holes and loose stones, full of bushes that jump up out of nowhere to whip themselves directly in your face. The trooper, though, is really on the ball, leading us unerringly over spots where a few inches to the left or right would result in a quick trip to a hospital for a busted leg.

About two o'clock in the morning, we come to a stream where even the trooper is willing to take a break. Once he has escorted Miss Steel Tits a little way off to wash, I undress and lay in the water as if I am going to inhale it through my pores. It has been more torrid than coals in a furnace, for we are about twenty degrees south of the equator, and when you consider that part of the Sahara Desert is twenty degrees north—well, they almost have to drag me out.

We reach the mountain late the following night, and

starting up that goddamn gargantua is exactly like having an operation on the spine without anaesthetics. After climbing my usual twenty feet, I quit to sit down. Tom the Trooper descends to swear he will kill me on the spot if I don't get moving, and as I know he will, I manage to climb another twenty feet before collapsing again. What with almost being executed and reprieved a couple of hundred times, we make a fair distance by dawn.

I must have been asleep for two or three hours when the trooper nearly fractures my side with his foot.

"Down! Quick!" he hisses.

I dive into the crevice he points to, him directly behind. Miss Steel Tits and Ahmed are already there, both aiming their binoculars down to the flat we have crossed earlier this morning. It doesn't take eagle's eyes to see two jeeps moseying along about two miles away.

I have to prod Miss Steel Tits in the ribs several times before she comes awake long enough to hand me her binoculars to take a closer look. Kee-rist, are those bastards below us ready for bear! Each jeep contains four bush-faced bully-boys armed with automatic rifles, and carries a light machine gun mounted on a stand in the centre. A radio, powerful enough to reach the North Pole, is hooked to the rear with an antenna twelve feet high.

The bully-boys are bad enough, but what makes me shudder is that in each jeep is also a brute of a police dog who probably eats lions for fun.

Now, having seen, and been on, maybe a couple of million patrols, it is evident that those boys are professionals. Their technique is to drive a few hundred yards, then, while three of them hop out to scout the area, the fourth stands on a seat to scan the countryside, after which they drive on another few hundred yards to start all over again. The lion-eating-for-fun dogs aren't just sitting on their tails either—they are ranging about as if

hunting for people is more fun than making baby lion-eaters.

"We must have hit a mike," I say.

"Oh, oh," chokes the Arab.

I swing the glasses. Two more jeeps have appeared from the left side, followed closely by a 6 x 6. When the truck stops, out jump a dozen guards, dressed in khaki shorts and shirts, wearing boy scout hats, leading a dozen more of those four-legged killers who eat lions for fun.

Ahmed whispers for us to look at a tall, wide-shouldered man in the first jeep coming up.

"Cherukime," he says. "Captain of guards." He says this as though he has said Himmler.

I adjust the lens a hair and see a face that would scare even the dogs. He is absolutely the meanest looking bugger I have ever seen. A jagged, high-ridged scar runs from his left temple to his right jaw, directly across the eyelid, drawing it up as if he is offering a prayer to heaven. A second, companion scar glistens from his left jaw upward to his right temple, forcing that eye to stare at his chin. I once saw a prisoner struck square in the nose with the flat end of a shovel, swung by a cop six foot six and weighing 280 pounds. His beak was a mother's dream compared to the mush on Cherukime's face. I know that should he be only one thousandth as vicious as he looks, I would take the gas pipe before allowing myself to be introduced as a prospective husband to his sister—even if she looked like Betty Grable.

The Arab is trembling and, involuntarily, I glance down to see whether he has wet his pants. Tom the Trooper isn't blinking an eye; he is laying out magazine after magazine of bullets for his Sten gun and opening a box of shells for the cannon he is toting on his hip. Miss Steel Tits has lost ninety-seven per cent of the sun tan she had gotten during the boat trip.

"How about a gun?" I ask for the third time.

The trooper doesn't argue; he hands me Miss Steel Tits' rifle and a box of shells.

Meanwhile, Al Capone is chasing tails below. Once his men have been formed into a skirmish line, he sends them running up and down the gullies, around draws and across open stretches. The dogs are barking madly with joy as if they can't wait to taste fresh blood again.

I am ready to join the Arab in wetting his pants when two observation planes appear. Al Capone grasps a mike from his jeep radio and gives instructions that galvanize them into action, sending them darting over the flat like hungry hawks looking for rabbits. We are five hundred feet up the mountain side, which is approximately a third of the way to the top, and although I realize we have a fine place to hide from the bully-boys on foot, those planes are strictly a case of death for poorly concealed mountain climbers.

Then, not only do I want to join Ahmed in wetting his pants, but decide to equalize the project from the opposite side, for suddenly I hear the putt-putt-putt-putts which spell even worse news, and soon a 'copter comes into view. When it lands, Al Capone enters to co-ordinate the search from the air.

He must have finally awakened to the existence of a goddamn mountain in the vicinity, for directly afterwards, one of the men standing by the truck, with a walkie-talkie radio tuned to the 'copter frequency, shouts something that turns three bully-boys with dogs towards us.

I come to the instant conclusion that now would be a fitting time to club Tom the Trooper and Ahmed, slip a quickie-nippy into Miss Steel Tits, then commit suicide before the Shadow of the Long Knives reaches our crevice. However, I hold that in abeyance because I am truthfully a little excited, especially since I now have a beauty of a scope-mounted rifle in my hands with which to fight. It strikes me that if we can shoot down the planes, destroy the machine guns mounted on the jeeps, and per-

haps have a volcano explode, all at the same time, I figure our position is sufficiently strong to put up one hell of a good scrap. The trooper must be thinking the same thing, for he is actually smiling, as though he has just got his bride into a hotel room with an intact cherry.

The three bully-boys spread out a hundred yards apart and start up the mountain. Again I am reminded that they are professionals; they hang on to the dogs' leashes and let the lion-eaters pull them along.

When they have climbed a couple of hundred feet, the Arab sorta sighs, lowers his rifle, and lies down as if he is going to sleep. I dig my elbow into his ribs—no sonofabitch is going to drop dead from fright around me. He just sighs again in resignation, ignoring my elbow which has driven maybe six inches inside him.

I am fully prepared to relinquish all thought of slipping one into Miss Steel Tits if I could have just one drop of booze about now. I can readily visualize the soft, smooth, velvety flow of amber gliding haughtily into a finely-worked crystal shot-glass, with perhaps an eager drop or two passing over its stately brim to roll graciously down its many-faceted side and come to rest against my fingers with a fierce, demanding call for recognition. Then lifting it slowly—don't spill it, boy!—and presenting my greedy, drooling mouth to meet this elegant beauty head-on, sticking out my trembling lower lip as an impatient platform for that cool, lovely glass.

Kee-rist!! I am ready to charge right down the mountain like a bat out of hell if those bastards would only put out a bottle.

Suddenly, the goddamnest barrage of gunfire since Bull Halsey opened up in Leyte Gulf breaks out! Even the three bloodthirsty lion-eaters stop to look down. I swing the binoculars to the left.

Every bully-boy below is converging rapidly on a deep ravine a few hundred yards away into which half a dozen



guards are shooting furiously as though six or seven million wild savages are hiding there.

The two observation planes and the 'copter immediately race to the scene of action. Within minutes, one of the men sounds a jeep siren that is louder than Gabriel tooting his horn, and everybody, including the three bully-boys halfway up to us, begins to assemble on the flat.

The trooper seems almost disappointed, and Miss Steel Tits tugs at my arm and whispers, "What happened? What happened?" and I answer, "Shit if I know," and the Arab lies there like the siren is actually Gabriel's call to him.

Then the trooper laughs, so I wipe the sweat out of my eyes and focus the glasses on the ravine.

"Ahmed," asks Tom the Trooper. "Do they have any game out here?"

The Arab manages to gasp out, "Almost never. Roving guards shoot them."

The trooper laughs louder. "Well, they did today."

Then I see the guards dragging out the carcasses of two antelope—and I wonder, for a fleeting second, whether it was us or the animals who had set off the alarm.

## 4

For the remainder of the day we twist and turn, and the only one who is able to sleep is the trooper, for the rest of us are still trying to calm our shattered nerves. That's not completely true; I am shaking, but most of it is due to the excitement of possibly engaging in a fire-fight. Frankly, that is also a crock of crap—I always shake, before and after, whether I do fight or do not fight.

Anyhow, at dusk the trooper drives us to our feet and we start climbing the monster of a mountain again. It is much better now. The moon is finally waking up and throwing a pale, silvery sheen on the crevices we fall in from time to time. Even a few lost gusts of stale wind come sneaking around to solidify the sweat drenching our clothes.

About two or three in the morning, we reach the top of the mountain, and I know exactly how Balboa felt when he spat into the Pacific Ocean after busting his back for fifty or a hundred years. I don't even topple over when Tom the Trooper tells us to take a break—being unconscious for several hours does something to your system

that prevents you from toppling, and climbing that last stretch was enough to black out a mountain goat.

However, I have to say this much for Ahmed the Arab—he kept right up there. Of course, he didn't stop cursing quietly from the moment he took his first step, but he was a helluva lot more rugged than I suspected. Miss Steel Tits just plodded along as if she hadn't quite decided whether she enjoyed it or not. Being twenty-six or twenty-seven years old, and a real healthy wench, she chugged up from rock to rock as though she was a little stupid in the head. I know that if she had laid one of those tits on top of my pack, I would have dropped quicker than a horse with a bullet in its brain.

By dawn we are halfway down, and it is worse descending than climbing, as any imbecile who fiddles around mountains well knows. We stop and sleep all day, twitching from exhaustion, the same as a dog who has been chasing heat for a week. Even Tom the Trooper and Miss Steel Tits deny themselves their daily exercise.

By midnight the following evening, we are back on the flat, where it is Arizona all over again. The trooper, however, still stays with the time-tested formula, selecting ground to march on where nobody in his right mind would think of installing a microphone.

Suddenly, about four in the morning, he stops! Like a pointer scenting a covey! One foot remains suspended in mid-air.

"Dan!" he whispers desperately, and he doesn't have to send me a telegram.

"Amy! Stop!" I instantly call out. She halts in her tracks. The Arab, behind me, pulls up even more promptly.

Flinging off my pack, I race over to the trooper. Under different circumstances I would have been heartily amused, but instead I go on my belly, rest my elbow on the ground, and slip my hand beneath his boot.

Then, very, very gently he lets his foot settle in my

palm, and I have to marvel again at that novelty trooper. He has stepped smack on to a trip-wire running ten inches high, has felt it through a boot thick enough to protect his tootsies from white-hot coals, then, completely off balance, has frozen in position. Rivulets of sweat are pouring down his face from the effort, and truthfully, I can't help but admire the guy.

Once I have raised my hand a hair against the wire and the boot to support him, he finally has sufficient purchase to shift his weight, and ever so slowly lifts his foot off the wire. At that angle, it must have taken thirty horsepower of strength to do so without staggering.

He squats on the ground, huffing and puffing, for almost a split second, then casts off his pack and slithers alongside the trip-wire to follow it up. Ten yards away, I see his pencil-flashlight flicker and soon I hear, "All right, Dan, you can release it now," so I let go of the wire and trot over to where he has disarmed a flare longer than a Malayan python.

"Push-pull activator," he tells me, as if I had been brought up on strength-giving, muscle-building corn flakes and cavity-forming jelly beans all my life. Then he says the words of praise which under other circumstances would have resounded throughout the world like when Lindberg landed at Le Bourget. He says, "A bit of all right, Dan."

I can't help it, so help me. I have to say, "A bit of all right yourself." For a moment I think of the French when they give out the Legion d'Honneur, kissing and feeling each other up.

Once we pass over the trip-wire, the trooper re-arms the flare, then continues leading the march. But we don't go too fast now, for he is checking every inch of the ground before putting down those size elevens again.

It is lucky we come upon another creek the following night, for although each of us carries four canteens we can see they will be as useful as the straw hat on the head

of a Wop junk dealer's horse if we don't strike water within a day. And as everybody is smelling somewhat bad, the trooper doesn't have the courage to deny us another short break, so he and Miss Steel Tits disappear upcreek to wash, or whatever, and the Arab and I wash and drink and drink and wash as merrily as two loving hippopotamuses.

This time, though, Tom the Trooper returns with Miss Steel Tits rather quickly, which leads me to wonder if some of his edge is wearing off. However, I soon realize he is excited about something that has come to him in the midst of wandering around.

He slides into a gully, unfolds the map, hovers over it with that pencil-flashlight, then climbs out to hurry us onward as if we must catch the Orient Express or be stranded in war-torn Shanghai.

I learn the reason for all these frenzied actions at dawn when we reach a horseshoe-shaped chain of hills.

"This is our destination," he announces, like he has just landed on Plymouth Rock.

We are all too tired to give a damn, so we set up camp by dropping our packs and falling on them, then as soon as our breathing is normal again, we take a look at what we have broken our backs to get to.

It isn't a helluva lot to look at. The hills are peanut-sized things, perhaps a hundred-fifty feet high, overlooking a flat piece of no-man's land ten miles by ten miles square, full of plain, old, scorching, sandy, sharp-rocked Arizona.

After lying under our nylon shelters until late afternoon, the trooper and I make a reconnaissance. Within a couple of hours, we find what we are searching for—a cave at the base end of the horseshoe which gives excellent observation over most of the dried-out, forsaken ground that the trooper is laying claim to. The cave is the size of a thirty-foot trailer suddenly chopped in half, with

an entrance so small that Miss Steel Tits could never squeeze through sideways.

It is more comfortable than taking up residence in the Beverly Hilton once we are settled there, and everyone goes back to sleep, even though we have lain around on our butts most of the day.

The next morning, the trooper holds a council of war, and I nearly bust a gut to keep from laughing when I discover that Mr. Shine-Your-Boots-And-Polish-Your-God-damn-Brass-Tom-The-Novelty-Trooper has unexpectedly run into deep water.

Ahmed the Arab brings it up immediately. "Can't move around daytime," he tells us, as if we have been waiting back at the boat throughout the march. "Too dark to find diamonds at night."

There is one helluva silence, somewhat like the stillness you'd hear if Miss Steel Tits married some guy, who, once he carried her over the threshold, informed her that his pecker had been shot off during the war.

Miss Steel Tits says, "Lor."

Tom the Trooper says, "Hm . . . m . . . m."

I say, "I thought all we had to do was pick up a couple of handfuls of earth and walk straight into Tiffany's."

The Arab decides to keep quiet.

After four or five eternities, the trooper crawls out of the cave and sits on a rock near the entrance, thinking. Miss Steel Tits takes a couple more hundred years of the gloom, then joins him. Ahmed, casting one glance at the thunder plainly written on my face, concludes that being outside is safer. Frankly, I don't know why the hell I am getting so sore. Now, that's a crock of crap—I do, too. I had made up my mind to steal so many diamonds that I could buy a monster of a ten-room house, equip it completely with a stainless steel central heating system, then fill the oil reservoir, storage tank and every radiator with booze.

That would be the dreamboat life, not having to waste

the least bit of energy carrying a bottle from one room to the next. I could picture me eating breakfast in the morning and relaxing in the john right afterwards—which I enjoyed doing when I was able to do so—and puffing away on a Havana gold-leaf cigar about the size of a midget submarine, then lifting one of the buckets I would store in each room and opening the radiator petcock to fill the bucket with whisky. . . .

When I wake up to find my fingers clawing into the rock floor, I go outside and sit down by the trooper.

“Well?” I ask.

“Bit of a set-back, Dan,” he says. He has stopped that chappie jazz since his boot touched the trip-wire.

“How much time does our Arab expert estimate we will need to do the job here?” I ask, trying not to think of strangling Ahmed.

“A fortnight,” he says, and immediately I remember that that’s two weeks.

“Why don’t we . . . ?”

I don’t continue, for suddenly the sound of a patrol plane overhead sends everybody dashing madly for the cave. The trooper and I assume a prone position at the entrance to watch its flight pattern. It flies up and down the flat as precisely as a guided robot, swings around the line of hills, over their reverse slopes, then finally, an hour later, goes away. It is therefore unnecessary for me to complete the question I had begun, which would have been, “Why don’t we take a chance for a few days and pick up what we can.”

It is Miss Steel Tits who helps us out of the hole. “Why not work a little bit in the morning, then a little bit in the afternoon, and hide the rest of the time?”

Tom the Trooper has thought of that. “Bit of a problem; food wouldn’t last out.”

“Reduce rations,” I say, with my big mouth.

The trooper turns to the Arab. “Ahmed, what is their basic surveillance plan?”

"No set pattern. Changed often. This one of seven fields not being worked. Checked every day." I never saw an Arab who talked as little as Ahmed. Usually you can't get them to shut up, even to make babies.

Tom the Trooper takes a split second to make his decision. "We'll give the morning and afternoon idea a try," he says. And that's that.

We spend three days searching for microphones, and it is one torturous job. We begin that very afternoon, directly after the plane has left. The trooper and I climb down to the flat line up our sights on a bush about a quarter of a mile away, then, shoulder to shoulder, we start walking towards it as slowly as an English Guard of Honour behind King Henry VIII's coffin, looking at each grain of sand with our binoculars. As I am now suddenly the expert, I give orders to scrutinize up to fifty yards to each side, and before an hour has gone by I am scared that we are goofing because we haven't sighted even one single flash of metal. I am also starting to look around for Al Capone and his lion-eating-for-fun friends to come chugging out of nowhere to grind up a few more tourists.

We are ready to call it a day, and perhaps a life, when I spot one, seventy yards to the front. I motion to the trooper to move back a dozen yards where I squat to hold my council of war.

"You cut that mike wire," I say, in my voice of doom, "and we'll have a wee bit of a to-do like we did in the mountain. If you mark it, eagle eye upstairs will probably catch on."

"What do you suggest, Dan?" he asks, and he is not talking sassy.

"We'll have to mark it in our heads," I say.

"Fair enough," he says at once, but there is the beginning of a wrinkle in his brow, for he is not the kind of person who permits loose ends to dangle behind him, which is something I should have stopped to consider long and hard prior to taking the next step.



Anyhow, I lead off, we skirt the mike, look at it from enough angles to remember its position in our sleep, then head on. We find two more before we reach the bush, and, as it is getting dark, return to the cave.

In three days we have penetrated halfway into the flat, locating a dozen more mikes. By this time, the trooper and I can race back from the furthest point with our eyes shut and pass around them, we know them so well.

On the following morning, all of us climb down, carrying little shovels upon which a fine-toothed rake can be hooked, and Ahmed pecks away here and we peck away there and all we find is a lot of blazing sunshine cooking out our brains. An hour later, we put up the nylon shelters and lie under them, quietly baking like idiots without a place to go. The plane comes over directly after lunch, has a look around, then departs. We continue roasting beneath the shelters until late afternoon, peck away for another hour, and return to the cave at sundown.

The next morning, Ahmed scratches up a couple of diamonds, and I wish I had a camera along. Tom the Trooper begins doing push-ups, Miss Steel Tits gives me a case of seasickness with the excited movements of her beauties, and I almost wet my pants getting over to see what the hell they are like.

Ahmed eyes them real close—then lets them drop to the ground! “Bad value,” he says, and I am ready to treat him savagely compared to what the lion-eating-for-fun monsters would have done.

“Ain’t they diamonds?” I scream, scrabbling around frantically on hands and knees to search for them. Finally, I find them, or rather Ahmed points them out to me, and I take one look, and brother, they are positively nothing, just globs of unadulterated, zero, nothing. “Are these diamonds?” I ask him, coming to the instant conclusion that this Arab is an absolute, raving, suicidal, warp-brained lunatic.

He says yes, but I don't believe him. Then when he tries to explain that rough diamonds don't shine, I shout, of course, goddamnit, I can see they don't shine, but these are only small, hard, ugly, globs of shit which I wouldn't even consider putting around a rock garden. Then when he says they always seem that way until a Dutch grindstone mechanic does some fancy jazz with them, I yell, goddamnit, I'm not a complete idiotic fool, I know about that Dutch jazz, but even a harebrained moron knows that diamonds shouldn't resemble small, hard, ugly, globs of shit. Finally, I bare my teeth and ask him if he knows what the hell a real, live, whisky-buying, ground-hugging diamond looks like, and when he says yes, I decide I will kill that bastard on the spot.

Well, finding those crummy globs is enough to send us pecking at the ground as though we won't stop until we reach China. Frankly, Miss Steel Tits and I are pecking away solely for the exercise: we wouldn't have recognized a real diamond, or even an unreal diamond, if it jumped up and bit us in the tail.

Of course it has to be the novelty trooper who finds the first valuable one. He stands up somewhat casually, and says, "Ahmed, got a moment?"

The Arab takes it from his hand, spits on it, rubs it, taps it against a rock, holds it up towards the sky, and says, "Not bad."

Miss Steel Tits and I begin fighting to look it over, and when I finally take possession, I see exactly what it is—just a slightly larger, harder, uglier, glob of shit. It's sorta yellowish, with a whitish crust, and identical to what came out of a collie bitch I once owned who had swallowed a handful of raw pork-fat and vomited it up.

"How much is it worth?" I pant, resolving for the seven thousandth time that I am not taking a bit of a walk and doing a bit of digging all over the African landscape for any lousy three hundred pounds—sterling.

The Arab cleans his nose for a while. "Maybe eighty-

ninety pounds. After grinding, polishing . . .” He raises his hands in that gesture which God gave only to Semites so they could speak among themselves—and confuse the rest of the bloody world.

I go into a squatting position. Kee-rist, that is less than two hundred and fifty bucks! I total up the amount of time we have lain under a baking sun the last two days, add the hours we have scratched around harder than Chink farmers, and the result is that I would make more money just staying drunk in a Casablanca saloon. However, before I decide to worry myself to death, I eye that slippery Arab to see if the bastard is giving the diamond just one millionth of its true value to throw me off the track. But I have never known an Arab to lie without twitching his eye—which is why they are always blinking—and for once, Ahmed the Arab is not pretending to rub sand out of his.

Anyhow, finding that diamond sets off the three of them, digging and scratching with those rake-shovels, as if they have only a few minutes to bury themselves prior to the end of the world. I swat at the ground here and there, making certain, however, that I don't break my back.

In the afternoon, the Arab uncovers a couple more which are nothing to write home about, but when we return to the cave in the evening, the trooper, Miss Steel Tits and the Arab jabber like they have just won control of General Motors.

After four days of such foolishness, I am ready to stay at home and relax; it is the world's greatest waste of time. As I have not found one of those precious globs, and as I am positive that I would never recognize one of them even if it protruded from a naked belly-dancer's navel, I am able to concentrate on thinking. Especially since the three of them have found a sum total of only one more glob during this period.

“Got an idea,” I say to the trooper. He doesn’t answer, for his face is so depressed that it is almost level with his boots. “Why don’t we leave someone near the top of the hill with binoculars to spot the search plane before it closes in? Then post somebody down there to watch the observer and yell out when he signals? That way you can have a helluva lot more time to scratch around.”

The trooper thinks it over, chiefly of how, during the past four days, we have been huddling under the shelters from mid-morning to late-afternoon, afraid even to take a pee outside, waiting for the plane to come zooming down like a hawk, always worrying that it might again return later in the day.

“All right,” he says, and it is exactly what I want. So commencing the next morning, I rest my back comfortably against a rock and begin looking for Lindberg. It hadn’t taken a genius to realize that Tom the Trooper would have to leave me; scouting for planes requires experience, and Ahmed is needed down at the diggings. As Miss Steel Tits is worthless for anything except one obvious item, the trooper assigns her the simple mission of watching for my signal.

It works like a charm. I spot Old Lindberg with sufficient time to send them scurrying under the shelters, and when he leaves, I give the sign to continue searching. By evening, they have found a dozen diamonds. I think they would have given me a drink of whisky if they had had any.

I also catch sight of two jeeps before they enter the open end of the horseshoe a couple of days later, and give the pre-arranged signal. The trooper and company make it back to the cave in time, carrying the nylon shelters and crap they have lugged out, but they huff and puff for an hour afterwards. The jeeps search the area for a while, miss the chicken scratching, which is not difficult in a hundred square miles of nothing, then go off.

By the end of two weeks, the canvas bag containing the globs that Tom the Trooper carries with him constantly, even when he goes to the john, isn't bulging enough to send anybody into hysterics, but we still keep up the routine of digging, scratching and observing, except for each fifth day when the Arab or I take a night hike to a creek about four hours stroll away to fill the canteens. Not only is there the evident lack of a bulge in the canvas sack, but there is one helluva big bulge in the food stores.

One evening I am pleasantly loafing in the cave with Ahmed the Arab, just doing a great deal of absolutely nothing, when suddenly this idea comes to me as swiftly as a Southern Baptist gets religion. Shortly before, Tom the Trooper had invited Miss Steel Tits to dinner at Maxim's, so they are somewhere outside having their meat course, as yelping in such a small cave would immediately cause a landslide.

"Hey, Ahmed," I ask. "When they work a field, do they scratch around like this?"

"At beginning. Then find pipes. Then work pipes," he says, almost without having to draw in a breath to get it all out.

"Where are the pipes they worked here?"

"Don't know. We find pipes, we find many diamonds."

I am near to asking a few more questions, but am so afraid he might talk me to death that I start thinking anew instead.

Then it hits! I am surely tempted to rush outside and pull the trooper off his dessert, but my gentlemanly instinct surfaces and I anxiously bite my toe-nails until they get back.

"Got another idea," I say casually, and Tom the Trooper sits up abruptly, knowing he is going to be conned like he has never been conned before.

"What is it, Dan?" he asks, with that slight inflection in his voice which says he will consider the shilling.

"How about a split if I lead you to a cluster of dia-

monds?" I ask, throwing a crippled goat into the cage of a starving tiger.

"How large?" he asks, and it curdles me to see that his voice is not cracking one iota.

"One quarter." It rolls off my tongue loud and clear.

I feel the spine-tingling flush of victory when he takes his own good time to answer. Finally he says, "All right, Dan."

Hanging a nylon shelter over the entrance, I hand Ahmed a flashlight. "Paper and pencil," I say, and Miss Steel Tits has them on my lap so fast that she must have thought I was going to sign a check on the Morgan Guaranty for her.

I sketch the outline of the hills, the one hundred square miles of flatland, then mark in the spots where we have found microphones.

"Take a look at the arrangement of the mikes," I say. Ahmed the Arab picks his nose in bewilderment; Miss Steel Tits acts as if she isn't even here; Tom the Trooper understands instantly. "They appear to be part of a planned disposition—as though they were deliberately laid out to cover sectors rather than take advantage solely of the terrain. To obtain a clearer picture, we would have to track down a larger number of mikes. As that would require at least a month, we have two courses of action: to back-track for more supplies, or to take a chance on one area." I look directly at the trooper. "How many days' food supply do we have?"

"Perhaps eight, if we go on short rations," he says, his eyes daring the devil out of me.

"We need five to return to the boat," I remind him, with a hint of a sigh. But I cut it off short to conceal the fact that I am grasping at straws. I lean over the drawing I have made, and all of them press in closely, waiting for the rabbit to jump out of the hat. "Here," I say, pointing my finger to the left side of the horseshoe, about halfway to its mouth. Everybody sits back like I have just com-

manded the waters to recede, hoping desperately that I am really Moses.

The trooper doesn't take more than one split second of time to make his decision. "All right," he says.

He doesn't waste time either. At once, we pack everything up, shoulder the much lighter loads, and are off. Tom the Trooper leads the way along the ridge line and reaches the left side of the horseshoe with only an hour remaining to locate a cave before dawn breaks. We don't find one, but the Arab, by accident, stumbles on to two rocks high as a giraffe that curl outward at the bottom, which the trooper sees immediately will offer sufficient concealment for us.

At first light, we take a terrible risk by leaving Ahmed behind to watch for planes, while the trooper, Miss Steel Tits and I go down to the flat to search for mikes. By the time the plane has come, gone, and the sun has set, we hav located five more.

That evening, as I prepare another drawing, there is silence between the rocks, like I am Ghengis Khan about to render judgment. I horse it up a little by writing down a few columns of figures, pretending I'm Einstein formulating his whatchamacallit theory, then jumpng up to stride around gravely with my shoulders sagging from the weight of the moment.

Finally I sit down, say, "There," and tap the sketch, singling out a point eight hundred yards from the base of the hill.

Nobody sleeps very much that night, except Miss Steel Tits, who still isn't sure of anything anyhow, and in the morning Tom the Trooper, Ahmed the Arab and Miss Steel Tits climb down to the flat. At the spot I have selected, they go scratching here and digging there and in general messing up the whole countryside.

I don't need binoculars to learn when they find the pipe, for suddenly the Arab shouts and waves his arms. The trooper and Miss Steel Tits run to him as though he

has had a heart attack. They fall on their knees, clawing at the ground.

It strikes me that now is the ideal time for the search plane to fly over, or Al Capone to rush in, or maybe a herd of elephants to stampede by. But the trooper quickly takes hold of himself, gets Miss Steel Tits back on observation duty, moves the nylon shelters closer to whatever Ahmed has found, and they begin digging.

I absolutely will not bull you, that afternoon they come staggering up the hill with enough diamonds to sink a battleship. Tom the Trooper is in the lead, and when he holds up two bulging canvas sacks for my attention, he almost smiles.

“Quite a bit of all right,” he says, instead.



## 5

I'm certain that if we were led by any man other than Tom the Trooper, there would eventually have been four skeletons at that cluster—with a billion dollars worth of globs all neatly packed to be carried away. Even I don't want to leave, ever, not after the three of them arrive with the diamonds.

Dropping to his knees, the trooper opens one of the sacks, lets the globs tumble slowly on to a nylon shelter, then he and the Arab inspect them with the intensity of a thirsty vampire staring at a new client she'll visit that night. I can't get myself all hot and bothered over the junk lying there, but the thought of the number of radiators it could buy is beating at my brain like a sledgehammer.

Ahmed the Arab figures there are twenty thousand pounds in the first bag, and he is not estimating their weight. I almost have a fit; not so much from the amount, but seeing that the first bag is the smaller of the two.

It takes only ten seconds for the exhilaration of sudden wealth to vanish; and, imperceptibly, everyone edges

away from everybody else, as if a message has just come down from heaven saying that one of us has a most infectious disease, and won't tell which one it is.

Tom the Trooper takes a grip on things, moves about ten thousand pounds towards his corner, and says, "Expenses." Nobody utters a word. Then slowly, he puts twenty-five per cent of what is left in one pile for yours truly, fifteen per cent for the Arab—who looks at his share silently, but whose brow is wrinkling like he has something broken off short in his anus canal—and thirty per cent each for Miss Steel Tits and himself. After stuffing their loot into canvas bags, they disappear, one by one, to bury them. Including me.

Then, real casually, we begin searching for something to do, such as polishing our weapons. Somehow we pass the night without a couple of murders, but it is evident that anybody who goes to odd places looking for the john will end up with a headache caused by a bullet tearing through his brain.

The next day of digging is a repetition of the one before, except that in the evening Tom the Trooper carries up two sacks and the Arab carries up two sacks, which totals up to four sacks.

The trooper lays aside twenty thousand pounds, says, "Expenses," and nobody opens his incredibly rich mouth. Then he shoves ten per cent towards me, fifteen per cent towards the Arab, and finally thirty per cent and forty-five percent between himself and Miss Steel Tits, but not in that exact order.

I gaze at the \$22,000, or thereabouts, of globs piled up in front of me, reflect on the \$25,000 which are stashed in the soil, temporarily I hope, ponder over the fact that my \$22,000 should by rights be \$55,000, and I think and think—then place the diamonds into a bag and go to the bathroom.

While I am relieving myself, of the globs that is, I consider the point that nobody said one word or acted the

least bit surprised when the calculating machine made a slight error at my expense, and I begin to ruminate all over again. Tom the Trooper puts an end to my thinking the next morning by taking along all the food and supplies, except for one canteen of water, when they go back down to scratch away at the soil. That settles any idea I have of taking French leave.

After a couple more days of the same sort of thing, such as divvying up an endless stream of globs—and keeping the same percentages as the last time—the trooper says we will scratch only until noon the following day, rest, then start back to civilization. Ahmed the Arab doesn't argue; he sits there with his eyes popping out, saliva foaming at the corners of his mouth, shaking his head 'no' like it will never stop. Miss Steel Tits grimaces as if some guy, who was preparing to mount her, has abruptly changed his mind. I just say, "I'm staying here."

At noon the following day we begin resting, and at dark all of us go to the bathroom for obvious reasons, then start off. I am walking on cushioned air once the trooper has torn away my fingers from holding on to anything which will prevent me from leaving. That \$100,000, or thereabouts, in my haversack is actually a pair of bird's wings. And we are travelling light because we have buried the tools and there isn't enough food left to excite the A & P.

We make the top of that monster of a mountain early the third night, get down to where we had holed up when Al Capone came into our lives, and there is still three or four hours of darkness.

I don't know what uncanny sense warned the trooper to suggest that we stop there until the following night, but the Arab, Miss Steel Tits and I raise so much hell that he acquiesces.

It must have been an hour after starting the march through Arizona when the goddamnest, biggest flare I've ever seen in my life suddenly illuminates the whole

bloody area! I freeze in my tracks, then turn my eyes to see Tom the Trooper standing as motionless as a statue. Ahmed the Arab and Miss Steel Tits are looking skyward and moving about as if they are admiring the lights on a Christmas tree. The trooper yells out and they finally stop moving, but it's still as bright as the sweat room in an Alabama sheriff's office when he is asking for your driver's licence.

The trooper and I catch on real quick when we hear a plane's engine switch on. The bastard has swooped down on us from nowhere, and it doesn't take a course in electronics to realize that we have been walking near some mikes along the way. Also, that we cannot count on antelope to pull out our chestnuts this time.

Tom the Trooper calls to us and we run to one side. But the plane must be carrying a billion flares because it keeps trailing along, continually lighting up the whole territory, as if we are never to know when sunrise comes.

"Split up!" I shout.

Grabbing the girl, the trooper starts off in one direction. When Ahmed attempts to follow them, he roars to go with me or he'll shoot him, so I take off in the other direction with one, fine, slippery Arab to keep me company. No, I have more than that; the goddamn plane has to make a choice, and guess who.

After ten minutes of running in circles like a rat in a cage under water, I yell at Ahmed to get the hell out or I'll shoot him, then when he turns back towards the trooper, I motion to the plane to follow him. But it doesn't co-operate worth a damn.

Now, as I'm not the world's most idiotic fool, especially when it comes to playing games with people who intend to perpetrate bodily injury to me, it doesn't take a college degree to realize that the pilot has lighted up the area solely to learn our present whereabouts and not to pin us down until Al Capone arrives with his lion-eating dogs. I also know that he is merely fooling with those flares, with

the same sort of fun-loving attitude that the lion-eaters would have knocking around a stray, baby lamb.

Instantly, I dive into a skinny gully, conceal myself among some scrubby bushes, then begin to catch a nap. For a hunted person to remain in one position for more than ten seconds with the countryside fully illuminated and a fun-loving fellow circling overhead dropping flares—well, it just isn't in the book. Any sane animal would continue running until it drops. So, after ten or fifteen minutes, the fun-lover begins to suspect that I have slipped out of the gully, and enlarges his circle a little by letting fall a few flares at a greater distance. I don't move. Soon he becomes piqued and drops a couple still further out. I still don't move. Then he gets madder than hell and unloads everything, including the propeller, trying to find somebody to play with.

Immediately, I am up and heading due north instead of the north-west direction we were going when fun-lover found us. Frankly, I am praying we had stumbled by a number of mikes while marching, so the bully-boys would realize our course was north-west and therefore seek us in that direction. Mentally I give the trooper credit for thinking of the same thing, so I am somewhat expecting Al Capone and his lion-eaters to follow and enjoy playing with one slightly worn-out Arab.

I start galloping like a racehorse, which at my age means something well under a sluggish jog. I am, however, surprised to learn I can run fairly well; the weeks of being forcibly deprived of mother alcohol and living in the wide open spaces have ruined all of those lovely years of wastrelhood.

I have covered perhaps five miles when dawn arrives, so I slow down to look for a place to hole up. Now, don't get that wrong; holing up does not mean hiding in this case—I know better. I am searching solely for a position to fight from, and the five miles of shagging tail is to insure that, if those bastards are following me, they will be

more tired and less alert than if I had waited back there for them.

I finally find a good spot. It is a gully about five feet deep, forty or forty-five feet long, with a narrow trench intersecting it. The gully doesn't make me cry out in joy, but as the ground slopes downward for a couple of hundred yards on all sides, it does have a tactical value. I sit there resting, smoking just enough to keep me from becoming sleepy, eyeing the hundred cartridges close at hand.

It is midmorning when the bully-boys arrive, and I must have gone by some other mikes because they are reconnoitring northward as unerringly as though they are magnets and I have a steel butt. There are two jeep-loads. I disregard the men—I have my honey of a scope-mounted rifle aimed towards the lion-eaters accompanying them.

When the first jeep comes within three hundred yards, I instantly shoot the brains out of the lion scourge it is carrying, then, quick as a whistle, I shift my sights to the second vehicle and tap the other dog into dream-land. The bullet undoubtedly passed clear through him because one of the bully-boys on the rear seat is also flung tail-over-tea-kettle out of the jeep.

I really breathe a vast sigh of relief when the two lion-eaters are dead, for nothing, absolutely nothing, worries me more to utter distraction than the horrendous sight of a highly-trained police dog barrelling along at about a thousand miles per hour, frothing and foaming at the mouth in his unquenchable eagerness to place two friendly paws on your chest and fondly lick your face. Especially when he is as easy to shoot while running as knocking down a V-2 rocket with a slingshot.

But as I said, those bully-boys are professionals. Even before my second slug has stopped flying over the landscape, the two jeeps have spread apart and are charging at top speed. Not only that, but a bully-boy in each has

grasped the machine gun and is spraying the countryside with solid tracers. Actually, they don't have the foggiest notion where I am at; the tracers are darting here and there solely in hopes of flushing me out. The vehicles are, however, advancing somewhat in my direction, and one will certainly overrun my position in a few minutes.

I have a helluva time zeroing in on the one furthest away, for it is bouncing up and down faster than a Mexican jumping bean, but I finally catch the driver in my sights and let go. The bullet strikes him directly in the throat! His hands release the steering wheel to grope at his neck. A blink of an eye later, the jeep hits a ripple in the ground, overturns, and rolls end-over end, spewing out bodies like a farmer sows seed!

The second group, which has lost the tail-over-teakettle bully-boy, now has me spotted! A million bullets immediately come whistling round! Professionals always fire in that manner to scare the bejesus out of an inexperienced sniper and force his head down so he won't shoot again. I promptly soil my pants and lower my head. But I don't stop there—I am crawling furiously out of that gully into the trench which is intersecting it. I don't get there any too soon.

A series of explosions thunder behind me! Pieces of earth jump up higher than the Eiffel Tower! I wait a few seconds for the sharp-edged steel from the hand grenades the bully-boys have thrown to settle down, then suddenly rise up.

I really surprise them. They have parked the jeep fifty feet away, and the three of them are lined up shoulder to shoulder, walking forward casually to check over the perforated pile of meat they expect to find in the gully. It's hard to snap off shots at such close range with a scope-mounted rifle, because there are no open sights to aim with, so I fire at their chests instead of their heads. I get two of them real good before they can even react, then a hail of bullets whizzes by.

Instantly ducking, I race back to the gully, crawl far to the left side, and peek. The one still alive is dashing madly for the jeep. It makes me sigh, as if I have a world title bout with Joe Louis and he enters the ring with his hands cuffed behind him and legs cut off at the knees.

He takes about one more step—then his brains are pouring out of the hole in his head.

I wheel towards the bully-boys from the jeep which overturned a couple of hundred yards away. Two are lying flat on their backs, lifeless, one of them having been the former driver. The third is crawling off like he has been duelling in a gladiatorial arena with a Roman Kirk Douglas, and the fourth is huddled behind the vehicle. I do not object to him seeking shelter there, but his automatic rifle is pointed in my direction in a most unfriendly manner and he is fussing with the radio.

I don't linger to take scalps. Grabbing up my pack, I go bellying over the ground as swiftly as boiling lava flows out of a volcano. Old Guglielmo Marconi doesn't wake up until I have the jeep in first gear, then he drops the radio head-set and rushes to one side to get a clear crack at me. He is wasting the battery, for I am off quicker than a ring-tailed bird, whipping from side to side to avoid any chance shots. Once out of range, I turn north-west, in the direction of the boat, and give that iron horse the spur.

The cove is maybe thirty-five to forty miles away, but before I drive ten miles from the fire-fight, I hear bad news overhead. Two fun-loving pilots catch up with me, and as it is now daylight, they do not bother dropping flares. Instead, they off-load the same sized blockbusters the B-29s delivered on Japan.

Boy, do I squeal louder than a greased pig at an American Legion picnic! Truthfully, there is not a great deal of beauty to it: I keep racing towards the cove, one eye on the ground, the other on the planes; when a fun-lover gets on my tail to drop a bomb, I spin off at ninety



degrees; the moment the bomb hits open space, I whirl back to my original direction.

The fun-lovers decide to act cute by coming at me from opposite angles, so I weave a little bit left then a little bit right and they get all mixed up and almost knock each other out of the sky. They stop that crap right away. But it doesn't take a genius to understand that they are attempting to prevent me from reaching the woodland which is about fifteen miles north.

I almost wet my pants when I suddenly see Tom the Trooper. He climbs out of a shallow ravine a couple of hundred yards away and waves. I make it there in a shake, slow down long enough for him and Miss Steel Tits to jump in, then I am playing greased pig again.

The trooper doesn't even say good morning. Quick as a flash, he is behind the machine gun.

"Pull up now, Dan," he says, as casually as ordering a beer in a pub. I slam on the brakes.

He shoots one of those planes out of the wild blue yonder like it is a big, fat duck asking for an invitation to dinner. One of his bullets must have whispered a message to a bomb aboard, for the fun-loving pilot and his kitty cart just evaporate, as if they had never existed.

The second plane flies out of range in a hurry and circles high overhead, waiting for something to happen. When I nose Old Nell north-west once more, fun-lover just trails along, dropping a bomb occasionally—which doesn't come within a mile of us—simply to inform the world that he is still there.

We get ten miles closer to the woodland when three 'copters fly up, and they are not dainty observation types that hold just a pilot and handy man; these are mean old fighting birds which carry a dozen tough men in each, and are armed with bigger machine guns than we have.

Racing ahead, they land a mile or so in front of us, disgorging teams of bully-boys who promptly spread out to set up their weapons.

At once, the three 'copters are airborne, take up positions, and I am reminded of how cowboys manoeuvre a stray maverick on the prairie. Carefully remaining out of range of our popgun, the black snouts of their 50-calibre machine guns protrude from open doors as they open fire, sending bullets buzzing round us like mosquitoes in a swamp. The windshield of the jeep disintegrates and the radio becomes a sieve. Miss Steel Tits gives a bit of a gasp as a slug singes her arm.

I really start driving furiously! But each time I edge in the direction of the woodland, they swoop down faster than angry hornets.

In the meantime, Tom the Trooper is sitting there calmly, enjoying the cool breeze stirred up by the million bullets whistling past our heads.

"Have to get one of those blighters," he finally says, and if there was enough breath left in me, I would have laughed. He leans forward to tap my shoulder. "That fellow on the right is becoming a bit careless."

I don't think he's the least bit careless; he is zooming murderously in and out at me, the 50-calibre inside his gut chattering without pause, supplied by a seemingly inexhaustible belt of ammunition.

When eventually I get the message, I turn back towards the mountain where we had met up with Al Capone. The 'copters love that! They are steering us away from those lovely woodlands into the direction of the final corral. I give Nell the gas, and we begin to pull away. This throws Old Careless into an absolute fit of excitement. Instead of just being satisfied with cornering our remains for the ground troops to finish off, he comes swarming down behind us to deliver the coup de grace, like he is after the Blue Max.

"Now, Dan!" snaps the trooper.

I spin the jeep in a 180 degree turn quicker than a fighting bull wheels round in a Seville ring. We skid and slither and slip, then I hit the gas pedal with everything I

have and race directly towards Old Careless. The instant the fun-lover finally wakes up, he starts climbing and banking and holding up his skirts as frantically as a grandmother screaming at a wild rat in the kitchen.

We are on him before the skirts have got too high! Tom the Trooper fires three long bursts from his machine gun, the tracers rising up angrily to chew away the tail and rake hungrily along the fuselage up to the cockpit. A gentle sigh, almost inaudible, comes from Old Careless as she begins fluttering to the ground. We dance around the flat to elude the other two hawks until she flops and breaks up into a couple of dozen pieces, then we race for the wreckage. The 'copters catch on and dive headlong towards the pile of junk—but we are well in front. I slow down only long enough to unload Tom the Trooper, then dart off to get out of the way.

The trooper charges into the wreckage with his Sten gun barking, so one of the bully-boys must still be alive. Soon a hail of 50-calibre tracers comes spewing out at the other 'copters. They take off, and quick.

I rush back to the trooper. He throws in that monster of a weapon, a couple of boxes of ammunition, and we are off again. Immediately the 'copters attack more furiously than Errol Flynn at Balaclava, for they know what is coming, and I get maybe a thousand more holes in the jeep by the time the trooper mounts the 50-calibre on the stand. A few bursts from him are enough to signal the end of an era, and they hurry out of range, trying to decide what to do next. They aren't at all interested in swapping slugs with a sharpshooter as deadly as the trooper, especially since his gun can shoot as far as theirs.

I run north and start driving like a sane person again, but keep a watchful eye on one of the 'copters which settles down to pick up some bully-boys to drop them off at a greater distance as roadblocks. Once it lands, I angle a bit to one side to stay out of range of their guns, and go by. The men are rushed to another spot, so I angle in the

other direction. It reminds me of a skinny terrier yapping at the heels of an overfed cow who is hopping from side to side to avoid stamping on the damn fool. With that 50 in the rear, and Tom the Trooper at the trigger, I am less worried than the cow.

We have zigzagged to within three or four miles of the woodland when an observation 'copter joins the circus. I don't have to peek to bet all my globs against a worn-out Franco-Prussian war decoration that it is carrying Al Capone, for at once the two big 'copters and the fun-loving bomb-dropper dive towards us as though they have received 'or else' orders, and that facing Tom the Trooper is the easier part of the alternative.

"All right, Dan," he says.

I slam on the brakes and jump out of the jeep like it is red-hot coals, Miss Steel Tits right behind me. Tom the Trooper sorta spits on his hands as he stands up as large as life to take them on.

There is no doubt that Al Capone is co-ordinating their speeds, for they all swoop in together, the 'copters opening fire even before coming within range. The trooper patiently waits a few seconds, then presses the trigger.

It is somewhat reminiscent of the old-time movies when a bright, slim, curly-haired, smiling Spad and a grim, beetle-browed, black-hearted Fokker are shooting at each other head-on, bullets by the billions flying everywhere, but nobody really getting excited. Suddenly, one 'copter staggers and drops as though it is hit square in the heart.

Immediately, the trooper swivels toward the second 'copter, firing desperately, his tracers rising to meet those bracketing him. An instant later, he dives out of the jeep and rolls to one side, barely avoiding a stream of bullets which pound the hell out of the place he has just vacated! With a perfectly balanced liquid movement, the trooper is up on his feet, sprinting back to the vehicle and hopping

behind the gun. By this time, the 'copter is directly overhead, making its farewell address, for the gunner inside is at an impossible position to fire downward.

The trooper lets it say about four beads of prayer, then rips it to pieces.

I yell at him! Leaping to the ground, he dashes to the dip where Miss Steel Tits and I are hiding. Just in time! The fun-lover has released a dozen bombs, all of which land smack on top of the jeep! Old Nell goes straight up in the air like she thinks she's an aeroplane herself, then tumbles down with the expression that all this is a waste of time and she wants to go home.

Once the smoke has cleared away, we rise and cautiously move out. The fun-lover makes a couple of half-hearted passes, but when he doesn't drop any more bombs, we see he's had it and might as well chop cotton. Al Capone, hovering high overhead, also does not come too close, for I have a honey of a scope-mounted rifle which is just dandy for shooting down small, nosey, observation 'copters, and the trooper has his Sten gun that can outdistance any Tommy gun which Scarface might be carrying.

I stop by the remains of poor Old Nell. I think of dogs, of their disgusting ability to track people by scent, of the fact that I was sitting in the jeep before the fun-lover changed her features. She's lying on her side, the gas tank resting at a bit of an angle. Placing a shot quickly through it, I strike a match on the seat of my pants and flick it at the dripping fuel. In a couple of seconds, any trace we might have left behind would have to be sorted out from ashes.

We plod wearily in the direction of the woodland. Every now and then, the trooper raises his Sten gun menacingly as a warning to Al Capone, who clearly understands by keeping the 'copter out of range and not attempting any sneak attacks.

At a slight rise in the ground, I take the binoculars

from Miss Steel Tits and look back. The teams of bully-boys are hell and gone behind us, but marching rapidly in our direction. What catches my eye, though, is a cloud of dust about fifteen miles away that is charging towards us.

The moment I tell the trooper the good news, he breaks into a run. But I lag slightly behind; first, because I do not have the capabilities of Glen Cunningham, and second, I am making certain that nobody drops anything. Frankly, I am petrified that whoever is coming up in that cloud of dust might have a dog with a nose, and I don't want him acquainted with any article which belongs to us.

We reach scrubland in half an hour, and fifteen minutes more of high-class running carries us into the woods. I am staggering like I have swallowed seven gallons of scotch without drawing breath; Miss Steel Tits' tits are flopping up and down as if she is beating the hell out of herself; Tom the Trooper is breathing maybe twelve times a minute in lieu of the usual ten. I take another look back; the cloud of dust has taken form to become a convoy bigger than Eisenhower commanded to invade Europe, and is approximately five miles away.

Al Capone, still nosing around overhead, is directing the marching men and the convoy, so once we are concealed among the trees, the trooper turns north instead of continuing north-west. In ten minutes, Scarface has lost all trace of us. We trot and walk, trot and walk; by night-fall, nobody is ever going to find us. Shortly after midnight, the trooper changes course to due west, pressing us onward, even though Miss Steel Tits is dying on her feet and I already have rigor mortis.

During one of our brief rests, I ask if they had seen Ahmed the Arab. Miss Steel Tits, who is panting madly—but not from desire—says, "Oh, the poor blighter. They shot him centre-off."

I consider inquiring what centre-off means, but figure it out myself. "Too bad," I say, in a somewhat mournful tone. "When did he get it?"

"Just before dawn," gasps Miss Steel Tits. "Ahmed came running past with a jeepload of those horrible people after him. They sent up a flare, then shot the poor bugger."

I am about to ask why, if they were near enough to see the centre-off, they didn't maybe help the poor bugger, but I shut up instead.

At sunrise, the trooper is still pushing us onward, driving our worn, staggering bodies through the woods, taking care, however, to run across open spaces in case a lost plane should accidentally come moseying around. By noon, Miss Steel Tits and I have so completely had it that the trooper has no alternative but to find a cosy spot where we can collapse.

Tired as I am, I have trouble going to sleep, because it's hard to do so with one eye open and that eye pointing at Tom the Trooper. When one pregnant thought leads to another, I rise to walk among the trees, pretending I am visiting the john, where I quickly select twenty-five of the best diamonds, tie them in a hanky which I hang inside my pants, then bury the rest. Once this little chore has been taken care of, I fall asleep like the world's most innocent child, snoring with my usual gusto and violence.

We rouse ourselves at nightfall, eat the last tin of food, I pick up my sack of globs, and we move off. It is pretty easy travelling, except for the clammy heat and the fact that my stomach is aching from not having enough in it to keep the walls from rubbing together, but by dawn we can smell the salty tang of the sea wafted on a trickle of air that is seeping into the forest to cool off the steambath we have been enduring. An hour later, we break out of the woods on to a flat strip of land stretching a couple of miles to the ocean. It is rocky ground, and I have to walk very carefully because I am absolutely at the end of my rope. The sun is blazing as if it is passing through a magnifying glass directly on me.

Finally we cross the baking flat and there, two hundred

yards away, sloping downward, is the sandy, half-moon shaped entrance to the cove. I nearly do a jig when I see the old sow sitting there.

I should never have done it, so-help-me-God. In all those years of playing Cowboys and Indians, there was always one cardinal rule—never turn your back on a red-skin. Like a goddamn fool, I began to think of those radiators filled with booze—and I let Tom the Trooper lag behind.

I hear, “All right, chappie,” and immediately everything falls into place. Instantly, I drop to the ground, roll, and struggle desperately to bring up that honey of a scope-mounted rifle.

It is too late! Tom the Trooper is standing a dozen feet away, feet planted wide apart, his pale blue eyes gleaming, that 12-inch barrelled revolver in his hand.

Bing! His first shot drives me back a couple of feet, almost tearing off my left shoulder. I really don't have too much time to worry about it, because, bang!—the second bullet bores squarely into my chest. Boom! I go out like a light!



## 6

Babs, my twelve-year-old daughter, is tugging at my arm and saying, "Papa, Papa, wake up." I try to tell her she is the most wonderful, beautiful girl in the whole world, but I have something sticking in my throat. "Papa, Papa," she insists, still tugging away. Pretty soon she gets mad and digs her fingernails into my arm.

That brings me awake. I open my eyes, focus them, then let out the goddamnest, loudest, most terrified, nerve-grinding croak in my life! Standing on my outstretched arm, talons dug deep into my skin, is the ugliest, most repulsive, horrifying monster of a vulture I have ever seen! Its beak is sunk into my biceps, and it is shaking its head viciously, attempting to rip off the flesh!

I let out another terror-stricken croak. The bird abruptly releases my biceps and looks up. It is a hideous bastard, with a filthy bald head rising high atop a long, skinny, snake-like neck that protrudes from a heavy, hunchbacked body. Brown piercing eyes full of venomous greed stare straight at me without blinking.

My bladder discharges a warm pee over my leg. I strive

to lift my hands, but they seem tied firmly to the ground. The sole action I can take is to blink at the vulture. For a moment I think the foul creature is going to strike at my eyes, then it hops off my arm to stand a couple of feet away, watching me balefully.

I take a breath. Instantly, my chest is on fire, as if a blowtorch has ignited inside! It cuts off that breath in a hurry. I lie there shocked, trying desperately to sneak in bits of breaths, but the torch is right after them, shriveling my lungs from its heat. That bastard of a vulture, staring murderously at me, is the only thing which prevents me from passing out.

My right arm finally comes to life, so, groaning, I lift the blowtorch, plus the body it is burning up, to a sitting position. There is a little blue hole high in the right side of my chest, and when I move, I can feel where the slug has pierced my ribs and exited an inch from the spine. The left shoulder is a mess; the collarbone is shattered, and the bullet has torn a hole in me big enough to hide a fist. But the wound that bugs me the worst is the rip in my biceps which the vile bastard has been tugging at, for I can almost taste the filth and carrion from its beak mingling with my blood. If I had a knife, I would cut off the god-damn thing right there.

I let a few drops of spittle drip out of my mouth on to my hand, surprised that no blood is mixed with it. If I didn't feel so blasted pain-racked, I would try to figure out why I'm still alive.

Suddenly, I awaken to the sound of a rake being dragged along a cobblestone street. I turn my head—and gag! Fifteen feet away is a mound of thirty or forty vultures pulling at something that lies underneath. There are always a few of them out of the pile swallowing strips of meat, then pushing others aside to jump back on to the heap to stretch down their long, skinny necks and tug off another beakful.

My blood freezes! I stop giving a damn about the

blowtorch and wrinkled collarbone. Alongside me is a stick, four feet long, almost thick enough to squash worms. Picking it up, I crawl to the mound of vultures, waving it as if I am leading a Palm Sunday parade. Some of the ugly bastards see me and hop to one side. Then I am among the others, lashing out with the stick. They come awake, a dozen flying like lumbering seaplanes to a couple of dead trees nearby, the rest making a wide circle around me.

I take a look at Miss Steel Tits—and I gag again. They have ripped open her blouse to work over the soft flesh, then have gone after her stomach. What gets me worst is her face.

Realizing that I will not live long enough to cover her with stones, I crawl away, tears of rage blinding my eyes. At once, the grisly circle closes in on her while the birds drop down from the trees—to continue the feast.

All but one. That bastard follows me, walking stiff-legged, stalking me from about six feet behind. I stop to glare at him. That crazy son-of-a-bitch! Doesn't he know he isn't supposed to go chewing on people until they are dead? I have to concede the fact that he has a justifiable reason for waiting around, but the books say a vulture would not begin eating until his dinner was fully deceased and putrefying. I wonder if birds have nutty birds like people have nutty people.

Anyhow, I manage to work my way to a tree where I try to rise. Lifting myself isn't easy, for my left arm is as useless as tits on a boar, but eventually, I get in a sitting position and look around. My haversack is lying open a short distance from where I was shot, and I don't have to hire a Pinkerton agent to see it is empty, that my globs of shit are gone. Miss Steel Tits' haversack is also nearby—empty, of course. Tom the Trooper hasn't missed a trick.

Seeing them reminds me of the globs I had stashed in my pants. I fumble around—they're still there. I have to

chuckle—they are as much value to me now as an exposed nerve in a decayed tooth.

I turn my attention to Vince the Vulture; he is over three feet tall, brown feathered, weighing about thirty pounds. He stands there, six feet away, with the expression that although he has all the time in the world, I should have enough sense to hurry up and co-operate. What bugs me inside is the thought that pretty soon he is going to take a big bite out of me, digest it a little, then fly way up in the sky and shit me out all over the horizon. That really gets me. Not dying, but being dropped out of a bird's ass over the whole of South-West Africa.

I wave the stick at him. He hops away a half-inch. When I stop swinging, he hops back that half-inch. Not only do I have a nutty vulture on my hands, but one which is also an engineer—he knows exactly how far I can reach out with that stick.

I know I am going to die, but watching Vince the Vulture I know one more thing—he is coming with me. I don't give a damn if all his relatives drop me out over the landscape, but I make up my mind that Old Vince isn't going to be one of them. I pick up a stone to see what can be done in that department, and when I throw it with all my might, it goes maybe eighteen inches.

Well, Vince the Vulture and I sit there eyeing each other for most of the day. The hours pass with an unrelenting slowness, during which I occasionally faint for short periods, and try as I may, I cannot build up the least bit of strength to get one step ahead of the excruciating pain. Towards the end of the afternoon, I figure it is now or never, so I crawl to what is left of Miss Steel Tits and wave the stick until the birds clear out. They don't move very fast, for they are stuffed so full they can barely walk. I gag a couple of times before I am able to untie the shoelaces from her boots, then I return to my tree. Vince the Vulture escorts me there and back like a personal bodyguard. It is a torturous effort to draw off my belt,

wind it around one end of the stick and buckle it tightly. It is also sheer agony to take out my shoelaces to join them together with Miss Steel Tits', but it results in a length of about seven feet. I slip it through the belt eyelet, form a noose, then crawl out six feet to lay it on the ground.

Vince the Vulture is an obstinate bastard; he moves right when I move right, left when I move left, but continually avoids that trap. After a while, I crawl completely around the tree to distract his attention. He follows me as eagerly as an obedient puppy waiting for his supper—then steps right into the snare! I grab the shoelace and tug!

There is a startled hop, as though a cobra has bitten one of his tootsies, and the moment the noose tightens around his leg, he goes straight up in the air, wings flailing, beak open, mad as hell. I stamp a foot on the stick to anchor it and draw in that bundle of fury inch by inch. When I have him snubbed to the belt eyelet, I am out of ideas. The shoelace isn't going to hold for ever, and I wouldn't lay a finger on that bird if my life depended on it.

Finally I wrap the lace around my hand to keep it taut, grasp the stick from under my foot, and start dragging him—towards the ocean. The sun is setting by the time I am able to cover that one hundred and fifty or two hundred yards, the vulture hissing, flapping his wings, stretching his ugly, naked head on his skinny neck, trying furiously to get at me. When I crawl into the surf, he attacks me with vengeance, but the four-foot stick is just long enough to hold him off. I cough like blazes when the water rushes into my mouth, which really helps my blowtorch chest, but I rise painfully to my knees and keep going. I guess not giving a damn is the only thing that gets me to my feet so I can wade out further, and once the water is nearly to my hips, I place one foot upon the stick to force it down. It is a fulcrum action. Vince the Vul-

ture's wings beat at me frantically, fighting desperately, so I draw him in a little nearer and push down again.

It is a beautiful sight to see that bastard's head shoot under water! I keep him there for five minutes, sure I am going to die at any second, but so happy watching him drown that if I had the choice of letting that son-of-a-bitch up for one breath of air or having a bottle of bonded scotch, I would have spit on the bottle.

When I do let the stick up, it is evident that Vince the Vulture is not going to drop people over the countryside any more. But I know that cunning bastard, so I drag him out of the water to the beach where I lay his ugly head on a rock, then slam the hell out of it with another rock until there is only a pile of mush at the end of his neck.

After which, I fall over and wait to die, knowing full well in my mind that Vince the Vulture merely symbolized the awesome hatred in my heart towards Tom the Trooper.

When I awaken in the middle of the night, shivering, I conclude that just dying isn't going to be enough—I will have to die hard, so I climb to my feet and start travelling north along the edge of the sea. The blowtorch burning inside my chest and the soldering iron blazing away in my left shoulder are competing for which one hurts the more, and it is impossible to choose between them. I am not too stupid to realize that the bullets have missed my heart. Also my goddamn lungs. Otherwise, I would be spitting blood all over South-West Africa. But it doesn't take Ben Casey to tell me I am a sick little bunny. Anyhow, and I don't know what for, I continue wobbling and staggering alongside that ocean until, about noon, I come to a narrow creek which I follow up to where the water is fresh, and drink two barrels of it. I don't even consider washing my wounds; I'd have died on the spot if I had laid a finger on them.

That night I lie and shiver as if I am a tambourine art-

ist in a side show, and when the sun finally rises, I don't jump upon a fence to crow, but I do lift my butt off the ground to begin wobbling and staggering again.

It is the following afternoon that I stumble across this kid. I am rounding a little bend when I see him, maybe twelve or thirteen years old, black as an arctic night, fussing with some fishing gear. He has caught a couple of fish which seem bigger than whales, and as I come up, he takes a single look, then scampers off like I am the whisper of death. I don't give a good damn—I sink down and pop one of those fish into my mouth quicker than a starving walrus.

Now, let me be frank. I hate fish. I would have changed my religion, if I had to, rather than eat any kind of fish—be it fried, baked, grilled, broiled, or what have you. But that raw, slimy, scaly, bony piece of nothing is strictly tenderloin. When I finish with the second one, I spit out the eyes, tails, fins, scales, then belch with the satisfaction of a bum having a free meal at Antoine's.

A half-hour later, the kid returns with three characters who remind me immediately of Vince the Vulture. Their kinky hair and flaring noses inform me they are not wandering Vikings, and the clubs they are carrying are longer than the masts of the Yankee Clipper.

I give a sort of pasty grin and say, "Good afternoon." They keep looking me over like they are measuring me for a cooking pot. I try the grin in French. Still no dice. Then in Arabic, which I hate to admit I know. Then Italian. I am about to reach for "Nasilsiniz Efendim", when I suddenly remember a little history, and say, "Wie geht's?" A wide smile breaks out on the face of the boss man, a grey-haired gook.

Quick as a flash, we are old comrades, as if we had 'prosted' many an evening in a Bavarian Bierstube. Charlie the Cannibal asks me whatever am I doing all the way from Berlin. I give him a cock-and-bull story about being the captain of the 'Deutschland' and having been

attacked and thrown overboard by a mutinous crew. He suspects it is a crok of crap, but anyhow, they carry me a couple of miles to a village set back a bit from the sea.

It is a helluva stinking village, and the grass hut they dump me into stinks even worse. Charlie the Cannibal, however, comes up with a jug of stomach dissolving stuff brewed from corn, and I swear I am ready to let myself be adopted. There are perhaps seventy-five people in the village, all of whom stink worse than I did when Miss Steel Tits and Tom the Trooper picked me up in Casablanca. They eat only fish—which is why they stink.

As I become pretty drunk the first day, it is the sole reason I do not die. A skinny woman, at least ninety years old, with shrunken tits hanging down to her knees, puts some junk on the wounds while Charlie the Cannibal pokes around my bent collarbone with a fish-stinking, snag-nailed finger, and between them and the pain-killer I am drinking, I manage to fall asleep that night.

But man, am I hurting the next morning! Charlie gives me another jugful of joy-to-the-world, forces more of that crappy fish down my gullet, and I succeed in living to the next day.

Three weeks later, I con him into taking me up-ocean by promising to award him the Iron Cross, and as these loafers have nothing better to do anyhow than squat on their fannies and eat fish heads—when they are not scratching their fleas—Charlie the Cannibal and two other gooks load me into an outrigger. I try to crawl back on land when I see what they are going to sea in, but I am still too weak. It is nine feet long, about as unbalanced as a year 1492 blunderbuss, and the sail has more holes than it has cloth. There is also a hole larger than my fist just above the water line. Actually, the only reason I go is because Charlie and his friends are as drunk as I am on that beetle juice, and I trust my own kind.

In spite of all this, the next evening we pull into something called a trading post, and immediately I lay eyes on



a big, fat, Arab storekeeper, I know he is my boy. The post has twenty huts; a big one for Ali Baba, who is one of the original forty thieves, and the remaining nineteen for the women he is shacking up with. It doesn't take long to discover the only thing he is trading is the company of his wives for whatever the market will bear. Charlie the Cannibal digs up three jugs of that white lightning he has brewed, for which Ali Baba gives him a woman whom I wouldn't want buried in the same cemetery with me.

We eye each other. Ali Baba asks a few stupid questions, so I give him a few stupid answers. But I am shaking in case the word has got up this way about a certain party shooting up the countryside. However, when he doesn't stab me at once, I conclude the jungle telegraph operators are striking for higher pay.

I visit the john, select a glob from the hankie hanging between my legs, then we have a go at it. After several hours of strenuous haggling, we finally meet in the middle. In exchange for the diamond, he provides me with a new shirt, pair of shoes, a revolver which was probably used in the American Civil War, and a mixture of coins and paper that adds up to \$50. I take the gun outside, fire a few rounds to learn whether it will blow apart in my hand, then curl up alongside the snoring Charlie the Cannibal and his two blood brothers to catch a little shut-eye.

The next day, I have another go-round with Ali Baba. For \$45 of the \$50, he scrounges up a couple more loafers who have a boat slightly bigger than Charlie's to take me further north. Ali Baba tries to sell me a bottle of rotgut for my last \$5, and although I am suffering more horribly than I have ever suffered before from the lack of a good, solid drink, one quick look at his brothers-in-law who will be sailing with me is enough to chill the idea. I can see them returning with a story about a goddamn shark jumping clear out of the ocean to swallow yours truly, all except for a few globs which Ali Baba sure as hell knows are on the body, and which would be evenly

divided, such as ninety-nine per cent for Ali Baba and the entire residue for the others.

A week later, I am in Porto Alexandre, Angola, where it doesn't take long to find a Portuguese Ali Baba with whom I negotiate a glob. This time I hold out a little longer, and it becomes evident that the further away I get from South-West Africa the more the diamonds are worth. I settle for \$220, of which half buys me passage on a tramp steamer sailing up the coast.

By the time I return to Casablanca, a couple of weeks later, I am a new man. This means I am no longer the tall, clear-eyed, full-of-pep guy like when I was with Tom the Trooper, Ahmed, and Miss Steel Tits. On the contrary, I am back to where I want to be—a raging boozier. And the crew on that tramp steamer have all the rot-gut in the world to make me that way—for a price.

When they support me off the boat, I have just enough sense remaining to press my legs together to prevent the rest of the globs from disappearing, and as the crew has mercifully left me \$30 of the dough I had come aboard with, I decide to start from the docks and see how far I can get prior to running out of money. I promise myself to drink only first-grade stuff, no rot-gut. After a most delightful afternoon and evening, I check into a flea bag for the night, then in the morning I continue being delighted some more.

I sober up quickly enough when I come upon the cafe where Tom the Trooper and Miss Steel Tits had taken me for the proposition. So-help-me, I have never sobered up so swiftly since taking the irrevocable pledge to drink all the whisky in the world. I go inside and sit at the same table. I even have a waiter bring me a shot of brandy, which I don't drink unless I'm dying, and I never use a waiter, because it costs so much more. I twirl that brandy glass around in my hands for a couple of hours, and I am thinking.

I don't know the exact second I get mad, for when it

comes it is not a sudden explosion, but somewhat like when your wife begins to nag, then she starts to gripe, and a little bit later she commences to yell, then she opens her goddamned mouth and screams louder than a banshee. I get to my feet, go to the bar, and ask the slob of an Arab how much the glass is worth. When he tells me, I pay him. Then I throw the son-of-a-bitch, with the brandy still in it, against the wall—and walk out.

Once on the street, I find I have the same kind of tears in my eyes as I had when I crawled away from the body of a girl named Amy.

That very morning I sell three globs for \$900, go straight to a bank to deposit \$800, then rent a safety deposit box to store the remaining twenty globs. In the afternoon, I am in a hot-rock doctor's office, who, upon examining my shoulder, puckers his lips as if he knows what I have downstairs. He is part-French part-Spanish, and as both tribes dearly love to wield a knife on a helpless idiot, we agree to \$400 for the butchery and two months of recuperation in the dive he calls a clinic.

The next morning, I present myself to Dr. Kildare, who is so eager to start operating on my collarbone that he doesn't even wait for the spinal injection to take effect. Fifteen or twenty years later, he sews the sabre wound shut, looks round to make sure he hasn't misplaced too many steel pins, then nearly has a fit when he discovers his bone drill is missing. Fortunately, one of the nurses locates it under the table, so, regaining his composure, he tells the clerk to strike it off my bill.

After three weeks of recuperation, I am again wheeled into the operating room where he begins slicing before they even prepare the spinal. Grabbing up a scalpel, I defend myself until the nurse injects the drug, whereupon he removes another handful of splintered bone, grinds away with that drill, taps in a few more steel pins, then stands

back with a real French "Ah!", as if he has just finished painting the Mona Lisa.

When my two months are up, I wander over to the American Consulate. The girl at the desk says, "Oh, you here again." It should have been a question, but it wasn't. I know why she's so sour; with her face, she can't even bribe an Arab pimp to do any business.

"Hi, beautiful," I say. "How about you and me taking in the sights tonight?"

As she has looked in a mirror a few times prior to giving up, she knows I'm no touch, even when I am at the bottom of the barrel. "Ha," she says, and if she had stuck her tongue out, I would have promptly vomited on the floor. Anyhow, she gets up, takes that square butt, and those square legs which have a gap between them six inches wide extending from her ankles straight up to her fork, and marches into an inner office.

Almost immediately, Our Father Who Art in Washington comes charging out with a countenance so astringently bleak that one might rightfully assume he is madder than hell.

"I bet you lost your passport again!" he snarls.

"Yes," I say, blinking my eyes coyly.

The face of Our Father Who Art in Washington grows more acidulously harsh. "I don't believe you!" he barks. "You've had three this past year."

I lean across the counter and give him my FULL COLONEL LOOK.

"Are you insinuating," I snap, like he is an apple-cheeked second lieutenant fresh out of Fort Benning, "that I have done something illegal?" I straighten up and pound the counter. "How dare you!" I roar. "Call the Consul General instantly!"

He pulls the plug from my tub pronto. "I am the Consul General!" he roars back. "And I am not only insinuating, but I am accusing you!"

I don't dare ask him what of, for I am suddenly con-

vinced he is aware of the fact that I have sold my passports when my drinking money gave out.

"I'm going to England," I mumble, hoping to mollify the bastard.

"Good riddance!" he shouts. "Get three photos—and you should know that by heart—and I will have your passport delivered to the carrier which will take you from this country. Not to you. Do you understand me?"

I say I do, and hand him the three photos. He flings them on the desk as though he has just contracted the bubonic plague, then stamps out.

Miss Six Inches Across The Fork smirks like she has finally had her first big thrill, so I salute her with the sign of the thumb before slamming the door extra hard behind me.

There is still one more thing to be done. I walk back to the cafe where you wouldn't get murdered for less than what a New York plumber earns in two weeks, and order a double-shot of the best whisky in the joint. Once I have paid for the drink and the glass, I swallow the fine, fiery liquid in one gulp, drop the glass to the floor and grind it to pieces underfoot, then gaze long and thoughtfully at the shards mingled with a few drops of amber liquid.

"Okay, Tom the Trooper," I say, and it comes out softer than a whisper. "You and me—we've got a couple of things to talk over."

Then I walk out.

# 7

Smuggling the globs of shit into Fish-and-Chips Land is a bit of child's play. I had a Moroccan baker whip up a handsome three-layer cake—with the diamonds inside—on the top of which he had written 'GET WELL, MOTHER' in large, brightly-coloured letters encircled by a score of red crescents that extended downward to include a gaudy Moroccan flag and a few lines of Arabic that said, 'Allah watches over you'. The customs bloke at London Airport almost blows a fuse rushing me through a cursory inspection and hailing a taxi when I tell him my mother-in-law at Ealing is probably drawing her last breath. Actually, the comment about my mother-in-law only drew a vast, happy smile of pleasure over his narrow, suspicious face, but the added remark that my wife would never let me forget it if I arrived a moment too late galvanized him into action.

I check into a decent hotel, which means that only the wash-basin, tub and toilet leak, but it must be a relatively high-class place because all the rugs are worn down to the wood underneath and the floors creak louder than a

Spanish-American War veteran mounting a new, young wife.

At suppertime, I have to make a terrible decision, so I get roaring drunk before finding the courage to eat the lousy English cooking, but as no other race has the iron stomach and utter fortitude to overcome that horrible Limey food, I bring it up, then trot around Piccadilly for a while looking over the local meat market.

Although it is July, it is so cold that I kick my butt for not having brought along a fur overcoat—or at least a pair of thermo boots. I come to the sober conclusion that the sole alternative is for the Fish-and-Chips Chaps to line up their whole bloody fleet and pull the son-of-a-bitch of an island somewhere else.

The next morning, I visit the Freedom-of-the-Press boys to insert an ad in the newspapers. It reads “Searching for Family of Young Woman Named Amy”. It requires a lot of considering to think of a way to describe her, but I manage to squeeze out, “Rather Well Formed”, then list the telephone number of my high-class hotel.

A friendly drunk in a friendly pub gives me the name of a friendly, though crooked, pawnbroker from whom I buy two 38 special revolvers which the American cops prefer, and for a slight, friendly fee he gives me the address of a friendly gunsmith who owns a hand-gun range. I blast off a box of shells before the gun-sights are adjusted exactly as I like them, then the gunsmith invites me to a pub where I become drunk enough to face the terror of having to eat another English meal.

The next day, when I begin selling the globs, I learn that England has an awful lot of diamond brokers who should be categorized as Anglican Arabs, and after the usual “I say, old boy, the market is a bit down in the teeth right now,” and some more of that high-level, nearly imperceptible highwaymanship, I gather around me two thousand, five hundred pounds, sterling, which is

about \$7,000 where they use Irish colour on all bank-notes.

I then buy a dozen magazines, a half-dozen bottles of bonded scotch, a carload of fat, Havana cigars, and stretch out on the bed to wait.

The first call is from a nut who finally informs me that the Amy he's searching for is a goddamn poodle. When I bring to his attention that the ad says 'woman', he sorta swallows his tongue for a couple of minutes.

"Oh . . . sorry, old man," he says haltingly, then adds, "But Amy was rather well formed." I hang up in his face.

After him, I receive an average of four calls per day, all of whose Amys resemble Katharine Hepburn or Twiggy, which isn't my piece of cake, and when I get one guy shrieking, "Yeah, yeah, what a pair!" I sorrowfully learn that his Amy is not quite sixteen years old.

Some goofball spends half an hour telling me about his Amy, whom he had never seen closely enough to determine how well formed she was under her bustles, and who had disappeared just before he left for Flanders in World War I. When I add up fifty years plus, I tell him to check the girls doing business round Piccadilly Circus, then hang up.

One caller sounds as though he may have something, so I grab a taxi over to his flat. A picture shows me she is not the one.

On the fourth day, I get a call which makes me sit up and take notice. It is a girl with a rather soft voice. She says, "Hello."

I'm wide awake, so I say, "Hello."

There is a moment of hesitation. "Are you the gent looking for a girl named Amy?"

"Yes." I ain't fooling around with this call.

"I had a friend with that name who worked with me. Left a year or so ago."

"Do you mind if I ask some questions?" I ask, very properly.



"Not at all."

"Was she about twenty-six, twenty-seven?"

"Yes. Seemed somewhat older at times. The way she dressed. Bit on the conservative side."

"About 5 feet 6 inches?"

"Thereabouts."

I don't know how else to put it. "Was she rather heavy—topside?"

"Oh, dear me, yes. She was quite a well-set-up girl."

"Was her jaw a bit jutting?"

Her voice becomes a little excited. "Why, that's exactly like her!" There is a pause. "Do you mind saying why you are looking for her?"

I am ready for that one. "I met this girl Amy at Dover a few months ago. She lost her watch, and I found it later. She said that she might leave for the continent, so I thought I'd advertise and hope to contact her this way." I am talking faster than a sideshow barker so I can hurry back to the main point. "Would you mind telling me your name?"

"Cynthia. Cynthia Berg."

"Could I please meet with you, Miss Berg? To get a few more facts."

A somewhat long silence ensues. "Well, I'm working till quite late today."

I become desperate. "That's all right. I'll be glad to meet you whenever you wish and wherever is most convenient for you."

"Well . . . would nine be suitable?"

"Yes. Where can we meet?"

"There's a little pub on Scranton Street. It's called the Boar's Head. Would you wait for me outside?"

"I'll be there at nine sharp. Thank you, Miss Berg."

She does not say goodbye, merely hangs up. I look at my watch; it is just four. I shave, dress, then look at my watch; it is five after four. I call the desk to waken me at six, undress, and go to sleep. After a while, I wake up and

look at my watch; it is nine after four. I take a bath, shave again, and get dressed. It is sixteen after four.

I must have looked at those bottles of scotch three thousand times, but I would cut off the arm that reaches for a drink at this time—and both my arms damned well know I mean it. At six o'clock, I go down to eat, not realizing until I finish that I have done so without first becoming completely stoned. Instantly, I hasten back to my room to throw up.

I don't even consider taking a walk on the street, for I am petrified that one of those wild bastard drivers will come on to the kerb and knock me down to prevent me from keeping the appointment. After a couple of centuries, I sneak outside, huddle against a wall until the doorman whistles up a taxi, then rush inside and threaten the driver with a lump on the head if he exceeds ten mph. Finally, about 8 P.M., I am at the Boar's Head, walking round more tensely than a groom who has just learned that his bride has screwed up on her calendar.

A few girls come by and I ask, most politely, "Miss Berg?" as each passes.

One of them says, "How dare you?" A brief glance at her face convinces me that I have really dared.

At quarter to nine, I debate whether to run inside the pub and use the John before I mess my pants—my bladder is so nervous. Instead, I hold my legs tightly together, attracting the attention of a queer who minces past three times trying to decide if I do or do not. When I growl, "Screw, punk," he blinks his eyes indignantly and waddles on.

By nine o'clock, I am a wet rag. Then I see this slender, well-dressed girl coming down the street, and I heave the biggest sigh in London. She is a graceful looking piece, sorta tall and willowy, about thirty-two, the light of the street lamps reflecting touches of red in her dark brown hair. As she approaches the pub, I step out—then she walks straight by.

“Miss Berg?” I mumble, weakly.

She keeps right on walking.

I take out a handkerchief to wipe my sweaty face, then put it back into my pocket.

Suddenly, a bullet hits me! It bores violently through my neck, whirling me about as though I have been struck by a racing street car! During the few moments my mind is in shock, reflex action takes over. Dropping to the pavement, I crawl to the nearest car and scurry under it like a cornered rat looking for a hole.

Drawing out my revolver, I wait until my brain clears, then edge forward to peer out from beneath the car. All I can see are the dirty underfeet of other vehicles, so I back up, lay down my 38 special, and examine my latest purple heart. The slug had to be from a high-powered rifle to strike with such force, but fortunately, it has ploughed through flesh and muscle only. Fumbling around for my sweaty handkerchief, I wrap it around my neck, wincing as I press my fingers over the two holes. The bleeding promptly slows down, but I can feel one helluva neckache about to set in.

Tom the Trooper! I have to chuckle at how beautifully he has set me up. He undoubtedly read my advertisement in the newspapers, added two and two together, then conned the phony Cynthia Berg into making the telephone call. Actually, I am almost happy being shot to learn he is in London. It had to be him—the bullet was his calling card. If it had struck an insignificant place, I would have been the first to agree, even at my autopsy, that someone else had fired it. The trooper must be glaring at his rifle in disgust—only clipping the side of my neck.

I try to figure out where the trooper is hiding. The bullet has entered and exited in a straight line, which means that he has to be at my level. Now, Tom the Trooper is not the kind of bedbug to shoot at people while he is standing in the middle of the pavement in the centre of

London, so it is obvious he has fired from a car. And as a few of them have come by since he has said hello, he could already have driven away—or he could still be waiting. Of all things I don't want to do, making a choice as to whether or not he is lingering about is next to the last—the last is remaining wedged under a bloody car with a hole in my neck.

I slowly back out, scout the area a little, then start running down the street—away from where the shot came. The reason I go in this direction is merely to prove to myself that I am not the world's greatest goddamn fool more than once in a day. After weaving down an alley here and a street there until I am satisfied that Tom the Trooper is not behind, I stop to take stock of the situation. The most evident stock is that my clothes look as though I have been shot brutally in the neck and lying beneath a somewhat dirty car.

Turning up my jacket collar to hide the wound, I catch a taxi to that high-class dump I am residing in, sneak through the creaking lobby up the creaking staircase to my frigid room where I peek into the near-blind mirror hanging over the chipped washbowl which has the brown stains caused by the leaking faucets. I see that the holes fore and aft are not too big, also that the bleeding has stopped, but the mirror does not show the vast ache pounding away inside. I wonder if the National Health Scheme of the Fish-and-Chips Chaps covers such disabilities. However, as I am not desirous of having a quiz game with inquisitive bobbies, I sadly pass up the free-load bit.

Billyboy the Bellhop, who is probably buying his own hotel with what he is stealing from this one, arranges everything, and it costs plenty. He procures a medical kit which a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital in Vietnam would drool over, half a year's supply of drugs from the Mayo Clinic, and a bottle of pain-killers that is supposed to be sold on prescription only.

I do not answer the phone for the next few days because I am incommunicado from a bobo which makes me feel worse than the guest of honour at a Spanish Inquisition interrogation each time I lift my head, but in truth, I must admit that I do prolong my recovery a trifle by indulging in my favourite indoor sport, which my conspiring bellboy, who would have made an admirable Arab, does abet and thereby receive many pieces of silver for replacing empty bottles by full ones.

All this notwithstanding, within a week I am back to the land of the living, peering dolefully at the scars which are marring my beauty and weighing the advantages of concealing them by assuming the role of a priest.

It is nine the next morning when a knock comes at the door. As Billyboy the Bellhop, Millie the Maid and I have devised a special door-knock signal, and as these are not their click, clickety, do, do, do's, I ask, "Who's there?"

"Telegram, sir."

I nearly break wind laughing. "Slip . . . it . . . under the door," I say, trying to stop the tears.

Of course there is a pregnant silence from the telegram deliverer. Finally a deep, precise voice says, "I'm sorry to have attempted to deceive you, Mr. Baldwin"—that's my name, incidentally—"but I would appreciate a moment of your time."

"Call me on the housephone," I say. "I'm ill."

"I know about your illness, Mr. Baldwin," says the voice. It strikes me that although I am unable to recognize the speaker, it is someone I should know as well as my mother. "I apologize for intruding, however, I must speak with you personally."

I cannot imagine how much more personal you can get than by telephone, but as the voice is bugging the very devil out of me, I slip on my robe, place the 38 special in a pocket with a finger curled around the trigger, then open the door.

I almost keel over! There is Cherukime, the original Al

Capone! I begin releasing the hammer of my revolver to blow out his guts, but suddenly realize his hands are in full view with his fingers extended.

"May I come in, please?" he asks, trying his best not to frighten me one iota more, for it is obvious that the bulge in my pocket is not a packet of Kleenex.

I start motioning with my head for him to come in, reconsider, and say, "Okay." Once the door is closed and relocked behind him, I level my cannon directly at the center of the X on his face, frisk him to within an inch of his life, tell him to be seated, place a couple of chairs between us for safety, then sit down.

"Who are you?" I ask, as though I have never been out of the Dakota hills in my whole life.

"Come, Mr. Baldwin," he answers, with an honest-to-God Der Meistersinger accent. "We have met before. I am not here to bring harm to you."

I am near to inquiring why, then, is he scaring me to death, but I conclude there is no sense playing the innocent. Instead, I look him over. He is a monster of a man, not so much in size as in the absolute force and power which seems to ooze out of each pore. I estimate him to be forty-five years old, 5 feet 11 inches, 190 pounds, with a catlike grace in each movement of the corded muscles rippling under the tight sports jacket. He has short sandy hair, piercing grey eyes, and his face, that which he still has, is as brown as a nut from the sun. He talks highly educated, as if he has gone to Heidelberg University prior to taking up the profession of slaughtering people. I must repeat, however, that he absolutely scares the hell out of me, even though I have a revolver in my hand, for I am sure the bullets would bounce off his head.

But there is more to him, something which cannot be measured in the form of height or weight—the smell of death. Not the nice clean kind, such as chopping off a guy's head or crushing him under a bulldozer, but the

odious, lingering sort which is associated with extreme torture and sadism and pure enjoyment.

"What do you want?" I ask, trying hard not to tremble.

He draws out a pack of cigarettes, begins rising to offer me one, then stops abruptly when my finger tightens on the trigger. Casually lighting up, he says, "Mr. Baldwin, accompanied by two other men and a woman, you entered a Cartel field and removed a quantity of diamonds. One of your group, an Arab, met with an accident and was unfortunately killed. The body of the woman was found near the sea, and our examination of her remains indicated she had been shot to death. Further investigation revealed that you were severely wounded, made your way along the coast to Casablanca, then came here.

"Our study of the pipe which you and your associates worked makes us certain that a considerable number of diamonds were taken. As you are not living in great luxury . . ." He doesn't do it, but I thought he would drop some ashes on the floor to explain. ". . . we have come to the conclusion that the fourth member of the party murdered the woman, attempted to kill you, then escaped by boat. I am here to enlist your aid in apprehending that man."

"What about me?" I ask.

"The incident with my men?" He flicks his hand as if the shooting down of a couple of 'copters and the killing of a dozen bully-boys is no more important than swatting an annoying fly. "They well deserved what they received. The others will be more alert the next time. We will give you immunity for your assistance."

"How did you get on my track?"

"That's quite an interesting story, Mr. Baldwin. After finding the woman's body, we assumed that you and your companion had escaped together, and therefore made a thorough, but unfortunately unsuccessful, search for the boat. However, three weeks ago we received a report which stated that a native spoke of having rescued the cap-

tain of the 'Deutschland'. From then on, it was a simple matter to trace you."

"So . . . ?" I ask, and he does not require a Heidelberg degree to understand my meaning.

"We are willing to pay an interesting sum for your assistance. First, to find the man whom we are convinced is the ringleader and engineer of the theft, and second, to recover the diamonds."

"How much?" I ask, suddenly needing a drink, because something tells me that whatever he offers will terminate with the biblical quotation: "Whatsoever the Lord giveth, He also taketh away."

"We are prepared to engage you for \$25,000, plus all expenses." His eyes stray to the bottles lined up on the bureau, just in case I have lost my memory or forgotten to whom I am wedded. "Furthermore," he continues, "we will not claim the diamonds you have retained." A gleam of humour rises in his eyes, softening them to a frigid, iceberg grey, as he draws out a notebook to tell me where I have sold, and how much I have received, for each of the twenty-five globs.

"I accept," I quickly say. "However . . ." I give him time to figure out what is coming. ". . . what guarantees have I that the altruistic organization you work for will let friendly bygones be bygones?"

"You have our word," he says, which reply carries the same implication as a French queer asking me to pick up something from the floor while my back is turned.

I am still aiming the 38 at the centre of the X on his face. "How are the financial terms to be regulated?" I ask, making a mental note to purchase an inexpensive casket immediately and apply for perpetual care.

"Half now, the remainder when the assignment is completed." Smoothly opening a snakeskin billfold, he peels off a roll bigger than a Samoan's belly and drops it casually on the bed. Then he eyes me.

I wish to expressly point out that at this moment I am



seriously considering the benefits of pulling the trigger of my police special, picking up the bundle lying on the bed, and relieving the dead body of one German, alias Cherukime, from the weight of the money remaining in his wallet. Al Capone must certainly have read the expression on my face, but that son-of-a-bitch doesn't blink eye one.

"Okay," I say, relaxing the pressure on the trigger and putting the Protector of the People in my pocket. I also place the roll of money in my pocket.

Al Capone doesn't even sigh with relief, which I would have done with great, big sobs if I had been on the other end. He just leans forward and says, "Now, tell me your story, please."

When I finish my tale an hour later, Cherukime gnaws thoughtfully on his lower lip for a few seconds. "Very well, Mr. Baldwin. We shall begin inquiries and keep you informed. However, there is a detail which we insist upon; that you permit one of our people to be assigned to you. For your own safety, of course."

"Of course, of course." I stop there.

Al Capone rises, gives a little bow like he's some Prussian baron, and walks out.

Swiftly locking the door behind him, I count the money, drink four water glasses of scotch without drawing breath, then fall on the bed with a quavering sigh.

Due to the fact that during the last couple of months I have had sufficient funds to indulge myself properly, and being somewhat desirous of building up a little nest egg against the misfortunes of life which stumble upon me so often, I have purchased a wrist watch. I again realize this when a knock comes at the door, for I look at my 'nest-egg watch' to see it is almost noon.

"What's up, Billyboy?" I ask, recognizing his click, clickety, do, do, do.

"Lady to see you in the lobby, sir," he says.

"Okay." Rolling out of bed, I slap on a couple of band-

aids to cover the Grand Canyons on my neck, dress, and step apprehensively into that trembling, groaning contraction of an elevator which the Fish-and-Chips Chaps call a lift. It gets me down in one piece, but I now understand why travelling salesmen who stay in English hotels acquire major heart ailments.

Billyboy the Bellhop points out the caller, and even though it is noon and my stomach is automatically rebelling at the thought of having to eat that horrible English food once again, I start getting a bulge right in the middle of the lobby.

She is a living doll. I can smell Swede, with cool, crisp flakes of snow, and, of course, it being August in London, that is not impossible. She stands about 5 feet 7 inches tall, her head regally erect on 130 pounds of smooth, svelte curves that would be a joy to fondle even at a wake, with blonde, blonde hair swept back into a thick, luxurious bun at the nape of her slender neck—which is the way I prefer buns—and a glowing, golden suntan spread evenly over her high-boned, sensitive face, then across her pixie type nose to surround a pair of wide, expressive lips crinkling in an amused smile, as if getting up each morning is the greatest thing in life. Her eyes are a clear, fascinating blue, so light that they appear almost translucent, vividly accentuated by startling violet-black pupils. Again, she is an absolute, unconditional, living doll.

As she walks towards me, I have to take my hand off the butt of the revolver in my jacket pocket to beat down the bulge which is running wild. Those beauties of hers register in the same way as my Police Special—a 38—and are aimed at me free and easy, as though wearing a brassiere would be an insult—and she wouldn't be offended.

I pass over her long, shapely legs tapering out of firm, sleek hips, because I have zeroed in on the target which shatters me with the impact of an atomic bomb. That tail!

Now let me be frank. Although tails are tails, an authentic, impeccably-trained, highly-dedicated butt specialist will generally puke at what is normally hung on the rear of 99.9 per cent of the gender which is called female. But hers is a tail designed to put womanhood to shame. It sort of flows along with the rest of her, not bouncing or being pert or saucy, but resembling the royal-purple velvet cushion they carry the Crown Jewels on. It is the divine kind of tail that would remain unchanged if she lived for a million years, and which a million-year-old guy would still get aroused by patting, even if he had lived with the same tail for those million years.

When she finally gets up to me, my eyes are spinning around so wildly taking in this and that, flashing down there and over here, that pretty soon my eyeballs become all crossed up and I have a helluva time forcing them back in the middle of their sockets.

“I am Ingrid Talaanger,” she says, but I don’t hear her, because I am listening to the thunderous sound of exotic, spine-tingling music. She waits until the thousand piece orchestra stops playing, then says “Mr. Cherukime has sent me to be your guide. He suggests that you remain at my apartment during your stay in London. Would that be satisfactory?”

Would it? It would!!!

## 8

Miss Tasty Tail, who in actual life is Miss Ingrid Talaanger from Sweden, comes up to my room to help me pack. This is an unbearable strain on me, for each time she leans over the bed to put some of my clothes in the suitcase, I eye that tail and almost have a fit. I slyly keep dropping items on the floor so she will have to lean over further to pick them up. When finally everything is packed, we go down to the lobby where Miss Tasty Tail insists on paying the hotel bill. Indignantly, I put up one helluva argument, as I don't want her to think I am a deadbeat, by vigorously saying, "Well . . ." and let her pay the tab.

Parked directly outside the hotel is one of those fancy sports cars, a red Mercedes 300, which is going a hundred mph while standing still. Lifting up the top for us to enter, she drives to her apartment in the West End in a little under two breaths, paying no attention to stop lights or me becoming airsick as I ogle one needle on the dashboard pointing to 120 and closing my eyes at the sight of a second needle trembling on 5,000.

Her pad is quite a layout, containing a living room larger than a regulation baseball diamond, a dining room somewhat smaller—being able to hold only six hundred or seven hundred people—two triple-sized bedrooms with double-sized bathrooms, and a balcony so big that it shades the street below. It is obvious that although it must rent at a slightly higher price than the United Nations Building in New York, it is strictly for the ‘nouveaux riche’, because not one faucet leaks nor are there any brown stains in the johns.

Upon being shown to one of the bedrooms, I smother a low groan of disappointment when I see it isn't hers. She presses a button, and a Jap servant, about 3 foot 6, pops up. She says, "We will have lunch on the balcony, Kito."

I take two steps outside before my butt-fascinated brain abruptly realizes that the balcony overlooks a park. Instantly, I dive back into the living room and cower behind a sofa.

She looks at me as though I have been raised with bad manners, so I patiently explain that I am allergic to fresh air, especially when it enters me through gaping holes caused by deliberately-aimed bullets fired by a fresh air vendor named Tom the Trooper, who could possibly be waiting in that park.

"Come, Mr. Baldwin," she says, and, looking down the front of her dress as she leans forward to give me a hand up, I feel inclined to remain strictly in position. She points to a panel-truck parked across the street. "Our people are inside, watching the park." She points to a sedan patrolling from one corner to the next. "More of our people." She points up in the air. I expect to see a dirigible, but it is only a hovering 'copter. "More of our people."

By this time, I have got the idea. Frankly, I have got it so well that Kito still has to move all the dinnerware and silver into the dining room, for I positively refuse to go out on the balcony. They don't know how deadly proficient the trooper can be, especially when he is out to si-

lence the one person in this wide, wide world who can identify him.

"What are the plans?" I ask, chewing noisily on a chicken thigh, but in truth, concentrating solely on squeezing my legs tightly together to keep from going over the table after her.

"Mr. Cherukime is attempting to identify the girl, Amy. Once that is done, he hopes to trace her movements and thereby learn about the man we are seeking."

"And I just stay here until that time?" I ask, trying not to leer.

"I hope it won't be too much of a burden being cooped up here," she says.

"Well, if it becomes too burdensome, perhaps we can think up a few adult games to play," I say, letting the smirk come gushing through.

She stops eating to gaze hard at me, a strange, intense gleam rising in those bewitching eyes, a gleam that seems to pose a question to which she already has the answer, not realizing that I can see another gleam behind it, and another question, one that she doesn't even know is there. I can tell, for I had seen it once before in the eyes of another woman.

The leer fades from my face. I lean back into my chair, the blood growing cold in my body, struck by an overwhelming intuition that here and now a vast, dark curtain-hidden deep within me has been abruptly and unbelievably pierced.

"Why did you kill that American major?" she suddenly asks.

I knock over my chair as I get up. "None of your god-damn business!" I snap, starting towards my bedroom.

"Mr. Baldwin," she calls. I stop and turn. "Please don't be offended."

I cool off a little. I have to—how in God's world can you stay mad at a woman with whom you have unexpectedly fallen in love.

"All right," I say. "Just lay off the questions." She nods. "Who the hell are you?" I ask.

"I work for the diamond syndicate."

"Why?"

A smile tugs at her lips. "I like diamonds."

"Why?"

She is studying my face with such an alerted attentiveness that it is obvious the thoughts pounding away at my brain are flashing across the room and striking her head-on.

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, it does."

"Very well, Mr. Baldwin—"

"Dan. You'd better get used to it."

"Dan." She rises to walk over to me, her eyes as steady as dice lying on a gambling table, and stops about a breath away. "I'm a countess, Dan. I'm not interested in being a hostess in a department store."

"What's wrong with being a hostess in a department store? They don't have to sleep with every guy who comes in to buy a diamond."

The sound of her hand smacking my face is like the crack of a whip. I reach out and pull her to me. Her lips are colder than stone. My hands glide along the curve of her body until my thumbs press into her breasts. She starts fighting with the fury of an aroused tiger, so I encircle her waist, force her over backward, then grasp the front of her dress and rip it down to her hips. Still pressed to those stony lips, I fondle her satiny mounds, and they swell, her paps becoming hard as agates under my fingers. I draw my lips away and fasten them to a pap, and it tastes sweeter than the most delicious whisky in the world.

She struggles silently, pulling at my hair to stop my tongue darting over her breast, but in the tautness of her body I sense electric waves passing up and down. I rip off the dress completely, then the panties.

She is still fighting when I lift her up, stride to the bed-

room, and throw her on the bed. I have one helluva time holding on to that wildcat while opening my trousers, and a helluva tougher time forcing her legs apart. In fact, I have to wallop her to quiet her long enough to mount her.

When I enter her it is like getting shot in the heart. For a split second I wish I had died before doing so. But I drive on. She doesn't scream once, although I taste the blood on her lips where she has been biting them.

Finally a low groan bursts from her throat—then she lies still. I take my time and she remains silent under me, fighting at an end, waiting for me to be finished with her.

Later, when I come out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around my waist and water of the shower dripping from my hair, she is lying in the same position, legs apart, eyes closed, still breathing heavily. I begin dressing. As I sit on the edge of the bed to put on my shoes, she stirs.

"I don't know when," she whispers, "but I promise I will kill you."

I turn to look at her. There is no expression on her face, and she has made no effort to cover her nakedness.

"You have a right to," I say.

I get up and start for the door.

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"What difference is it to you?" I am sore as hell—at myself.

"You are not to leave the apartment."

"I would think you wouldn't give a damn."

"I don't. Not about you. But I do about my orders."

"To hell with your orders." I turn to leave.

"You!" The tone is enough to stop me in my tracks. I don't know where she has got the pistol, but it is long and slender, and doesn't waver one inch in her hand. "I will shoot you in the leg if you take another step," she says.

I walk back towards the bed. She motions with the pistol to a chair in the corner, so I change direction and sit down.



"Will you stay here?" she asks, in a voice hard as flint.

"Yeah. Go wash yourself."

She rises from the bed, places the pistol on a bureau, then goes to the bathroom. About fifteen minutes later she returns, scrubbed, combed, wearing a quilt housecoat which doesn't hide one bit of the most magnificent tail in the world. I watch quietly as she takes off the sheets, rolls them up, and begins putting fresh ones on the bed. I suddenly realize that we are in my room.

"I thought we were in your room," I say, like a jackass braying at the moon.

"Do you always rape women?" she asks, her face as stern as Judgment Day.

"I have never before in my life laid a hand on a woman who didn't want me to."

She stops what she is doing to study me in that same piercing way she did at the table. "Why me?" she asks.

"Take a look at yourself someday," I say.

She almost smiles. "I don't believe it," she says.

"You should." I stand up and walk over to her and gaze into her extraordinarily clear blue eyes. "I think I've fallen in love with you," I say.

She doesn't lower her eyes one millionth of an inch. "Falling in love with a man like you would not be easy."

"Nothing's easy. Especially love." I reach out to take her hand, but she pulls it away, so I return to my chair. "Why didn't you yell out that you were a virgin?"

She folds in a corner of the sheet. "Would it have made any difference?"

"I don't know. But I might have stopped long enough to think."

She straightens up. "Why did you kill that American major?" she asks again.

I am suddenly very weary. "I told you to keep your damn mouth shut about that."

She is over to the bureau in one step, snatching up the

pistol, fingers white from her rage—especially the finger curled around the trigger.

“You can rape me and live a while longer, Dan Baldwin,” she says furiously. “But if you attempt to bully me, I will kill you on the spot, orders or no orders.”

We glare at each other. I climb to my feet and walk deliberately towards her. “Pull the goddamn trigger!” I growl. Her finger is pure white about now. “Well, pull it!” I snap. Then I have the pistol in my hand, tearing it out of hers.

I don't have to reach for her this time. She is in my arms, lips softer than velvet as her fingers bore into my shoulders to draw closer to me. She is kissing my cheeks and eyes and lips, trembling like a reed in the midst of a typhoon.

I pick her up and lay her on the bed and open her housecoat to kiss those perfect breasts. She is breathing faster than a wild woman by the time I am undressed, but I continue to caress her until she is moaning. Then I mount her, gently.

She accepts all of me, pulling me savagely until we are locked firmly together. Suddenly, she lets out a loud scream. Then, arms and legs wrapped around me so tightly that I can barely breathe, she raises her face to kiss me.

“Dan,” she croons, and that thousand piece orchestra begins playing. “Dan.” The chimes of Westminster Cathedral are ringing. “Dan.” It is the pounding of the cataracts of the Victoria Falls. “Dan.” By this time, I finally understand.

The 3 foot 6 inch Kito serves us supper shortly before midnight. It is almost midnight because Miss Tasty Tail, whom I have trouble remembering as being named Ingrid, will not let us out of bed, and each time she does consider the fact that we are starving to death, I turn her attention back to more fertile thoughts.

Over supper I receive a few more thousand shocks. First, I learn she really is a genuine, coat-of-arms-owning countess. The second shock is that her old man is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Diamond Cartel, and that he actually owns the whole of Sweden but lets the King run the country for him while he is off buying up the rest of the universe. Third, Miss Tasty Tail is some kind of a nut who likes adventure, which is why she is helping the Cartel, and fourth, and most important, she has never met a guy who had the guts to rape her.

When we are finished eating, I lie down on the sofa with my head in her lap so she can stroke my hair fondly. She is sitting on one of my hands, which I have slipped under her, because I absolutely cannot believe her tail is real. She has stopped saying, "Dan, Dan, Dan," except for every now and then when she leans down to kiss me or I feel around with the hand she is resting on.

"Dan," she asks. "Will you be able to tell me about yourself someday?"

"Maybe," I say, and it is a concession as equally important as giving up booze. It suddenly strikes me that I have not had a shot for hours, and for a few seconds I consider getting up to rectify that oversight. Her hand on my hair makes the drink seem less important.

She must have been reading my mind. "I understand that you drink quite a lot," she says.

"How come you know so much about me?" I ask.

"Cherukime has a dossier on you."

"What does it say?"

"That you were a colonel in the American Army, and went to prison for three years for killing a major. That you've been drinking since your release four years ago." She hesitates. "Also, that you were married, that your wife and daughter were killed in an automobile accident."

I must have turned cold, because she puts her arms around me, cradling me like you do with a shivering

child. When I am able to speak, I say, "Don't ever bring that up again."

"Very well, Dan," she says, rocking me gently.

I am not good company for the rest of the night, even though I knock off half a bottle of whisky in fifteen minutes. Miss Tasty Tail apparently realized the booze was necessary, for she doesn't say anything, just holds me in her arms until I pass out.

Ingrid undoubtedly left the apartment quite early in the morning—for the simple reason she is not there when I awaken. I shower, shave, then Kito brings in a tray of breakfast. One taste of that English coffee is enough to ruin all further thought of eating, so I prowl around a bit until I find a bar stocked as fully as the Lido, and open a bottle of scotch. I am doing pretty good—in fact, Kito is almost becoming normal size—when the door opens.

I begin smiling at Miss Tasty Tail, but it fades away quickly when Al Capone follows her in.

"Good morning, Mr. Baldwin," he says.

Cursing under my breath for having stored the 38 specials in my suitcase, I grunt a return welcome.

Miss Tasty Tail nods at me coolly, as if we have met for the first time only an hour ago.

"Good morning, Mr. Baldwin. I hope you slept well."

I catch on, finally. "Good morning, Miss . . ." I rack my brain for her last name.

"Talaanger," she says, and being out of direct sight of Al Capone, she gives me a look which promises that I will pay for having forgotten her name. She also eyes the half-empty bottle of scotch.

Cherukime draws out a dozen photos from his pocket. "Do you recognize any of these women?" he asks.

The fourth one is a picture of Amy. If I had been anything but half crocked, I would have immediately given the show away. Instead, I unhesitatingly continue on through the remaining photos, return ostentatiously to the

eighth photo to study it more carefully, then hand them over to Al Capone.

"No." I say, pouring another shot and downing it.

He doesn't portray the least disappointment. "I will have others for you to inspect within a day or two," he says, watching me take a long swig directly from the bottle.

"Who are they?" I ask casually, my voice becoming drunk-thick.

"Missing women named Amy."

"Let me see that eighth one again," I say, putting on a big act, as though drinking a crummy half-bottle of whisky has addled my brain. He passes it to me. "Where she from?" I ask, but it comes out, "Wear sh-he fromb?"

"Edinburgh," he says.

I employ the same ritual with the others, the Kraut falling completely for the drunk bit. He even glances helplessly at Miss Tasty Tail. After I have learned that Amy came from Brighton and am slobbering over the seventh picture, Al Capone's eyes narrow—so I pretend to faint dead away.

When I decide to quit shamming, I am lying on my bed and Al Capone has gone. I stop the foolishness because Miss Tasty Tail has entered the room carrying a glass of tomato juice a little taller than Kito, spiced with abominable-tasting stuff which should be given only to convicted murderers waiting for the gallows. As she lifts my head to get the poison down, I see a twinkle in her eyes.

"You have been faking, haven't you?" she says.

"A little," I say, placing the glass on the bedstand and pulling her down alongside me. I am doing this in a half-hearted manner, for, as I explained, I am strictly a night-time lover-boy, except when under duress, such as raping women. Miss Tasty Tail, however, gets the signals all mixed up; she strips to bare skin so swiftly that I have no time to say I'm only funning, and is beginning the Dan, Dan business all over again.

The day is a repetition of yesterday, but as we have started prior to lunch it means we must stop once to eat before getting up for our midnight meal. About this time, I am more than ready to slip something in Miss Tasty Tail's food to have her relax for maybe a month or two so I can recover. Frankly, she is as easy to fall in love with as apple-pie.

The thoughts of love vanish from my mind the next morning when I find her gone again. It is not her disappearance which causes this reaction, but the fact that while I am prowling through the apartment searching for booze, which she has concealed with the usual female aim of attempting to reform a man who is enjoying himself excessively, I come upon a newspaper article lying in one of her dresser drawers. The article is very well written. It reads, 'Dan searching for family of Amy', and gives the address of Miss Tasty Tail's apartment.

I drop the article to the floor like it is molten steel and rush back to my room, teeth chattering louder than gypsy castanets as my fumbling fingers open the suitcase and draw out a revolver. Then I calm down.

It has not taken much imagination to realize that Cherukime has placed the announcement in the newspapers with the intent of staking me out like the hunters do with an Indian goat when they are trapping a tiger. I would not have really minded being the bait, except for experience having taught me that the tiger generally kills the goat before the hunters open fire.

When my heart is back to normal, I edge into the living room to peek out of the window. It is as I expect—cars are parked all over the place, filled with hard-faced bozos—and I am willing to bet a couple of billion dollars that Al Capone has another dozen bully-boys cluttering up the roof, hallways, and probably blocking the drainpipe of the john, waiting for Tom the Trooper to come calling for me. All this protection jazz makes me feel just as secure as going to sleep on a ticking timebomb.

I sneak out into the hallway, and sure enough, around the corner near the elevator are two men in work clothes polishing the woodwork. Each of them has a hand in his back pocket which is bulging from the horse-pistol not very well hidden there.

I wait until they are looking at something or other, slip to the staircase and start upward, climbing to the eighth floor where I find a ladder leading to a skylight. On the flat roof are a couple more bully-boys, who are not concealing horse-pistols—they are carrying big, fat Tommy guns. I quietly push open the skylight and slither out on the roof, then slink from chimney to chimney until I am behind the guardians of my well-being.

I am almost ashamed to do it. They are such poor guards that I don't clobber them too hard. Just 'tap', and down goes the first one. The second guard, taking nearly a century to hear my gun barrel bounce off his comrade's head, finally begins to turn. As the term 'begins to turn' is self-explanatory, I drag their bodies out of the possible rays of the sun, which could come up in England by mistake, then work my way to the roof of the next building. It takes but a few minutes to descend to the first floor, steal out of the back door to an alley, cross over to the opposite building, crack a window to unlock the door, then trot through the hallway to the front of the apartment house.

Hailing a passing taxi, I give him directions to the right, the left, the right, the left, until we come upon a Lyons restaurant where I throw the driver a handful of change and rush inside. As most English houses, restaurants, pubs, and assorted places have a john in the rear which exits on to an alley, I am quickly on another street and again in a taxi.

After half a dozen similar manoeuvres, which are being done solely for the sake of spending money for taxis, I finally arrive at Victoria Station. There I learn the next train for Brighton does not leave for an hour, so I slip

down to the public john and take up a position in a corner commanding the entrance.

As I am standing there, huffing and puffing from all these labours, I have to chuckle at how easily the trooper could have come visiting me if I had lingered in Miss Tasty Tail's apartment any longer.



## 9

It is raining like a son-of-a-bitch when I get off the train at Brighton. I take a taxi to a class two hotel, which means that only one out of every two people who stay there loses his life from the lousy food, or by falling through holes in the floor, or by gas pipes blowing up. At the reception desk is a big picture of a dozen gorgeous dolls lolling about on a white, sandy beach, with a dozen handsome guys, sun tanned to within an inch of their appendices, ogling them, and a luscious tomato water-skiing behind a boat, waving to everybody on the beach. Underneath the picture are letters twelve inches high telling everybody to come vacation in *Sunny Brighton*.

My room is so bitterly cold that I have to fling the floor mat around my shoulders and blow on my hands before I am able to open the telephone directory. I finally find what I am looking for—an investigation service. It is named Heatherstone, Gynnforth-Myershein and Popkin. I ring and ask for Popkin, fully aware that it being three o'clock in the afternoon, the others are out having their spot of tea.

Popkin is over to the hotel in two shakes, and I almost have a convulsion when he enters. He stands 6 foot 4, weighs maybe 125 pounds, has a woollen muffler around his neck, wears baggy Scotch tweeds, and carries on a complete conversation with his mouth tightly shut and every word coming out of his nose.

"I want to locate the former whereabouts of a girl named Amy," I say. "She would be about twenty-seven . . ." I describe her, concluding with, ". . . and she has a monster pair of tits."

"I take it you refer to her mammary glands," says his nose.

"Why, are tits found somewhere else?"

"The tit," continues his nose, "is a teat, nipple. Have I your permission to mark down the term breasts?"

"Will it make your job easier to find her?" I ask, deadpan.

"Decidedly, sir. Should we base our investigation on misinformation, we would—"

I throw him out of the goddamn door. After double-checking the doorlock, windows, bathroom, fire escape, etc., I call up one of the Phillip Morris bellboys to arrange a contract with him for a constant supply of booze, to keep his eyes peeled for any suspicious characters loitering about, and to have at hand the address of the nearest hospital with stomach-pumping equipment in case I eat too much English food, then I draw the curtains, slide my 38 under a pillow, and lie down, waiting.

Popkin must have done more with his nose than just speak through it, for in two days he is back at the hotel.

"We have learned of a young lady who fits the description you gave. Her name is Amy Simpson. She disappeared approximately eight months ago."

"What of her family?" I ask.

"The only family Miss Simpson has is . . ." He opens a thirty-seven page dossier, of which I know thirty-six are blank—to give the impression that he has worked his

head off and prepare me to be billed at so much per page. ". . . a half sister, Mrs. Bessie Rodgers," says the nose.

"What makes you believe she is the Amy I am looking for?"

"Physically, she meets the description to a Tee."

"How about the tits?"

The nose wrinkles in distaste. "That also, Mr. Wilson," he says, which explains that I am using an assumed name.

Once we exchange pieces of paper, the name and address for a roll of pounds, I tell Popkin I will let him know if he is on the right track.

That afternoon, I rent one of those MG sports cars, the sexy kind which gives a queer a thrill each time his hand closes around the shift on the floor, and start looking for Mrs. Bessie Rodgers. I have one helluva time finding her flat, because there is no map of the town, and even if there was, nobody in his right mind would be able to figure it out. It is in a row of houses all looking alike. Parking the sex car directly in front, I walk up a flight of steps and knock at the door.

A fellow about forty-five years old opens it, and we immediately sense an indubitable kinship. He has not shaved for a week, he's wearing an old, dirty undershirt, his pants are held up by a pair of worn out suspenders, and his rounded stomach shows all the way down to his crotch hairs. He is drunk—which is why we perceive a common brotherhood.

"Mrs. Bessie Rodgers?" I ask him, just in case he's another one of those odd balls you find living in England.

"My wife," he belches, and for a real horrible after-drunk smell, that British ale sure beats the hell out of skid row wine.

"Could I have a few words with her?" I ask.

"Wha' for?" he asks, suspicious as a French concierge. He tries to draw in one foot so he can stand up straight, capitulates, then leans against the wall.

A scrawny, worn-out-looking woman, face blotched from unhealthy drinking, hair scraggy, comes to the door.

"Wha's 'e want, 'Arry?" she asks.

'Arry shuffles to one side to conceal the raving beauty he is married to.

"D'yer know this bloke?" he asks.

She lifts up on tip-toe to look me over. "Never sor 'im before," she says mistrustfully, as if I am preparing to attack her.

"Wha' yer wanna see 'er for?" asks 'Arry. "I know you blokes. Always piddlin' round wiv our womenfolk while us men are out earnin' a bit to keep body and soul together."

"I swear, 'Arry. I never sor the bloke before," says the raving beauty.

"Shut yer gob," growls 'Arry. "Caught red 'anded, tha's what I say. Man can't step out the door but wha' one of these slickers come nosin' round."

"But I swear, 'Arry. I never sor—"

'Arry jerks an elbow back and the raving beauty's teeth snap shut. "Tha's enough of yer lip—"

He doesn't say any more because I have sunk a fist eight inches into his watermelon belly. Instantly passing wind, he sags to the floor. I step over the body.

"I want to have a few words with you about your sister, Amy," I say to Mrs. United Kingdom.

Her mouth is open, showing a few gaps in her teeth. "Oh, 'Arry will be terrible mad at you. Shame on you, strikin' the poor man tryin' to defend 'is family from mashers."

"I want to talk to you about your sister, Amy," I say again.

It finally gets through to her. "Oh," she says.

We drag Poor 'Arry into the living room. After a while, when he comes back to the land of the living, I apologize profusely for having lost my balance and accidentally striking him, then hand him a fiver. Still passing wind, he

lurches out of the house, returning before the door swings completely shut behind him with a couple of bottles of gin.

As I am torn between obtaining information and the normal pursuit of happiness, I choose the more important of breaking bread with them. A bottle later, I find 'Arry to be a highly-intelligent, understanding, well-bred, salt-of-the-earth type. Even Mrs. United Kingdom, who is slipping in a nip now and then, assumes a vague form of beauty.

"Terrible girl," says 'Arry, taking another pull at the bottle. "Runnin' off with all that money which righ'fully belonged to us."

"Who?" I ask.

"Amy," he says.

"Ungrateful sister," says Mrs. United Kingdom. "'Alf sister," she adds, raising her head from the table to show that the relationship was not her fault.

"Do you have a picture of her?" I ask.

'Arry belts his ever-loving in her ribs, who struggles to her feet, staggers to a dresser, and brings back a shoe box full of junk. She shows me photos from before The War, then works her way up through the years. Finally she hands me a picture—and I am suddenly cold sober.

"Tell me everything about her," I say, speaking very softly.

"She in trouble?" asks 'Arry.

"She will be when I catch up with her," I say. "She stole two hundred pounds from a friend of mine."

That makes them very happy. "She was never any good," grunts the slob.

"Not since the day she was born," adds his wife.

By the end of the second bottle, and an hour later, I have the story. It seems that the father of Amy and Mrs. United Kingdom was a pensioned postal worker, and as his two former wives were dead and the raving beauty of the family had married the movie star, 'Arry, it was up to

Amy to take care of the old man, who suffered from every ailment in the book. I had to read a lot into the story, for her half sister and loving brother-in-law weren't about to describe her as being anything but a real hundred per-cent bitch. Anyhow, Amy worked her heart out to take care of everybody, pounding a typewriter in an insurance company office, cooking and cleaning, passing small sums to her half sister to buy the kind of cough medicine we were drinking.

Eventually, about a year ago, the father manages to walk in front of a truck and is killed. The insurance company settles for five thousand pounds, and Mrs. United Kingdom and 'Arry are mad as hell that Amy takes the half which is due to her.

"Ungrateful slut," blubbers 'Arry. "After all we did for 'er."

Mrs. United Kingdom nods her head. "Took the bread right out of our mouths, she did. Never 'ad a grateful bone in 'er body."

"Not only does she steal the 'alf which should rightly be ours," roars 'Arry, "but that ungrateful slut quits 'er job straight away. Not one thought to those who scrimped to keep 'er in board an' lodgin'. The least she could 'ave done was to keep workin' to pay us back."

I don't say anything even though I have learned that she lived down the street with her father.

"Where did she go afterwards?" I ask.

"Lunnon," says 'Arry. "Brighton wasn't good enough for 'er after takin' our money."

"Did she have a boyfriend?"

"Who, Amy?" 'Arry laughs. "Who would want a mean-lookin' girl like 'er?"

"How about a close girl friend?"

"It was tha' Milly Purcell," says the raving beauty. "She runs off to Lunnon with Amy. Leaves 'er family without so much as a ta-ta."

"Who is Milly Purcell?" I ask.

"Another tramp who worked in the office with Amy," replies 'Arry.

"Did either of them ever give you an address in London?" I ask.

"Oh, yes," says Mrs. United Kingdom. Ploughing through the shoe box, she comes up with a postcard. "We 'ad to write Amy there for the money to bury poor old Dad. Selfish girl—tryin' to 'ave us pay a part after all we did for 'im and 'er."

It is the Blauchester Hotel. I take a deep breath. "Thank you," I say. Then I smash the slob squarely in the face, happily watching him spin off his chair and crumble to the floor. For a few seconds the pleasant temptation to belt Mrs. United Kingdom passes through my mind, but I rise and walk out instead.

The rain has let up to one of those nagging drizzles which is like having a throbbing toothache on a deserted isle, and has formed a mist that shrouds the dimly-lit street. I have the door of the sex car part-way open when I sense movement in the night! I don't hesitate—I dive straight over the roof of the car, roll to the centre of the drenched street, and come up on one knee with the 38 special in my hand.

"Mr. Baldwin," calls a very recognizable voice.

"Keep your boys away," I say, the cocking of my revolver hammer making a helluva loud click amid the soft pitter-patter of the raindrops.

Al Capone gives a low command, which brings to a halt the half-dozen or so figures converging on me.

"Mr. Baldwin," says Cherukime. "You have broken our agreement."

"I never keep agreements when I'm the patsy," I growl.

"We would have protected you. There was no need to flee."

"Your boys weren't too bright in permitting me to get through. How did you expect to keep the trooper out?"

There is a heart-warming silence. "Will you return if I allow you to supervise the security?" he asks.

"Over your dead body," I say, and I am not bantering.

Sighing, Al Capone gives a sharp whistle. I do not wait for the Cossacks to come charging in. I snap off a shot at the nearest figure. He grabs at his side, bends over in the middle as though he is looking for something on the ground, then drops to the street. Instantly, two of them are on me. A blackjack almost tears off my ear as it comes pounding down on my shoulder. I shoot that bully-boy good—right through both buttocks. He goes sailing back a dozen feet before he falls.

Ducking under the blackjack swung by his buddy, I leap on top of the sex car, hop down to the engine hood, then to the street, and start running like a madman. One of those bastards must have been a second Jesse Owens, for he catches up within fifty feet and tackles the bejesus out of me. As soon as I can regain my breath, I hit him over the head with the barrel of my 38 special, but it is only a glancing blow. He yells for help so I hit him again. When he reaches up to grasp my wrist, I pull the trigger. Part of his arm sprays over my hand.

Immediately, I am up and running again, but this time I do not dash along with the speed of Frank Budd; my ankle has had certain gears thrown out of wack when the former Jesse Owens tackled me.

There is a piercing whistle. Directly ahead of me the lights of a parked car suddenly flash on and doors are flung open to discharge four or five more bully-boys. Behind me are the running footsteps of the cavalry closing in. I keep hobbling until I am nose to nose with the new group, my revolver blasting louder than a chattering housewife, hoping to open a hole in the line.

Then they pile on me, and it brings to mind the time I called a fat-assed Irish girl a fat ass without realizing that her seven brothers had sneaked up behind me. When I am pinned to the ground more tautly than a deerskin is



stretched for scraping, Cherukime trots up. His face is a picture of such fury that I can feel my bladder preparing to let go.

“Get him in the car!” he snaps. Many willing hands lift me to my feet to toss me unceremoniously on to the back seat. Al Capone spins to a couple of men. “Get the wounded out of here.” He points to another man. “Get that MG off the street.” Then he is in the car sitting next to me.

The driver barely completes a U-turn when suddenly there is the goddamnest explosion since Hiroshima. The whole area lights up. All of us look back. My sex car is in six hundred pieces, and the bully-boy who stepped on the starter is mingled with the flying steel.

Cherukime looks at me. I look at Cherukime. “See what happens when you screw around with the trooper?” I growl.

“You should be grateful we stopped you from entering the car,” he says grimly.

I eye him. “How long were you waiting for me?”

“We arrived a few minutes after you drove up.” The implication takes a whole five seconds to strike him.

I chuckle. “Right under the noses of your bully-boys, the trooper booby-traps my car. And you expect me to let you guard the family jewels?”

Al Capone does not answer, just rides in silence for a while. In the interim, I am peeking at the pug seated beside me and the one in front. They are staring at me as though I am something from another planet, and fondling blackjacks which are begging to split my head open.

“What did you learn?” asks Cherukime.

My first reaction is to pretend I was merely looking at television the past couple of hours, but realize he will be checking back with the Rodgers once the bobbies have finished investigating the shooting and blown-up car.

“Her name was Amy Simpson,” I say. “She lived in

London with a girl called Mabel Tweedle at the Yorkshire Hotel." Damned if I'm going to make his job easier.

"What were you intending to do? Negotiate a deal with the man once you found him?"

"Of course. With the money from the diamonds, we could come back with a real gang and take over all the fields."

He doesn't have a sense of humour. He glares at me, so I abruptly stop fooling around.

"I'm kidding," I say.

He keeps glowering at me.

"Really," I say. "I was just kidding."

He keeps scowling.

"Honest," I say.

Eventually, he catches on. "You are not to take any further steps," he says. "We will be responsible for apprehending him."

I shake my head. "No dice. The trooper is mine."

"Mr. Baldwin," he says softly. "You have caused us a great deal of trouble. We cannot have you interfering any more. Do I make myself clear?"

"The trooper's mine," I repeat.

Cherukime barks out an order. Instantly, the pug on my left joyfully grasps my throat in a strangle hold while the one in front dives over the seat to grab an arm. Al Capone immobilizes my other hand, then pulls out a knife a yard long and places the razor-sharp edge on my thumb joint.

"Unless I have your irrevocable oath immediately," he snaps, "I will cut off both your thumbs! You will never be able to pull a trigger after that."

I hesitate one millionth of a second and the blade begins biting into the joint.

"I promise! I swear!" I shout, absolutely convinced that Al Capone is wishing I had waited another millionth of a second before giving in.

Directly they release me, I sit back, breathing hard.

The knife-wielding Kraut is also breathing heavily, but not for the same reason.

“Do not tax my patience!” he says sharply. “Your life has certain value to us, but there is a limit.” He does not make any comment as to what that limit will be once I have identified the trooper, and as I do not have the least intention of bringing up that subject, I huddle quietly in my seat.

After an hour’s driving, we reach London and stop in front of a vast, grey-stone building that is bigger than a Norman castle. I am rudely man-handled up the vast, grey-stone outer steps, through a vast, grey-stone hallway, and into the plushiest, vastest, grey-stone den in the world. Cherukime motions for the two bully-boys to get out. I begin sitting down. “Remain standing!” he snaps. I don’t have the courage to tell him my ankle is hurting worse than hell.

A few minutes later, the door opens to admit a man of perhaps fifty-five years of age. Al Capone stands stiffly to attention. The newcomer is 6 feet tall, has silvery hair, weighs 200 pounds, and is dressed in a brown woollen suit that probably cost more than the MG which is now a pile of junk. He has the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen, and everything about him radiates health—as if all the germs in a room drop dead as soon as he walks in.

Without condescending to glance at me, he takes a seat behind a solid teak desk and raises his little finger. Instantly, Al Capone rushes over to whisper in his ear. He listens for a while, then raises his pinky again and points it towards the door. Cherukime goes out as though he is a Viking and Valhalla is waiting on the other side.

“Sit,” says the man. He doesn’t add ‘down’ or even look at me.

I hobble to the chair furthest from the desk.

“Here,” he says, pointing his pinky to one directly in front of him. I sit down.

He levels his eyes at me, and they feel colder than icicles jabbed into my spine.

"I am Talaanger," he says.

Miss Tasty Tail's father! If I could have committed suicide, I would have done so without hesitation. My eyes dart around the room like those of a cornered rat.

"I have been informed," he continues, but I am not listening too well, because I am trying to remember the last prayers for the dead, "that my daughter has taken an interest in your case."

"I am most grateful for her interest," I say, holding my knees together to keep them from knocking.

"Be quiet," he says, so I try to bite my tongue off. "Furthermore," he continues, "I have learned that you have killed and injured a number of our people, besides having attempted to evade an agreement to assist us in finding the ringleader of your thievish group. You are never to address my daughter again, nor are you to give us one bit more of trouble in the future. Now, get out."

I rise quickly and limp towards the door.

"You," he calls. I turn. "Have you ever seen a man impaled?" he asks.

As I do not have enough spittle in my mouth to answer, I just shake my head.

He waves a pinky. I almost knock the door down in my rush to get out of the room. Al Capone is waiting for me, flanked by his bully-boys, and they lead an old, trembling broken man back to the sedan.

We drive further into the city, stopping a half-hour later in front of a tall, rather dreary looking apartment house which disappoints me when I see it is not the one where Miss Tasty Tail lives. Four or five carloads of bully-boys are loitering about, covering the entrance and street. We get out. I am halfway up the entrance steps when a long, black car comes racing by. The tyres squeal for the slightest second as the brakes are applied, then there is a crack!

The bullet goes through my side like a white-hot rocket, knocking me down as though I have been pole-axed. For a moment there is absolute amazement, then the whole army of bully-boys opens fire on the car speeding down the street. They should have been shooting at the moon—it would have been more effective.

“Goddamn you,” I growl, as Cherukime lifts me to my feet. Forming a somewhat belated protective ring around me, they hustle me inside to an elevator which lets us off at an even more dreary looking apartment. Al Capone helps me undress, and he doesn’t have to purse his lips for me to realize that I have a few unhappy days facing me. “Goddamn you,” I growl again, between grunts of pain. “I want some whisky. Now,” I order.

He doesn’t argue. I lie on the bed, guzzling away, waiting for mother alcohol to take effect. In time a doctor arrives, rolls up his sleeves, and begins probing. After a half-hour of pushing here and there, he tapes me up.

“Am I covered by the National Health Scheme?” I ask him.

Cherukime shoves him out before he starts looking for the loose screws in my head, then sits by my bed.

“I was in error,” he says.

“Two scraped ribs worth,” I remind him. “Another couple of inches to the right and you would have had a corpse on your hands. I want a gun.”

He shakes his head. “I will assume the responsibility of guarding you myself.”

“Thanks,” I say. “When are you going to get it through your thick, Kraut head that I am a dead man if I don’t keep moving.” I suddenly sit up. This brings one lovely gasp to my lips, but I bite it off. “You’d better get some people back to Brighton,” I say. “I bet the Rodgers won’t be on speaking terms if you don’t.”

He is nowhere near as sharp as the trooper, but he finally wakes up enough to go to the door and give a few

orders. By the time he returns, I am already fast asleep from the shot the doctor has given me.

In the morning, I am feeling as though the rocket is still burning inside, but I feel even worse when Al Capone comes in to say hello. I take one look at his face.

"When did the Rodgers die?" I ask.

His brow lifts, then lowers. "Last night," he says.

"What time was I shot?" I ask.

"A little after eleven."

I count two more hours for the trooper to drive to Brighton and do the job. "I bet they died about one this morning."

His brow lifts again. "Yes." He eyes me. "Very well, Mr. Baldwin. What do you suggest we do?"

"Let me rest up a bit, give me a gun, then get the hell out of the way. You'll never get the trooper, charging around like a herd of buffalo. You've got to get him while moving."

"I cannot do that. The Cartel has ordered me to find him. That will be difficult if you continue to impede us. You have lied again. There is no girl named Mabel Tweedle, and Amy Simpson never resided at the Yorkshire Hotel."

"You've got it all wrong," I say. "Her name is Mabel Yorkshire, and Amy stayed at the Tweedle Hotel."

He has a terrible time restraining himself from pulling me off the bed. "I will warn you of other instructions I have received, Mr. Baldwin," he says, his face flushed with anger. "If you continue to interfere, I have been ordered to dispense with your services." He stands up, the muscles of his jaw pulsating and jerking as if he is having a fit. "I would not find it objectionable to carry out these orders."

Right here and now I realize that all this jazz of \$25,000 and immunity which Al Capone and the pinky-pointing Mr. Talaanger have been promising me is merely

a crock of crap—that the Cartel had marked me for death since minute one, and the instant I point my finger and say, “He is the trooper,” is the instant I will be escorted forcibly into a perpetual dreamland. Also, they have no more intention of permitting a person who entered their diamond fields to live than they have of giving every poor person on earth a quart of globs of shit as a poverty-fighting programme.

“Mr. Cherukime,” I say, polite as I can be. “I regret exceedingly that I have been unco-operative. I hereby promise that I will turn over a new leaf. And to prove it, I will now tell you truthfully what I learned from the Rodgers. Amy stayed at the Blauchester Hotel while she was in London. I was lying when I said the Rodgers mentioned a girl friend.”

Al Capone calms down a little, and I am praying like hell that my half-truth, half-lie is not showing, for I am damned if I’m going to hand him everything on a silver platter. He leaves the room without uttering another word, holding the door open for two bully-boys to enter. One takes a seat by the window with his Tommy gun pointing towards it, as if he expects Superman to fly in at any minute, while the second locks the bedroom door and sits in a chair facing me—as though I may suddenly turn into a butterfly and disappear.

The day goes by slowly. Food is brought in on a tray, but I am not that sick that I can stomach it. In the afternoon, the doctor returns to fiddle with the bandages and shoot another three quarts of antibiotics into my can. Fortunately, as nobody really gives a damn about my welfare, I am provided with all the booze I want, so I am relaxing like I am occupying the bridal suite at the Fountainbleau in Miami Beach, and the only actual discomfort is a twinge in my side each time I lift the bottle to my lips.

Al Capone returns in the late afternoon, and he is vastly pleased.

"I am glad you have decided to be truthful, Mr. Baldwin," he says.

"What did you find out?" I ask.

"Miss Simpson did stay at the Blauchester Hotel for a month last year. One of the clerks remembered her. She was seen in the company of a tall, blond man two or three times, then she moved from the hotel." His brow furrows. "Are you certain the Rodgers did not mention her having a girl friend?"

"No, they didn't. Why?"

"She was occupying a double room. I understand that desk clerks often list only one person as occupying a double room and pocket the difference, even though there might actually be two people residing there."

"Maybe she took the double room so the trooper could stay overnight without having trouble with the hotel owners."

"We have considered that also. Very well, Mr. Baldwin, I see you are co-operating. Do you have any further recommendations?"

"Yes. Contact the War Office. Get a list of all the non-coms and officers up to the rank of captain who are blond, about thirty years old, and who left the service within the past couple of years. Then check them out." I say this with a straight face, for I am positive the assignment will take Al Capone a good twenty years to complete.

As Cherukime is a Kraut, he doesn't have enough sense to understand that spending twenty years on a wild goose chase is somewhat nutty, so he almost smiles before taking off.

The next few days go by more smoothly than peaches and cream. I lie back on the bed, guzzling the fine, free scotch provided by the Cartel, giving a loud belch every now and then to see how quickly my two guards jump off their chairs in sudden alarm, feeling my torn ribs slowly mending. Frankly, I am putting on one helluva big act, moaning and groaning at intervals, for a little bullet



through the flesh, even though it has cracked a couple of ribs, is not much more than a bothersome hangnail, except that I do have to hold my side when I get up to go to the john.

A week after I have been ventilated by Tom the Trooper I am in the midst of trying to eat the crappy lunch that the English call beefsteak, which is actually elephant hide boiled in carbolic acid, when a loud ruckus is heard in the living room. Soon, somebody bangs on the door. The two bully-boys become all excited, point their Tommy guns every whichaway and dance around as if they are finally face to face with the Great Beyond.

A key turns in the lock, and the door flies open. In pours Miss Tasty Tail, shoving a half-dozen bully-boys out of her way, and she is madder than a bee-stung grizzly. She strides over to my bed.

"Where are they, you thief?" she snaps, her eyes flaming like an eruption of Mount Pelee.

"What?" I say.

I don't have time to say any more, because she smacks my face so hard that I hear bells.

"Well, where are my earrings?" she shouts. "You petty crook!" She spins towards the guards. "Have you searched his clothing?"

All of the bully-boys are shuffling from foot to foot. One of them, probably Cherukime's lieutenant, goes into the living room, and returns in a jiffy.

"There are no earrings in his pockets, Miss Talaanger," he says, real politely.

She is still raging and glaring down at me as if I will not be alive in a couple of instants.

"You vile thief," she hisses, slapping me another four or five times. She turns to the lieutenant. "Have Cherukime get in touch with me the minute he returns!" she snaps, then flounces out of the room.

The bully-boys are grinning at the red welts on my cheeks. But I don't grin back—I am afraid they might see

the gleam in my eyes. Especially since I am gripping, under the covers, the snub-nosed revolver Miss Tasty Tail has passed to me while she was whaling the hell out of my face.

# 10

It is directly after supper that I decide to go to the john. "I am going to the john," I notify the two bully-boys in the room, for they have warned me that any sudden movement on my part will result in certain segments of my anatomy being forcibly separated from the rest of my body. One of them unlocks the door to the bathroom, inspects it to determine whether a platoon of rampageous Zulu warriors is hidden there, then motions to me. I roll slowly out of bed, sorta bent over to hold my side, and make my way towards him. The bully-boy at the window doesn't even look at us; booze always makes my bladder function, so I have been getting up a dozen times each day.

At the doorway to the john, I stagger a little, like I have lost my balance, and that fool of a bully-boy reaches out with one hand to support me. Taking one hand off that Tommy gun is the same as deliberately committing suicide. I uncover my aching side and place the snub-nosed revolver to the bridge of his nose, at the precise spot where he can feel the cold steel and see the

hammer cocked back just waiting for a slight pressure on the trigger to send a bullet crashing through his head. His eyes open real wide.

I put a finger to my lips, which is a very old-fashioned way to tell a person to shut up, then, before he has time to think, I pluck the Tommy gun from his hand and motion for him to go into the bathroom. Once I lock the door softly behind him, I turn my attention to the bully-boy watching hell out of things—in the wrong direction.

Finally I cough a little bit, so he turns his head to look. He has brown eyes, and the whites around them become as big as truck tyres when he sees the Tommy gun pointing at him. As he is approximately my size, I have him remove his clothes before I tie him up, then I unlock the bathroom door and call out the other bully-boy, who I also tie up. I am not at all gentle about gagging them, for they were exceedingly surly during my sojourn, so I shove half a curtain in each one's mouth with no qualms about them suffocating prior to Al Capone's return.

Donning the brown-eyed guard's clothes, I slip out of the window and start up the fire escape. There are lights in the apartment directly above, so I climb to the next floor where I crack a glass, open the window, and sneak through the empty rooms to the hallway. It is clear. I push the button to call the self-service elevator, then stand to one side with that little, snub-nosed revolver in my hand in case a barking alligator should jump out by chance. When it arrives devoid of snoopy bully-boys, I take it down to the basement and work my way to a coal chute leading to an alley. I halt in my tracks the moment I see four figures outside patrolling to and fro, as if daring a mouse to move near them.

Searching round, I gather an armful of paper, rags, and assorted junk which I carry to the second floor and light a fire in the hallway with the keen anticipation of a pyromaniacal cub scout holding his first field test. Then I go back to the cellar to wait.

I don't have long to wait. Soon, there are all kinds of yells, sirens, and people running by, smiling and laughing like people do when somebody else's property is burning to the ground. As the smoke is pouring out of the side facing the alley, the four bully-boys are quickly lost in a mass of humanity, so I crawl out of the chute and plough through the crowd to the street.

I spot the red Mercedes of Miss Tasty Tail a couple of blocks away with the top already open for me to climb in. In a flash, she is going slightly faster than the X-2 experimental jet.

"Dan," she says, her eyes all misty.

"Ingrid," I say, slipping my hand under her sweater to fondle those perfect breasts.

"Are you all right, darling?" she asks.

As a bit of sympathy never hurts a guy, I reel back, grab at my side and moan, "I may make it." But when I see she is really worried, I laugh. "I'm okay," I say, putting my hand under her skirt. Immediately the car almost crashes into a lamp-post, so I reluctantly take my hand out from between her legs. "Where are we going?" I ask.

"I have a cottage twenty miles away."

"Does anyone know of it?"

"No. I've just bought it." She looks at me again, all cow-eyed. "Dan," she says, sighing. "I had a frightful time finding you. Father was very angry. He sent me to our home on the Riviera, but I eluded my bodyguard and returned to England as soon as possible."

"Does he know about us?" I ask, trembling at the notion of what the term 'us' implies, and even more so at the idea that her father might know.

"Oh, no," she says, "he thought I was merely doing odd chores for the Cartel. When he learned I ordered Cherukime to allow me to participate directly by having you stay at my apartment, he was furious."

Pretty soon the comet she is driving turns off the main road on to a narrow, dirt lane winding back into the

boondocks and comes to a cute little cottage a million miles from nowhere. After parking the car in a garage, she rushes around to help me out, as though I am a one hundred per cent invalid. Of course I don't disappoint her—I lean heavily on her shoulder, but one hand is locked to a breast which is swelling like mad.

She supports me inside to a bed, then removes my clothes.

“Oh, you poor darling,” she wails, eyeing the bandage over my side held in place by a couple of kilometres of adhesive tape.

As I have had more than enough sympathy for a while, and as there is something I have not had for over a week, I pull her down on the bed. She struggles for a split second, afraid that the wound might reopen from our exertions, but soon she begins saying, “Dan, Dan, Dan,” and everything is positively hunky-dory once again.

We linger in the cottage for three days, and it is pure heaven. That Miss Tasty Tail is the world's best cook. The steaks are broiled to a mouth-watering pink-red, the salad oil contains just a fleeting hint of Dijon mustard mixed with quantities of lemon juice—which is how I prefer it—and although she is taking no chances by using powdered coffee, it is strong enough to eat through glassware and liberally dosed with thick, sour cream, which is also on the top of my list.

In the bedroom, where we spend 99.9 percent of our time, she is a real doll, experimenting thisaway and thataway until I have to reach far down into my bag of tricks to keep ahead of her. Being a Swede, she goes round the cottage stark naked all day, completely unconscious of the fact that each time I sink my teeth into a chunk of juicy, dripping steak, I am about to jump across the table to snap at a more delectable morsel, even though I am reduced to a state of near impotency by indulging in pleasant pastimes when I should be reposing in a strict, convalescent centre.

Nevertheless, as all of this exercise is working wonders for my side, I am soon in top form, so on the fourth day I give her the word.

"I'm going out tonight," I say.

"Is it that important, Dan?" she asks.

"Yes," I say. I think back to Amy and Vince the Vulture. "Yes," I say again.

"Can I help?"

"Yes. Get me some decent clothes." She is a wise woman; she doesn't try to explain that what she meant was to help me track down Tom the Trooper.

She takes off, returning in a few hours with a carload of stuff which cost approximately what I used to earn each year as a colonel with Uncle Sam. She even comes up with the second 38 special I had left in my suitcase back in her apartment. When night falls, she drives me to the outskirts of London and stops across from a taxi stand.

"Please be careful, Dan," she says.

"All right," I say.

She kisses me like I am leaving to engage James Bowie in a knife duel in the darkness, then I am out of the car and into a taxi.

"Blauchester Hotel," I say to the driver, and with these two words I am affirming that somebody is going to die.

The Blauchester is such a dump that I wouldn't have deigned to live there even when I was at the bottom of the barrel. It has a narrow, poorly-lit passage extending from the door to a small desk at the rear, with an old, filthy-looking clerk lying on a cot in the hallway.

I get out of the taxi a couple of blocks up the street, cross over to the other side, then make my way back cautiously. I don't need bifocals to see a car full of bully-boys parked near the entrance.

At once, I spin round, walk up another block, turn right, then down an alley which leads me to the rear of

the hotel. The door to the dump is so crummy that a broken shoehorn is sufficient to open it. Soon I am inside and almost giving the old guy lying in the dim hallway a heart attack when my hand goes over his mouth and my 38 special digs into his ribs.

"Come to the desk," I growl.

Once behind the counter, he pulls out the room register, and his hands are trembling so much that I am afraid he will tear the pages.

"Why are you all looking for Amy Simpson?" he quavers.

"Shut up," I say. Finally he gets to the page on which she had registered, and I scan the names of the other residents of this magnificent palace. Suddenly, an idea hits me. "When did she leave here?"

He manages to turn the pages to a month later without dropping dead. I grab the book and look through it more closely, not at all surprised to find, 'Mildred Purcell, Room 37', listed near the bottom. I had guessed that Milly would change to a single room once Amy had checked out. Continuing for a couple more pages, I grunt ostentatiously in disgust, as if nothing of importance has been gleaned, for I more than suspect that Al Capone is paying this old cocker to pass on bits of information which come along from time to time.

"Where do you keep your forwarding book?" I ask.

"What?" he asks.

"The book where you record the forwarding addresses of people who check out."

He shakes his head. "Nobody ever leaves a forwarding address here." I stamp heavily on his instep. "So-help-me, sir," he moans. I stamp harder, then press my hand over his mouth when it opens to emit a yelp of pain. He takes out a notepad from a drawer.

I go through it page by page, starting with the day Milly Purcell had registered, until, on a page dated three weeks later, I find her name with an address on the South



Bank of the river. Slipping the book into my pocket, I swiftly bind and gag the old coot, then sneak out of the back door. Within minutes, I am in a taxi winding its way through the streets to the South Bank.

The address is a garishly-painted boarding house, the kind of place where semi-respectable, unmarried women stay before giving birth to unwanted children. The old bat who runs the house is about fifty, lavishly padded with four pounds of fat for each year since her birth. I can see two things; first, she is not going to give me the time of day, and second, she is a gin drinker.

"Madam," I say. "My name is Howard Purcell. I have just come from the United States, and am looking for the whereabouts of my niece, Mildred Purcell. Does she still live here?"

"No," she says, trying to close the door on my foot.

I hand her a fiver. "Would you by chance have a drop of something to drink? I have been travelling for a couple of days now, and my throat is parched."

There is no closer, more binding relationship than that which exists between serious drinking people. Damon and Phintias were mortal enemies compared to the strange, hypnotic love of one boozier for another. The door opens wide. She leads me into the parlour, where I see that her hair is not blonde as I thought, but orange. After a half-hour of discussing the best kind of drink for a person who is intelligent enough to leave the trivial cares of the world behind, I get down to business.

"About Mildred Purcell," I say.

The old biddy staggers over to a desk and pulls out a ledger. As she is now too drunk to read it, I make out the name Mildred Purcell—with an address in North London.

I pinch the old bag in the butt, and while she is trying to decide whether to make something of it, I slyly rip out the page, tell her I am leaving to fetch another bottle, then I am on the street and in a cab.

The next address is in a row of houses resembling the

one the Rodgers formerly inhabited in Brighton, but more as if the tenants spent their time paying their bills instead of drinking. When I knock, a young fellow, his shirt sleeves rolled up as though he has been washing the dishes, comes to the door.

“Does Mildred Purcell live here?” I ask.

Just because I have a foreign accent, he has to act like a wise guy to prove that England is not solely a land of stinking fish for breakfast.

“Mildred Purcell no longer exists,” he chortles. “She’s now Mildred Wilkins.” He waits a while so I will appreciate the punch line. “She’s my wife.”

I am two breaths from making her his widow. “Ha, ha,” I say.

“Come in,” he says, opening the door wide. “Milly,” he calls.

I follow him into the living room where I see that although the furniture appears somewhat pass-me-down, the apartment is cleaner than a new pin. Milly Wilkins comes in. She is a little thing, plainly dressed, neat as her apartment, and it is obvious that almost-a-widow’s-ex-husband, Mr. Wilkins, has got himself a fine wife.

“Mrs. Wilkins,” I say. “My name is Howard Roberts. Three months ago my younger brother was vacationing in southern France. He was in an automobile accident and was seriously injured. Two Britishers stopped to help him—a young woman named Amy Simpson and a blond man named Tom. While taking my brother to hospital, their car also had an accident. All of them were killed.”

“Oh,” says Milly, groping for a handkerchief. “Oh,” she says again, starting to cry.

When she calms down, I continue, “I would like to know if you are acquainted with the families of Miss Simpson or the man Tom.” I am also praying harder than hell that she has not heard about the Rodgers suddenly being deceased.

“Poor Amy,” she says, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"She has a half sister in Brighton." She rattles off the address. Then she begins weeping again.

"Could you tell me a little about her?" I ask. "I am grateful for her having tried to help my brother."

"I always knew Tom would bring her bad luck," she sobs.

"Tom who?" I ask, very softly.

She shakes her head. "I don't know his last name." She goes into the story of how Amy had worked her fingers to the bone for her father and step-sister, then, when the insurance money had been paid, how they had come to London. "We were looking for work here, but right off the bat she met Tom. He swept her off her feet. He was after her money."

I almost have a heart attack. "Tom was living at the hotel where you were staying?"

"No. He was at one nearby. We met at a small restaurant while having lunch."

"Do you know the name of his hotel?"

"I'm afraid not. There were a number of them in the area, but he never mentioned which one. Amy said they were going to take a trip and come back with a lot of money." She starts crying again.

"What kind of a trip?"

"I don't know. Neither did Amy. She said that Tom had something in mind, but needed money to carry it out. I told her it was the only reason he was after her, for her money, but she wouldn't listen. He had swept her off her feet."

I figure that when she starts repeating herself there is not much more I am going to learn here. I take a long shot. "Do you have any idea where Tom came from?"

Her brows furrow. "No. He wouldn't say anything about himself. That's why I told Amy he was—"

I get up. "Thank you, Mrs. Wilkins."

I am almost at the door when she calls out, "Mr. Rob-

erts." I stop and turn. "There is one more thing I remember."

"Yes?" I say, without too much enthusiasm.

"One evening we had supper together, and Tom accompanied us to our hotel. He told Amy to wait—that he wanted to get something from his room. He was back in exactly six minutes. I remember making the comment to Amy that he must live quite close by."

I nearly kiss her. "Thank you, Mrs. Wilkins." I think for a few seconds. "When Amy checked out of the hotel, did Tom go with her?"

"Yes. He brought his bag over and they left from there."

I leave the flat as though I have a new lease on life. Feeling that way, however, does not interfere with my eyesight. As soon as I start down the steps, I see the car parked a block away. I have to chuckle. It is Miss Tasty Tail. She makes an effort to hide behind the steering wheel, but her red comet stands out so much like a sore thumb that she could have huddled in the ash tray and still be recognized. I wave at her to come up. She starts the motor and begins moving towards me.

Suddenly from a short distance behind her, the headlights of a long, powerful sedan flash on! The engine roars as it races forward!

Ingrid sees it in her rear-view mirror and stamps on the accelerator to reach me before the bully-boys.

I run out into the street so I can spring in as she comes by. The driver of the sedan observes this manoeuvre. His monster of a car leaps onward and swiftly overtakes the Mercedes desperately trying to build up speed. The driver abruptly flicks his wheel, sideswiping hers! Ingrid fights to retain control, but it is too late! Her comet spins, rushes over the pavement, then crashes violently into the stone steps of a house. My heart stops beating.

The sedan snaps to a halt, the doors burst open, and

five bully-boys jump out. I take one look at Ingrid's car, front smashed in a foot or two, and I lose my goddamned head.

That 38 whips into my hand as I sprint towards her, charging down madly on the bully-boys lined up between us. My first shot hits one of them squarely in the temple, and that's pure luck, considering that I am still running like a lunatic. A stream of bullets reach out for me, one of them grazing my leg. Instantly, I dive to the ground, roll a couple of times, then rise up on a knee. It requires two shots to kill a second bully-boy because I am breathing hard. And frankly, I am so son-of-a-bitching furious that my hand is trembling. A bullet singes my cheek. I roll sideways, spring up and advance to closer shooting range, then flop to a prone position and let fly another shot. It nails one of them directly in the throat. He whirls into a man by his side, spoiling his aim, so I take my time killing the pug still shooting at me.

That's just enough for the bully-boy who was shoved off balance by his friend with a big hole where his throat used to be. He begins to run down the street. But I'm nowhere about to let him go. I rest my elbow on the ground and slowly pull the trigger. His back arches as if his spinal cord is no longer connected, his feet drag a step or two, then he falls.

I don't even wait to reload. I am off the ground, racing to Ingrid's car and jerking open the flap which is slightly ajar.

She is unconscious, a cut somewhere in her head, her hair full of blood. The side of her dress is even more laden with blood. I draw her out and hustle to the sedan where I lay her on the back seat. In an instant, I am behind the wheel ploughing through the score of people who have hurried out of their houses into the street.

I drive off like a madman. Immediately we are out of sight, I pull over to the kerb and climb in the rear to examine her more closely. Her head injury is not too serious

—merely a superficial cut in her scalp—but the wound in her side, probably caused by flying glass, is a helluva lot bigger. I breathe a sigh of thanks that no arteries have been severed. Using my handkerchief, tie, and belt, I bind on compresses, then drive slowly from street to street until I locate a doctor's office. I park around the corner in an alley, pick up Ingrid, and trudge to the door. It takes him half the night to answer the bell.

"Automobile accident!" I snap, pushing by him into the hallway. He is a little guy, but wide awake.

"In here," he orders, running ahead to open a door leading into a narrow examination room. He checks both wounds in a flash, then studies very carefully a lump large as an egg, above one of her ears. Ingrid begins to stir, so he breaks an ampule under her nose which brings her awake in a hurry.

Fifteen minutes later, she is the proud owner of half a dozen stitches in her head and side, and bravely sporting one helluva headache. The doctor doesn't yell very much when I lock him in a closet, after which I pick up Miss Tasty Tail to carry her back to the car.

She winds her arms around my neck. "Dan," she says, and for a torn-up woman, she is kissing me as though the accident hasn't even happened.

"You crazy Swede," I say. "What the hell were you doing, following me?"

"I'm sorry, darling. I didn't mean to cause you any trouble."

I am so relieved she isn't dead that I don't become sore. I place her up front with me, and we are off.

"Do you know any back routes to the cottage?" I ask. "The police probably have a good description of this car."

"I have an apartment near the river," she says. "It's not too far away."

"Christ no. Cherukime's boys will be staked out everywhere now."

"He doesn't know about it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She directs me to a tall, modern building in a plush neighbourhood. I let her off in front of it, park the sedan a dozen blocks away, then walk back. The apartment is another ball park of a place on the top floor, and when I get her undressed, in bed, and resting comfortably, I go to the bathroom to put iodine on the gash in my leg. I see that I will have to be careful shaving for a while until the bullet singe on my cheek heals. Slapping on a bandaid, I return to the bedroom.

"Will you be all right if I leave you for a while?" I ask her.

"Yes, Dan." She sits up higher in the bed. "What happened back there?"

"Not very much." I am not about to tell her that half the British Isles' police are undoubtedly looking for a beat-up American who has left five bodies lying in the street.

"Dan," she says. "Please don't go. Stay here."

I shake my head and start towards the door.

"Dan," she says. I look back at her. "I love you."

"All right," I say, lowering my eyes. I am afraid she might see why I'm leaving—to settle accounts with her father.

# 11

I load up my empty 38 special, hoping that Cherukime will sooner or later run out of bully-boys, for I have only a couple of dozen bullets left. It is past ten by my watch, and although it is darker than an Irishman's sympathy for anybody but himself, I am not sure whether it is night-time or just a heavy fog. After a while, I find a clear spot in the sky where I see stars—so I conclude it is night-time.

Deciding that the last place Cherukime will be looking for me is in his own back yard, I take a taxi directly to that castle of Talaanger. Furthermore, as I am still god-damn mad about Ingrid's automobile accident, I march straight up the staircase and ring the bell. The door opens to disclose a giant of a man, 6½ feet tall, dressed in tails, with a bulge under his armpit which shouts gun. Wordlessly, I put the muzzle of my 38 in his stomach as a calling card. That's not quite factual—I do not place it there. Actually, I ream it smack into his gut. He says, "Uff," bends over, and I bring down the barrel, viciously. When he tumbles to the floor, I lean forward and tap him once



more so he will fully understand what is expected of him for the next half-hour or so.

The den where Talaanger held his audience with me is to the left side. I glide over to it and slowly open the door. It is empty. I pad down the hallway a little further to a monster of a door on the right and place my ear against it. There are voices, so I push it open and step inside.

The room is about fifty feet long, and nearly as wide, with a highly polished table taking up half the space. Talaanger is seated at the far end entertaining two white-haired gents to his left and right with enough silver and cut-crystal resting in front of them to provide for the passengers on the Queen Mary. Liveried servants are standing stiffly along the walls.

All conversation stops when I walk in. Talaanger doesn't blink an eye; he merely studies me as though I should have had better sense.

I raise my left hand and wiggle my pinky at him to come over to me.

"Get out," he says, without one bit of inflection in his voice.

I wiggle the pinky again.

He just stares at me.

My revolver lets out a helluva bang as it goes off. The lobe of Talaanger's left ear disappears. He raises his hand to his ruined ear, gazes at the blood seeping out, then a most astonished expression crosses his face.

I wiggle my pinky again.

He sits there with his mouth open.

The 38 booms out another message, and his right ear lobe disappears. Nobody is even breathing in that room, except me.

"The next shot will make you look like Cherukime," I finally say.

He gets the message and stands up. "I will personally supervise your impalement," he says hoarsely.

**"Dead men can't brush a fly off their nose!" I growl. Sensing movement at the door behind me, I reach back, lock it, then move to one side. I wiggle my pinky.**

**He comes from behind the table and strides angrily towards me, stopping a couple of feet away to glower indignantly. I punch him in the face so fast that he hasn't time to utter a word. He drops to the floor, blood pouring from his nose and mouth, his eyes opening wide with shock.**

**"Get up, you bastard, or I'll kill you on the spot!" I snap, and even though he is groggy from the wallop, the words flash through loud and clear.**

**It is not easy for him to rise, because I have put all of my 170 pounds behind the blow, but he manages to struggle to his feet.**

**"Come here," I say.**

**When he is within range, I smash him in the face again. He falls as though he has been clubbed, eyes glassy, barely able to spit out a broken tooth.**

**"Get up," I say.**

**He turns away. "You'd better kill me," he mumbles.**

**"Not until you lose more blood than your daughter did tonight."**

**His head jerks up, and he is off that floor in an instant, a tight, worried expression settling over the gore covering his face.**

**"Say that again!" he says sharply, the gun in my hand not fazing him one bit now.**

**"Your bully-boys crashed her car tonight," I tell him, coldly.**

**His eyes narrow, and I can see that the son-of-a-bitch is a real fighter.**

**"You are a liar," he whispers.**

**"I'm taking you to her," I say. When he nods, I motion my head towards the door. "Call off the wolves outside."**

**Unlocking the door, he rattles off a series of orders which state briefly that if I am even looked at by any one of them until he says otherwise, that person will never see**

again. Once that is done, he doesn't waste time wiping the blood from his ears or face, but leads me out of the house to where a Rolls Royce is waiting. I give the address of Ingrid's apartment.

She is still awake when we arrive. Talaanger walks over to the bed like he is a zombie and sits down heavily, picking up her hand as gently as if she is a newborn baby. She takes one look at his face and begins crying, then turns to me. "No, Dan. No. Not to Father."

"Are you all right, Ingy?" he asks, and he is almost crying too.

"Yes, Father."

He lets out a deep sigh of relief. "Did Cherukime's men crash your car?"

"Yes, Father." She raises a hand to his torn face. "Oh, Father, please forgive Dan."

Talaanger rises from the bed and turns, eyeing me as though he has just seen me for the first time. Then he looks down at Miss Tasty Tail. She merely nods. He eyes me again.

"I won't have it, Ingy. He's a tramp."

As I am lighting a cigarette, I draw in a lungful and blow it into his face before answering.

"What makes you think I'd have her, dead man?" I snap. That jolts him.

"Dan," pleads Miss Tasty Tail. "Please. I love you."

Talaanger is still staring at me. "You mean that, don't you?" he asks.

"About which? Having her—or killing you?"

"Both."

"Absolutely. You have just enough time to say good-bye."

"Dan!" cries Ingrid. She struggles out of the bed.

"Stay there or I'll shoot him on the spot," I tell her. She stops to sit on the edge of the bed.

"Dan," she whispers. "Don't you love me?"

"With all my heart," I say.

"Then why? Why?"

"This punk you call a father understands. Don't you, big man?"

Talaanger's eyes haven't wavered from my face one hair. "I think perhaps I've underestimated you," he says. "We should discuss this a bit further."

"It's too late to talk," I say. I wiggle my pinky. "Outside, big man."

"Dan!" The sharp tone of her voice draws my eyes to the bed. She is holding the slender pistol she almost shot me with in her other apartment. "No," she says. "If you don't want me, that's your decision. But Father stays here."

I thumb back the hammer of my revolver.

"I won't shoot you, Dan," she says. Turning the pistol, she places the muzzle to her breast.

"Ingrid!" I shout. I begin trembling. I can tell when a woman has made up her mind.

"Put your gun away," she says.

"All right," I say. I am afraid the son-of-a-bitch will go off by accident, my hand is shaking so much, but I finally ease down the hammer and pocket the 38. "Put yours down," I tell her, my throat dry as hell. I don't start breathing again until she slips it under the pillow.

Talaanger glances round the room. "Where is the telephone?" he asks Ingrid.

"In the living room, Father."

"Get back into bed. I'm calling a doctor to check you over."

"I'm all right, Father."

When he strides out of the room, I realize that he wasn't scared one bit of being a thread away from death.

"Dan," says Miss Tasty Tail. "Come here, please."

I sit on a chair beside the bed.

"You meant it—about not wanting me, didn't you?" she asks.

I nod.

“And you meant it about loving me with all your heart, didn’t you?”

I nod again.

There is a moment of silence. “Your wife, Dan?” she asks, softly.

I take a deep breath. “I’m a drunkard, Ingrid, chained to a nightmare. I respect nothing in this world, least of all, myself. I’m not the kind of man to be lived with.”

“Your wife?” she asks again, softly.

I take another deep breath. “Yes.”

There is a longer moment of silence. “Can you tell me about her now?”

I lean back in the chair and try to light a cigarette, but my hands are shaking and my eyes are full of tears.

“She was one helluva woman,” I manage to say. “As opposite from you in looks and as much like you inside—as if you were twins. I guess we were the happiest couple around. We had a right to be—we had the most wonderful daughter, Babs . . .” I have to wait till I stop crying. “We were at a dinner on the post I was stationed at. It was a special celebration for us. I had just been recommended for promotion to Brigadier General, and it was somewhat of a ‘Best of Luck’ party before the official notification came through. Directly before it broke up, the Commanding General was called by Washington—to attend a conference there. He asked me to his office to discuss a few matters which had to be taken care of during his absence.

“It was about nine then, and as Babs had to be in school the next day, my wife took her home. The car developed engine trouble on the way. This major from the camp, who was right behind, stopped to offer them a lift. My wife didn’t know he was drunk until they got into the car. She asked to get out. He refused, then made a few passes at her. She tried to calm him down, but he lost control of the car anyhow. Babs was killed instantly, smashed to pulp. My wife lived an hour after I got to the

hospital. The major survived the accident, but . . ." I stop talking.

"Oh, Dan. My dear one."

"All right," I say.

There is a slight noise at the bedroom door, Talaanger is standing there.

"I had no intention of listening, but I couldn't help hearing," he says, gently. "I would like to offer my sympathies."

"Screw your sympathies."

He does not take offence. He comes to the foot of the bed. "Have you eaten, Ingy?"

"No, Father."

"Are you hungry?"

"Not now."

"You must eat. Where is the kitchen?" For a guy with aching ears, nose a couple of degrees off centre, and a split mouth, he is a cool one. Ingrid points, and he goes out. We sit, silent, and I consider that she is one helluva wise woman, not saying anything at this time. Talaanger returns with a tray of chicken sandwiches and a few bottles of beer. When he hands me a sandwich and opens my bottle, I gaze at him long and hard.

He takes a seat facing me. "I don't have all the facts yet, Baldwin, but I will concede your right to become angry. Especially in the case of Ingrid."

"You don't concede anything, big man. Your death warrant has been issued. It's just a matter of time before I serve it."

"Why are you so determined to kill me?"

I lean forward, becoming mad again. "Listen, Talaanger, it doesn't take a genius to realize that you have put the death sign on me. If all those nitwits you trample on don't give a damn about fighting back, that's their funeral. But I've had enough of you and Cherukime and your bully-boys. It boils down to it being you or me, and that's not a hard decision to make."

Talaanger sits up straighter. "We have a right to take action. You were the one who illegally entered our field, stole our diamonds, and killed our men." He starts getting angry too, but it is difficult to discern. "You act as though you are the innocent party and we the guilty ones."

"Then take action. Kill and get it over with, but don't play paddy-cakes. Not with me."

"Do I still have a choice?" he asks. The question is not the dumbest one in the world.

"Dan," breaks in Ingrid. "Please. For the sake of all the love I have for you. Please."

I am breathing hard, as if I have run uphill a thousand miles. I get up. "All right, Ingrid." I look down on her tenderly, like she is cool, clear water, and I am dying of thirst. "Goodbye." I start for the door.

"I wouldn't go out there," says Talaanger.

I stop. "Why not?"

"Cherukime and a number of his men are outside."

That 38 of mine jumps into my hand so fast that Talaanger has one hell of a time getting in his word before I shoot him.

"They are not here for what you think," he says hastily. I hold up releasing the hammer. "I told Cherukime to come to explain about the car accident. I promise that you can leave safely whenever you want, but I will have to give him the orders first."

"Then give them, big man," I say, softly.

"Very well." He gets up, then hesitates. "May I bring him inside so you can hear the orders I will be giving him?"

"I'll come to the door with you," I say, just so he won't think Mrs. Baldwin raised a complete idiot.

He leads the way to the door, gives instructions for Cherukime to enter and the remainder of the men to get the devil out of there. Al Capone eyes me as he strides in, eyes the 38 in my hand more closely, and his fists are white with fury.

Talaanger slams the door shut. "Put your gun away, Baldwin," he says.

"Over your dead body," I say.

I never thought he would show real temper, but it finally comes out. He walks straight into the muzzle of my revolver, pushes his stomach against it, and glares in my face. "There will be no more shooting and killing. I said to put your gun away."

I have to admire the guy. I place the 38 in my pocket.

He spins toward Al Capone. "Is it true that your men crashed into my daughter's car?"

Kee-rist, do we have a roomful of brave men. Cherukime stands stiff as a board. "Yes, Mr. Talaanger."

"Why?"

"I instructed Bordmann to just follow Miss Talaanger's car, but he acted like a fool. It is my responsibility."

"Where is he?"

"Dead. Baldwin killed him and the four men who were in his patrol."

Talaanger turns slowly to look at me. "Cherukime," he says clearly. "Baldwin is not to be molested again. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"What will be the situation with the police?"

"We can handle the incident if we can find the sedan and hide it. As soon as I learned Miss Talaanger's car was involved, I had one of our contacts arrange a predated report with the police showing it had been stolen earlier in the day. Miss Talaanger will not be disturbed."

"I took her to a doctor," I say.

Al Capone's eyebrows shoot up and down. "Where?" I give him the address.

"I will take care of it," he says.

"Like hell you will," I growl.

He almost smiles. "He will not be harmed, Mr. Baldwin. There are easier ways to obtain a person's co-operation. Where did you leave the car?"



I tell him.

“Do I have your permission to leave, sir?” he asks Talaanger. “To take care of things?”

The Swede nods, and Al Capone is out of the door in a flash. Before it swings completely shut, two elderly men carrying medical bags trot up, puffing. I wait in the living room while Miss Tasty Tail and her father are checked, rechecked and patched up, but I am not unhappy about waiting since there is a bar full of whisky which I drink as though it might suddenly evaporate into thin air.

I am therefore in a happy frame of mind when, an hour later, the two doctors bow themselves out of the apartment. Talaanger locks the door behind him, fills a glass from one of the bottles strewn around me, then sits down. He sips at it, watching me guzzle four or five ounces each time he sips.

“What do you intend to do afterwards, Baldwin?” he asks.

“Kill a trooper,” I blubber out, my lips feeling like the rubber eraser on an elastic pencil.

“After the trooper?” he asks.

“Keep moseying along,” I stutter. It’s impossible to say those exact words without stuttering when you are crocked to within an inch of your life.

“I will arrange for you to have an income, as long as you are . . . moseying along.”

“Screw your income, big man. You don’t have to buy me off. I wouldn’t touch your daughter again for all your screwing incomes, so shove them up your ass.” Boy, am I in a happy frame of mind!

“That’s enough, Father!” I try to focus my eyes. Ingrid is standing in the doorway, a bandage around her head, and even I can see that she is madder than hell. She comes over to me, sprawled on the sofa, and sits down, taking my hand in hers. “Dan will do whatever he decides. You are not to interfere.”

“Look at him!” snaps Talaanger. “Is that what you want—for the remainder of your life?”

“Yes!” she snaps back. “Either accept it or get out.”

“Atta girl,” I chortle. “Give it to him, Tasty Tail.”

“What did you say?” she asks.

“I said, give it to the bastard.”

“Not that. What did you call me?”

“Tasty Tail. Don’t you know it? You got the most beautiful tail in the whole goddamn world.”

My head abruptly falls back and the room begins whirling faster than a runaway Chinese firecracker, but not before I see the flicker of a gleeful smile pass over her face.

“Dan,” she says. “Can you hear me?”

“Sure. Always hear you.”

“Then drink every minute of every day. As much as you want. But let me come along. I promise I’ll run to get you something to drink whenever you’re thirsty. I’ll never, ever, say a word. I’ll never disapprove. I swear.”

From way down at the bottom of the spinning cyclone engulfing me, I manage to say, “Nope,” as I pass out.

# 12

**Kee-rist, do I have one helluva ache when I awaken. I half-open one eye, see it is almost noon, then I instantly close the eye because my brains will boil out if I allow the least aperture to remain open in my head. Miss Tasty Tail must have had a television transmitter aimed at me, for a couple of seconds later she enters carrying a tray. I have to admit once again that she is an unusually intelligent woman; she doesn't bring in such crap as a normal human being would take in the morning. Instead, she has a bottle of booze, a glass of tomato juice with tabasco sauce, and a cup of coffee strong enough to neutralize hydrochloric acid. I take a slug of each in the same order of which I have spoken, and after a second nip of scotch, I am back to the land of the living.**

She fetches **Kito**, who has arrived from nowhere, and the two of them support me to the bathroom and lower me into a tub of lukewarm water full of sweet-smelling foamy suds. The **Jap** snips the end of a **Havana** cigar, holds my hand steady so I can get it lit, then takes up a position in the corner to make sure I don't pass out and

drown. In a little while, Miss Tasty Tail returns to scrub me to within an inch of my life, then gives me such a lovely massage that I am soon able to stand and shave without cutting my throat.

Talaanger is seated in the dining room having a bite to eat when I get there, and we just look at each other while I am polishing off a platter of ham and eggs.

"It appears that my daughter is determined to take up with you," he says, as we sip coffee. Miss Tasty Tail must have known he was going to speak about her, for she had gone out immediately after serving the meal.

I light up a cigarette, inhale deeply, then lean back. "What's this? A bargaining session?"

"In a sense. She has never demonstrated a serious interest in any man until now, and when a woman reaches thirty she is generally mature enough to view life without adolescent emotions."

"What's on your mind, Talaanger? I don't like beating around the bush."

"Last night, Mr. Baldwin, I saw you in quite a different light. Your drinking—and your harshness, is due to the great loss and shock which you suffered. Before then, you were the type of person who could appreciate Ingrid's position in life, and fit into it. My daughter is the most precious thing in the world to me—as your daughter was to you. She is in love with you. Therefore, I am prepared to do anything you ask of me so the two of you can find happiness. I cannot offer my assistance, for I realize it would offend a man of your character. I just wish to inform you that I am eager to help, whenever you feel inclined to permit me to do so."

He has done a good job, I have to give him credit for that. My mind turns to Babs—she would have been nineteen years old if she had lived. If the wheel of chance had turned differently, I might have been sitting in Talaanger's chair looking at some bum who would have made every minute of her life a living hell.

I am suddenly very sad. But having lived with sorrow these many years, I do not find it a strange companion, for each instant of mourning has so increased the ache within me that I am too dulled to hope or struggle any longer.

I cannot believe in miracles. When the boxes containing the remains of my heart were lowered into their graves, I knew that no ray of beauty could ever enter the vacuum of loneliness and utter despair which would linger on until I joined them.

And yet that crazy, incredibly wonderful Swede has performed a marvel, edging into the bleakness of my grief, striking off one of the links of my nightmare. But deep inside I sense that for every curtain she tears away from my cell of darkness, she must pay a thousandfold. For I cannot cast off my bonds—I can only chain her to the agony which is flogging me.

I rise. "Give a message to your daughter. Tell her I don't want her." I do not wait for him to speak, but walk out.

When I get outside, I feel as if my lungs and muscles are drained, shrunken. I force in great gulps of air until my brain turns to a thought which sends the blood pounding in my veins. Tom the Trooper. I start looking for a taxi, battenning down my sorrow, concentrating only on a man I must kill.

Within a half-hour, I am back at the Blauchester Hotel. Six minutes, Milly Purcell, now Milly Wilkins, had said it took him to go to his hotel, get something, and return. I try to estimate the amount of time it would take him to climb a flight or two of stairs, open a door, pick up whatever he was after, lock the door, and descend. Knowing the trooper, he would be doing everything at a run.

I finally settle on thirty seconds each way, give or take ten of them, which leaves approximately two and a half

minutes to reach his hotel. I walk rapidly down the street for three minutes and come upon one small hotel. Returning to the Blauchester, I go in the opposite direction for three minutes. There are two. I wander through side streets, finding still another, plus a boarding house which are also within range.

To facilitate matters, I register at the largest hotel where I corner a bellboy, who, following a sudden switch of money from my pocket to his, provides me with a list of men having the forename Tom or Thomas who had checked out on the same day as Amy. There are three.

Registering at the second hotel is a waste of time and money; no Toms had left on that day. The third, however, has one, and the fourth has one also. The landlady of the boarding house almost throws me out until I break her heart with a cock-and-bull story that the Tom I am looking for had done certain things to my sister which necessitated medical care in a maternity clinic, at which time she chokingly tells me that I could have saved my breath—the only Tom she ever had in her place was the guest of honour at a turkey dinner.

Since I have signed up for four rooms to expedite the search, I decide to give all the hotels a little business, so I phone an investigation service from one of them to make an appointment with a London Popkin at a second. This Popkin, whose name is actually Foord-Wilson, is a short, round man, who wipes his brow continually and leaves perspiration marks wherever he lays a hand.

I pass over the list of Toms and Thomases. "One of these men," I say, "should be an ex-paratrooper or commando officer, about thirty, with blond hair and blue eyes, who went out of the service at least ten months ago. Do you have any contacts with the Military Services?"

He pulls out another handkerchief and wipes away. "Of course, sir."

"Then get cracking. I want a preliminary report as soon

as possible. But don't hold it up waiting for details—you can give them to me as you learn them.”

When the Anglican Popkin has left, I go to the third hotel to eat supper, then rush to the fourth one to bring it up.

Old Foord-Wilson must have been a first cousin of Montgomery, because before noon the following day, he is back. I open his report and my hands are not steady.

‘Captain Thomas Duddley’. I do not pay any attention to the rest of the investigation, for I am breathing too hard to read it carefully anyhow. Foord-Wilson nearly drops dead when I tip him, and makes such a fuss that I have to throw him out of the room to cut off his insistence that I should search for more people.

Propping the report on the bureau, I open a fresh bottle of scotch and sit on the bed nibbling away until the bottle is half empty. Then I look at the information with fresh eyes.

He comes from some burg in Shropshire, about a hundred and thirty miles north-west of London, has soldiered for ten years in a parachute regiment, and his physical description fits my trooper to a Tee.

It is only when I am at the railroad station checking on trains to the town in Shropshire that a brainstorm hits me. Tom the Trooper is 99.9 per cent certain that nobody knows his full name. Until I have shown up from the Valley of the Shadow of Death, he has been as much in the clear as a diplomat's frigid wife. At once, I go to a phone booth to prowl through the directories. This is a more complicated procedure than developing the formula for the atomic bomb. I am too much of a coward to ring up information, because in the first place, it is beyond my intelligence to figure out how to do so, and second, if I did get information, I wouldn't be able to understand the telephone operator anyhow.

Taking the easiest solution, I grab a taxi to one of my

four hotels where I corner a thieving bellboy who gives me a hand. He goes through a dozen telephone books, but there is no Tom the Trooper Duddley registered. He calls information for new listings—then hands me an address. It is as simple as that.

I go to my room and open a bottle. I have made sure that each hotel room is properly stocked, just in case of an emergency like this. It is a number of hours until dark, but I am not too impatient now. The twinges in my shoulder containing those stainless steel pins, the still-weak chest muscles, the spots on my neck where the skin is reddish-white, the side which gives a dig every now and then, are enough to remind me that I have come such a long way that a few more minutes or days won't change the world.

About nine, I hail a taxi. It takes me to a high-class district consisting of row after row of plush apartment houses, all called the Majestic Mansions and Tudor Court and India Palace and shit like that.

I get out a couple of blocks away to patrol the area, slinking from Mansion to Place. There is a little, square park around which the apartment buildings nestle, encircled by a steel fence with a gate at one side which holds a sign explaining that the park is open from 9 A.M. to 7 P.M. only. I go over the fence and slip from tree to shrub until I am directly across from the entrance to the address I have on the slip of paper.

I squat and wait. As a matter of fact, I squat and wait until my butt and legs are breaking, but nobody enters or exits who remotely resembles Tom the Trooper. At 2 A.M., I climb back over the fence and catch a taxi to one of my four hotels. Just before taking a nightcap in preparation of turning in, it suddenly strikes me that I am a nut to keep four hotel rooms, so I make a mental note to pick up the bottles scattered about and move them all into one place.

The next day, having ants in my pants waiting around,



I purchase a good pair of binoculars, take a taxi to the opposite side of the park from the address I am observing, work my way up to the roof of a tall building, and lie there watching the entrance. For the first time since I have been in Merry Old England, the goddamn sun has to come out, but I am not completely stupid, because I have brought along sandwiches, a couple of bottles of beer, and a quart of scotch. As they sell only imperial quarts in Fish-and-Chips Land, it means that I benefit by an additional twenty-five percent of drinking per bottle.

It is almost six and I am preparing to start down when I see a figure stride out of the apartment house. I don't have to use my binoculars to know who it is. Tom the Trooper! My entire stomach tightens. I adjust the glasses a hair. He stops on the sidewalk, looks around warily, then walks halfway up the block to a black Bentley which he enters. A few moments later, he has driven off.

I lie on the roof, breathing deeply. When the pounding anger within me subsides, I descend to the street and cross over to the apartment house to check the mail boxes. There are twenty occupants, four apartments on each floor. Thomas Duddley is third floor, left front.

I find a pub a few blocks away where I quickly swallow a dozen drinks. Full darkness does not come soon enough for me.

It is 8:30 before I make my move. Returning to the park, I hop over the fence and move slowly through the bushes to scout the front of the trooper's building. The lights of his apartment are out, his Bentley is not in sight. Cars are parked on both sides of the street, so I carefully select a sheltered position which permits me to clearly observe the entrance.

I inspect my 38 special, sit on my heels and wait. This time I do not remain squatting, but shift often to keep my legs limber. The hours go by, but I still do not become impatient. There are too many thoughts and memories in

my mind to be concerned with the movement of the hands of a watch.

It is after eleven when I see headlights approaching. The Bentley stops about a half a block up the street to park at the kerb. Immediately, I am over the fence, crouching behind a car.

Tom the Trooper gets out, locks the door, then walks towards the discreetly-lit, canopy-covered entrance. As he turns to start up the steps, I rise and advance a few paces.

“Trooper!” I call.

That bastard doesn't even freeze in his tracks. With the same unique command of balance he demonstrated time and time again, he drops instantly to the ground and begins rolling away from the entrance lights towards the shadows. I fire at his moving body. His left arm jerks. Then in one fluid motion, he is up on his feet and running down the street faster than a greyhound chasing a frightened rabbit. Dashing to the pavement, I take quick aim at his back and fire. It hits empty air—he is already out of range.

Flashing a glance over his shoulder, he slackens speed when he comes to his car, then is inside before I can move ten feet. I hurry out in the street to wait for him. He is not long coming, straight at me, the Bentley's motor racing furiously. I hop back between two cars in the nick of time.

As he whizzes by, I edge out, draw a deep breath, say a quick prayer, then fire. The left rear tyre flattens abruptly as though it has hit a field of glass! The Bentley skids, side-swiping a parked car. The trooper slams on his brakes to keep from spinning. For a split second he slows down. Immediately, I shoot out a second tyre. That really does it! The heavy Bentley ploughs solidly into another parked car, whirls, and comes to a stop pointing towards the park.

As I start running the fifty feet towards it, the door

bursts open and the trooper leaps out, races to the fence and hops over it without pausing. I throw a wild shot at him, but I am again hitting air. In seconds, I am at the fence and over it too.

I crouch behind a tree, huffing and puffing like a locomotive. It does not take a medical degree for me to understand why the trooper was unable to control that Bentley or why he won't be running too far away; that first shot of mine has put his left arm out of business.

I flick out the four empty cartridge cases and reload. When I get some of my breath back, I creep through the shrubs and trees. It is darker than the shades of hell in the park—I can't see my nose in front of my face. I keep working in, placing each hand and knee down as if I am in the middle of a mine-field.

Suddenly, a blast from my right! Dirt kicks up into my eyes! Instantly, I roll to the left until I bump into a tree, then snake around it to face towards the trooper.

"Hello, trooper," I call out, wiping my eyes.

"That you, chappie?"

"Yeah. How's the arm?"

"Good shooting, chappie. Why don't you come over and find out?"

"I intend to." Frankly, all this talking is only to give me time to catch my breath. "What did you do with my diamonds?"

"In a safety deposit box in a bank, chappie. The key's in my pocket. Come over here and get it."

"Which pocket?" He doesn't answer, so I close my eyes, which can't see anything in the darkness anyhow, and listen like mad. It is so quiet I can hear a worm pass water. I slither backwards for about ten feet, wriggle between two shrubs, and wait again. Then, from the distance, comes the sound of a police car approaching. A few seconds later, I hear movement in the bush—going away from me. Immediately, I am up and running after him.

In a clear spot, I see his form disappearing towards the far side of the park, so I pick up speed, crashing through shrubs and cracking my damned head against low branches, but by the time I reach the fence, he is already over it and racing down the street. I keep trailing him, but he is getting further and further away.

All of a sudden, headlights flash on behind me and a car noses up. I stop. It has to be her, holding the door open for me. I jump inside.

“Get after him!” I snap, pointing at the trooper.

Miss Tasty Tail hits the gas, moving up rapidly. “There’s a large park ahead, Dan,” she says.

“I see it,” I growl, especially since the trooper has already turned into it and is running wildly towards a thick cluster of trees surrounding an oval-shaped pond.

When we drive up, I am out of the car in a flash. “Get out of here,” I yell at Ingrid, then I am trotting over the grass and among the small trees leading to the jungle the trooper is hiding in.

I flop behind a tree, panting so hard that I can’t hear a damn thing except my heart pounding.

“Hey, trooper,” I call out. “You still around?”

“I’m here,” he calls back. “End of the line, chappie.”

He is smack in the centre of that grove, and he has spoken only to let me know it. That means he is already somewhere else. He is moving to his left. I don’t have to hear him do so; with a wounded left arm, it would be the natural thing.

Turning to my right, I begin crawling through the trees. Suddenly, a shot comes unexpectedly from behind me! The bullet shatters my upper arm, tearing the 38 from my grasp!

I bite my lip to keep from grunting at the shock and search desperately for the gun. I am lucky, it has fallen directly by my side. I wheel round like a cat stepping on a white hot stone to face the direction from which the trooper has fired.

"Which arm, chappie?" he asks, chuckling.

"The good one," I call back.

"How well do you shoot with the left hand?"

"Rotten," I say, backing up until I find a nice, solid tree to shelter me. That trooper is one sharp bastard. As I don't have the foggiest notion where he is now, I relax a short while to calm my breathing, then snake to my right, attempting to flank him. That arm of mine is pumping blood and feeling as though a bulldozer is sitting on top of it, but I wouldn't lay down the 38 to bind it up even if I knew I would bleed to death in ten seconds.

Then I hear him! It is a faint motion, as if he has brought up a leg to get purchase to stand. He is only about fifteen feet to my front.

I stop behind a tree, feeling a vast weariness settling over me, and realize that my strength is running out of the wound. Pulling out a hanky, I slip it under my armpit, wincing at the wave of pain which strikes as I press my arm against it. The bullet must have hit bone.

I fumble in my pocket for half a dozen cartridges. As quiet as a mouse, I place them one by one between my teeth, pull out the steel-jacket slugs and empty the powder in a little heap to the left of the tree in front of me.

When all is in readiness, I take a long, deep breath.

"Hey, trooper," I call out. "This is it. I'm coming over." I want his eyes wide open, looking at me.

"Come right ahead, chappie," he says, a satisfied tone in his voice.

I rise to a half-squat, deliberately making one helluva racket in the silence of the woods, lay down my revolver, and draw out my cigarette lighter. I place it next to the pile of gunpowder, close my eyes tightly and flick the wheel.

I can sense the bright glare when the powder ignites. Eyes still tightly shut, I grab up my gun, leap to my feet, and charge towards the trooper.

He fires! The bullet whistles by my ear. He has been momentarily blinded by the flaring powder. Another shot blasts out! The slug bores into my wounded arm, checking my rush.

I snap open my eyes. He is kneeling a couple of yards away, preparing to shoot again. Instantly, I pull the trigger. The bullet hits him squarely in his right shoulder, driving him back a foot or two. His pistol falls to the ground. He lunges for it, reaching out with his wounded left arm. Quickly stepping forward, I bring the barrel of my 38 crashing down on his wrist. There is a sharp crack as the bone splinters. Then I kick his pistol aside.

He lies quietly on his stomach—but he is still dangerous.

“Turn over,” I say.

He rolls over on his back. It isn't really necessary to aim at this range. I blow off a kneecap. Letting out a deep groan, he flops around. I wait until his convulsions stop, then blow off his other kneecap. He lies still again, spread-eagled, gasping, biting his lip to curb the fire boiling up inside.

His teeth have been pulled. I kneel, staring at him in the night.

“Finish it off, chappie,” he says, jerking out the words in short gusts.

“I want to talk a while,” I say. “Why did you kill Amy? Wasn't your share big enough?”

“Too chancey . . . leaving things dangling behind. Had to make . . . it perfect, y'know.” He bites his lip again to cut off a moan. “Made a . . . mistake about you. Thought you . . . were a goner. Bad mistake. Should have shot you once again.”

“I can understand about me. But not about her. She didn't deserve that.”

“Life, chappie. Couldn't be rid . . . of you and . . . have her as a witness. Makes no difference, now.”

“You're wrong, trooper. I've been saving a gift for you

—from her.” I lower my revolver to his groin, slightly at an angle so I will not hit his spine and ease his suffering. I fire. The bullet rips through his intestine.

A violent grunt explodes from his throat, his breathing races.

“Finish it off, you bastard,” he says, jaws locked tightly together.

“I want to talk a bit more,” I say. He catches on and struggles to rise, so I club his face with the gun barrel, driving him back to the ground. I take out the handkerchief still in my armpit and tie it firmly around my arm above the wounds. The blood flow slackens.

The trooper is moaning, twisting from side to side. The shock is wearing off, the real pain setting in.

“Hey, trooper,” I say. “Who dreamed up the operation?”

He stops squirming long enough to say, “Me, of course. Met Ahmed—year ago. Left army to . . . prepare.”

“Why did you bring in Amy?”

“Needed money for boat. Ahmed . . . me . . . enough for gas, food only.”

Suddenly he screams. Immediately, I tear off part of his shirt and stuff it in his mouth. He writhes in agony. Taking out a cigarette, I light it, drawing deeply, waiting.

When I sense the shrieks behind the gag in his mouth, I grasp the collar of his jacket and drag him into a small clearing where pale moonlight comes filtering through. His face is grey, drawn, etched with his excruciation. He is trying vainly to lift his hands to pluck at his groin, but nothing he can do can ease the searing flame.

I kneel down beside him. “Hey, trooper. Want an end to it?”

His eyes are full of tears. He nods.

The instant I remove the gag, the groans pour out. I lean forward.

“Say, forgive me, Amy,” I tell him.

His lips quiver as he tries to utter the words.

“Louder,” I say. “She can’t hear you.”

He makes a terrific effort. “Forgive me, Amy,” he whispers.

I place my 38 to his temple and draw back the hammer. “Now, say please.”

“Please,” he whispers.

I release the hammer.

Rising to my feet, I look down at him, and I feel no slackening of the hatred inside me, no exultation that vengeance has been executed, no remorse that a nigh-perfect machine of a man has been blasted into a whimpering hulk before being coldly and surgically destroyed. There is only the feeling that a putrid, repugnant odour has been blown away by a raging wind, and that only time will remove the last traces from my nostrils.

But I am not yet finished. Digging out the last few shells from my pocket, I reload, level the revolver, and send a bullet crashing into his other temple. The head splits. I fire again. And again. Then again.

When the hammer drops on a spent case, I slowly turn away and walk out of the woods.

I come to the edge of the road before I am aware of the people around me. Miss Tasty Tail, Talaanger and Cherukime are standing in my way, a dozen bully-boys waiting tensely in a semi-circle behind them. Ingrid is looking at my bloody arm, her lower lip showing white from the pressure of her teeth on it.

“He has a key in his pocket, for a safety deposit box,” I say to Talaanger. “You’ll find what’s left of the diamonds there.”

Talaanger nods.

“Send me the best one he has,” I continue. “I want to drink to his health.”

“Very well, Mr. Baldwin,” he says.

“I want a car to get out of here. Then a boat to get out of the country.”



"Take care of it, Cherukime," says Talaanger.

"Yes, sir," says Al Capone. He points to a sedan by the side of the road. "Take that one."

I start towards it.

"Dan."

I keep going.

"Please, Dan."

Suddenly Talaanger and Cherukime are in front of me. I stop.

"Take her with you, Mr. Baldwin," says Talaanger.

I look at him like he has gone mad.

"Are you out of your senses?" I ask.

Ingrid comes to my side. She is wearing a funny little hat to hide the bandage on her head.

"You can't drive with only one hand, Dan," she says, softly.

I push through them and open the door of the car.

"Dan, I could never love anyone else." It is a whisper so low that it reaches me on the breath of a light wind.

I climb into the car. It is harder than hell to find the ignition key to switch on the motor, for my eyes are full of tears, but I get it started and drive off.

I have rolled maybe twenty feet when, without warning, that dirty treacherous bastard of a right foot abruptly hits the brake! I glare down at it, and I snarl! But I know that perfidious son-of-a-bitch; it is the most goddamned stubborn foot in the whole stinking universe once it makes up its mind.

There is absolutely nothing I can do with it, so I shake my head, sigh in resignation, then slide over to the window. They are standing in a knot, looking at me. Ingrid takes a half-step forward.

"Well, damnit," I growl. "I don't have all night."

I have to turn away from being blinded by the light that glows in her eyes. She throws her arms around Talaanger's neck, kisses him, and starts towards me. I see she is carrying a bottle in her hand.

"Hold it!" I snap.

She stops in her tracks, a veil of dismay clouding her face.

"Bust it," I say.

She cocks her head, frowning.

"Bust it," I say again.

Suddenly, the sweetest smile in the world crosses her lips as she lifts the bottle high overhead with both hands, and a full-throated laugh comes pouring out as she slams it to the ground.

Then she comes running.

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Dan Baldwin knew how it felt to wake up in the gutter—coming to in the desert was much more frightening.

"I open my eyes, focus them, then let out the god-damnedest, loudest, most terrified nerve-grinding croak in my life! Standing on my outstretched arm, talons dug deep into my skin, is the ugliest, most repulsive, horrifying monster of a vulture I have ever seen! Its beak is sunk into my biceps, and it is shaking its head viciously, attempting to rip off the flesh!"

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