

THRILLING MYSTERY


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BLACK

CHAPTER I

The Walking Dead Men

THE big Creole woman entered the shimmering green gloom of the newspaper office, waddled toward the city desk. She was perspiring freely, and the whites of her eyes were like hard-boiled eggs. Everyone in New Orleans had heard of Emmeline Sompayrac.

Dressed entirely in slinky black like a Creole queen, she looked exotic and interesting. The city editor rose and nodded graciously. Over by the green-shuttered windows two cub reporters stopped flirting with their Coronas, sat up stiffly and stared.

"Looks like hell's popped loose in Congo Square," said Reporter Number One.

"Looks like a story," said Number Two.

Emmeline wiped the moisture from her forehead with her pudgy palms. Mr. Pratz, the city editor, seemed pleased. He knew that if Emmeline came to the office in person there was sure to be trouble brewing somewhere

A Complete Novelette of Creole Witchcraft



Leprous, Evil Shapes Stage a Danse

DEMONS DANCE

By **FRANK
BELKNAP
LONG, Jr.**

*Author of "Murder at
Midday," "Medicine for
Three," etc.*



Macabre to the Castanets of Death!

In the French Quarter. Not just ordinary trouble, either, but something distinctly unsavory, like the oysters in the stalls along the riverfront when the thermometer stood at 115 in the shade and the hot pavements ate holes in your shoes. Only some devil's cauldron brewing black mischief could have moved big Emmeline from her cool patio to the torrid asphalt of the New Orleans streets at high noon.

It was a miracle, and the city editor was still marveling when the fifty-five-year-old policy queen set to work on his nerves. Big Emmeline knew a thing or two about psychology.

"Someone is trying to freeze me," she said. "But I never touched her. I just let her sit on the floor and came over myself to tell you about it."

"Who, Emma?" asked Pratz. "Who is sitting on your floor?"

"Judge Rocque's daughter. Someone pasted adhesive tape on her pretty little mouth, tied her up so she couldn't move, and left her in the *juju* room all night. No white girl could stand that, Mr. Pratz. The *papaloi's juju* would scare that little blond child out of her wits. But there's other things in that room—*zombies*, walking dead men. Sometimes I hear voices all night."

"What happened to Nizilda, Emma?" said Pratz in a tight, anxious tone.

"She didn't know me when I spoke to her," said Emmeline. "She just looked at me, like her pretty blue eyes had turned to ice."

P RATZ was alarmed. He knew all about Nizilda Rocque. She was a little madcap, a little fool. She gambled at Emma's night after night for higher stakes than even the judge could afford.

She was college-bred, but her brains were in her feet. She was a wonderful dancer, had tawny hair and a scornful little mouth which resented kisses. Perhaps she wasn't as wild as she was painted, but it was rumored that no man's private life

was entirely safe in her hands.

"This is bad, Emma," said Pratz. "They could shut your place up tight. You ought to be careful, Emma."

Emmeline's face was an anxious study. "I had nothing to do with it," she said. "Someone kidnaped her, wrapped her head in a towel and dragged her up a ladder to the *juju* room."

"Is she hurt, Emma?" asked Pratz. He had put the question off deliberately, out of sheer funk.

"Only in her mind, Mr. Pratz."

Pratz brightened. He was still concerned, but the news-hound in him was sniffing at a verminous scent. Scarlet horrors, terrible hauntings in the *Vieux Carré*! It was front-page stuff just as soon as you linked it up with Nizilda Rocque and her madcap personality. The ritzy set and Congo mumbo-jumbo! It was news!

There was no one in the office but the two cubs. He called to one of them in a voice that clapped like thunder.

"Come here, Freddy, quick. Got something for you."

Freddy Curtis was elated. He slapped a cover on his Corona, bounced across the office and stood at attention while old Pratz explained the assignment.

"This is Miss Sompayrac, Freddy," he said. "She runs a roulette parlor in the *Vieux Carré*. Nice place, all white clientele."

Emmeline nodded emphatically. "All white," she said. There was a ring of pride in her voice. Emmeline was an influence in New Orleans. Half the blacks in the French Quarter were enmeshed in her policy toils and some of the best and wealthiest pinks patronized her roulette parlor. Blacks and pinks together sent the stout old lady's income spinning up into the higher brackets.

She was proud of her social status, her immense importance in the city of sin and carnivals.

"I know the place," said Freddy, and could have bitten his tongue out. Old Pratz would think— But Pratz wasn't worrying about the moral derelictions of a cub reporter. He

teetered on his toes, his fingers in his vest, his eyes bright with excitement.

"Miss Sompayrac lives over the parlor," he said. "On the second floor. The third floor has been shut off for about six months."

"Five," corrected Emmeline. She started talking directly to Freddy. "It's got a spell on it. It was on account of the *papaloi*. He used too much *juju*. He died with the spirit on him. He was sitting on the floor with a bowl of blood on his knees when his heart burst and he fell over dead.

"When a *papaloi* falls dead with the spirit on him you should stay around and work over him, get the spirit out. But all the black dancers were so scared they fled and left the spirit in him. The *papaloi* was buried with the spirit in him, and that means he's not dead in his grave. He's a walking corpse, a zombie with white eyes. Every night he comes up out of his grave and goes back to the room. He can fill that room with dead men dancing. All the *juju* dancers in the graveyards he can call up. They'll serve him and dance for him.

"*Papalois* and *mamalois* that died when I was a little girl—that died with the spirits on them long before I was born. He can fly over all the graves in St. Roch's Campo Santo, and call up all the dead spirits.

"I woke up one morning a couple of months ago, and there was blood on the ceiling. It was just a little round spot at first, but it got bigger and bigger, and then it began to splash down into the room. It splattered the walls, splattered all over the night dress I was wearing. I had to have the walls done over, get a plasterer to fix up the ceiling. That was the only time the blood showed, but I could tell you about other things, the voices—"

P RATZ cut in emphatically. "All right, Emma, let's skip it. What you're trying to say is that the third floor has a bad reputation. There were dark goings-on there months ago, before you took the place over.

Voodoo dances; an old priest fell dead. So just to be on the safe side you shut the third floor off, boarded up the door and all. Freddy's got that."

Freddy Curtis nodded. "Third floor haunted, ghost of *papaloi* puts intruders on spot. What comes next, Miss Sompayrac?"

Emmeline cleared her throat. Something horrible had happened on that haunted third floor. It wasn't easy to talk about.

"Miss Rocque lost on every number," said Emmeline. "She was crying her pretty little eyes out. So I said: 'You go home to papa, honey. You've lost enough for one night.'"

"Wasn't there anyone with her?" asked Pratz.

"No. She shooed off her boy friend along about ten-thirty. There was only poor old Emma there to stand by her."

The city editor smiled. He couldn't picture Emmeline not standing by when one of her patrons was losing money.

"I put her in a cab," continued the policy queen. "Put her in and paid the fare. It must have been an out-law cab. I thought the poor child was safe at home in bed until I heard someone moaning this morning up over my head. I looked at the clock. It was nine-thirty. I got up, put on a wrapper and went upstairs.

"She was moaning so loud I could hear her through the boards. I was so scared my teeth started clacking. I thought it might be the *papaloi* trying to drink out of his bowl of blood and moaning because he couldn't. Zombies can't drink. I went downstairs and got an axe, and then went back upstairs and set to work on the boards. It took me nearly ten minutes to get them down. There was a musky smell came out of the room while I was hacking at the boards. It made me feel sick all over."

"Never mind how you felt," said Pratz impatiently. "You got into that room, got the boards down."

Emmeline nodded. "I did, Mr. Pratz. And when I saw who was ly-

ing there on the floor I knew someone was trying to freeze me."

"She means, freeze her out," explained Pratz. "Give her joint a bad name; queer her with the police."

Emmeline bridled a little at the word "joint." Mr. Pratz, whom she had always really liked, was forgetting himself.

"The poor child's mind was just a blank," she said. "She just stared at me with eyes like frozen blue grapes."

Freddy docketed that phrase for future use. Emmeline Sompayrac was really a wonderful person. A little screwy, maybe, but a grand old girl all the same.

It was actually a privilege to follow her out into the stifling streets under a blazing sun. She waddled along in front of him, her black, silky flounces absorbing the glare as she moved. Freddy was more than elated. He knew that if he could get the little madcap daughter of Judge Rocque to talk freely his cub days would be over. A star reporter could have a pretty swell time in the carnival city by the yellow Mississippi.

A half block from the office they came to a broad cross street down which traffic streamed. Freddy moved to the edge of the curb and hailed a cab.

CHAPTER II

The Room of Horror

THE sun seemed even hotter when they passed out of the American Quarter, having rattled down St. Charles Avenue and crossed the intersection of North Peters, Canal and Tchoupitoulas Streets. The Liberty Monument seemed wilting in the torrid sunlight and in all the traffic of Liberty Square Freddy felt a dark, pervasive influence snaking up out of hell to envelop him in an aura of unclean superstition.

From Orleans Street the chimes of the old cathedral drifted across the city, but were nearly obliterated by the drone of the traffic. Blazing shafts

of sunlight streamed downward through the cab windows, turning Emmeline's face into a lake of perspiration and slithering off the chromium out in front.

Even the drive through the narrow, peaceful streets of the Old City Freddy did not enjoy. From somewhere near the center of the Vieux Carré a gruesome, malign influence radiated outward, meshing him in its unclean sweep. It was an illusion, perhaps, but a dozen times Freddy seemed to feel a tight band encircling his forehead and nasty chills running up his vertebrae.

But old Pratz wanted a story, something damned good that would knock his readers cold. It was up to Freddy. He had to make good, had to string along with old Emmeline. The cab drew to the curbing and came to a halt with a swishing of tires.

EMMMA'S place stood in the center of a block of miscellaneous houses. Some of them were low dives and some were just places where you could dine and wine without spending a small fortune, and some were wonderful inside like Emma's, glittering with the appurtenances of the gambling trade.

Emma's place was the largest establishment on the block. It was stuccoed in pale pink, with a jalousie to set it off. It was old and quaint and picturesque and an antiquarian would have raved over it. But what it offered a little spoiled madcap like Nizilda Rocque was not apparent on its outside. You had to go in through the very old door and look around, and then you knew.

Freddy dismissed the cab and followed the big policy queen inside. She didn't waste a second in the gambling parlor. She waddled forward between the roulette tables and under a glittering chandelier that had looked down on gracious ladies in plumes and satins when big Emmeline was a baby and up the stairs to the second floor. She didn't stop there, but went right on up to the *juju* room.

Freddy followed her, his heart thumping strangely. She moved along a dark hall at the head of the second flight of stairs and came to the boards she had attacked with an axe. Freddy glimpsed light between the pine-board ruin, and in his excitement and haste to get into the room, nearly toppled her over.

For a long second they both filled the doorway between the demolished boards, and then they were in the room, standing in a banner of light that streamed in through an open window and gazing in stunned wonder at the girl on the floor. Then wonder gave place to swift horror, and a little, choking sob flew out of Emmeline's throat.

Freddy made no sound. He just stood there, swaying a little, while his eyes goggled and the blood left his cheeks. The girl was sprawled in a corner. Her body was twisted and her face was black.

She was fully clothed, but she had kicked off—or perhaps someone had flipped off—her yellow suede sport shoes. There were dark bruises and red, ugly-looking welts on her firm-fleshed legs. She was wearing a white swagger coat over a yellow voile dress and rolled yellow socks. The little slippers were lying a few feet away on a patch of coffee-colored mildew.

Emmeline and Freddy both knew that the girl was dead. No form still warm and limber could have maintained such a posture. The ghastly distortion of her limbs and torso was even more horrible than her features, which were congested with black arterial blood.

She had apparently struggled fiercely, for the cords on her ankles had come loose, and those on her wrists were stained a rusty red. The little rouged, cupid's bow mouth was rimmed with pinkish froth.

There was a peculiar odor in that room. It was faint, but nauseatingly unpleasant. Emmeline would have said it was the contents of the *papaloi's* bowl gone rancid, but Freddy was familiar with the odor of spilled blood, and he did not think it was

blood he smelled. There was a stranger, more repulsive odor in the room.

Suddenly Freddy recognized it. It wasn't the kind of odor that assails your nostrils vehemently, like the effluvium of a monkey house at the zoo. But it was a zoo odor. Freddy had smelled it several times as a kid and once or twice as a man. As a kid he had often visited the snake house at the National Zoological Park in Washington, D. C.

MENTALLY Freddy took his reporter's card and tore it into bits. He didn't want to go through with this. He wanted to dash out into the clean, bright sunlight again.

But when the Creole Queen flashed large eyes of scorn and reproach at him he got wise to himself. Freddy had a lot of courage in cold storage. His spine was an icicle, but he knew that he couldn't go on being a cub forever.

Here was the first big break he had got so far, and even if it was all dressed out in a grinning death-mask it wasn't going to bite him.

It was to his credit that when he really got over his momentary funk he figuratively took off his coat and waded right into that dark sea of horror, up to his knees, his waist, his chin. He knew he couldn't touch the corpse until the police came, but he made a visual examination at close range of practically everything in the room.

There were many curious things in that room. No furniture, but a lot of bric-a-brac on the mantelpiece, which was higher than Freddy's head. A little china bear and a French king sitting on a high china throne and a carnival mask of black papier-maché with long ribbons attached to it.

But the oddest thing was a yellow paper poster announcing a circus of some kind. Freddy held it up in the sunlight that streamed in through the window, perused it swiftly. It read:

AMAZING EXHIBITION
 First battle—an Attakapas Bull
 against Six Wild Dogs!
 Second Battle—a Black Panther
 against a—

The poster was torn at that point. The black panther's opponent would never be known. Freddy's steel-grey eyes narrowed in deep puzzlement. Why did a circus poster, and curious bric-a-brac, gather dust on the mantel of a voodoo priest's room?

Perhaps big Emmeline could enlighten him. He turned to her with a question on the tip of his tongue; then suddenly decided to keep his thoughts and queries to himself. The atmosphere of that grim room favored secrecy.

During the next five minutes Freddy was very busy. He bent close above the dead girl, studied the distorted body that some brute thing had crushed and— Not mutilated exactly, for there were no knife gashes in the bruised and abraded flesh, but the crimson welts indicated that the mutilating impulse had been present in the thing that had assailed her.

Freddy instinctively envisaged it as sub-human. Some leprous shape of black night, some scuffling, unclean thing bearing a snake-odor, trailing the fetor of graveyards. That was his instinctive feeling, and it was not a sane one. Old Pratz would laugh at it, sneer, perhaps. Old Pratz was as logical and level-headed as an adding machine.

Freddy had lived in New Orleans for a decade. Being young and imaginative, he knew a thing or two. The dark cult of the *juju* with its ophidian sacraments and blood-lusting ceremonies, still reared its ugly head in the city of levees. Seventy-five years ago the blacks had worshiped the snake-god openly in Congo Square. Something pretty awful had bruised and distorted the fragile, slim body of this little madcap scion of wealth.

Freddy took mental notes while his flesh crawled. His reporter's card was back in his pocket, and he was functioning at white-heat.

Emmeline was wringing her hands by the time Freddy was ready for her. He quizzed her, frightened her, threatened her. She answered him with shrugs and slight groans, her big fat body quivering against the

door jamb, her mouth working.

"Honest, young man," she said, "she was alive this morning. She was sitting up, looking at me. This must have happened while I was telling Mr. Pratz about it."

"How did they get her up here?" rasped Freddy. "Didn't you hear them busting the window open? Where's the ladder?"

"It's down in back," she said. "They carried it around the house. You can see the grooves on the ground right under the window. I sleep heavy; that's why I didn't hear."

"Well," said Freddy, "it doesn't look so good, Miss Sompayrac."

"But, my God, young man, you've got to make it look good! I'll be frozen if you don't. Please, young man, please try and fix it up for me like Mr. Pratz asked."

Freddy's brow was corrugated. "Best thing you can do is phone the police," he said. "Tell them to send someone right over. I can't make it look any better than it is, Miss Sompayrac. I can't pull off a miracle. This kid is socially prominent."

Emmeline let the tears flow then. They streamed down her fat cheeks, wearing furrows in her rice-powder makeup.

Freddy felt sorry for that aged lump of blubbery flesh.

"Just tell them what's necessary," he said. "Just keep to the story you told Pratz, if it's the truth."

"Where are you going, young man?"

"I've got to break this to old Judge Rocque," said Freddy. "I'll phone Pratz, and he'll send Davis or maybe Fearn over to keep the police from riding you. Remember, you don't have to tell them anything but the truth."

CHAPTER III

The Strange Family

FREDDY was relieved when he found himself out in the hot sunlight again. He looked up at the pink

stuccoed walls of Emma's place and thought of the thing he had seen. Warm clean sunlight on pink walls, and inside a festering horror that had made his flesh crawl. He went up close to the wall, and looked at the grooves in the soft earth directly under the window of the *juju* room. He shot a glance upward, saw Emeline's fat, frightened face peering down at him, and swore impatiently.

"Go down to your room and wait," he called up to her. "Stay in your room until the police come."

He stamped around the house through a grass-carpeted alley between the east wall and the adjoining joint, and took a squint at the ladder which was lying on trampled grass a few feet from the rear door of Emma's joint.

Then he returned to the front of the house, stood for a minute staring across the cobbled street at the row of pink and blue stuccoed houses opposite, and then stamped off down the street in quest of a cab.

He found one about half a mile from Emma's place. Cabs didn't cruise about much at midday in the French Quarter. The houses near Emma's joint were all shuttered and silent, and who would want to visit such places at midday? The few cabmen who cruised did it for exercise.

FREDDY tumbled into the cab which had drawn to the curb with squealing tires, and gave Judge Rocque's address to the driver. The latter stopped an instant to wipe the sweat from his dark Creole face and the tips of his waxed mustache.

"Hot day, ain't it, mister," he said as he took his toes from the rake pedal, spun the cab out from the curb and around a little parked-off square in the center of the street.

"Yeah," said Freddy, hugging the cushions and wishing that he didn't have to interview poor old Judge Rocque. The cab put on speed, swooped over the crest of a steep grade flanked by houses that looked like bits of old France, and turned right, then left, then right again.

It sped across two intersections,

beamed down a tree-planted street, and came to a halt with a grinding of brakes before a house that was almost a mansion. Flower beds and shaven shrubbery gave it an air of scenic distinction. It could have stood on upper St. Charles Avenue or Prytania Street without shaming its neighbors, but Judge Rocque preferred the less sumptuous residence districts of the Creole section. His house was on a back street not far from the black shadows of the *Vieux Carré*.

Freddy climbed out of the cab, paid the driver and strode between the flower beds to the door. His heart was pounding. Judge Rocque was one of the kindest men in New Orleans. He was kind and decent and just, and this thing was going to hurt him. Freddy rang the doorbell and waited.

A few seconds later the door opened and a dark-skinned manservant with white hair and nervous eyes peered out at him. Freddy said: "I've got to see Judge Rocque right away."

Something in the tone of his voice won him instant admittance. The manservant stepped back and Freddy passed down a long, oak-paneled hall, and into a brightly lighted room on the first floor. The judge was pacing the floor when Freddy entered.

He was a very tall, thin man with hawk features, and the sloping shoulders of a confirmed bookworm. His lean face was heavily lined and haggard. When he saw Freddy he paled. An agonized question leapt out of his eyes toward the young reporter before his lips murmured: "Is it about my daughter? Tell me, is it—"

Freddy nodded. He stood looking across the room at the grey shelves of books that towered up behind the kindly, scholarly jurist. A quick thrust is the kindest, thought Freddy, but his own face was paler than Judge Rocque's when he stammered out the truth.

The judge's reaction was curious. He remained for a moment very still and quiet. Not a muscle of his face stirred. Then he stepped backward, and his shoulders sagged. He slumped against the bookcase, all his dignity gone, in an agony of grief. Choking

sobs came from him while Freddy stood with dry mouth, gulping with pity.

He didn't know just what to say. He tried to say something, but his dry mouth stopped him. Why should a really good man like this have to suffer so? It was indecent, a mockery of justice. Freddy wished that he could shunt this ordeal as he had shunted the other, get out into the warm sunlight again. But he knew he had to stick it.

THE judge was still spread-eagled in agony against his books when his other daughter screamed. Somewhere upstairs Juana Rocque had looked into the face of death too. But it was not a daughter's face. Juana's small feet pattered on the stairs; she descended swiftly, screaming again and again, and raced along the hall toward the library. Her face was contorted with horror when she appeared in the doorway.

Freddy gasped. The grief of Judge Rocque and the wild girl cry had rasped his nerves, and he felt ill all over, right down to his soles. But the vision of loveliness that stood gasping and choking in the doorway wrenched a gasp of sheer wonder from him. No amount of tragic horror could dim such radiance.

Judge Rocque's youngest daughter was so lovely that she seemed dream-like and unreal. She was perhaps eighteen. Glowing dark eyes, a fair complexion, and slim, exquisitely graceful figure enhanced but did not really explain her breath-taking charm. It was the molding of her features, perhaps, which revealed a depth of intensity of feeling far beyond the average, that drew a gasp from Freddy.

She remained in the doorway only an instant, her eyes shifting wildly from Freddy's white face to her father's grief-racked figure, and then back again to Freddy. Then she ran toward her father, sobbing. He caught her, held her.

Freddy wished he could draw a curtain on the scene which ensued. The girl tried to describe the thing

which had frightened her and Judge Rocque tried to calm her, though he looked about ready to cave in himself.

"He had no face," she sobbed. "He came in through the window. He was carrying a little bag, all spattered with blood. There was fresh blood on his clothes. He shuffled—shuffled toward me."

Freddy didn't wait to hear more. He turned, bolted out of the room and up a staircase that was wider than any staircase he had ever climbed. Dark, menacing shadows leapt toward him over the massive bannisters. From the landing above, shadows leapt down. He plunged between the flickering tongues of darkness like some nery diver who doesn't fear sharks.

On the first landing he heard footsteps up above, half way to the second a big form blocked him.

"Not so fast, young fellow. What are you doing up here?"

The form was six feet four or five in height and proportionately broad of shoulder. A menacing, resistant bulk, impossible to argue with. It started to move down the stairs, and Freddy moved with it. It propelled Freddy with slow, ruthless insistence down the stairs and back into the library.

Once Freddy tried to brush past, but a big hand descended on his shoulder.

"Just keep moving, young fellow."

Back in the library, Freddy saw the big man clearly. He was dressed entirely in black: black shoes, socks, suit and tie. He had nearly black hair, black eyes. He was, perhaps, fifty years old. He had a face like a basilisk. Gold snake-eyes stared at Freddy from cheeks shriveled and parchment dry. There was a flicker of malignant dislike in the eyes.

Juana Rocque was standing by her father, holding tightly to his arm. Freddy had never seen a whiter face, eyes so tortured.

"It's all right, Cousin Joseph," she said. "This man is a reporter. He's seen Nizilda. She's dead—Nizilda's dead."

The cold eyes contracted a little, the mouth twitched a little. That was all. No violent shock reaction to indicate that the death of Nizilda Rocque meant more to him than the loss of a good dinner.

Worse followed. Old Judge Rocque began to cringe, to grow subservient. It was horrible. Judge Rocque seemed to forget his grief for an instant under the cold scrutiny of the big man's eyes.

Suddenly Cousin Joseph said: "You are very like Nizilda, Juana. Sometimes fate confers blessings in tragic guise and frees us from obligations which—"

COUSIN JOSEPH was moving toward Juana with a slow, snake-like glide. Juana trembled and her eyes sought Freddy's. There was unmistakable appeal in her gaze, a beseeching, intimate glow that changed the world for him.

Freddy put himself between the big man and the two by the bookcase. "I've got to ask a few questions," he said. "The police—"

Cousin Joseph's hand shot out, fastened on Freddy's coat collar. "Ask them elsewhere," he said. Before Freddy could protest or cry out he was lifted up and literally dragged from the room. The manservant opened the front door and Freddy was shoved out into the hot sunlight of the siesta hour. Instantly the door slammed on his back. It had all happened so suddenly that Freddy was left breathless and gasping on the doorstep.

All the way back to the newspaper office in a cab that dawdled too long at the intersections, he cursed the huge man in black and worried about Juana Rocque. He'd get action from Pratz that would blast Cousin Joseph from crown to toe.

But when Freddy reached the city desk and told old Pratz about the incident, the latter poured icewater on all of his retributive schemes.

"Judge Rocque's cousin is probably a little cracked, Freddy," he said. "He's an eccentric character. He was an actor in his youth, and he likes to

spout rhetoric and dress like a superannuated *Hamlet*. He has a violent temper. You've got to make allowances for a bird like that."

His face became grim. "I've another hot assignment for you, Freddy. Emma phoned about an hour ago. I sent Fearn over to make the cops behave. They took Emma down to Headquarters. Fearn phoned from there. The commissioner is grilling her himself. I got him on the wire, talked to him, got a concession from him. He promised to treat Emma with kindness."

Pratz shook his head a little sadly. "Emma is a victim of circumstances, Freddy," he said. "She inherited the policy business from a brother years ago, carried on because she enjoyed being Emmeline Sompayrac, the Creole Queen, the Big Lady of Numbers. But she hasn't a black impulse in her nature."

His face became grim again. "What did you think when you found the Rocque kid, Freddy? Didn't your flesh creep; didn't the voodoo drums start beating in that room? *Tra-dum—tra-dum—dum*. Tell me, Freddy, didn't you hear them at all? There's something black and horrible about all this, Freddy. Maybe if you spent a night in that room—"

"What?" gasped Freddy. His mouth went suddenly dry.

Suddenly Pratz smiled. "There's nothing in it, Freddy, of course. I mean, the supernatural business. But I want you to spend a night in that room anyway. It will make a great story. I'll play it up, ballyhoo it. I've got the commissioner's permission. Everything's all fixed. All you'll have to do is sit tight and use your imagination. Nothing will happen, but it will be swell publicity. And if you sort of doze off and can half swear that a zombie climbed in the window and looked at you with its white, dead eyes—so much the better. Public falls for that sort of thing hard. I'm leaving it to you. All I want is a story, and if I get a good one you'll get twenty berries additional at the pay desk every week from now on."

Pratz went to his desk, flipped open the upper right-hand drawer, and drew out a slick number in firearms—a gleaming automatic that Freddy could have carried in the palm of his hand.

"Hard to get these for cubs," he said, and dropped the weapon into Freddy's coat pocket.

Freddy liked the little gat, felt suddenly pleased and proud. It was just like Freddy to forget all his morbid feelings when something pleasant made him happy. In a few minutes the old dread, the pervasive and oppressive sense of primitive evil entering his life and refusing to leave, would return. But now he was willing to play along with old Pratz.

"Take the afternoon off, Freddy," said Pratz. "Have a good time; forget all about this. There's a swell movie at the Franklin Playhouse—'The Blonde from Buenos Aires,' or something. Better take that in, and treat yourself to a one-buck *table d'hôte*. The paper'll pay for it. But remember, Freddy, no liquor."

Freddy left the office with nothing but kindly feelings for old Pratz. Why shouldn't he enjoy the movie? He had read somewhere that Charles the First had slept soundly while his gaolers were erecting the scaffold that was to finish him, and that one of America's foremost mobsters had asked about the weather on his way to the electric chair. A guy who let his nerves run wild would never get to be a star by the yellow Mississippi.

CHAPTER IV

Black God Dancing

THE Vieux Carré at dusk. There is very little traffic, and half the vehicles in the ancient streets are outlaw cabs *en route* to shady rendezvous. The rectangle of buildings and marts and monuments bounded by Canal and Esplanade Streets is sleepily dozing under the frosted silver sky. A yellow half moon swings low over Jackson Square, and up from Congo Square comes the *beat, beat,*

beat of jungle drums. Or maybe it is just imagination.

Once long ago the *papaloi* danced down there. With ugly Congo masks on their sweaty black faces, they grinned and capered under a moon just like this moon, under a sky just like this sky. But now maybe it is just imagination, that jungle odor on the wind that blows up from down there and whistles through the iron lattices and sweeps about the antique chimney-pots on the very old houses.

The wind says that somewhere down there a girl nude to the waist is tearing a white fowl with her white teeth, while the blood dribbles down over her comely brown limbs.

The wind whispers that the *papaloi* is tired now, and is resting, with the brimming sacrificial bowl tilted perilously on his scrawny knees. Fresh blood in the bowl, broken egg shells and chicken feathers scattered about. The chicken feathers are crimson-tipped, and the egg shells are red and brown.

Black and brown men and women, sweating in every pore and crazed with a kind of Satanic thirst, crawl toward the *papaloi* on their hands and knees, begging a drink from the bowl. But the *papaloi* is very tired now, very sleepy.

The wind blows up from Congo Square, carrying the taints of black Guinea, carrying the blood-chants of old slaves dead in chains who have lain for centuries underground. Carrying also the taint of the graveyards, of St. Louis Number One where the great gentry rest, and of the shallow tombs where the poor do not.

Dusk in the Vieux Carré. Along the narrow, cobbled streets ebony blacks shuffle; octoroons, the lightest of high yellows; white men, Americans, Creoles, shuffle in unison. Outlaw cabs move slowly through the dusk. Lights glimmer behind green-shuttered windows; the voices of Creole women evoke strange visions, and dreams of love.

It is a world of enchantment until up from Congo Square comes the boom of the drums again, the taint of

the jungles. But probably it is imagination. Only a few hear the drums now, smell the rank jungle odors.

Freddy got out of a cab a block from Emma's place, and walked with nervous steps past the joints where you could get anything at any hour of the day or night.

He was feeling it now, the reaction after old Pratz's buoyant assurances. In the office it had sounded all right. His scalp had tingled a little when Pratz had hurled the idea at him out of the blue, but that had been just momentary funk. Now it was different. He was jittery all over.

It had started in the movies. "The Blonde from Buenos Aires" had looked like Nizilda Rocque. And like Juana too, of course. She kept reminding him of what had happened to Nizilda and what might happen to Juana. He discovered to his dismay that he was horribly concerned about Juana. He couldn't keep his thoughts on the picture. He turned hot, then cold, then hot again. Then he began to shiver violently.

He hadn't even taken Pratz's advice about the *table d'hôte*. He had wolfed a scanty dinner at a one-arm lunch wagon in Jackson Square, and followed it up with a whisky and soda. Then he had commandeered a cab, and driven to the corner of Emmeline's block.

A detective was standing in the doorway of Emma's place when Freddy walked up with his police card in one hand, and a couple of magazines in the other. Freddy had bought some mystery magazines to read in case the black *juju* stayed buried.

He didn't look jittery. He looked composed, a serious young man of four and twenty, with mouse-colored hair, spectacles and a little mustache. He wore a tweed sport coat and white flannel trousers.

The detective looked him over, looked at the police card, squinted at the magazines.

"Publicity stunt," he muttered. "Fool thing to allow. Whatja going to do, read yourself to sleep?"

"I'll be too busy," said Freddy. "When do you leave?"

"I've got orders to stay out here all night," said the detective. "If you see anything, holler."

Freddy nodded and entered big Emmeline's dark house for the second time that day.

The roulette parlor was lit by a single green-shaded lamp set on one of the tables near the middle of the establishment. All the tables were covered with white sheets; and when Freddy entered, his shadow leapt all around the room on that white field.

It gave him a start. His own shadow was like a *juju* leaping out to devour him. His eyes searched the gloom for things unclean and leprous, shapes from the anteroom of death. He didn't see them.

An uneasy feeling chilled his spine as he ascended slowly up a wide, darkened stairway to Emmeline's suite on the second floor, paused an instant to stare at his shadow again as it danced on a white door illumined by a hall lamp of low wattage, and went on up to the *juju* room.

The *juju* room was in total darkness. The commissioner's minions had left it dark, at Pratz's request. Outside in the hall a lamp glowed dully, but its rays did not penetrate beyond the splintered boards which framed the doorway. Freddy's lips set firmly. He took a deep breath and stepped into the darkness.

The odor was as intolerable as ever. Freddy moved over the creaking floor to the center of the room, stood for an instant staring at the square of open window. Then he fumbled in his coat pocket, drew out a tiny electric lamp.

THE lamp looked like a little metal mushroom. It had a circular base and its rounded hood projected rays downward over a three-foot radius. It simply illumined a patch of floor without dissipating the surrounding darkness. An observer from the street would notice no glow when the light functioned.

Still, it was only for an emergency.

If nothing happened for a couple of hours, he might risk switching it on for the rest of the night. But first he'd give the *juju* every chance. He set the lamp on a projecting cornice of the massive mantel, and switched it on for a couple of seconds.

The dust was so thick on the illuminated boards that it looked like a greyish fungus growth sprouting evilly in the darkness. Two footprints crossed it, his own perhaps. He cast an anxious look around at the dim outlines of walls and ceiling; then switched off the lamp.

He felt bum all over. His mouth was dry and his temples throbbed. It was hellishly hot in that room. The *siesta* hour heat was still sluggishly circulating there, resisting the flank attacks of the cooler night breezes from beyond the window.

Freddy took off his coat, hung it on a projection of the mantel opposite the mushroom lamp. Then he wiped the sweat from his forehead and parked himself on the floor. He chose a corner near the window. He sat cross-legged, with his back against the wall.

All in all, it was a nasty assignment. He sat there in total darkness, with only his thoughts for company, and the memory of what had occurred in that room only a few hours before would have driven a less nervy kid mad. But Freddy could take it even though he was sick with loathing and his flesh crawled.

For minutes that dragged like dead eternities he sat there. He wasn't sleepy; his eyes didn't even blink. He just sat and stared into the darkness and he was still staring when the hideous faceless man appeared in the room.

The figure materialized so suddenly in the darkness that Freddy still stared quietly. His eyes saw it, but somehow it didn't click in his brain for four or five seconds. And when at last it did click Freddy didn't gasp or cry out. His face seemed to freeze. He could feel the blood draining out of his cheeks while his jaws seemed to grow rigid.

It was a ghastly sensation. Shakes-

peare says somewhere that a man can be frightened out of fear. Freddy was so frightened that he tingled and then went cold all over.

The faceless man was black. His nearly nude body glistened from toe to crown with a faint and spectral phosphorescence. The darkly gleaming torso was almost skeletal, and the ribs stood out. Horribly between them were scored lines in white chalk, and running vertically from navel to fleshless throat was a mark in scarlet blood.

The face seemed eaten away. Eyes on stalks, a twisted gash where the mouth should have been and a clotted, fibroid mass of mangled and striated flesh in the region of the nostrils suggested a countenance slashed and ruined by the holocausts of Armageddon.

The obscene creature was holding a bowl against its belly, and as it advanced toward Freddy its shoulders swayed. Swayed and jerked while its knees gyrated and its head went back. Suddenly Freddy perceived that it was dancing. It was dancing the hellish dance of the *juju*, to the wild beat of invisible drums.

It gyrated and spun, and the bowl spilled.

A RED stain spread over its white loincloth, ran down its gleaming dark thighs, its knees. It was dancing the supremely horrible ritual dance of the black jungles, the dance of its people known to red Congo moons by silvered waters in the deep forest glades, known to the hyena and its kin. The dance of the snake-god that called down from the skies murky blasphemies in semi-human shape, and capering blood-spirits that possessed black bodies and slew babies and old, old women in the shadow of the *kraal*.

It was dancing the sinisterly mischievous and hellish dance that summoned the *obeah*, the *mumbo-jumbo* dance of forgotten tribes. *Tra-dum—tra-dum—dum*. Were there drums beating in that room, or was it the blood in Freddy's ears that made his own body writhe and sway on the

floor, in unison with the dark, faceless form?

The bowl was empty now. The black dancer's torso and limbs gleamed with the spilled bright fluid of life, but still the dance went on. *Tra-dum. Tra-dum. Tra-dum—dum—dum. Tra-dum . . .*

Freddy's fingers lifted the little automatic out of his pocket. His body was swaying as he raised it, aimed it at the white chalk marking in the center of the dancing *papaloi's* black chest. His forefinger flexed while his body continued to move in unison with the inexorable Congo rhythms, to move and sway as the *juju* swayed.

The little gun blasted with a sharp recoil. A jet of yellow flame spurted from Freddy's raised arm, and the detonation which ensued shook the room. Freddy shot twice in quick succession.

The black figure continued to dance. Freddy fell back with a strangled sob and the little gun went clattering. Was it a man or a black god dancing? Even the instinctive revolt which had nerved Freddy's fingers was quelled now. Freddy would sway as the black shape swayed, would grovel in the dust of that room as the black worshippers had groveled.

Down on his knees he moved toward the black priest, toward the black god dancing. Across the room he moved, his features convulsed with terror and insane appeal. The faceless black priest had died with the spirit on him. Out from his unclean body the spirit flowed, enmeshing Freddy in its leprous aura. Jerkily Freddy moved toward the black man dancing.

He did not move alone. Out from the shadows of that slimed and fetid room a long, undulating shape slithered toward the capering priest. Its flat head wavered slowly from side to side as it drew near to the phosphorescent glow, its long body swayed in unison with the gyrations of the two human dancers.

Freddy was dancing on his knees, weaving crazily forward and backward when the great snake stopped

him. Its immense yellow body turned slightly in its course and flowed toward him, buckling into a swelling noose as he lurched sideways with a frantic cry. Like a tidal wave descending, the frightful bulk of the thing crashed down upon him, knocking the breath from his body, enmeshing him in a smother of slime and stench.

In a dark clearing by the silver River Congo, an old woman screams as she sees the snake-god descending. Ponderous, drooling black saliva from its scummed jaws and weighing many hundred-weights, it rests upon her, pressing the breath from her wizened chest, constricting her scrawny limbs. A scream is wrenched from her throat as the great shape tightens about her and takes her narrow black skull in its distended jaws. The voodoo drums are beating wildly, insistently under the red moon. The old woman's skull cracks like an egg-shell in the shadow of the *kraal*. Far off a hyena howls.

IN a New Orleans roulette parlor on the third floor a young cub reporter was retracing step by agonized step the *Via Dolorosa* of the African victims. High above the twisting coils a flat, scaly head reared. Two eyes, whiter and more opaque than the blind eyes of zombies, gazed down at Freddy Curtis.

Above the snake-encumbered body of the white lad the black *papaloi* with the spirit in him continued to dance the hellish ritual dance of the black Guinean jungles, all encrimsoned with the spilled sacrificial blood, all aglow with the white phosphorescent fires of some black hell.

Tra-dum—dum. Tra-dum—tra-dum. The devil-drums were louder now because the blood was splitting Freddy's eardrums with its wild, internal hammering. He thought he heard a fanfare of trumpets blown far off somewhere in another world.

Actually, it was the blast of a pistol that he heard. In that dark room bright yellow flame spurted again to a thunderous detonation. From the gleaming blue-steel barrel

of an automatic a bright tongue of flame whipped across the room, heralding a charge that shredded the flat snake head to a crimson pulp.

The oval-spotted python neck writhed with its weight of shattered head an instant before the thick body uncurled. Slowly it uncurled and retreated into the shadows, leaving a wet trail of snake gore on the dry, dusty boards.

Freddy was nearly unconscious. But though everything within the distorted angle of his vision flickered and danced like heat waves in fierce sunlight he sensed vaguely that the capering shape had vanished. Only a dim yellow glow that swiftly narrowed came from the wall before him.

The detective's eyes widened abruptly as he grasped the significance of the diminishing glow. With an oath he lurched forward and threw his right shoulder against the edge of the panel as it slid toward the wall. Instantly the light went out. He stumbled between a lot of things that made clattering and eerie noises when his shoes whacked into them, moved swiftly forward into inky blackness.

He could hear footsteps scraping on the dry boards ahead of him. Vaguely he was aware of heavy breathing and the odor of sweaty flesh. Then flame spurted out of the void, and a savage detonation whammed against his eardrums.

A slug buzzed past his left cheek, cut a deep swath in the woodwork behind him and ricocheted off into empty air.

Instantly he raised his automatic and fired three shots in rapid sequence, spacing them over an imaginary arc in the darkness. The darkness exploded in a crimson blaze. He caught an evanescent glimpse of something weaving or jerking about ahead of him between walls that seemed to waver and coalesce.

The triple blast had exhausted the dick's clip, but he had sprayed lead with telling effect. Twenty feet from where he was standing, a tall black man with a .32 caliber bullet in his vitals felt his body begin to rotate about his feet. He gave a hoarse

cry, slapped both his hands frantically to ears that roared, and sank to his knees on the creaking boards.

When the dick flashed a light on him he was a grim and pitiful sight. Smearred with yellow and reddish ochre and white chalk, he groveled on the boards, clutching his belly, twisting his head about in dazed agony.

The most hideous thing about him was his face. It was a sunken mass of twisted, discolored flesh. Only his eyes were animated. Madness and despair leaped in them while red blood oozed from the wound in his stomach, spreading over his black knuckles, dripping to the floor and spreading fanwise in a widening arc.

The dick flashed his electric torch in a wide semicircle about the passageway. He saw things that astonished him. But he was the opposite of unimaginative, and the strange-shaped objects that were massed just behind the panel caused him no perplexity. He knew that the huge drum head with the resin cord attached to it, the slatted wheel, the tin whistles above a weird, cone-shaped sounding box would create a cacophony sufficiently eerie and horrible to convince anyone he was listening to Africa speaking.

THE detective stood staring at the synthetic sound devices for fully ten seconds while the man on the floor beside him flattened himself against the boards with convulsive jerks. The panel had stayed half-shut after the dick's shouldering and the room was in partial view.

Across the floor and through the narrow opening Freddy came tottering in the darkness.

The grim-faced dick flashed the light on him, saw how bad he looked and swore softly.

"Take it easy, kid," he said. "Everything's okay now. It's damned lucky I heard your firecrackers."

Every fiber of Freddy's body shrieked. But he was spunky all the same. He knelt on the floor with the dick beside the faceless black man, and got a confession out of him implicating Cousin Joseph Rocque be-

fore he joined his ancestors beside the silver River Congo in the shadow of their *kraal*.

Cousin Joseph Rocque had engineered it all. Old Hamlet Rocque, whom Pratz had thought merely eccentric, had killed madcap Nizilda, and brought the faceless man to an untimely end. Presently he would stand in the shadow of the gallows with a rope around his throat.

Freddy explained it all to old Pratz the following morning. He had his story, the story that would save Emmeline Sompayrac and make him a star.

Old Pratz's eyes were shining as he listened to Freddy talk. Freddy talked very well when he got warmed up and old Pratz suspected that he could write, too. He was going to make a swell reporter.

"Emmeline didn't lie about the *papaloi*," said Freddy. "About five months ago, before she took the place over, an old priest named Simon Janin actually died there during a voodoo dance. I guess his heart gave out while he was working himself into a sweat. Simon Janin was a first-class charlatan and not just an ordinary witch doctor. He roped in some of the wealthiest high yellows in New Orleans, put on a show that was a knockout.

"I've told you about the secret panel and the hidden passageway in the walls. Simon Janin had gadgets stored behind that panel so he could imitate all the sounds of nature, and some sounds that weren't natural. He could even make a lion roar by pulling a resin cord through a drumhead. He had blue lights and green and yellow lights set in the wall and he could bring Africa right into that little room at any hour of the night.

"His credulous patrons would sit in the middle of the floor with eyes uprolled, moaning and wailing and looking at the *juju* man making faces at them beyond the panel. Then the panel would slide shut, and the *juju* man would beat it down into the cellar of the house and through another panel, and along a subterranean passageway that terminated in an old,

disused cistern nearly two blocks away. A clever rogue was Simon Janin."

"But how did the snake get there, Freddy?" demanded Pratz. He was fuming with impatience.

FREDDY smiled. "One thing at a time Mr. Pratz, *please*," he said. "It seems that Emmeline forgot to tell us about the snake charmer. A black lady as stout as Emmeline lived in the voodoo room too. She was Simon Janin's wife. She had eight pythons and one of them escaped, crawled into a hole under the boards and remained there for five months.

"When Janin died his wife got cold feet and fled. She knew that one of her pets was missing, but she thought it had climbed out of the window. I traced the old girl this morning, got her story. She rented her snakes out to the mercenary devils who stage animal fights for the edification of black and white sadists. It's against the law to hold such entertainments openly, but for over a century wild dogs have been pitted against bulls, pythons and boas against panthers and even tigers in this fair city, and the police have shut their eyes. Of course the snake was ravenously hungry. Pythons can go without food for several months, but it doesn't sweeten their dispositions any."

"But what about Joseph Rocque?" fumed Pratz.

"Cousin Joseph's fortune was made in rackets," said Freddy. "He had his fingers in the policy pie and operated a dozen roulette parlors under blinds. But Emma's place was the best plum in the pie, and he wanted it very badly.

"Cousin Joseph tried to kill two birds with one stone by having Nizilda kidnaped and carried through the cistern and wall passages to the *juju* room. The ladder prints under the window were red herrings. Nizilda's infernal cleverness and waywardness were twin swords hanging over Cousin Joseph's head. You see, old Judge Rocque wanted Nizilda to marry Joseph for his

money. The judge was in a bad hole financially, with a mortgage on the family estate and the grocery bills unpaid. But Nizilda was in love with a boy her own age. She wanted Joseph's money, but balked at the idea of marriage. She had an eight-cylinder brain behind her baby face and she figured out a way of getting Joseph's kale on a silver platter. She got wise to his rackets, got something dangerous on him—I don't know just what—through association with Emmeline and was blackmailing him, bleeding him white.

"Cousin Joseph was desperate. It occurred to him that if he could get the disfigured Negro, Nimrod Christopher, to put on a voodoo *mumbo-jumbo* for her benefit with all the paraphernalia in the *juju* room, she might go mad, and then her testimony against him would have no legal weight. And even if she didn't crack up, the crazy story she would tell would give Emma's place such a bad name that he could buy the old lady out for a song. He had very little to lose. If Nizilda could take it, if she remained sane they'd have a hell of a time hanging it on him. It was a long gamble, maybe, but worth a try.

"The set-up was magnificent. Nimrod Christopher had been the voodoo charlatan's sidekick and had helped hoax the deluded members of his cult. He knew about the secret passageway and how to put on a grand show with the paraphernalia behind the panel.

"Christopher was a kind of superior mongrel dog that licked Joseph's boots whenever Joseph called. He lost his face in a brawl in one of Joseph's joints. Some tough blasted his profile at close range with a Colt automatic. Joseph had forbidden him to enter Judge Rocque's home, but when he got wind of Nizilda's death he became so frightened he scrambled up the side of the house over a sun-porch and tried to contact his chief. He cut himself badly on a drain and when he climbed in Juana's room with blood on him Juana ran screaming to her father. That was what sent me upstairs to investigate

and slamming in Joseph's big bulk. Joseph didn't like me.

"I thought Judge Rocque would take my part, but only Juana did. The judge didn't dare antagonize Joseph. With Nizilda gone there was only Juana, and the judge wanted Joseph badly as a son-in-law.

"Of course Joseph didn't know about the python. The big snake came out of its hole while Emmeline was talking to us in this office, and killed Nizilda by constriction. I noticed that one of the boards was loose when I went into the room. There was a dark hole the size of my fist in one corner of the room, where the wall joined the flooring. I thought a brood of rats had taken up its quarters there."

"But why did Christopher give another exhibition last night?" asked Pratz.

HE was the one who cracked up, Mr. Pratz. He went temporarily insane. That poor faceless wretch had a sensitive conscience. Hoodwinking the high yellows and doing Joseph's dirty work didn't faze him, but he wasn't a killer. He was tortured. He couldn't imagine what had killed Nizilda. Brooding over it, he had a temporary brain storm.

"Joseph, as you know, had a lot of influence in this town. He found out through one of his agents in the commissioner's office that you had secured permission to have me spend a night in the *juju* room. Naturally he passed the information on to Christopher, warning him to stay away from the French Quarter. But Christopher knew that the paraphernalia was still set to function behind the panel, and he couldn't resist the impulse to see what effect his hideous posturings would have on me. It was an utterly insane impulse. The poor devil was crazed by fear and remorse, and wanted to convince himself that he hadn't killed Nizilda.

"Ironically enough, I sat in on a performance that might have killed. Voodoo is snake worship, you know, and when I saw that immense dark

shape flowing slowly toward me—”

Freddy shivered, in retrospect.

“Apparently the light and noise drew the snake from its lair. It all fitted horribly together like a jig-saw puzzle made by the River Congo under the guidance of some wizard-devil wearing a hyena’s pelt, beating a blood-smeared drum. Even when I shot at Christopher and missed he went right on dancing, because he was too crazed to realize his danger.”

MR. PRATZ nodded. “Sometimes I think that the line between imagination and reality wears pretty thin at times. Take Emmeline. She swears she saw blood on her ceiling.”

“I guess she saw some kind of a dark stain or smudge,” said Freddy. “That snake couldn’t live in the room a half year without leaving certain defilements which probably seeped through to the ceiling of the room below. Emma, being superstitious, made a tall story out of it. Trust an

old Creole woman to take liberties with facts.”

Pratz was tugging at his chin. “Perhaps you’d better put all that in writing, Freddy.”

“Maybe I’d better,” said Freddy.

He worked hard on his story, drank black coffee and worked. Late that afternoon he received a phone call. He gathered up his typescript and deposited it quietly on Pratz’s desk. His face wore a look that only a star by the yellow Mississippi could afford to flaunt in public. It was a pleasure-before-business look.

Mr. Pratz sighed as Freddy passed out of the office and descended in the elevator to the street. Maybe in a few weeks he would have to give Freddy a fortnight’s leave and a wedding present. It was very annoying.

Juana Rocque was waiting for Freddy by the curb in a limousine that purred. Freddy’s eyes were shining as he advanced across the pavement toward her.