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**STEPHEN MARLOWE**

# KILLERS ARE MY MEAT



**Chester Drum**

finds a seat—

a hot seat

for a killer

**“Hey! Cut out  
your damned shooting!”**

He fired again. I took a deep breath and smashed the barrel of my Magnum .357 against the window glass, heard it shatter, and shouted as loud as I could:

**“Hold it! Hold your fire. It’s Drum.”**

Then I dove on my hands and knees and waited. His voice came from inside the cabin sounding like the condemned man he was:

**“Drum? Drum, is it really you? I’m going crazy holed up in here. Drum? Are you alone? Get in front of the window where I can see you. I’ve got a gun. I’ll shoot. I . . . ”** Then I heard a gurgling sound and I realized he was drinking from a bottle. He laughed in a crazy, drunken way.

Another shot rang out.

**Other Gold Medal Originals by**

**Stephen Marlowe:**

**TROUBLE IS MY NAME**

**MURDER IS MY DISH**

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# KILLERS ARE MY MEAT

A Gold Medal Original by

**STEPHEN MARLOWE**

*Cover Painting by Gerry Powell*



**GOLD MEDAL BOOKS**

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**T**HE LITTLE BOAT coughed and slapped its way across the dark choppy waters of the bay on a five-horse-power kicker. Against the wind and the driving rain and the uneasy tidewater it had taken us almost an hour to come this far from Chesapeake City, a small fishing town about thirty miles south of Annapolis.

“That’s Little Chesapeake Island now, son,” the man hunkered over against the wind in his oilskin coat at the stern of the dinghy shouted over the wind and whipping rain on the water. He was charging me twenty dollars for the round trip from Chesapeake City to the island and back again. He said I was crazy to want to go out there at all on a day like this, especially since it would be dark before we returned. He said he was crazy to take me. He said twenty dollars was dirt cheap. Since a man’s life hung in the balance, it probably was dirt cheap.

The island loomed like an animal crouching on the lead-gray horizon, the gray finger of dock thrust out over the water, a ribbon of sand that was the beach, and the low black humps of hills covered with tidewater pine. Pretty soon we reached the dock, my pilot slowed his kicker from an explosive chattering to a steady throbbing, threw a coiled rope, caught it around something, and hauled us in.

“Watch your step,” he said. “Rotten planks up there, son.” He raised the capes of his oilskin coat, I saw the brief flare of a match and smelled cigarette smoke before the wind drove it away, then I hoisted myself to the dock, pulled down my hatbrim and started moving against the wind.

In another month or so Little Chesapeake Island would be crowded with week-enders from Washington and Baltimore, filling the small clapboard cabins with their noise, their lights, their smells. Right now except for me the island had only one occupant. I had to find him and bring

him back to the mainland before someone else crossed the choppy waters of the bay and put a bullet in his brain. I wasn't in love with the idea. For one thing he wouldn't know who I was until I got close enough to shout my name above the shriek of the wind and the drumming of the rain, and all he had for company was probably a gun, a bottle, and a lot of wild ideas. For another, bringing him back to the mainland might prove more dangerous than leaving him on Little Chesapeake. There, though, I had no choice. His wife had driven me in her car to Chesapeake City. She'd have come with or without me. She had driven like a madwoman across the southern Maryland scrubflats from Washington. Alone she wouldn't have done her husband any good and alone or with company she might have been followed. This way at least they had someone who wasn't either drunk or crazy with fear.

I went across the dock, feeling the pulpy give of rotten timber underfoot. I went up a brown muddy path down which the rainwater tumbled in dirty brown streams. The path made a sharp left on high ground, and suddenly in the little light that was left I could see the cabins. They had been built along the edge of a ridge forty or fifty feet above the beach, with flights of wooden steps hugging the cliffside behind them. There were about twenty of the cabins, stretched out in a long ragged row on the shelf of rock. I didn't see any lights.

When I reached the first cabin I left the muddy path and walked around behind the flimsy-looking clapboard building. About a dozen feet of soaked bare earth separated the rears of the cabins from the edge of the shelf of rock on which they had been built, and I made my way along this. Just as I reached the fourth cabin, a pistol shot banged like a thunderclap over the sounds of the storm. I crouched at the corner of the cabin wall, the pistol banged again, and clapboard splinters flew about three feet from my nose.

On the third shot I saw the muzzle flash in the side window of the seventh cabin in line. Seventh cabin. That was theirs. His wife had said so. I shouted:

"Hey, cut out your damned shooting! It's Chester Drum!"

If he heard the sound of my voice, it was all he heard. He fired again. I cursed him and his wife and the weather and did the only thing I could. I sat down behind the

wall of the fourth cabin on a bark-stripped log and waited for darkness.

In about twenty minutes the rain began to soak through my trench coat. In another twenty it was so dark I couldn't see the splatter of rain in the puddle at my feet. Then I got up and walked very quickly, slipping in the mud, to the path in front of the cabin.

He didn't have a light on. He wouldn't, of course. I reached the heavy plank door of his cabin and stood there. He would have locked it. Barricaded it too, probably. Maybe he was standing inside there, his face about six inches from my face, with a loaded gun in his hand. I moved around to the side of the cabin which had a window. I crouched alongside the window. Or maybe he would be there, I thought, on the other side of the dirty panes of glass, waiting. The rain hissed and throbbed, water squished in my shoes as I resettled my weight, and the wind—which had slackened some—made a moaning sound. I took a deep breath and stood up suddenly and smashed the barrel of my Magnum .357 against the glass and heard it shatter and shouted as loud as I could:

“Hold it! Hold your fire. It's Drum.”

Then I dove down on my hands and knees in the mud and waited.

The storm. My breathing. A trickle of water near my chin. Then his voice, a bleat of fear like a condemned man's last words. “Drum? Drum, is it really you? Drum? Are you alone? Get out in front of the window where I can see you. I've got a gun. I'll shoot. I . . .”

“Your wife brought me,” I said distinctly. “She's waiting on the mainland. We're going to take you home.”

“Don't want to go home.”

“Let me in and we'll talk about it.”

“Don't want to talk about it. Go away.”

“Let me in or I'll fight my way in, damn it.”

There was a silence, then a sound like a groan. Then: “All right. Come around to the door.”

I heard furniture scraping across the floor when I got to the door. In a minute or so it was opened a crack, and a gun and an eye peered out. Then the door opened and I went, soaking wet, into the cabin. I struck a match and it flared momentarily before the man in the cabin knocked it from my hand.

“You crazy?” he said.

“We're alone on the island except for the man who



brought me. He's waiting with a boat. I'm taking you home."

The man in the cabin, whose name was Gilbert Sprayregan, was a private detective who once had been big in Washington, D.C., who had skidded the last couple of years as fast as you can skid in Washington in our business or any business, and who was now doing divorce work for twenty-five a day and expenses.

He said, "You're not taking me home. Or any place."

"If you were any safer here I'd say wait. But it's not the thing to do. Your wife's brought you food a couple of times already. She's too scared to stay with you and too scared to leave you here alone. Maybe they followed her here. Maybe they know where you are."

"Maybe they followed you here tonight. Just leave me alone."

"Maybe they did. Do you want to stay here alone and wait for them to come? Is that what you want?"

He moaned. A floorboard creaked. I could see him only as a vague darker shape in the darkness. It was very cold and damp in the unheated cabin.

"Oh, Jesus Christ, Drum," he said, "what would you do?"

"The thing for you to do if you really want to get away is get in your car and keep driving, not stay holed up on an island like a sitting duck. Your wife's got a bag packed for you. After all you only have to get out of town for a few days. They're leaving the country soon. You know that."

"Then what?"

"Then we'll see. Well? You coming or do I have to take you?"

"Don't try it, Drum," he said. Then I heard a gurgling sound. At first I didn't know what it was, then I realized he was drinking from a bottle. His lips smacked and the bottle clunked down somewhere.

"Get your coat," I said.

He laughed and drank some more. "I'm wearing it," he said. "Haven't been out of it for two days."

"Well?"

He threw the bottle and it broke against the wall. His laugh was a desperate and bitter sound. "I called you yellow once, Drum," he said. "That was a lot of crap. Someone's yellow, all right." He hiccupped and then either laughed or sobbed. "Come on. Get me out of here.

Get me out of here before I wet the God-damned floor.”

We left the cabin together. I put my gun in its shoulder holster. I could just make out the glint of his in his hand. He slipped a couple of times in the mud. We went past the row of cabins and down the hill with me holding his elbow and half-supporting his weight.

The boatman came up on the dock and helped us aboard his dinghy. He said, “Going home, are you, Mr. Sprayregan?” and Sprayregan laughed and answered something in a drunken mumble. In a little while we were heading back in the dinghy across the choppy tidewater to Chesapeake City.

What they call the municipal pier in Chesapeake City is a quay extending out into the bay for about forty yards at the end of the town’s one big street. It had been so muddy in the parking lot between the end of the street and the beginning of the pier that Mrs. Sprayregan had parked their Packard a couple of hundred yards up the street, where the red and blue and green neon of the Chesapeake City storefronts glowed wetly in the rain.

At the entrance to the parking lot the boatman said, “Drop you all somewhere? Got my heap in here.”

“Mrs. Sprayregan’s car is down the block,” I said.

Sprayregan shook his head. “Like to walk if you don’t mind, Drum. I still need some air. I—I don’t want her seeing me like this.”

I told him he looked and sounded all right to me and was imagining things, but he insisted on walking. It really didn’t seem to make much difference and I saw no reason to push it. I gave the boatman his twenty dollars and he took it with him into the parking lot. Several cars were parked there in the rain.

We began walking toward the neon glow of Chesapeake City. The sidewalk did not begin for another hundred and fifty yards or so. The shoulder of the road was slick with mud. We walked on the edge of the asphalt.

When we had covered about a third of the distance, a car started up behind us. Ahead of us a car door opened and slammed and heels click-clacked along the sidewalk. A woman’s figure was silhouetted against the neon. Distantly I heard the sound of music from one of the taverns on Chesapeake City’s main drag. The woman cried:

“Is that you, Gil? Did you find him, Mr. Drum?”

“We’re coming,” Sprayregan called.

"Oh, thank God," his wife said.

Just then the car roared up behind us. Its headlights, up on high beam, swept us and held us. Its tires whined in the rain. Mrs. Sprayregan screamed. I grabbed Sprayregan's elbow, but he seemed frozen there as the car bore down, its front tires spraying arched silver planes of water. Sprayregan pulled his arm away from me. Maybe he tried to run. Maybe he stood there. I leaped and something barely seemed to brush my shoulder and simultaneously there was a ripe bursting wet-sounding slap of impact and a hoarse, choked-off cry from Sprayregan and then I seemed to sail serenely through the night and the rain up over the darkness and down suddenly down and I heard pounding feet and more screaming and the sound of the rain and the car roaring away and then all at once magically and with absolutely no pain everything was shut off.

2.

**A**LL ALONE in a vast clanking tractor factory running entirely by automation, the last man on Earth was trapped. He was a little man. Finally he jumped up on the punch press. The press slammed down, the little man tried to run away, the press slammed down again. The shiny new tractors rolled off the end of the long assembly line endlessly with no one to see them or drive them away. Down slammed the punch press.

It was a novel dream as such dreams go, but after a while I came out of it. My head felt like the little man on the punch press. I peered from under half-opened eyelids and saw a long white mound about the length of a man's body and walls which looked accordion-pleated until I realized they weren't walls at all but portable hospital screens. Two figures, fuzzily double-exposed, floated in front of the accordion-pleated walls. Slowly and still fuzzily the two figures became one figure, which approached the white body-long mound which was a blanket and a sheet with me under them on a bed. It bent down, sex indeterminate, and stared at my face. One of us let out a groan. It moved away making a noise like, "Doctor!"

Four figures this time, all fuzzy at the edges. Four three two. Little Red Nightingood and Dr. Livingston, I presume. My head was still on the bed of the punch press but at least I could see better and that was something. The nurse was middle-aged and had a mole at exactly the same spot on each of her two long noses. The doctor seemed young and had four-lensed glasses. They came closer and did things which may have helped them but did not help me in any way I could see or feel. Something got hold of my cheekbone and brow and tugged them apart.

"Observe the difficulty he has in focusing," a woman's voice said. "It's a simple concussion, isn't it, Doctor?"

The doctor, who was very young and spoke very slowly, allowed as how it was a simple concussion. "Patient will probably have retrograde amnesia—say until breakfast. You'd better not feed him until then, either. Just liquids perhaps. They sometimes have difficulty keeping it down."

"I know about concussion, Doctor," the middle-aged nurse said frostily.

The last thing I remembered, I was in the office. Then a big black wall as high as the moon and as wide as a continent. On the other side of it, the tractor factory with the punch press, and here and now.

"Where," I said, "am I?" Careful, Drum. Some more dialogue like that and they're liable to offer you a job writing for TV, headache and all.

"You see?" the intern cried triumphantly. "Retrograde amnesia."

The bed seemed to move and the nurse held something to my lips. It was wet and cool. Then they went away and I closed my eyes and slept without dreaming. . . .

"Feeling better?"

"Better."

"There. Let me see those eyes. Ah. Yes. Ah, uh-huh. Can you see distinctly?"

This time I could see distinctly. I said so.

"This is the Michael Bell Memorial Hospital in Chesapeake City, Maryland. Do you remember now?"

I remembered. I remembered not remembering, too. My head ached and throbbed, but I could learn to live with it. I said: "Sprayregan?"

I shut my eyes. There was a whispered conference. A voice said: "Mr. Sprayregan was pronounced dead on

arrival. Someone from the sheriff's office wants to see you, Mr. Drum. But at your own time, please."

"No, it's all right. I'll see him."

I didn't feel any sadness about Sprayregan. He was not that sort of man. On top he had been tough and cold and occasionally magnanimous as only the tough and cold could be. Riding the long slide he had been an object of pity. I felt sorry for his wife. I wondered what she would do.

They propped me up in bed and went away. They didn't take away the portable screens. Then I was looking at the man from the sheriff's office. He was a stocky man with a raincoat on his arm and a square face and bleak, small, wide-spaced eyes. He had a small thin white scar on his blue-whiskered jaw. His name was Malloy, he said. He showed me an ID card in a little plastic window to prove it. A small bronze star had been affixed to the card. He said I was very lucky to be alive at all. He said the other guy wasn't any kind of lucky.

"His wife didn't even get a look at the car, Mr. Drum." He added something unprintable before the words hit-and-run driver. He said, "Did you get a look at it?"

"No."

He made an unhappy sound. "Stuff in your wallet says you're a private eye from Washington named Chester Drum. You down here in Chesapeake City on business, Mr. Drum?"

"Yeah."

"The dead private eye your business?"

"That's right."

"Got any reason to think you're in trouble?"

"No. Why should I?"

"I wanted to warn you. Anything you said could be used against you. You know. Then you can talk about it?"

"I can talk about it."

"Good. Sprayregan your client?"

"Not exactly."

"Meaning—exactly—what?"

He spoke with a chip on his shoulder, as if he didn't like coming over to the Michael Bell Memorial Hospital in the middle of the night to question a man who had been struck down by a hit-and-run driver. I thought it was an easy night's work but didn't say so. I asked him if he was from Baltimore. He talked like a native of Baltimore. He admitted it with reluctance, as if he liked

Chesapeake City, population 3200, better. I told him I had been born in Baltimore, although I had lived most of my life in Washington. I named the street. He had spent his childhood about five blocks away, but of course we had never seen each other before tonight. Anyway, quite suddenly, he was less wary and less suspicious.

"Sprayregan wanted me to do him a favor," I said.

"Coming out here tonight—well, last night?"

"No."

I thought about the favor Gil Sprayregan had wanted. It had been the kind of favor you could go to jail for. But now Sprayregan was dead and they couldn't touch him with it. And it might help them get the drivers of the hit-and-run car. I thought I knew who they were.

When the waiter had dropped our luncheon check face down on the table, Sprayregan had reached for it with a crablike motion of his big hand and dragged it across the littered tablecloth with as much effort as it would take to haul a passed-out drunk up three flights of stairs.

He had glanced at the check too casually, had dropped a ten-spot on it also too casually, had smiled and said:

"Well, how's it strike you, Drum? I told you I ran into one would knock you on your duff, didn't I?"

"I'd like to help you, Mr. Sprayregan," I said. "But the answer's no."

"You're kidding," he said in a shocked voice.

I shook my head.

"No?" Sprayregan gasped. "Then just what the hell's wrong with you?" He had a big, rugged face with brush-cut gray hair as thick as the bristles on a military brush, cold gray eyes with too much blood in the whites, and a jutting chin with dewlaps beginning to sprout below it.

"Maybe I'm all tied up with a case," I said.

"Maybe you're yellow."

I stood up and pushed my chair back. "Well, I'll see you around the divorce courts."

He stood up too. He was a big man getting heavy around the middle. "Jesus, I'm sorry for blowing up at you, Drum. Maybe you want to think about it for a while. You don't have to give me your answer right away."

We went outside through the Statler lobby together. It was one of the first warm days of May and the government secretaries out for their lunch and the sun were showing more flesh than they had since last September.

We walked up the block toward Sixteenth Street, where my De Soto was parked.

"Drop you somewhere?" I asked.

He nodded and got into the car, giving me the address of a rundown office building on E Street. Then he said, his voice rising to a thin bleat of self-pity, "At least tell me why, will you please? I got B.O. or something? What's the matter, don't you like to earn a few grand for playing delivery boy? Or is it on account of the boys say I'm slipping? Well for crying out loud, which it is?"

I made a left turn in the heavy traffic near Farragut Square and drove south on Seventeenth Street past the White House Executive Offices. "I'll give you some advice," I said. "You've got a client. Write him a report, send him a bill, and forget it."

Sprayregan mopped sweat off the back of his thick neck with a handkerchief. It wasn't that hot. "You think I'm nuts?" he said. "You think I'd chuck it all out the window because the first dumb shamus I take it to pulls a lot of holier-than-thou crap on me? Well, your name ain't the only one in the Yellow Pages, wise guy."

"If you're so hot about it," I asked, "why don't you do it yourself?"

At first he didn't say anything. Then very softly he said: "I can't. I wish to Christ I could but I can't. So now you know."

"You're scared. Is that it?"

He called one of us a name under his breath and sat there staring straight ahead, a big man who somehow had lost whatever had once been inside of him to make him tough.

"Let me get it straight," I said. "Your client's a rich old bird, now retired, who used to be a big shot in the administration. He hired you to do a routine make on a girl his son was playing around with. You did the make and—"

"Christ, I did everything but sleep with her."

"—decided the girl, whose identity would knock me on my duff, as you put it, would pay more for what you found than your client would."

"The girl nothing. Sure, she'd give her right eye to keep what I've got to herself. But it's her husband I'm thinking of. He'd have to play ball, or else. His wife's been denting every crisp white sheet in Washington with her fanny, and I can prove it."

"Go ahead and prove it," I said, pulling up in front of his office building on E Street, "but count me out."

"I suppose your hands are lily white."

"White enough for me."

I watched him lean out of the car and slide his backside across the seat. He wanted to say something else, then changed his mind, slammed the door so hard that the De Soto shook, and stomped in anger across the sidewalk to the rundown office building. I sat for a minute thinking of the big suite of rooms he'd had on New York Avenue a couple of years back, and the string of six dicks working for him, and the tie-in with the Burns Agency, and feeling a little sorry for him, and wondering if losing his guts had made him slip or slipping had made him lose his guts. Then I drove over to F Street and parked my car half a block from the Treasury Building and started thinking reluctantly of the paperwork piling up in my own one-man agency.

### 3.

A WOMAN was seated in the waiting room, flipping through the pages of *Time* without reading anything. When I came in she put the magazine down and said, "You must be Drum." She looked around at the bare walls of the waiting room, without the testimonials from J. Edgar Hoover or anyone else, at the identical sagging leather chair across from the one she was seated on, at the door to my inner office. "I sure expected a bigger layout," she added, her voice bitter and spiteful.

"You can always try the Pinkertons down the block," I suggested. "They have armored cars and everything."

She showed me her teeth in a reluctant little smile. She was on the wrong side of thirty by a couple of lean, hard years and had bags under her eyes and a furrowed forehead to prove it. Except for that she had a pretty face and the kind of slightly plump high-busted figure that wears very well until forty or so and then sags overnight.

"I guess I deserved that," she said. "But after the build-up my husband gave you, I expected—"



"Who would your husband be?"

"Gil Sprayregan. You saw him?"

"Yeah, I saw him."

"You're going to team up with him?" she asked with absolutely no expression on her face.

"No, I'm not, Mrs. Sprayregan."

"Oh, thank God, Mr. Drum! Gil's so confused lately, he doesn't know what he's doing. Was it hard talking him out of it?"

"I didn't talk him out of anything. How the hell could I talk him out of it?"

"But Gil thinks the world of you. He's always talking how you're the fair-haired boy of all the private dicks in D.C."

I grinned. "He didn't exactly show it at lunch."

"Well he's envious too. You can't blame him. He was once up where you are. And you're young, too. That's what makes Gil so bitter, all the young ones taking his business. He's still a good sleuth, Mr. Drum, if only—if only—"

All of a sudden she started to cry. I led her inside and helped her sit down in the client chair, then opened the deep drawer of the desk and took out the bottle of Jack Daniels. I poured her a stiff one in a paper cup. She drank it without looking at it and probably without tasting it.

"Please," she said, "I beg you. Please. Please stop him. Oh, please. They'll kill him. I know it. They'll kill him."

She raised her left fist to her mouth and bit the knuckles. Her lipstick left a mark like a crimson gash. "All right," I said. "Try and pull yourself together. Who'll kill him?"

"Oh, no," she said. "Oh God no, I couldn't tell you that. How could I tell you that?"

"I don't know how you could tell me that or how you could tell me anything. I also don't know how I could stop your husband. Just what do you want me to do?"

She looked at me and laughed, the sound tearing from her throat like a cry of anguish. "It was six years ago, wasn't it?" she said, unexpectedly calm again, her face showing nothing but the tears streaking her pancake make-up. "Or don't you want to remember?"

"I remember, Mrs. Sprayregan."

"Do you? I didn't think you would."

"I said I remember."

"Go ahead. I want to hear you say it."

"Gil Sprayregan gave me my first case when I thought I never was going to get one. We split a fee. It was a pretty big case and it gave me a pretty fair rep which I probably didn't deserve. I've never split a fee since."

"So now you're going to let him get himself killed. Just like that."

"I admired your husband for not bringing that up at lunch, Mrs. Sprayregan. I'd honestly like to help you, but if you refuse to tell me—"

"Wasn't that convenient for you? Just how sanctimonious can you get?" she cried.

I waited. There was nothing I could say. If her purpose in coming to my office was to make me feel like a first-class heel, she'd done a splendid job. But if she really wanted me to help her husband, she hadn't given me anything to help him with.

"They're going out of town," she said. "They're leaving the country in a few days. If you can stall Gil for a few days, you'll save his life."

"Good. That's something. I'll try to stall him."

"I have very little money of my own. We're in debt. I'll do anything you want. Anything."

"I'll try to stall him."

She thanked me, we shook hands, and she got out of there. I dialed her husband's office. An answering service girl told me he had gone for the day and I left a message for him to call me. I looked at the bottle of Jack Daniels and wondered if that was Gil Sprayregan's trouble. He had needed both hands to raise his first cocktail to his lips at lunch.

The middle of that night, the telephone rang.

I groped for it in the darkness, knocking the luminous-dialed clock off my night table. I picked the clock up and saw it was almost two in the morning, then jerked the telephone receiver off its cradle and made a sound into it.

"This Mr. Drum?" a woman's wide-awake voice asked. "Mr. Chester Drum?"

I made another sound into the telephone, trying without success to place the voice.

"I'm terribly sorry to disturb you at this hour, Mr. Drum, but it's important. I'm Mrs. Stewart Hoffman Varley, Jr. Would you know my husband on sight?"

That got me wide awake. Mrs. Stewart Hoffman Varley, Jr's father-in-law was the recently retired Secretary of State. The younger Varley and his wife stood well up in the District pecking order. I would know her husband on sight, all right, and I said so.

"Fine, Mr. Drum. At the moment my husband is at the Anacostia Tavern, a roadhouse on Good Hope Road across the Maryland border. You know the place?"

"No. I know Good Hope Road, though. I can find it."

"Then that's fine too. Would you bring Mr. Varley home for us, please?"

"That's it?" I said. "That's the job?"

"You sound disappointed."

"I gather Mr. Varley's got a load on. Why don't you fetch him yourself? Or surely there must be a family friend could do the job?"

In an amused voice Mrs. Varley said, "I don't fancy myself a match for the hoodlums waiting outside the Anacostia to bat my husband's brains out. I don't know any family friends who are, either."

"You know this how?"

"Mr. Varley called and told me. He sounded amused. It was an interesting problem, he said, but he had drunk too much to find its solution."

"So do you," I said.

"So do I what?"

"Sound amused. Why not call the cops?"

Suddenly her voice went cold on me. "Really, Mr. Drum, if we had been able to notify the police, do you think I would have bothered you? Or aren't you awake yet?"

"How do I know you're who you say you are?"

"Really, Mr. Drum."

"Well you're not exactly tearing your hair out."

"I see what you mean, but then you don't know Mr. Varley. When you live long enough with him you come to realize he's indestructible. You also come to view the world as he does, with detached amusement. But that's neither here nor there. You'll do it?"

I said I would do it.

"I meant it about those hoodlums, Mr. Drum. You'd better go armed."

I told her the idea had occurred to me. She mentioned the name of a Senator who thought I was a good P.I. and a discreet one. We hung up without discussing price.

While I dressed I wondered why this was suddenly the day to save wayward husbands. In the morning it had looked like any other day, but then you never know. . . .

The red neon of the Anacostia Tavern blurred out of the southern Maryland fog about a mile and a half on the Maryland side of the border along Good Hope Road. It was a big barn of a place catering to District dwellers who liked their drinking late and in public places and to Virginians who liked their drinking any way at all as long as they didn't have to bring the bottle along and pay for setups.

I pulled into the parking lot at a little before three. A dozen cars sat out there on the gravel, beaded over with condensed moisture. Fog had painted the windows of the Anacostia tavern gray too. If any hoodlums were waiting out in the dark and the fog for Mr. Stewart Hoffman Varley, Jr., I didn't spot them.

Inside, a juke wailed its preference for tender love, a half-dozen teen-agers from Virginia who would have to wait a few more years for hard liquor on their side of the state line slouched and petted in a row of booths, and Stewart Hoffman Varley, Jr., leaned the elbows of a two-hundred-dollar tailormade suit on the surface of a long bar.

". . . . C.B.I. during the war," the stout, bald barman was telling Varley. "You don't have to say a word about those Indians, no sir."

Varley was a tall, lean lad in his middle thirties, with a grave, gaunt face mirrored behind the bar. He turned swiftly as I moved over next to him at the bar.

"Drum's the name," I said, taking out my wallet and showing him the photostat of my P.I. license. His shoulders relaxed and the fingers of his big right hand, which had made a fist around a highball glass, opened. "Your wife thought it would be a good idea if I saw you home."

He looked surprised for a moment. I wondered if I would have trouble with him, but he smiled slowly and said, "Now, why didn't I think of that?" He waved a hand at the barman. "So long, Max. Taking off now."

"So long, Mr. Smith. Too bad the lady friend didn't show. She's nice."

"Better shut your face, Max," Varley said, still smiling. "You see a station wagon outside, Drum?"

"Yeah. But with diplomat plates."

**"That's them."**

**"Indians," Max said. "Nonviolence. Hah!"**

**"Listen," I told Varley. "You wait here. I'll drive my car right out front. It's a De Soto convertible with the top up. Give me about a minute, then come out running. Right?"**

**"I don't know about the running bit," he said. "I guess I could walk a straight line if my life depended on it."**

**He didn't look drunk and he didn't talk drunk, but some guys can hold their liquor like that. "All right, then I'll come in and get you."**

**I went outside. Running footsteps crunched across the gravel and a car door slammed. I looked at the station wagon with the Washington DPL plates. No lights and a dead engine.**

**I got into the De Soto and drove it to the narrow sidewalk in front of the Anacostia. Before I could go in after Varley he came out squinting at my headlights. I punched the light switch and shouted for him to jump in. The lights had pinned him like a butterfly specimen to the double doors of the Anacostia.**

**Shoe leather came crunching across the gravel again as I slid across the seat and opened the door for Varley. He didn't make a move toward the car. He stood there not doing anything but waiting, so I got the crazy notion that he wanted to wait. Then two dark figures came running past the car. The one in front was a little fellow that moved like greased lightning. He went right up to Varley and Varley just stood there and then the little fellow whipped his left fist into Varley's stomach and as Varley sat down the little fellow grunted and kicked him in the head.**

**I jumped out of the car just as the Anacostia's double doors swung open and Max rushed out in a streaming yellow rectangle of light. Max swung a sawed-off bat but the little fellow blurred under it, moving with incredible speed, and kicked Varley in the head again. Then the big fellow who had done nothing till then closed with Max.**

**I got a mugging grip on the little fellow. He stamped on my instep with his heel. His head jerked to one side and down. He bit my wrist and flailed back at me with his right arm. That was a mistake. I shoved my own right arm under his and brought it up behind his neck. His feet drummed. Gravel flew. I did the same thing with my left**

arm. Then I pulled him back against me and started to lift him. His feet ceased their drumming.

"Cut out the struggling," I said, "or I'll break your neck."

He stopped writhing and twisting. Holding half of the Nelson on his neck with my left arm, I clawed the Magnum from my shoulder holster and shoved the muzzle against his ear.

"Hey!" Max hollered just then. The big fellow broke away from him and ran off into the darkness and the ground fog. Max took half a dozen lumbering strides after him before pulling up short.

The whole business had only taken a minute or two. Varley crouched vomiting on the narrow sidewalk in front of the Anacostia while Max went inside and came out with a wet towel. "Some nursemaid you turned out to be," Max told me as he patted Varley's face with the towel.

I took the little fellow over to the De Soto and told him to sit down behind the wheel. Then I got a pair of handcuffs from the glove compartment and used one of the bracelets around his right wrist and one around the curve of the steering wheel. He sat staring straight ahead as if I weren't there. He had light brown skin and a very handsome and very arrogant face. He wore a tennis sweater with a red-and-blue V over white wool. He looked as much like a hoodlum as I looked like Lady Godiva. I searched him and found a clasp knife in his right-hand pants pocket but decided he couldn't reach it the way he was handcuffed. Then I took the key out of the ignition and returned to Varley.

Max helped me get him into the rear of the De Soto. Then Max went back to the teen-aged petting party in the Anacostia and I climbed in the front seat of the car alongside the handsome, brown-skinned and arrogant-looking man handcuffed to the wheel.

"You drive," I said. "The Varley house in Georgetown."

He sneered and started the car. I held the revolver on the seat alongside my right leg and watched him. He had small, fine-boned hands. In profile his face looked like a boy's. I didn't think he was twenty-five years old.

By the time we crossed the Anacostia bridge and took Maine Avenue to the Tidal Basin, Varley became lively enough to ask for a cigarette. I was to get to know that

liveliness of his. He was a gaunt and grave-looking man but had an irrepressible buoyancy which wore a little thin after you got to know him, like a whore's professional smile.

"I don't know what my wife told you, Drum," he said. "I don't make a habit of getting picked up by private dicks in the middle of the night." He laughed. "I can usually take pretty good care of myself."

"Do you usually have to?"

Again he laughed and said, "Well, it makes life interesting."

"Then that's why you stood out there in front of my headlights so they could see you? To make life interesting?"

"What's the matter?" he said. "Don't you like me?"

"Nobody's paying me to like you, Mr. Varley. I'll take a reasonable risk for a client, sure. That's my line of work. But I won't jump into something like this again for someone who wants to get his head kicked in."

The brown-skinned boy handcuffed to the wheel surprised me by saying, "Mr. Varley's no masochist, if that's what you mean." It was the first time he had spoken. He had a tenor voice and an Oxford accent and an obvious, arrogant contempt for lowbrows—present company not excepted.

"It's the old Varley curiosity," Varley said. "I had to find out if Ambedkar was just bluffing."

I told him what to do with the old Varley curiosity. Ambedkar laughed. He drove very well. He didn't seem worried about anything. We went up along the black water of the Potomac and past Francis Scott Key Bridge to Canal Road. I didn't have to tell Ambedkar where to turn.

He pulled up in front of a brick Colonial house with one of the few really big lawns in Georgetown. I put the ignition key into my pocket and led Varley from the car. We took only a couple of steps on the red brick sidewalk when the front door of the Colonial house opened and a woman came hurrying down the walk toward us.

"Stewart!" she said. "You gave us a scare."

She floated into the glow of the street lights like a dream. She wore a metallic silver dressing gown and had a halo of silver-blond hair and the kind of tall, long-legged figure that belongs in every man's secret dreams. Her face was dream stuff too. Even under the street lights

you could tell her eyes were deep blue. But somehow, despite all her obvious assets, she managed to look as cold as the far side of the Greenland icecap.

She studied Varley's face and touched the bruises with her long fingers. "You picked yourself a good detective," Varley said cheerfully, effusively. "You should have seen him out there, Priscilla."

Priscilla Varley nodded her lovely head in the direction of the house. "I'll be along in a minute, dear," she said as Varley made his way obediently across the red bricks. Then she told me: "I'd like to thank you, Mr. Drum. If I mail a check for a hundred dollars to your office, will that be satisfactory?"

"More than."

"Well then. I guess I'll say good night." She extended her hand. "And thank you again."

"Hold on," I said, and jerked a thumb toward the car. "There's your hoodlum, Mrs. Varley. Some hoodlum. What do I do, put a stamp on him and mail him back to the Eton rowing crew?"

Priscilla Varley's penciled black eyebrows climbed toward her silver-blond hair. "You mean you brought them with you?"

"One of them. The other one got away. I can turn him loose or put a scare into him or hand him over to the buttons. What's it going to be?"

"We couldn't possibly press charges if you handed him over to the police."

"You're the client."

Priscilla Varley smiled. "How would you go about putting a scare into him? I wouldn't want you to hurt—"

"Hell, maybe you'd like me to drive him home, wherever home is, and tuck him into bed."

"You needn't be sarcastic."

"No? The way things are going, the next thing you're liable to tell me is the guy's the houseboy around here."

Priscilla Varley shook her head. "Not around here. If the man in your car is a handsome little fellow with an arrogant smirk on his face, he's the houseboy over at the Indian Embassy, his name is Ranjit Ambedkar, you can do whatever you bloody well please with him, and I'm going to bed." She was mad suddenly. Not at me and not at Ranjit Ambedkar. At her husband, I figured. She turned around and stalked quickly across the red bricks and up the path and into the house. The door slammed.



I went back to the car. "Far as I'm concerned, buddy," I said, "you're out of the dog house—if you agree to get out of the neighborhood."

Ambedkar nodded without speaking. I unlocked the nippers for him and he came lithely from the car smirking at me. He was barely more than five feet tall. "What I can't fathom," he said in his Oxford accent, "is why, with something like that walking around his own house, he insists on looking for trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"The kind of trouble he is looking for. You'd better warn him, mister."

I snorted and began to think that none of this had happened, that it was the kind of dream a private dick will have, and that I would wake up any minute. I got into the car and drove around the block a couple of times until I saw Ambedkar waiting for a streetcar on Canal Road.

He saw me driving by and waved.

## 4.

I TOOK the elevator up to Gil Sprayregan's floor of the rundown office building on E Street shortly after noon the next day. As I neared the door to his office it opened and a short, middle-aged woman came out, her face livid and her lips trembling. "I ought to report him," she said. "I ought to report him to the police."

She went on down the hall and I went in. Sprayregan paid his hundred bucks a month for a waiting room about the size of a water closet in a cold-water flat and an inner office which barely had room for a small filing cabinet, two chairs, a hatrack and a beat-up roll-top desk which had been new when the Pinkerton guards rode stage-coaches.

Sprayregan was drunk. He had forgotten to shave this morning. The tic danced under his left eye. "Screw you, bud," he said. "If you think you're gonna climb on the li'l old gravy train after old Gil already went'n got the ball rolling, you can just screw you, what I mean, screw you."

He reached for the bottle on the desk and knocked it over. It was empty anyway.

"Is that what you told her?" I asked, nodding my head toward the door.

"'Smatter, can't I pick my clients? Friends too. I can pick my friends. Scram outa here, buddy. Get lost. Dusht, buddy. Dust."

"Better tell me about it, Mr. Sprayregan. What happened?"

"We don't want you here," he said, lurching to his feet heavily and lunging in my direction.

"Didn't you get a message to call me?"

"I called, aw right. No answer. Afraid to pick up a phone? You're yellow, Drum. Yellow."

"What happened?"

"If you must know, I got in touch with the mark. Appointment li'l while."

"Where?"

His big red face twisted into a crafty smile. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"You told the mark what?"

"Nothing. Nothing yet. Worth his while is all."

He waved a big hand toward the door. I got out of there and took the elevator down to the lobby and went outside. It was an overcast day, much colder than yesterday, with a light rain falling from a bleak gray sky.

I found a hack stand down the block and opened the door of the first cab in line. A young guy with a visored cap and a long nose and a long neck sat behind the wheel eating a sandwich.

"You interested in a tail job?" I said.

He looked up and grinned cockily. "I'm your Indian, chief."

"Trouble is, I don't know when it's going to start."

"Shoot; that's okay. I'm on my lunch hour. Come in out of the rain. You a flatfoot?"

"Private dick," I said.

"Well, well, well." He went on eating his sandwich. I sat down in the back of the cab to wait.

Forty-five minutes later Sprayregan came out, his big frame leaning forward as he walked, like a man fighting a stiff wind. The only indication of the alcohol in his blood was a slight roll in his stride. I pointed and the long-nosed boy started the cab. We slipped out into traffic as Sprayregan went around the corner.

"You'da done better on shanks mare," the boy said, but then quickly pulled into a parking space when Sprayregan crossed the street to a Texaco service station. He talked to a grease monkey, then waited while a gray Packard three or four years old came down off the grease rack, paid the grease monkey, got behind the wheel, and started up North Capitol toward the rail yards.

"Better get closer," I told the boy.

"Chief," he grunted, "I do this just as natural as you breathe. Watch me."

I sat back and watched him. The gray Packard made a left on M Street when we were still a block away. The boy gunned it, then slammed on the brakes when the traffic light turned yellow and a stout traffic cop waved his white glove at us and yelled something I couldn't hear.

I began to curse but didn't get past the first four-letter word. Half a block down M, the Packard pulled into a slot near the curb. In about ten seconds a figure moved across the sidewalk quickly. He was a small man and at this distance I couldn't make out his face through the rain. He wore a white tennis sweater, though, with a vivid red and blue V gashing the neck line. He got into the Packard and slammed the door.

"What's the matter," the boy at the wheel demanded, "you seen a ghost?"

Coincidence, I thought. All of a sudden Washington was crowded with little brown-skinned men in red, white and blue tennis sweaters. Coincidence, sure.

It was Ambedkar.

When the light changed we went tires squealing around the corner on M street. The boy stepped on the gas and began weaving in and out. I spotted the Packard again, then lost it in front of a moving van. I sat forward gripping the leather upholstery of the front seat. The boy whistled and we passed the van doing forty. The Packard still had a block on us. Then at the intersection of Sixth Street Sprayregan ran a yellow light. We hit it on red, cross traffic surged forward from both directions, and the boy mumbled and brought his cab to a screeching halt. The back of his neck almost matched the color of the light.

In about a minute the light turned yellow for the Sixth Street traffic. The boy leaned on his horn, gunned

his motor, and took off. Crossing Ninth I thought I saw the Packard. We hit Thomas Circle doing thirty and the boy slowed down. We took the circle around past Vermont Avenue and Fourteenth Street and Massachusetts Avenue, then M Street, Vermont, Fourteenth, Massachusetts and M again.

"See him?" the boy asked in a subdued voice.

I shook my head.

"Want I should try M straight through?"

"No. What for?"

"Yeah," he said, "what for?" He pulled over to the curb. "You wouldn't believe it, chief, but this never happened to me before. Where to now?"

I gave him my office address.

"You ain't mad?"

"Forget it."

"Well, this one's on the house."

It was, too. But that didn't help me any. And it certainly didn't help Sprayregan.

I looked up Sprayregan's home address in the phone book, hoping I'd find his wife in. But there was no answer. I prowled around the office for a while, looking out of the window at the view of the Treasury Building across the street. The rain fell steadily and the hiss of the traffic came through the window on a wet cold breeze. I picked up the phone and dialed Sprayregan's home number again. Still no answer. I lit a cigarette and poured Jack Daniels into a paper cup and left him standing there on the desk top so he'd be frustrated too. Then I dialed the State Department's number and asked for Jack Morley in the Protocol Section.

Jack's Assistant Chief of Protocol over at the department. We'd gone through F.B.I. school together and stuck out our first hitch together. Then Jack decided on a State Department career and I got tired of taking orders, nailed up my shingle, and went to work for myself.

"Well, if it isn't the best third of the Spirit of Seventy-six," Jack said. I swung the swivel chair around and stared out at the rain and cracked back at him, but thought of Sprayregan out there driving through the rain somewhere, busily and nervously talking himself into an early grave if his wife knew what she was talking about.

“What’s the matter?” Jack said. “Why the long voice?”

“Jack, you know of any skeletons in the Indian Embassy closet?”

“What? What did you say?”

“Well, let’s say a party over there can be blackmailed. Someone pretty big. Any idea what it might be?”

“N-no. I don’t know.”

“Maybe this will help. A gal, wife of a big-shot diplomat, maybe, with an inclination to go visiting all the bedrooms she can squeeze into her itinerary?”

Jack laughed. “My God, Chet. Don’t tell me you only just now tumbled to that?”

“I didn’t tumble to anything.”

“The lady’s name is Sumitra Mojindar. Wife of the First Secretary of the Indian Embassy, the same Mojindar who’s been Krishna Menon’s front man in organizing the Benares Conference. Everybody in Washington knows Lady Mojindar as an Anglo-Indian beauty with overactive glands and a dedicated public servant of a husband more than twice her age—everybody but Mojindar himself, from what I’ve heard. That what you’re after?”

“Maybe. But if everyone knows it, just who the hell would my extortionist blackmail?”

“I’ve seen them at the usual parties. Mojindar doesn’t know, Chet. He dotes on his wife—when he isn’t doting on the latest two-steps-forward-and-one-step-back of India’s neutralist policy. Like the typical husband wearing horns, I guess he’s the last one to know.”

“So conceivably he could put the bite on Mojindar?”

“Sure, unless he got short-stopped by someone in the know over there. Then he’d get a swift boot in the rear end for his troubles, they’d tell Mojindar the sad truth, and that would be that.”

“Would a guy named Ambedkar be someone in the know?”

“Ambedkar? Name doesn’t ring a bell, Chet.”

“What if the fellow in the know, whoever he is, didn’t want Mojindar to tumble?”

“Then I would say this blackmailer of yours had better watch his ass. But why shouldn’t they want Mojindar to find out?”

“Search me. What about Stewart Varley, Jr.?”

“What *what* about him?”

“He know the Mojindar woman?”

"I guess so." Jack chuckled. "If you mean is he sleeping with her, unfortunately Mr. Varley doesn't talk about his conquests. But he sure as heck knows her. He's quite a guy, Chet. He's as unpredictable as the Brooklyn Dodgers but has enough charm to have pulled some strings and wrapped up the first big assignment of his career, United States observer at the coming Asian-African Benares Conference. So he's more than likely spent plenty of time with the Mojindars lately. Listen, Chet. You wouldn't be this hypothetical extortionist?"

"What do you think?"

"All right, I apologize. But whatever else you are, Drummer-boy, you, Varley and the Dodgers all have something in common."

"You a Dodger fan?"

"I'm a Drum fan."

I thanked Jack for his information, wondered if he'd really given me any information, dialed the Sprayregan home again and hung up after the eighth ring.

About twenty minutes later a messenger boy wearing the full-dress livery of the Mercury Courier Service came in with an envelope. I signed for it, gave the boy a quarter which he did not thank me for, and opened my envelope.

It contained a check for one hundred dollars made out in my favor and signed Priscilla Varley, and a note:

Thank you so much again, Mr. Drum. Something has come up that is terribly important to me and could mean considerable money to you. Will you meet me for cocktails at the Sheraton Park lounge at five this afternoon? P.V.

I put the hundred-dollar check into my wallet and read the note again and wondered what roadhouse Stewart Hoffman Varley, Jr., was going to get himself kicked in the head outside of this time. Or maybe someone had chalked Stewie loves Lady Mojindar on the brick wall of the Varley home in Georgetown. Or maybe Priscilla Varley would show me what seemed a coincidence in a business where coincidences are the exception and not the rule was not a coincidence at all.

I called Sprayregan's home three more times without success. I called his office, but the phone service girl couldn't help me. At twenty to five I locked up for the day.

# 5.

WHAT kind of cocktail can I bring you today, Mr. Drum?"

"A Martini will be fine."

The waiter came and fawned over Mrs. Varley. He was an old man who probably hadn't smiled that way in thirty years, unless he did it each time he saw Mrs. Varley. She was a girl to fawn over, all right. She wore a mauve suit and a jaunty little mauve hat on her silver-blond hair and some silky fluff at the open throat of her jacket to match her hair. She was as lovely as a girl could be without bludgeoning your endocrines. If anything, she was subdued, very tailor-made, very sure of herself. She was a dream sculptured from ice—the kind of ice that burns when you touch it. She wore gloves that matched the silver scarf. There wasn't a speck of lint on the mauve suit. I got the feeling you wouldn't burn your hand after all: you could put your hand right through her. She was too perfect for anything but a dream.

We saluted each other with our Martinis and sipped them. If there was a male in the Sheraton Park who didn't stop whatever he was doing to give her a long and longing stare he was a male in name only.

"I hope coming here hasn't inconvenienced you in any way, Mr. Drum."

"No inconvenience at all, Mrs. Varley."

"Martini the way you like them?"

"Perfect."

"Would you like another? The drinks are on me."

We had a second Martini. I thanked her for her check and she said: "What do you know about my husband, Mr. Drum?"

"What everyone else knows, I guess. Son of a famous father. Following in his footsteps working for the government although your husband is independently wealthy."

"We're worth in the neighborhood of thirty million dollars," Priscilla Varley said apologetically.

"Also, your husband has a pretty good war record."

"He won a Distinguished Service Cross on Tarawa as a lieutenant with the Marines. He wears a steel plate in his head where part of his skull was smashed by shrapnel. That may not sound important to you and it may seem strange for me to tell you, but it is important. And it explains so much about Stewart."

I watched her as she talked. I tried not to stare at her ruttishly. Once my mind wandered and I started thinking that if Stewart Varley was indeed making out with the Mojindar woman, maybe he deserved getting his head kicked in.

". . . pretty disappointing not to die when everyone is sure you're going to die," she was saying. "He waited. He healed. The healing process was slow. He didn't die. He had a strange sense of disappointment. That's the way he put it." She looked at me and said suddenly: "Sometimes it's almost as if Stewart has been searching for some other way to die since Tarawa."

She went on with hardly a pause. "No, I suppose that's wrong. Not exactly looking for a way to die. He's in love with life too much. Looking for something. You see, he—well, he completed the cycle of his faith on Tarawa. That's exactly how he puts it. Now he's searching. For the past ten years and more he's been searching. He doesn't know what he hopes to find. He doesn't know where to look. But he can't stop searching—physically, emotionally, spiritually, in every way. Tell me, Mr. Drum," she asked unexpectedly but without self-consciousness, "would you say I'm a beautiful woman?"

I smiled at her. I hoped it wasn't a leer. "Yeah," I said. "You're beautiful."

"And that I could give a man what—well, frankly, what he wants?"

I didn't say anything. The back of my neck felt warm.

"On several occasions Stewart has been unfaithful to me. He admits it. He can't help himself. It tears him up inside. He drinks a great deal, as you have seen. I love him, Mr. Drum. I love my husband, you see. Despite what I have told you. And please don't think my telling you this is peculiar. It's part of the picture, and I do want you to have the entire picture. Do you understand?"

I did not understand. But I nodded my head. Sometimes a private detective gets to think about putting an analyst's couch in his office and charging per hour what he charges per day. I said:



“What’s the rest of the picture?”

“Stewart’s searching is the rest of the picture.”

“He’s having an affair with Sumitra Mojindar, isn’t he?”

She did not look surprised. She lifted her silver-gloved hand and the old waiter sprinted to the bar and sprinted back with a third round of Martinis and served them fawningly. When he went away she said: “I forgive him his affairs, Mr. Drum. I want my husband to find what he wants—wherever he finds it. But I don’t want him to die looking for it.”

“Ambedkar?”

“Ambedkar’s part of it. I don’t understand about Ambedkar. It ought to be the husband, oughtn’t it? But Ambedkar isn’t entirely what I wanted to see you about. My husband leaves for India on the weekend, Mr. Drum. As you may have heard, they have appointed him observer at the Benares Conference.”

“The way I heard it, he had himself appointed.”

“Well, perhaps. If he goes to India, Mr. Drum, I’m afraid he won’t come back to me.”

“Ambedkar again?”

“Ambedkar? Oh, I see what you mean. Perhaps. But I didn’t meant Ambedkar. India. I meant India, Mr. Drum. The lure of the timeless East. The hold the mysticism of the East could get on my husband. I said he had completed the cycle of his faith on Tarawa. Those are his words. But he didn’t die. He lived. He lived. Sometimes he says he feels as if he’s empty inside. Absolutely empty. A hollow space inside what used to be his skull. He loves me, but love isn’t enough. He wants to find what he has lost. He wants to find faith again. He hopes to find it in India.”

“If you want me to keep him from going—”

“No, of course not. I want him to go. But I want him to come back. I don’t want Ambedkar or Sumitra Mojindar or India itself to stop him. I want him to go and search for what he hopes to find. But, Mr. Drum, I want you to bring him back to me.”

We sat on either side of a small round table at cocktail hour in one of Washington’s best hotels. The coolest dream of a lovely woman I had ever seen had just asked me to follow her husband halfway around the world and bring him back. I was still trying to swallow all of it. I couldn’t say yes. I wouldn’t say no. I asked:

"Your father-in-law hire a P.I. named Sprayregan to look into your husband's love life? Excuse me, I mean—"

"You mean exactly what you said, Mr. Drum. Yes. Yes, he did. I'm a little startled to find that you know about it, but I'm pleased. You really dig into a case, don't you?"

"Coincidence," I mumbled, but not very loud. The back of my neck was warm again. Priscilla Varley could make you feel like a first-grader given a gold star by the teacher.

"As for my father-in-law, I'm very much afraid he threw his money away. After all he only had to ask me. I'd seen it coming with Sumitra Mojindar, you see. I suppose I know the symptoms. It isn't Mrs. Mojindar as much as what Mrs. Mojindar symbolizes to him. Although in this case, as I understand it, the woman is perfectly available." She smiled and shook her head deprecatingly. "I'm afraid that's catty. And she is lovely. Well, Mr. Drum. Will you do it? Stewart's father can cut all the red tape that will have to be cut for you. I'll pay all your transportation expenses and of course all your expenses while in Benares, and then we could settle on some figure over and above your expenses. How does two thousand dollars sound to you?" She looked at me, uncertain of herself for the first time. "Of course that's an arbitrary figure. If you want more, say so."

I didn't want more. I wanted to tell her what she wanted me to do was something out of the best lurid TV melodrama. It was like hiring a nurse to keep her husband away from liquor or mainlining or a bodyguard to steer him clear of the racetrack or what they used to call a shooting gallery. It could be done—if her husband cooperated. But if he wanted to cooperate you wouldn't need a nurse or a bodyguard and if he didn't want to cooperate all the nurses or bodyguards in Washington wouldn't help. Or all the private detectives.

But I didn't say any of that. She gave me a dazzling smile and I smiled back at her, still hoping mine wasn't a leer. And she said: "Of course I couldn't hope to have your answer now. But don't call me, Mr. Drum, please. I'll call you." She stood up and offered her silver-gloved hand and that smile again. "Thank you so much for coming!" she said a little breathlessly. It was like a caress.

I floated out of there and into the cold rain.

Gloria Sprayregan was waiting outside my office the next morning. Her husband hadn't come home that night, she said in that flat, undemonstrative way she had. She had seen him once the previous afternoon and he had been scared. She had never seen him looking so scared. He wished he hadn't gone ahead with his plans, but of course it was too late for that. He didn't know what to do. Did she have any ideas? She had no ideas.

She wanted to know what I thought he ought to do. There was no answer to that one, except look for him. Even looking for him might prove dangerous if she blazed a trail to him. I was almost sorry I had suggested that and was going to offer to find him myself when the telephone rang. It was a Congressman who had what he called a prodigal son and I called a juvenile delinquent. I had been hired to yank him off somebody's chandelier on several occasions before, the pay was good, and I was being hired again. At first I thought of turning it down because Gil Sprayregan might need finding in a hurry. But even I couldn't guarantee covering my trail and it might turn out better all around if Sprayregan went on an anonymous bender until after the Mojindars left for India, so I told Gloria to let it ride a day or so if she could, to keep in touch with me and to call me if she thought she knew where to find her husband. She went out without a word.

As it happened, the Congressman's son had involved himself in a drunken brawl in Richmond, Virginia. That meant a hundred-mile drive and a session with a lawyer I knew in Richmond and forty-eight hours in all before the Congressman's prodigal and/or delinquent son could walk out of the Richmond jail a free if not wiser young man. Meanwhile, Gloria Sprayregan had thought to look for her husband at their cabin on Little Chesapeake Island, had found him and visited him a couple of times, bringing food which he hardly touched and watching him drink liquor steadily and without pleasure.

"I know my husband," she had said. "He'll drink and drink until he gets drinking tough, and then he'll do something absolutely wrong, all wrong, Mr. Drum, and he'll be killed. I know it. I know it."

She had decided to go out there again—her fourth visit. I decided her husband would be better off if I went with her than if she went alone. I decided to bring him back.

But apparently other people had other ideas.

# 6.

**T**HE STOCKY, square-faced and bleak-eyed deputy sheriff from Chesapeake City, whose name was Malloy, massaged his chin with a fat-fingered hand, sat back and looked up at the ceiling of the ward in the Michael Bell Memorial Hospital, then sat forward and scowled at me.

“You think them foreigners did it?” he said.

“I never saw the hit-and-run car.”

“But you think so?”

“I told you all I know. Don’t you?”

“That’s a laugh,” he said bitterly, and laughed to prove it. “You didn’t tell me hardly anything at all.”

Actually I had told him a great deal of it but not all of it. I had omitted the names of the Stewart Hoffman Varley Juniors, figuring that if Sprayregan had been murdered and if their involvement with Ambedkar was more than coincidence, it was police business to involve them, not my business.

“You two-bit private punks from D.C. are all alike,” Malloy said, his voice still bitter. “Think I ain’t seen your kind before? I want you should tell me the name of your client, Drum, and I want you should tell me now.”

I sat up. The walls tilted some and then straightened. “That’s right, buddy,” I said. “Show me how grateful you are. I could have called it as a straight hit-and-run for you and you never would have known the difference. So the Sprayregan’s cabin gets visited by the Sprayregans on a cold rainy day in May. There’s no law against it. So they throw a party and I’m invited. So we get run down by a hit-and-run driver on the way home. I could have told it to you like that. All I’m trying to do is keep my client’s name out of this business if it belongs out. You’ve got to prove it belongs in, not me.”

“Yeah?” Malloy shouted. “I’ll go right downtown and get an order and have you booked as a material witness, you smart son of a bitch.”

“You’d need a court order even in Chesapeake City, buddy, and you’d never get it. You didn’t take down

a word I said and if you start pushing me like that I didn't say a thing. Try holding a material witness to hit-and-run homicide and they're liable to take away your tin badge."

He was bewildered and angry, like any small town cop who thinks the hot shots from the big city are pushing him around. He said furiously, "You think you got connections, huh? I'll show you what freaking good your connections are gonna do you."

I sighed. He had had that kind of look on his face all along. He was the kind of cop who was a cop because it was one way of making a living, usually a pretty easy way in a town like Chesapeake City. I jerked a thumb toward the hospital screen. "Now be a good boy and get out of here so I can sleep."

He called me a dirty name in a loud voice and a nurse came running in with her face beet-red and her breath coming in little gasps. She told him to leave. She looked mad enough to hit him and maybe capable enough too. She was built like a lady wrestler before the lady wrestlers turned into glamour girls for the Midwestern TV circuits. She came back to my bed and clucked over me and told me don't you worry none, mister, and outside the range of my vision someone moaned in his sleep and then it was dark and I felt calm and lethargic, and I slept.

I slept until the late afternoon, when a doctor came and told me I would need two or three days on my back to rest after the concussion. I asked him how almost one day would be. He said I had had almost one day and asked how I felt. I felt lousy and said so. He asked if I could wait. I thought about Gloria Sprayregan. I thought about Ambedkar, who came from India where the life-expectancy is under thirty years, where death doesn't mean what death means here, and where murder, like death from malaria or smallpox or diphtheria or starvation, comes easy. I thought about a beautiful dream of a silver-blonde named Priscilla Varley and her husband, who kind of gave you the idea he belonged in the pages of a story by Somerset Maugham.

I got dressed and signed some forms which absolved the Michael Bell Memorial Hospital of any blame in the event that something happened to me. My pants were torn at both knees and my jacket at one elbow,

and both were caked with mud, but they would have to do until I got back to Washington. I hung around for the hospital dinner, which wasn't good but filled your stomach anyway. Then I told the people at the administration desk to send me a bill. They didn't seem to think much of the idea, but nobody barred the door on my way out.

Deputy Sheriff Malloy wasn't waiting outside for me. He would probably take it out on every out-of-state visitor who came to Chesapeake City for a few late-hour beers the next week or so by running him into the clink if he raised his voice above a whisper.

A taxi pulled up in front of the hospital and the driver ran around the front of his car to open the door for a pregnant woman with an overnight bag and a shy, expectant smile. He carried the bag inside for her as if it had a million bucks in it. When he came out I was standing near his cab. He gave me a look which said he thought I didn't have enough money to pay the fare to downtown Chesapeake City. I asked him how he would like a long trip all the way into Washington. He smiled with interest but suspicion and said he wanted to see the color of my money. I showed it to him. He said the fare would be fifteen bucks. That was steep, but I wanted a long drink, a hot shower and a good night's sleep in my own bed in that order, and wanted them badly. I didn't argue with him.

The drink went down fast and hit hard and asked for company. I gave it company, then undressed and got under a shower as hot as I could stand it. I looked down at the blue marks and contusions on my body. The combination of two long drinks and a hot shower did wonders for stiff, aching muscles, but a rubdown would perform even greater miracles, so I decided to go over for one at the Ambassador tomorrow. I climbed out of the shower and into a towelcloth bathrobe and padded barefoot into the living room for another drink and a cigarette. It wasn't much of a living room. The furniture came along with the three-room apartment for a hundred and thirty bucks a month, utilities included. The overstuffed chairs sagged in the wrong places like a matron who has lost interest in her figure. But I sat down in one thinking it was the most comfortable chair in the world anyhow.

Just then the doorbell rang.

When I opened the door Gloria Sprayregan shoved the muzzle of a .38 Police Positive which had probably belonged to her husband against my chest, placed the flat of her free hand alongside it and pushed me into the room. She didn't push very hard. She didn't have to. The muzzle of the .38 did her pushing for her along with the absolutely blank expression on her face. She looked about ten years older than she had on our trip out to Chesapeake City. The lines on her forehead had etched in deeper and the pouches under her eyes were really black. She looked sick, but her hand holding the Police Positive was as steady as Lincoln's marble hand on the chair-arm over at the Memorial. She removed her free hand from my chest and used it to shut the door behind her. When she did that the world outside ceased to be. There were only the two of us and her husband's gun. She said, softly and hardly moving her lips: "I'm going to kill you, you dirty no-good rat."

I stood there looking at her. There is no repartee to such a statement.

"You could have helped him. I asked you. I begged you. You were always too busy. You never wanted to help. When you finally did, you led them to him and they ran him down and killed him. Well, aren't you going to say anything?"

Her index finger went through the trigger guard of the .38. The knuckle was white, its skin taut and waxy-looking. If I breathed through my mouth instead of my nose she might decide to exert the tiny erg of energy which would put my name in the obituary columns in the morning. If I twitched my ears she might decide to do it. On the other hand if I did absolutely nothing at all she might decide to do it.

"I didn't kill your husband, Mrs. Sprayregan," I said quietly.

"Look at you. Expensive liquor on your breath. A bathrobe which probably cost you more than he averaged a week the last year or so. The clean, scrubbed-looking Mr. Chester Drum. Look at you. Do I detect a twitch in your lips, Mr. Drum? Are you scared because you know you're going to die? Gil didn't know it. Oh Jesus God he never knew what hit him."

"Sure," I said. "Go ahead and shoot. That will get you a lot closer to his murderer, won't it?"

She bared her teeth. Our faces were quite close. She did not smell of liquor. She did not smell of perfume. She wore a black suit and no makeup. She was perfectly, entirely, inexorably sober. She was going to kill someone.

"I'll get them," she said. "No power in this world will stop me. Tell me, Mr. Drum; how does it feel to have let down the one man who made your own success possible? How does it feel to know you're going to die? Was Gil better off, not knowing?"

She watched my eyes. Her own eyes were brown, the whites clear but rimmed with red, the lids swollen. I had the feeling that as soon as I answered that question she would tighten her finger and pull the trigger. She was sober and not entirely sane. Temporary insanity, the courts would rule. It was the first time I had ever looked beyond my own death. She blamed me entirely because she did not want to blame herself at all. Perhaps the court psychiatrists would explain it that way. Or perhaps they would explain it in words I wouldn't understand. It didn't matter. It didn't matter to me. Because then I would be a few lines in an obituary in an old newspaper in a newspaper morgue. Chester Drum. Private Detective. Born Baltimore 1924. Survived by an aunt in Spokane, Washington. Former F.B.I. Agent. No wives, no present lovers, no sorrows, no regrets.

"Well?" she said. "Was he better off or wasn't he?"

At that moment the telephone started to ring.

Her eyes darkened. That was all. They didn't waver. It wasn't much, but it might be my only chance. The telephone went on ringing. I struck at the gun and ducked. It went off and she brought the barrel down on my head and for an instant I saw white flashes of light in front of my eyeballs and nothing else. Then I grabbed the gun as my vision came back and she swung it at me again. All of a sudden she let go of it and wailed. It was a long, drawn-out, faraway sound. It seemed to come from outside the apartment and down on the street and a long way off. I slapped her face. She sank down into one of the sagging overstuffed chairs and cried silently, without tears. She looked up at me, gasping for breath. I slapped her again, harder. She made a wheezing, asthmatic sound and could breathe again. I brought her a glass of whisky. She held it without drinking it while I removed the bullets from the Police Positive. The telephone stopped ringing. She looked at the



glass of whisky and threw it at me. Then she really began to cry. It was a bleating sound and the tears flowed.

Someone rang the doorbell.

"Yeah?" I said.

"Everything okay in there?"

It was my neighbor down the hall, a G.S. 11 with the Department of Interior. It was nice to know the world was still out there waiting.

"Gun went off while I was cleaning it," I said. "Sorry."

He knew my line of work. He was a fussy little bachelor who always looked at me with faint suspicion but not malice. He went away.

Gloria Sprayregan stood up. "Oh God," she said. "Oh God. I was going to do it. I was going to kill you."

"Just take it easy now," I said.

"It isn't you I want. It isn't you. Help me. Help me get them, please. I'll do anything you want. Just anything. Try me. Absolutely anything. Please. Please say you'll help me. I must have been crazy. Of course. Of course it isn't you. You tried. You really tried, didn't you? Just help me. Say you'll help me get them."

I went over to the sofa, which was one of those contraptions they say a five-year-old kid can open in thirty seconds, which usually takes an adult five minutes to manipulate, and which took an adult who had just been shot at closer to ten minutes to open into a bed.

"Look," I said. "You'll sleep here. You can't go outside now. Stay here for the night. Then we'll talk about it in the morning. All right?"

"You'll help me?"

"We'll talk about it in the morning. But you'd better stay here tonight and calm down."

"I'll sleep here if you want. I'll do anything you want."

I went into the bedroom and brought her out a sheet, a pillow and a pillowcase. I got a blanket from the linen closet.

"We can go over there in the morning," she said, nodding her head slowly, her eyes very wide. "To the Indian Embassy. Do you promise?"

It was the first time she had mentioned who her husband had wanted to blackmail.

The telephone rang again. She looked at me gravely while I picked up the receiver.

"This is Priscilla Varley, Mr. Drum. I read what hap-

pened to you in the papers. I called the Bell Hospital in Chesapeake City but they said you had been discharged at your own request. Are you all right?"

I said I would live.

"Well, what I told you still stands. All expenses and two thousand dollars. It is expected that the Benares Conference will last about a week. Stewart leaves on a T.W.A. flight tomorrow. Well, what do you say?"

I told her I thought I had better spend some time recuperating. She said they had discharged me from the hospital, hadn't they? She refused to take no for an answer and said she would call me again in the morning. I let it stand at that and hung up.

"In the morning," Gloria Sprayregan said after I had hung up, "we can go over to the Indian Embassy and find them and shoot them. There were two of them. I saw them in the car. No. Not a car. A station wagon. A little man and a big man. I couldn't see their faces. Well, good night."

I went into the bedroom and took off the bathrobe which had cost a dollar ninety-eight at a Washington's Birthday sale last year and crawled between the covers naked and was fast asleep either a split second before or a split second after I shut my eyes.

Her hands awoke me.

They were cold and moving up and down my back. She was breathing on my neck and her breath was not cold.

She had crawled into bed with me.

"Anything," she whispered. "I told you I would do anything you wanted. Name it. Say the word. Anything, if you'll help me. I wasn't fooling. I'll bet you thought I was fooling. Do you think I'm fooling now?"

I turned around toward her. A hammer of pain throbbed at the base of my skull. She thought I was going to take her in my arms. I was going to push her out of the bed. She came against me, her big high breasts softly pushing against my chest. She was wearing exactly what I was wearing. Her thighs moved against my thighs. Her belly was hard. Step one: kill the man. Step two: if you fail, make love to him. Logical? She was determined. She was determined to do just one thing. It was almost dawn and gray light seeped into the room through the down-slatted Venetian blinds. In the gray

light she had a look of either intense rapture or intense pain or intense loathing on her face.

I got my hands on her shoulders and pushed her away from me. She started to come back. I climbed out of the bed. "You sleep here," I said. "I'll sleep inside. I said I'd talk about helping you in the morning. Maybe it's morning to you, but it's not morning to me. I'll get your clothing for you. When you come out—in the morning—come out only when I call you and come out wearing it. You got that?"

Tough guy, I thought. Tough guy with your tough routine. She's going to love you in the morning. Oh yeah, she's going to love you. First you don't let her kill you. Then you don't let her sleep with you. The first she needs to get rid of her own feelings of guilt. The second she thinks she needs to make you a blood brother in vendetta. Oh yeah. She's going to love you. And she's just going to love herself.

She didn't move when I returned with her clothing and dropped it on the floor inside the bedroom. I shut the door and stretched out on the sofa-bed with my bathrobe draped over me. Drifting off to sleep I decided to call a psychotherapist I knew in the morning and have him decide what ought to be done for Gloria.

When she came out of the bedroom it was before I called her.

She came out fully dressed and walking briskly toward the door. It was the brisk walking and the opening of the door which started to get me up. It was the slamming of the door behind her which really woke me. I jumped into a pair of slacks and a T-shirt and ran barefoot into the hall and downstairs and outside. It was a bright, sunshiny morning, not at all cold for May.

By the time I reached the street of course she was gone.

## 7.

**T**HAT MAY, the Indian Embassy was still in its temporary quarters on M Street a couple of blocks from Embassy Row. It was a big brownstone house which had

belonged to a retired general who had come to Washington to peddle his influence, if any, until they had found him one morning with an empty bottle of sleeping pills. He had died intestate and the Indian Ambassador had picked the place up for a song. It looked like a museum.

I found a parking slot about a block from the Weather Bureau and double-timed back up M Street. It was a peaceful Saturday morning with very little traffic, as if all the cars had gone down to the Tidal Basin to drive past the cherry trees. A panel truck pulled to the curb in the no-parking zone in front of the Embassy as I got there. It was a refrigerator white truck with blue Air France lettering on the side. Two fellows in white Ike jackets and blue ducks and wearing white caps with blue visors got out, stretched their muscles in the morning sunshine, and dropped their cigarette butts on the sidewalk.

I went over to them. "Little early in the day for you, isn't it?" I said.

"Rush order, Mac."

"Delivering or picking up?"

The bigger of the two Air France men looked me over. "Who wants to know?"

I took out my wallet and showed them my buzzer. They weren't impressed. I got a ten from the money compartment of the wallet, and before the bill came clear of the leather the big fellow said, beginning to smirk, "To do what?"

"For the jacket and the cap. And you get to sit this one out in the back of the truck while your buddy and I get to do the work."

They looked at each other. The little fellow seemed doubtful, but the big one thought it was a good way to start the day's work. A couple of minutes later he was ensconced in the rear of the panel truck with a knowing smirk on his face. The little fellow and I wrestled a trundle-cart down from the truck and wheeled it through the wrought-iron gate and around the side of the Embassy on a cobblestone drive which led to the delivery entrance. The driveway widened to a small courtyard in back of the brownstone house, with a delivery entrance and greenhouse in which exotic plants grew on one side and a garage big enough for half a dozen cars on the other.

"Why didn't you drive the truck back here?" I asked.

"Those were our orders," he said sullenly, and went over to ring the bell at the delivery entrance.

A butler let us in and told us where to find the cartons. There were about fifteen of them, and they were heavy. They were stacked in a library with most of the shelves empty, so I figured we were moving books. When my partner saw the size of the cartons, he went back outside for the trundle-cart. But when it clattered over the threshold the butler didn't approve, the little fellow in the visored cap managed to look politely exasperated, and we carried the cartons out one at a time.

If Gloria Sprayregan had got here before I did, she was doing a good job of hiding. And if anyone had recently rattled the skeleton in the Embassy closet, the butler didn't show it. He was as high strung as an over-fed Guernsey cow.

When we finished loading the cart and the butler closed the door behind us, I told my partner to grab himself a smoke. "Let's load up the truck first, huh?" he said.

I shook my head and walked across the cobbled courtyard to the garage while he leaned unhappily against the cartons piled on the cart. The garage was stucco painted to look like brownstone, two stories high, with a peaked roof and living quarters upstairs for the hired help. Two big overhead doors faced on the courtyard. They were locked. Around the side of the garage I found another door. This one was the kind that opens on hinges, and it wasn't locked. I opened it just enough to slip through, and closed it behind me.

There was a faint exhaust smell in the garage. It was of cinderblock construction with a concrete floor. Of the four vehicles parked in there, only one was a station wagon. It was a dark green Merc which I had seen before outside the Anacostia tavern. And it had a spotlight on it.

The spotlight was up front on a portable stand and it wasn't really a spotlight. It was one of those baking lamps used to bake the finish on a spot auto paint job. It glowed bright orange and left a black double after-image in the dim interior of the garage when I turned away from it. Whoever had placed it there had done so to bake a new finish on the left front fender of the Merc station wagon. I ran a finger lightly along the fender and could feel where it had been sledgehammered

back into shape. A smudge of green came off on my finger.

In front of the station wagon a big tarp had been spread on the concrete under an auto-wrecker's toolkit and the Merc's front bumper, which had been taken off and disassembled. The bumper was badly twisted and a new one, still in its packing tape, lay alongside it.

I started crouching to have a look at the bumper, but something touched my shoulder.

What little noise he had made coming up behind me had been swallowed by the hum of the baking lamp. He was my size and had a face but I couldn't see it with the black afterimage of the lamp before my eyes. With the light behind me he wouldn't be able to see my face at all. That didn't seem to bother him. He used his fingers like the jaws of a monkey wrench on my upper arm and said, "Well?"

"Pretty good job," I said.

He didn't make a speech but his fingers remained where he had put them. If I shook them off I had a hunch I was in for a fight.

"I used to be in the business," I said. "I thought I saw a baking lamp and came in to have a look."

"You couldn't have seen it from the courtyard."

It was the longest speech I could get out of him. He didn't have any accent I could identify, but he didn't speak like an American either. He hadn't budged since I'd turned around. He had cinderblocks for legs. The only way I could get by him was to knock him over. After a while I got the idea he wanted me to try it.

Instead I said, "It's a pretty good job but not good enough so you'd want the sheriff of Chesapeake County to have a look at it."

The first thing he moved was his legs. He did a little shuffle like a marcher who'd been out of step. Then his right shoulder went down and his fist swung up. I moved my chin and air went rushing by. Because he had hit nothing he followed through awkwardly, exposing his right side long enough for me to use the edge of my left hand against his kidney. He grunted and sagged to one knee, letting go of my right arm. I moved around him, heading for the door.

Then three things happened. The door opened and a woman in a sari was silhouetted there before it closed behind her. There was a click and white light glared

overhead and splashed harshly off the whitewashed cinderblocks. Then metal clanked behind me.

“Rukmini!” the woman shouted.

Rukmini was the other fellow in the garage. He wore jodhpurs and a crew-necked shirt. His absolutely bald head gleamed. He had been at the pile of tools on the tarp. He came at me in a crouching run with a sledge hammer in his hand.

He brought it up and around like a discus thrower. I did the only thing I could. I went down under it, all the way down. The sledge clanged against the body of the station wagon. I was at his knees, driving him back off balance before he could use the hammer again. We crashed back together into the baking lamp. The portable stand went over and the lamp shattered. Then he came down on top of me, chipping concrete with the hammer about six inches from my face. We rolled over on the floor. He had the flattest, deadest eyes I had ever seen. They looked like glass eyes in an expressionless plaster face a shade lighter than Ambedkar's. He never made a sound. He never even opened his mouth. All he wanted to do was kill me.

He might have, too, except for the hammer. He was strong. He was surprisingly agile. But he had a one-track mind. We rolled over and fought for the hammer. It was the only weapon he would deign to use. He didn't try to protect himself at all. I used my left hand to keep the hammer out of reach. He sent sparks flying from the concrete with it twice. I used my right hand, the fingers stiff and extended, against the side of his size-seventeen neck. Then I searched for his eyes with the stiffly extended fingers. I found his high, protective cheekbones with them. Then my finger slipped upwards, the middle finger going numb against his brow and the index finger encountering something soft. He dropped the hammer, rolled off me, and covered his face. I began to get up. On his knees, he groped blindly for the hammer. I kicked it away and he went crawling after it. There didn't seem to be any way of stopping him short of killing him.

I had forgotten about the woman. She said, “That's enough, Rukmini.” It didn't stop him. She said something in a language I had never heard. That stopped him. She said some more. He got up and lurched blindly toward the stairs at one end of the garage.

The woman was panting as if she'd had a part in our fight. Spots of color glowed on her tan cheeks. She wore a red sari flecked with silver. A woman without a superb figure shouldn't be seen in public in a tightly wrapped sari. She didn't have anything to worry about on that score. Her glossily black hair was drawn back and down tightly from the straight white line of her part to a bun at the nape of her neck. I didn't know if she was beautiful or not. Her standards weren't ours. But I do know she was the most striking woman I had ever seen, or I wouldn't have noticed her at all, not then. Then overhead I heard footsteps moving heavily and outside the trundle-cart clattered on cobblestone. Like that, the world came back.

She said throatily, "When you fight, you mean business."

I didn't say anything. Her eyes were amber and belonged in the Vale of Shalimar, halfway around the world.

"Rukmini usually is quite docile," she said. She was panting more than I was.

"You ought to keep him muzzled," I said.

"He's a kshatriya of an ancient warrior family. Once he's aroused . . . what did you do to arouse him?"

I grinned at her. She waited expectantly with a sheen of sweat on her upper lip. I said, "The night before last he ran two of us down in that station wagon of his. I pulled a dirty trick and managed to come out of it alive. He must have been plenty mad, all right."

"What are you talking about?" she said, the spots of color burning more brightly on her cheeks.

"You don't have to worry about it," I told her. "He's a member of your staff, isn't he? He's got diplomatic immunity. The law can't touch him for what he's done. Maybe if they find out about it they'll be able to suspend his driving license."

"How dare you speak to me like that! If Rukmini did anything wrong, we'll waive immunity. He'll answer to the law for it." She went on without a pause for breath. "Do you realize who you're talking to? Who are you?"

"Which is it going to be?" I said. "Do we waive Rukmini's immunity now, or do you read the riot act to me?"

She clenched her small fists. "I'm going to report you to Air France," she said.

That reminded me of the two men out front. My once



crisp white jacket was smudged, grease-stained, and torn at both elbows. I went out into the courtyard and along the driveway. It cost me another ten spot before I could square things. They drove away without thanking me for the money.

When I returned to the rear of the house the woman in the red sari was coming across the courtyard, the silk of her garment catching the sun and clinging to her firm body. She almost seemed surprised to see me. She wasn't mad now, or wasn't showing it.

"I see you're no messenger boy," she said. "Would you like to talk about it over a drink?"

I said breakfast would be better, so we went inside to a dining room big enough to feed all the private dicks in Washington. Servants brought me sausages and scrambled eggs on fancy plates under tin helmets. She watched me eat and had a cup of tea to keep me company. When I finished I leaned back with a cigarette and thought the best way to play it with her was to play it straight.

"Drum's the name," I said. "Your name is Sumitra Mojindar, you're the wife of the First Secretary here at the Embassy, and you figure in a case I'm working on."

"Yes?"

"Yes. I left the house before breakfast, something I almost never do, because I thought someone else was on her way over here and wanted to head her off."

"Who would that be?"

"That would be a woman named Sprayregan whose husband was run down and killed by your chauffeur. But I already told you about that."

"Really, Mr. Drum, if you insist on this wild story, I don't think we have anything more to say to each other."

I shrugged. There was nothing to lose, but probably nothing to gain. They were protected four ways from Sunday by diplomatic immunity, the law couldn't touch them no matter what they did, they were leaving the country in a day or so, and all I wanted at the moment was a reaction. I said:

"Sprayregan was a pepper who thought he had something big and tried to blackmail you with it. If you're telling the truth, he never got to you with it."

"No?" She seemed both amused and angry. "To whom did he get—and with what?"

I leaned across the table and looked into her amber eyes. I said, "The poor sap thought he had dynamite. He didn't have a damn thing all of Washington doesn't know, Mrs. Mojindar. Do I have to tell you what it is?"

She stood up. I stood up. "You had better go, Mr. Drum," she said. The pupils of her amber eyes were very small. Yellow flecks danced in the amber. I leaned across the corner of the big table which separated us and leered at her. It was the kind of suggestive leer that could draw only one response from her. She slapped my face without passion, came around the table and said, "I'll show you to the door, Mr. Drum."

"I know," I said with false brightness. "Maybe instead of telling you I ought to tell Mr. Mojindar."

"Maybe I ought to call Rukmini and have him finish what he started."

"Could he, Mrs. Mojindar?"

"I—I didn't mean that. If there's something you want . . ."

I held out my hand and rubbed the thumb along the index and middle fingers, palm up. She gave me a look which said, Dirty peeper with your dirty mind. Then she turned and walked ahead of me out of the dining room and through the hall to an enormous high-ceilinged living room which had probably once been two floors in the old brownstone house.

"Very well," she said as we reached the front door. "How much do you want?"

I walked back to the center of the living room. If I named a figure, that would be that. I took my time looking around the room. I didn't meet her eyes. There was an open staircase on one wall which didn't fit the oppressively heavy Victorian decor and had been built there as an afterthought. I studied the wood of the stairs. It was teak.

"Well?" she said impatiently. "How much?"

"I'd rather discuss it elsewhere," I stalled. I was wondering what she would do if she knew I was more interested in her reactions than her money, when the doorbell rang.

She looked at me. She didn't make a move to answer the door although it was less than twenty feet away. Some women have been trained like that, but they're not the type I do my drinking with. She said: "What with getting ready to move the Embassy back to its permanent

quarters and packing to leave for India and the Benares Conference, I'm afraid I won't have time to meet you elsewhere."

I didn't answer her. The butler came down the hall and went to the door without looking at us. We stood there, suddenly awkward, like strangers in an elevator. The butler opened the door and immediately backed into the room.

Gloria Sprayregan came after him. She wore the same black suit and held the same .38 in her hand. From where we stood it looked as if she wanted to put the muzzle in the butler's mouth. Then she waved the gun and stood still. He kept going back. Her eyes were glassy with liquor, which explained the delay. They stared at me, unblinking. Then they focused on Sumitra Mojindar and the gun muzzle came up.

"Take it easy, Gloria," I said, and took a step toward her.

The .38 jerked in my direction. "The dedicated Mr. Drum," she said. Her eyes were bleak and bitter. "You're dedicated, all right. You don't even wait till the body gets cold to cash in on what he died for. You're dedicated to yourself."

Gloria's bitter eyes snapped at Sumitra Mojindar. I took another step toward her. Only about a dozen feet separated us now. The butler, who stood between us and off to the left, was trembling. He was an elderly man with a wrinkled monkey-face, and you could actually see his legs shaking in the formal trousers he wore.

Gloria said, "You thought killing him would get you out of it, didn't you? Didn't you?"

I'll say this for Sumitra Mojindar: she never dropped the veil of inscrutability which she'd put on as soon as Gloria came through the door with her .38. That surprised me, because she'd been excited and angry by turns before. She said, "If you are referring to the man Mr. Drum claims was run down and killed by my chauffeur, I have been aware of the accusation for only a matter of minutes. I can assure you, though, as I have assured Mr. Drum, that the chauffeur's diplomatic immunity will be waived if he has any crimes to answer for."

Gloria's answer was a burst of laughter. The unexpected sound made the butler sob. His head was shaking as if he had the palsy.

"Wouldn't that be convenient for you?" Gloria said. "Wouldn't that be dandy if you had a patsy to take the blame? You think I came here to sell you my husband's reports for that?"

"What reports would you be referring to?"

At first Gloria didn't say anything. She laughed again, but her eyes were bright with unspilled tears. And she said, "Why don't you guess, Lady Mojindar?"

"I'm sorry, I couldn't possibly," Sumitra said coolly. She was either as innocent as September Morn or the best actress I had ever seen. "But," she went on, "if you have come here to threaten blackmail so crudely, I must warn you that Ayyangar and Mr. Drum have heard every word spoken. Surely you must realize that."

"Maybe I came here to kill you."

Even that didn't upset Sumitra. She said, "Then it's taken you a great deal of time to screw up your courage."

There was a long silence. It stretched out over a pit with black death at the bottom, and crossed over. Gloria wasn't going to kill anyone.

I took another step. I had covered half the distance between us. Gloria waved the .38 in my direction, but only halfheartedly. Her eyes were about ready to overflow. I thought she would be glad if I grabbed the gun and took her off the spot she'd put herself on. In another second I'd have done it.

But just then two shots rang out, and they didn't come from Gloria's gun. Gloria's mouth flew open and she swung around to face Ayyanger the butler. But Ayyangar hadn't done anything. He made a croaking sound and as if it were a command Gloria obediently dropped the .38, pawed at the glossy stain blossoming on the lapel of her black suit-jacket, and fell almost at Ayyangar's feet. The old man swayed but remained standing.

Sumitra reached Gloria before I did. That was because I turned around and looked up at the teakwood staircase. Ambedkar was standing near the top of it. He wasn't wearing the tennis sweater. He had on an open-necked sport shirt and a pair of contrasting slacks. He looked as deadly as a page boy in the Library of Congress, except for the gun in his hand. It was a small and fancy .25 automatic, a woman's gun. The muzzle velocity hadn't even been enough to knock Gloria off her feet. She hadn't fallen down until her heart stopped beating.

# 8.

AMBEDKAR'S story was that he'd put two bullets in Gloria's chest because she had threatened Lady Mojindar's life, was obviously high strung, nervous and under the influence of alcohol, had a gun in her hand and might have decided to use it at any moment. He stuck to his story and made himself look good sticking to it. He surrendered the .25, mother-of-pearl-handled automatic to me without a fight. He broke down and sobbed when Sumitra looked up and told us Gloria was dead. Her arm, he said. I only wanted to hit her arm. But when I went back downstairs and looked at Gloria, I saw the bullet holes. They had entered her upper chest on an angle from above within an inch of each other. At that range with a small hand gun with a low muzzle velocity that made the heart the only absolutely certain target of instant death, Ambedkar's story didn't look so good to me.

I extracted the magazine from the little automatic. It held three more soft-nosed .25 bullets. That made it look more like murder because Gloria's skull might have deflected the soft-nosed bullets or caused them to break apart without entering, so if Ambedkar wanted to shoot her down with the certainty of death there was only one place to aim for, and he had hit it.

The way it was set up, though, you'd never get the case inside a courtroom. Assuming Ambedkar, who had absolute diplomatic immunity as a member of a foreign legation to the United States, allowed it to go any further than a quiet coroner's inquest.

"Go ahead and tell me you didn't know I was about to take the gun away from her," I told Ambedkar.

He didn't bat an eyelash. The look of contrition and horror in his eyes stayed right where it was. In a broken voice he said, "But how could I be sure? How could anyone be sure? You heard her threaten the Lady Mojindar. I only wanted to shoot her in the arm."

"You waiving immunity on that one too?" I asked Sumitra.

“Don’t be childish, Mr. Drum. What happened is regrettable, but no court of law in this or any country could possibly hold Ranjit Ambedkar responsible.”

Nobody said anything for a while. Ayyangar the butler went over to the sofa and sat down with his knees spread and his head hanging down between his legs. He sobbed once, then the quiet, and the burden, of a mausoleum settled on the large room. I wondered why the Embassy staff hadn’t rushed in from the working wing of the building to investigate the two shots, then realized it was Saturday and the Embassy staff was home sleeping in bed or out walking in Rock Creek Park or taking a drive into the Virginia hills.

Then I heard footsteps. We all heard them, and even Ayyangar’s head came up. They were not heavy footsteps. They came down the hall from the dining room and a tall, very thin man wearing a silk-shot jacket which buttoned all the way up and didn’t look a foot across at the shoulders and hung down to his knees over a pair of gray jodhpurs paused in the archway.

This was my first look at Gaganvihari Mojindar, the First Secretary of the Indian Embassy to the United States. He was six feet tall and probably weighed a hundred thirty pounds in his winter coat. He looked eighty or ageless or twenty-five, depending on whether you noticed, respectively, the wrinkled skin and the wild shock of white hair under the Gandhi cap, the sad, wise Oriental eyes when they were seeing almost anything, or the same eyes when they were seeing Sumitra Mojindar.

He came into the room, but not very far into it. His Asian eyes became warm and youthful when they settled on Sumitra, and he said in a startlingly rich baritone voice, “My dear, I thought I heard—” Then he saw what was on the floor and his voice didn’t trail off, it stopped dead. His hand came up slowly as if it had all the weight of the world to lift and his sad, wise eyes for a moment seemed to mirror the world’s grief before going blank. I reached him before he fell. I carried him to the sofa. He was incredibly light and felt almost fleshless, like a bundle of stiffly starched clothes without anyone inside.

When I put him down on the sofa, Sumitra came over and said, “All right. All right, just leave him alone. Leave him alone. He’s a disciple of the Mahatma. He cannot stand violence in any form. He will be all right.”

I leaned over him. If he was breathing, it wasn't in any way you could see. Sumitra loosened his collar and took off his shoes. He made a little sound in his throat. One of his hands moved.

"I'm going to call the cops," I said. "Do you want me to stick around?"

Surprise made Sumitra's amber eyes grow big as she looked up at me. "No," she said. "Of course not. It would be—embarrassing. But you—"

"Then I'll call them and take off. Or why don't we let Ayyangar call them?"

The surprise was still in her eyes. "Ayyangar," she said, "call the police and tell them a woman has been killed here." Ayyangar walked unsteadily from the room. It was so quiet I could hear a phone being dialed in another part of the house.

"Why are you doing this?" Sumitra asked me.

I said, "How are you going to explain Mrs. Sprayregan?"

Her slim shoulders moved under the red silk sari.

"You'd have even more trouble with me," I said. "I can still talk."

I went through the archway and down the hall past the dining room. Ayyangar was just coming back. If he was surprised to see me leaving, he didn't show it. "Good morning, sir," he said. "But you could have used the front door."

I shook my head and told him I knew my place. He didn't offer to show me out the back door but went into the living room with a blanket for Mojindar.

When I reached the back door I opened it and took a breath of the clear spring air in the courtyard. Then I slammed the door and took off my shoes, leaving them there. When I got back to my side of the archway, Sumitra was saying:

"You fool! You fool, you didn't have to shoot her."

Ambedkar answered in his Oxford accents and with none of the respect a houseboy would show for the lady of the house. "Talk about your fools, you didn't have to tell Ayyangar to ring up the police."

"I didn't call anyone," Ayyangar said.

There was the sound of someone walking across the room.

"How is he?" Ambedkar asked after a while.

"You know these seizures, Ranjit. It's nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about? He saw her, didn't he?"

"Yes, and he must have seen the blood and he saw the gun in Mr. Drum's hand, but he can't be sure she was dead. Especially if she's gone by the time he revives."

"Just remember this," Ambedkar said. "I had to kill her. You know I had to kill her."

"Did you run her husband down as Mr. Drum said? Who was he? Why did you kill him?"

"He wanted twenty thousand dollars. He'd been following you for weeks."

Ayyangar made a nasal sound. Sumitra didn't say anything. Then Ayyangar said, "But even if he learned about Lady Mojindar's—shall we say, weakness—even if he learned about it . . . Oh, I see. You feared he might tell Sir Gaganvihari."

"That isn't it at all," Ambedkar said. "He followed Sumitra. And saw us together." He grunted and went on, "Somebody give me that blanket. I don't want to get her blood on me."

He began to move heavily. I figured he was carrying the body. I tiptoed down the hall, got my shoes and ran out into the courtyard with them. I went in through the side door of the garage and waited behind one of the sedans. Pretty soon Ambedkar came in, carrying Gloria Sprayregan's body wrapped in the blanket. He put it down on the floor and opened the tail gate of the Merc station wagon. Then he put the body inside. He scratched his head and made a face, then went to one of the other sedans and opened the trunk. He took the body from the station wagon and wrestled it into the trunk. He pulled down the lid, banging it shut. He displayed as much emotion as a door-to-door salesman loading his samples.

Lighting a cigarette, he went to the foot of the stairs and called Rukmini. The big chauffeur came to the head of the stairs and said, "Well?" in a happy, faraway voice. He swayed up there on the landing. I thought he was going to fall. I knew he was doped to the ears.

"Keep away from that stuff the rest of the day," Ambedkar said. "You have some driving to do tonight."

Rukmini nodded and lurched back to his rooms and his dreams. Ambedkar left the garage.

I waited half an hour. It was a long wait and I had only my thoughts for company. They were some crew.



Not Mojindar—not the First Secretary himself. I had heard a great deal about Gaganvihari Mojindar, as anyone in Washington would have. He was one of the leading statesmen of the Asian world and a sincere follower of his beloved Mahatma. His seizure might seem peculiar by Western standards, but Western standards aren't Asian standards and Gaganvihari Mojindar was a great man. How great, I was to learn later.

But it was the rest of them. A nympho wife, a hop-head chauffeur, a butler who could barely keep from keeling over in the presence of murder but who didn't call the cops when he'd been told to, and most of all a houseboy who called the First Secretary's young and beautiful wife by her first name, who apparently was having an affair with her which was just one among her many affairs, and who made decisions which the rest of them seemed inclined to follow—and who had, in cold blood, killed first Gil Sprayregan and then his wife.

After my half-hour was up, I got out of there. I went over a wall in the courtyard and out to the street and through someone else's back yard. No one tried to stop me. No one shot at me.

With luck, they would dispose of Gloria Sprayregan's body tonight. Someplace about fifty miles out in Virginia or Tidewater Maryland, I thought, where they'd never be connected with it.

I hoped they would get away with it. I had a hunch they would. . . .

I drove the De Soto over to my office in the Farrell Building and let myself in.

The other alternative, I thought, was the cops. You could go to the cops, I thought, but the only one that would put in a box was you.

Not that I wouldn't have been able to crawl out eventually, but figure it out for yourself. You do your best to help a scared and foolish guy and his scared and foolish wife out of a jam, and they both wind up dead, so your best isn't only not good enough, it leaves the kind of taste in your mouth that a three-week bender wouldn't wash out. Sure, you could go to the cops.

Go ahead, you tough shamus, I thought, go call the buttons. Go call them and watch how fast Ambedkar ducks behind his cloak of diplomatic immunity.

But of course I wasn't going to call the cops. I could have called them from the Embassy and hung around

for the wrinkle-suited men from Homicide. I'd already made up my mind back there. Now I was only batting it around to make myself feel better. Tough shamus, I thought. A fat lot of good you did them.

I took out the office bottle and belted it twice, once to Washington in the spring and once to the ghost of Gil Sprayregan's long slide. Then I picked up the phone and dialed it.

Priscilla Varley surprised me by answering it herself.

"This is Drum," I said. "Does the offer still stand?"

"Of course it does, Mr. Drum! And I can't tell you how delighted I am."

We decided I couldn't hope to leave with Stewart Varley today, but she thought her father-in-law could cut the red tape for me so I could catch a Pan-Am World Airways flight on Monday. She hung up telling me how delighted she was again.

There was nothing in the Sunday papers about Gloria Sprayregan. I read all of them.

Monday morning Priscilla Varley called and told me to pack. She delivered my visa and Pan-Am ticket to me in person. She even saw me off, but no bands were playing.

## 9.

STEWART HOFFMAN VARLEY spoke effusively three days later. "So it's really you. Come on in and get a load off. Drink?"

He led me into his room at the Pilgrim Hotel in Benares, India. "Hot as a son of a bitch, isn't it?" he asked, pouring lemon squash from a pitcher and spiking it with gin. A big ceiling fan turned sluggishly. It was the nearest thing to air-conditioning they had in Benares. They also had burning ghats on the banks of the Ganges, where the dead were carried and the living dead dragged themselves to be burned to ash and strewn into the waters of the Holy Ganges, and they had two million Hindu pilgrims crowding the pilgrim road every year and a quarter of a million natives to fleece them, and they had fakirs and

snake-charmers with hooded cobras, and they had sacred blue langur monkeys and the sacred bony cows, and they had mango trees and heat and stink and dust and this year, as an extra added attraction here in this city of death, for death, and by death's door, they had a conference of twenty-one Afro-Asian nations as if to prove that life could go on somehow in a city dedicated to the rites of death. They had all that and a lot more, but I hadn't sorted out my impressions yet.

I drank spiked lemon squash with Stewart Hoffman Varley, and he said, "Nice trip out?"

It was an inane question, for all I'd seen on the way out was a three-day string of airports stretching from Washington and New York to London, Brussels and Munich in Europe, and Istanbul, Beirut, Basra, Karachi, Delhi, Calcutta and finally Benares in Asia. But inane or not, Stewart Varley managed to ask it with his usual exuberance, an exuberance which went with a smile which, as usual, sat awkwardly on his gaunt, grave face.

I made an appropriate remark and followed him to the window, where he stared down at the crowds in the street below. Sweat had plastered his shirt to his back. I mopped the back of my own neck with a sodden handkerchief and waited for him to turn around. Coming from the Benares airport, I'd had enough of those pilgrim crowds for a while. My taxi, an ancient Ford which had been around when I wasn't old enough to know there were Indians any place but in the western U.S.A., broke down midway between the Panch Kosi Pilgrim Road and the hotel, so I'd walked the rest of the way with a couple of cowhide valises, eating the dust of those crowds and thinking they'd probably stamp me to death if they knew what my valises were made of.

Varley swung around to face me. Ice clinked in the bottom of his glass, then melted so quickly in the fierce heat you could actually see it getting smaller. Varley said, "Doesn't it kind of get you?"

"Doesn't what kind of get me?"

"Those crowds down there, the noises, the smells—man, the feel of it! Just outside that window, waiting to be explored, to be known, the heart of timeless Asia, the mysteries of the East, if you're lucky, the Peace That Surpasseth All Understanding . . . Okay, okay," he said, smiling. "You don't have to look at me that way. I know it's why you're here."

"It bother you?"

"Hell, no. But don't get the idea Priscilla wears the pants, because she doesn't. Maybe she knows what she's doing, though, because I know I've been looking too hard for something and I'm still looking and when I look I've been known to be careless."

"Your wife called what you're looking for faith."

"Okay then, faith. I don't expect to find it here, Drum. If I were frank with myself, I probably don't expect to find it anywhere, but I'll be looking. I've got to keep looking." He grinned engagingly and a little shyly as if the dead-seriousness of what he'd said embarrassed him. He told me, "That's where you come in."

"Yeah," I said doubtfully. "Want me to be frank?"

"Of course."

"Your wife is paying me to protect you from yourself, from the lure of the timeless East, as she put it, and from Sumitra Mojindar and her hatchetman. The pay is damned good and I intend to earn it."

My knowledge of his extramarital activities didn't seem to bother him. He whistled and said, "She never let on she knew about Sumitra. She's a wonderful woman, Drum. I don't deserve her."

I ignored the way he was airing the wash and asked him, "Is Sumitra Mojindar something special to you or just a way of exercising the libido?"

He grinned again. He did it so often I found myself fighting an impulse to make him throw it on the floor and step on it. "Exercising the libido," he said. "That's pretty good. Yes, you might call it that."

"And if I told you to keep away from her for your own good?"

"I'd say advice was cheap."

"Even that kind of advice—to the official U.S. Observer at the Benares Conference?"

"Ouch! You make it sound so grim."

"The way I hear it, you went out after the job. They didn't force it on you."

For the first time he bristled. "I'll do my job."

"Good. And I'll do mine."

"Want some advice yourself, Drum?"

"Only if I can afford it."

He grinned again. "It's cheap, just like yours." He finished his second drink and went to the wall hooks for his tie and white-linen jacket. There wasn't any closet

in the room. "Here it is: do your job, and good luck to you. Maybe I can use your help. But if I happen to find what I'm looking for here, don't try to drag me off. You wouldn't be able."

"Think you're going to find it?"

"Unfortunately, no. Although there's a sadhu—that's a holy man—on the Panch Kosi I've been wanting to meet. You might put him down in your notebook, if you keep a notebook."

"Why the tie and jacket?"

"Press conference in the lobby in about ten minutes. I'm still kind of surprised anyone would want to interview me. We Western Observers aren't exactly the most popular figures in Benares these days. There's a feeling it should have been Asia for the Asians, but Gaganvihari Mojindar figured the Asian nations had nothing to hide from the rest of the world and in fact would have reason to be proud of their accomplishments here in Benares, so he rammed his plan for Observers through the pre-conference meetings in a one-man crusade that was more a tribute to his own popularity than anything else. Anyway," he added lamely, "most of the reporters waiting for my words of wisdom are Western. Want to join me?"

Before I could answer, the window broke.

It broke because someone in the crowd outside had heaved a rock through it. The rock was the size of an Idaho potato, lost much of its momentum in the process of shattering the window glass, just managed to reach the far wall, struck it, fell to the rush-carpeted floor, and rolled to a stop in the center of the room.

Neither one of us jumped quite high enough to reach the ceiling.

I went to the window and leaned out, avoiding the shards on the sill. The crowds surged by in yellow swirls of dust. There were thousands of people out there, all heading for just one place, the bank of Holy Ganges about half a mile up the crooked street. Most of them were half starved. They wore filthy rags and were desperate enough to believe almost anything and try almost anything. Any one of them could have thrown the rock and disappeared immediately in the noise and confusion.

"Take a look at this," Varley said. He was holding the rock in his hand. Someone had scratched into its surface in English, WE DON'T WANT YOU HERE.

"I was beginning to think I had B.O.," Varley told me.

“Most of the other Western Observers already got theirs. Well, coming?”

Since the rock seemed to amuse more than frighten him, I didn't get any gray hairs over it either. Varley was that kind of guy. I went downstairs with him. There were rush chairs and some ornate and well-worn pieces of teakwood furniture in the lobby and about a dozen people in Western-style clothing, most of them sipping lemon squash and looking uncomfortably hot.

The press room was too small for the twenty or so reporters crowded into it. Someone introduced Varley, and he began to answer their questions. Since the Benares Conference didn't get underway until the weekend, the questions had to do with Varley's impressions of India. His impressions were of the timeless mysticism of the East, of Hindu piety, cycles of worlds, Mogul and Dravidian architecture and something or other about the University of Benares. My impressions were of heat, dust, filth, starvation and squalor. I guess his impressions made better copy than mine did. Anyhow, they helped explain why he was United States Observer at the Benares Conference and I was a private richard grubbing for a living.

Then I decided to go out and have myself a drink, something which foreigners were permitted in dry Benares. I wasn't the only one. A girl reporter came out after me and closed the door. Then she surprised me by saying:

“Chet! Chet Drum! I *thought* it was you in there. I couldn't believe my eyes. What on earth are you doing in Benares?”

I stared at her. My eyes saw a trimly attractive blonde with short-cropped hair, brown eyes which weren't enormous but weren't mousy either and promised more intelligence and more curiosity than most men like to cope with, a vividly red mouth against tanned skin, and the kind of small-hipped boyish figure that looks better on a tennis court than at a formal ball and was now wearing a sensible lavender dacron dress, no stockings, and low-heeled shoes. That was what my eyes saw, but my mind went flipping back three years through the pages of time to the memory of an innocent little affair which had almost grown to a thing until we both had decided to call it off. It was an unexpectedly poignant memory, so I didn't say anything for a minute, not trusting my voice.

I reached out for her hand, started to shake it and

wound up squeezing it. We smiled at each other while her eyes grew big and a little misty.

"I was looking for a drink, Marianne," I said finally.

She took my arm and moved alongside of me in that jaunty stride of hers. She was the perkier girl I'd ever known, and with the assortment of femme fatales you meet in my business it was more than enough of a recommendation. Her arm slipped around my waist and I put mine around hers as we walked. She smiled up at me like a little girl about to leave for summer camp. By the time we walked that way into the Pilgrim Hotel's European Bar, the three intervening years had dropped away. We sat down at the bar and settled for Scotch because they didn't have bourbon.

"D.C. and Hall Mountain, California," I said lightly, "wasn't it?"

"Hah! As if you didn't know."

"Still in the writing racket?"

"Uh-huh. I'm covering the Benares Conference on assignment for *Life*."

I toasted her with my Scotch-on-the-rocks. "You," I said gravely, "have come up in the world."

"Look who's talking. The peripatetic Mr. Chester Drum." She smiled and we clinked glasses and drank. "You know," she said, "I've been following your checkered career in the papers. Did you know that *Time* once did a piece on you? They called it 'Nero Wolf and His Seven-League Boots' or something ilke that. It was about the time you flew down to South America and started a revolution or ended a revolution or something. But I'm glad you don't look like Nero Wolf."

That called for another Scotch. After that we got pretty hungry and the barman knew of a place called the Occidental, Benares' only decent restaurant, he assured us, where we could get good Occidental food. We went over there in a cab. The food was good, but it wasn't Occidental. We had roghan josh, which is mutton in ghee and curds. We had lentils and chutney in little brass bowls on a brass tray on which the chunks of mutton were heaped, served by a thin old waiter whose teeth were black from chewing betel nut. And mostly, we had the kind of un-sniping small talk which is rare in the circle I travel in.

Then, while we rolled our paan in betel leaves and tried chewing it and told each other how silly we looked,

Marianne said: "I haven't asked you what kind of case you're on."

"No. You haven't."

"Okay. I can take a hint. For now."

"*Life* wouldn't be interested in it, Marianne."

"Is that so? It's my guess *Life* would be interested in anything that brings you to Benares."

"No, they wouldn't."

She ignored that. "If I can take a hint, I can also give one. If you don't watch out you're going to get yourself followed by a newshen looking for a story. My hint is, don't fight the inevitable."

She looked so solemn, with a little frown puckering her brow, that I couldn't help smiling. First it made her frown some more, then it made her smile. She said, "Besides, Marguerite Higgins followed an army around and look what happened to her. *She* married a general."

"All right, inevitable," I said, "you're leaking paan all over the table. Let's get out of here."

The sun had gone down. The tropic night was hot and dry, but most of the Benares pilgrims were now indoors, so the dust had settled and you could see a thin sliver of moon that hung low on the horizon. Marianne said the *Life* bureau in Calcutta had supplied her with a car. We went over to the Pilgrim Hotel for it. The car was an Italian Fiat. I did the driving, but Marianne showed me the road that cut south from the heart of Benares to the river, two or three miles below the city. We got out and walked on the sandy bank. From where we stood you could see the red glow of the burning ghats upstream, but the wind was blowing north, so the sweetish burning smell which hung over Benares like a pall hadn't followed us from the city.

We walked about a mile, holding hands and not talking. Marianne had left her shoes in the car. Every once in a while our hips brushed. She had the kind of ingenuous sex appeal most girls would give their right arms for.

We sat down on the hard sand. I lit a pair of cigarettes and gave her one. She took one drag, then flipped the butt into the water. "Who wants to smoke?" she said.

She came into my arms as if we'd never purposely lost track of each other. Her skin was cool. A light breeze blew off the water. "Oh, Chet," she whispered. "I don't care why you're here. I'm just so darned glad you came, I could cry. It's been such a long time . . ."



There was jasmine in her hair. There were tears in her eyes. She made every girl I have ever known seem cheap and tawdry by comparison.

In a little while she said, "Go slow, Chet. Go slow."

So we took it up to the point that the kids in the borrowed jalopies back in the States, drunk on malted milks, reach, and we cut it off there. We stayed on the sand a long time, watching the red glow fade from the water.

It was wonderful just being with her. It was the kind of unexpected interlude that helps you through all the bad times in life. But still, I'm glad we didn't know then what was waiting for us in Benares.

## 10.

IT BEGAN innocently enough Friday morning, when Varley poked his head into my room at the Pilgrim Hotel and said, "Hey, ayah, want to come out to the Panch Kosi with me?" An ayah is a nursemaid. His manner was light, but knowing Varley that probably meant he was on his way to steal the crown jewels.

"The holy man?" I asked.

"Right. The Panch Kosi Sadhu. The Pilgrim Road Holy Man. He's something of a celebrity, even among ascetics. You coming?"

I nodded, and finished shaving while he waited. We went downstairs together and had a Continental breakfast served with tea instead of the usual coffee or cocoa. "I first got interested in the Panch Kosi Sadhu years ago," Varley told me. "I once read a book about him. His name was Rajeshwar Mehta, but nobody's called him that for twenty years. He's just the Sadhu. Far as anyone knows, he hasn't budged from his spot near a big old pipal tree on the Panch Kosi for twenty years. The funny part of it is, before that time he was active in politics as well as a fabulously wealthy member of an old Brahmin family. He gave all of it up for his pipal tree."

"What does he do out there?" I asked.

"Contemplates. The contemplative life is the best life,

according to yoga principle. It isn't the only good life, but it's the best."

"You sound interested."

"I am interested. I've wanted to come to India ever since I heard of the sadhu. Don't you see, Drum, there's a man who—well, like I did—had everything. Wealth, position, you know. And threw all of it over for the life of yoga contemplation. I want to meet him, Drum. I want to talk with him. I want to learn if he's happy. I want to find out what he's thinking."

"Twenty years in one position under a pipal tree, what the hell can he be thinking? His thoughts must be going around in circles."

He showed me his teeth in a supercilious smile. "You don't get it. You don't get it at all. A Hindu sadhu renounces the world not to get lost in a maze of introspection but to leave all desire behind and, through serene, impersonal contemplation, arrive at a vision of the life force of the universe, the Brahma."

I held up my hands as if to fend him off. "I'll stick to sleuthing," I said, but then a voice behind me informed us:

"Well, *I* think it's fascinating."

I turned my head. It was Marianne, looking crisp and perky-pretty in a pale rose sister of yesterday's lavender dress.

"Join you for coffee?" she asked.

I grinned. "It's tea. You've already joined us in spirit, haven't you?"

"Newshen's prerogative. So *this* is why you're in India!"

I took refuge in a stage groan and said, "Marianne Wilder, this is Stewart Hoffman Varley, U.S. Observer to the Benares Conference. Mr. Varley, Marianne's the *Life* reporter in these parts. I have a hunch there'll be three of us in that party out to the Panch Kosi."

Marianne offered her hand, and Varley shook it. Marianne had a cup of tea with us, Varley signed for the check, and the three of us went outside together.

The heat of the new day in Benares always hit you right between the eyes. It was a solid hot invisible wall with a dry wind blowing sand particles through it. Here in late May there was still almost a month to go before the rainy season got underway, so that meant every day was somewhat hotter and drier than the impossibly hot and dry day before. It didn't seem to bother the pilgrims,

though. There was no letup in the long, ragged files of the sick, the maimed and the leperous who trudged through the dusty streets to the ghats on the riverbank. For a car, they made the going as bad as bumper-to-bumper traffic.

Varley had a car, courtesy of the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi. It was a chauffeur-driven sedan. The driver was a quiet American boy named Meadows, who seemed more impressed with a *Life* reporter and a private eye than with the State Department's representative in Benares. He navigated through the crowds with his horn and more gear-shifting than a truck going over the Continental Divide. Finally he found a comparatively uncrowded side street which took us out to the Pilgrim Road.

This was the widest, best highway in the area. It circled the city of Benares on a thirty-six-mile course through flat, parched plains where oat grass waved in the hot wind and almond trees stood like gnarled, ancient sentries. Pretty soon we passed the University of Benares, where the Afro-Asian Conference would be held. It was a several-acre heap of ornate north-India buildings.

Beyond it every two hundred yards along the mango-lined Panch Kosi were Hindu shrines for the pilgrims who, in trucks, oxcarts and on foot did their sacred circumambulation of the holy city. They wore rags. They moved slowly, in small clots. Most of their faces had been burned dark by the fierce sun. Most of them were skinny to the point of emaciation, and wore no shoes. You heard the shuffling of their feet. You heard a steady hum which you supposed was talking or groaning or praying or all three. It was an oddly frightening sound, like the pounding of a down-east surf to someone who has never heard the ocean. It made you think: drop a match, any kind of match. Light a spark in this mob, brother, and duck. . . .

The Panch Kosi Holy Man's pipal tree stood three miles beyond the university. As Meadows slowed the car I saw Varley light a cigarette and immediately put it out, then breathe deeply through his mouth as if he'd just come up from under water. He saw me watching him and tried on his usual grin, but it slipped off his gaunt, grave face almost immediately. I don't think Marianne was aware of his tension; she was staring out the window and scribbling notes in a steno pad furiously.

We got out of the car. Meadows lit a cigarette and

waited. We had parked at the edge of the Panch Kosi about seventy-five yards from where the grotesquely twisted limbs of the pipal tree were silhouetted against a sky of brass. The tree stood on a little sandy hummock with stunted hill bamboo growing in patches around it. There was a crowd of perhaps two hundred people up there on the hill, keeping their distance respectfully from a masonry platform which had been built around the sacred fig tree. On this platform stood the holy man.

Actually, there were two figures on the platform. As we drew closer, I saw them clearly. One of the figures was a girl. She wore a white cotton garment which the hot wind pressed against her body as she stretched her arms up toward the sadhu's face. In her hands she held a bowl of brass and a spoon. She was feeding the sadhu.

He was an elongated ascetic figure like something out of a painting by El Greco. He was very tall. He wore a saffron rag around his loins. He was absolutely motionless, not even moving his jaws although he seemed to be eating the food the girl spooned into his slack, thin-lipped mouth. He stood with his arms high over his head, perfectly still, the extended fingertips inches from a branch of the pipal tree. He had long white hair. His skin was burned almost black by continuous exposure to sun and wind. It stretched like parched leather over his protruding bones. His large, wide-spaced eyes stared over the heads of the crowd, on over the Panch Kosi with its dust and its pilgrims, over the sheen of Ganges water you could see from the hummock and out to something you could not see, something which the Panch Kosi Holy Man had been seeking for twenty years, something beyond the sight of men, beyond the world and beyond time. Tears hung on the lower lids of his eyes. They were suspended there, as he was suspended. I never saw them fall. I never even saw him blink.

Stewart Varley walked to him as in a dream. I stood back in the crowd with Marianne. There were angry mutterings. Then there was no sound at all except the faint noise of the spoon against the brass bowl the girl held and the distant hum from the Panch Kosi.

Varley went to the very edge of the masonry platform. He gazed raptly at the sadhu a long while without speaking. His back was to us. When he finally spoke, his voice held awe and surprise and wonder, as if he had found something which until this moment he had feared did not

exist. "Holy sadhu," he said, "I have come halfway around the world to see you. Where I live I have wealth and position, as once you had. But I seek the wisdom which lies beyond the wealth and the desire of man—if such wisdom exists. Will you speak with me, holy sadhu? Will you tell me of it?"

Marianne was writing in her steno pad. I took the pad away from her, tore off the last page and told her before the look of bewilderment on her face could turn to anger, "You can't use that, and you know it. The guy's sick. He's hypnotized himself. Or maybe he isn't sick. Maybe we're the poor saps who can't understand. But at least it makes a little sense to us because we're here. You won't laugh at Varley when we go back to Benares, will you?"

"No. No, of course not. What kind of a person do you think I am?"

"No matter how you write it, your readers would laugh at him. Or they'd feel sorry for him, and that's worse. No matter how you write it. Don't you see?"

"Is that why you came to India, to protect Varley from himself? Or from the press?"

I looked at Varley. He stood as still as the sadhu, waiting for an answer. I thought of the job Priscilla Varley had given me. I thought of Gil Sprayregan and his wife. I couldn't really answer Marianne's question; I wished to hell I could. Protecting Varley wasn't enough. Finding out why the Sprayregans had to die would help, but that wasn't enough either. Did I expect to make Ambedkar pay for what he'd done? Nero Wolf and His Seven-League Boots, I thought. Ambedkar? Hell, it wasn't only Ambedkar. It was Sumitra Mojindar, too, and her hopped-up chauffeur. I'd need those seven-league boots, all right. And I'd need the Royal Mounted Police and every Irish cop in Boston and the Bengal Lancers.

I snapped out of it without answering Marianne's question. By then she wasn't waiting for my answer anyway. Her attention was riveted on the sadhu's masonry platform, where things were happening.

The sadhu hadn't moved. He showed no sign of having heard Varley. The girl had finished feeding him and was watching Varley now. She was very young, no more than sixteen or seventeen, and quite pretty.

Varley said, "Answer me. You've got to answer me. I know you speak English. I know who you are. You're

Rajeshwar Mehta and you probably speak English better than I do."

The sadhu remained a statue against the brassy sky.

"Please," Varley pleaded. "Someone must have told *you*. Someone must have showed *you* the way."

Maybe he hadn't realized it, but he was shouting. The crowd around the pipal tree was edging toward him. A big bald man with the white crescent of Siva on his forehead shook his fist and yelled something in Hindi. A woman jabbered.

Someone nudged me from behind. I whirled, ready for a fight, but it was Meadows. "I think we'd better pull out of here," he said. Then he whispered, "What's the matter with him, anyway?"

"Take Miss Wilder back to the car," I told him. "Wait for us. With the motor running."

Marianne gave me an exasperated look. "If you think I—" she began.

"Take her back by force if you have to," I told Meadows. Then I went forward through the crowd.

Varley had reached up to touch the sadhu's leg. There was no expression whatever on the girl's face, but she had swung around to look down at Varley from the platform. The big fellow with the Siva crescent had come up behind Varley. He held a walking stick in his hand. He raised it over his head.

I grabbed his arm. His biceps was like a plank of wood. He pivoted and we looked at each other. He shouted something at me in Hindi. His face was dark red. He was so mad, saliva flew from his lips.

I said, "Try using that stick and I'll break it across your back."

I don't know whether he understood me or not. Plenty of Indians can speak English. He shouted something back at me. There was a chorus of similar shouts from the crowd. Then, suddenly, they were stilled as if someone had cut off the sound track.

The girl on the platform had put her small foot against Varley's chest. And the sadhu had moved.

One of his arms came down, the gnarled hand resting on the girl's shoulder. She cried out, dropping the brass bowl. She fell on her knees before the sadhu, but his hand remained where it was, still gripping an invisible shoulder.

The whole crowd had fallen to its knees, and a wailing

sound rose over the hummock like a ground swell. Clots of other pilgrims, robes streaming behind them, came running toward the hill of the Panch Kosi Sadhu to prostrate themselves before the miracle of his movement.

I looked up at the sadhu and thought I saw a twinkle in his eyes. I touched Varley's arm. He jerked around, his eyes badly out of focus. Using the sadhu as a point of concentration, he'd hypnotized himself. He swayed toward me. I shook his arm and all at once he came out of it. His face was bathed in sweat.

"We're getting out of here," I said.

He came with me docilely.

Marianne was standing outside the embassy car with the door opened. Meadows sat behind the wheel, ready to roll. After Varley climbed into the car, Marianne told me: "Someone in a jeep's watching us."

I didn't think it meant much. Everybody was watching us. Marianne got into the car and I looked around. There was a jeep parked about thirty feet behind us on the edge of the Panch Kosi. Its lone occupant wore white dhotis and a shirt. At first I didn't recognize him. The only time I'd seen him before he'd been wearing jodhpurs.

He was Sumitra Mojindar's chauffeur, Rukmini.

"Okay," I told Meadows.

We drove away. Rukmini didn't follow us. Marianne sat staring out the rear window of the car until a curve in the Panch Kosi hid the holy man from view.

I gave Varley a cigarette. This wasn't the time to tell him if he pulled a stunt like that again he could forget all about being the United States Observer at the Benares Conference. His hands were shaking violently. "I'm going to be all right," he said. "I'm going to be all right now."

## 11.

**I**N THE AFTERNOON I borrowed Marianne's car and drove out to the University of Benares on the Panch Kosi Pilgrim Road. Marianne surprised me by not asking to come along, then I realized she wanted to get her jour-

nalistic claws into Varley without interference. I couldn't blame her, but I hoped she would use some discretion on what she cabled back to the States as copy.

The chokidar at the University told me that some of the delegates to the conference had already moved into the settlement of masonry bungalows provided for them, but when I asked him if the Mojindars had arrived he told me, "That, sahib, I do not know." For a watchman, he was armed to the teeth. He wore a holstered automatic and carried a rifle slung over his shoulder and a brass-bound lathi club. I could almost feel his eyes boring into my back as I made my way on foot to the slate-roofed cluster of houses.

A trio of Oriental kids was playing in the first street I came to. One of them wore a shirt as protection against the fierce sun, the other two were naked. "Mojindar?" I asked them. "India sahib?"

The one in the shirt giggled. One of the others looked scared. The third, who was about six years old, said in English as good as mine, "The house of Sir Gaganvihari Mojindar is the fourth on the left, this street."

I thanked them and tried it.

Sumitra Mojindar came to the door herself. She had changed her sari for white shorts and halter. A sheen of sweat glistened on her face and flat, bare midriff. A tendril of hair hung down in front of her face, and she brushed at it.

Then she recognized me. If I expected cart-wheels, I was disappointed. Sumitra Mojindar still had her composure. For a split second I saw white all around her incredible amber eyes, and that was all.

"Mr. Drum, isn't it?" she said. "You must forgive my appearance, but a sari was not made to do housework in, and it seems we arrived before the domestic staff."

"You didn't arrive before Rukmini."

"Is that supposed to mean something? As a matter of fact, Rukmini and Ambedkar arrived even before we did, but they're being released from their domestic duties during the conference."

"That right? Reward?"

"Mr. Drum, I find your inclination to smirk at the things I say most annoying."

"Then why don't you call the chokidar?"

She was a girl who maintained her composure no matter what, but she was a girl who didn't like to be badg-



ered. The two traits fought it out for a moment, her fists clenching and her eyes darkening. Then she said: "Come in, please, Mr. Drum. I don't think this costume I'm wearing would appeal to some of the neighbors."

I couldn't resist one more dig, because if I was going to get through Sumitra Mojindar's composure at all that seemed the way. "I'll bet the First Secretary isn't exactly wild about it either."

She slammed the door behind me harder than necessary, and I followed her into a pleasant, rattan-furnished living room. Then she wheeled suddenly and said, "I am a Malabar woman, Mr. Drum. Unlike the rest of the women of my country, we Malabar women were never considered an inferior species of animal. Does that answer your question about the First Secretary? Or anything else?" She paused. I didn't say anything. She went on: "As for Ambedkar and Rukmini, they have been released from work because by Indian standards the pay they receive in Washington has made them wealthy men, so they would consider it degrading to perform the same functions here. Was there anything else?"

She didn't ask me to sit down. The room seemed in pretty good shape. She'd left a broom leaning against one wall.

I said, "And Ayyangar?"

Her eyes narrowed. She almost pouted. "He was a sick man. His heart. He was so excited about returning home. He was born in Benares, you see. He died in his sleep our last night in Washington."

"Wasn't that convenient?"

She picked up the broom. I thought she was going to hit me with it, but she bent her shapely torso to the task and began sweeping the rattan rug. She swept right up to my shoes and looked up at my face from three inches away. Her voice was soft and controlled, but it was sitting on mayhem, holding it down. "Stop insinuating. If you want something, say it."

"Forget it," I said. "Just tell the First Secretary I'm here."

She hadn't expected that. She carefully returned the broom to where it was doing guard duty against the wall. She wore flat sandals and they whispered back across the rattan. "Do you have a cigarette?" she said.

I gave her one and lit it. She inhaled, letting the smoke trickle from her nose. Then she took my arm and

led me to a rattan sofa with palm-print upholstery. We sat down. She was facing me with her legs tucked under her and her bare knees touching my seersuckers about six inches above the knee. The rules of the game had changed.

She said, "Why did you come to India?" Before I could answer, she went on, "Because if you expected to blackmail me, that's stupid. You had your chance before the body was disposed of. You let us do it. You practically helped us. Now that it has been disposed of, there is no possible way of connecting us with it."

"Is that what you told your husband?"

She sighed. "My husband. Of course, it would have to be my husband. How much buys you off, Mr. Drum?"

I said, "I wasn't thinking in terms of money." Then came the part which, according to the reports I'd had in Washington, was supposed to make her roll over on the sofa. I grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward me. She came up on her knees against me. I kissed her. Her lips parted, and she began to squirm. It was nice work, but I didn't enjoy it. I began to think that was all Sprayre-gan had found, all he had died for.

Then her bare arm went around my neck. Her fingers moved in the short hairs at the nape of my neck.

And she jabbed the glowing cigarette against my skin. I jumped only half a mile.

We both stood up. She was panting, but smiling too. I rubbed the back of my neck. The smile wasn't for me. After a while she stopped smiling. There was controlled fury in her voice when she spoke. "I told you I am a Malabar woman," she said. "A Malabar woman is not made love to. A Malabar woman makes love. In the time of my grandmother, the women of Malabar took many husbands. Today it is not legal, but we are still the women of Malabar. Isn't that what your Mr. Sprayre-gan failed to understand?"

I shrugged. "He wasn't that dumb," I said. "He wasn't nearly as interested in your mating instincts as he was in your relations with Ranjit Ambedkar."

She didn't get it, or pretended not to. She continued on in the same tack. "Among the Malabese, there is no such thing as an over-sexed woman. Look at me, Mr. Drum." It was easy. "I like food, but you wouldn't call me overweight, would you? I enjoy sex, but . . . you see? Now, what was it you were going to tell my husband?"

He knows I am a woman of Malabar. He knows all about the women of Malabar. He understands me. Well?"

I grinned at her. "We're barking up two different trees, baby. Since we both know it, why don't we stop playing around and get down to business?"

She took the pack of cigarettes from the breast pocket of my seersucker jacket and lit another one for herself. "Yes, why don't we?" I was ready for almost anything, but not for what followed. Knowing nothing except that Sprayregan had stumbled onto something he didn't understand, something in which Sumitra Mojindar and Ambedkar were involved, I had taken the ball as far as I could. I had her worried, I hoped. The rest was up to her. She said:

"The day before you flew to India, Mr. Drum, my husband's office received a call from Mr. Stewart Hoffman Varley, Sr. Mr. Varley wanted a visa cleared through for you at once. The purpose of your visit to India, Mr. Varley said, was unofficially connected with the United States Observer team at the Benares Conference. He did not say more, but it satisfied my husband. That is how you received your visa.

"Further than that, Mr. Drum, I can only guess. But if, as you say, my penchant—misunderstood though it is—is known in Washington, so is the penchant of the U.S. Observer here at Benares, Mr. Stewart Hoffman Varley, Jr. May I hazard a guess that the older Varley hired you to watch after his son? May I further hazard that your visit here is entirely extracurricular, that you hold me responsible for the death of a man I never even met and a woman who, had she not been stopped, might have killed me, and that if, indeed, this man Sprayregan uncovered anything which could conceivably have me worried, you don't have the slightest idea as to its nature?"

"In short, Mr. Drum, you can just get out of here. You are a cheap man on a cheap mission. You don't frighten me at all." She was so close to the truth, and knew she was so close, she could afford to be arrogant. Her eyes were banked amber fires flecked with yellow, but under the surface calm they were deadly. I still had something, though. At least I thought I did. I said:

"Aren't you forgetting your husband?"

She tried a sneer on for size. It must have fit because she went on wearing it. "You said you were barking up a tree, Mr. Drum. You are. But you did not quote the

idiom of your language accurately. You're barking up a tree. It's the wrong tree, so don't you think it's time we took it away from you?"

I didn't quite say, "Oh yeah?"—but she was on her way to reducing me to that. She continued, controlling her voice now by holding it down to a tight whisper:

"Each year has seen my husband wedded more firmly to the doctrines of the Mahatma. For some time now that has come to include the shunning of all physical desire. Such a state of desirelessness, Mr. Drum, includes the shunning of sexual desire, even in a married man. My husband regrets that I cannot follow him in his search for what we call *moksha*, but as I have said, he knows I am a Malabar woman. I have not slept with my husband for two years, Mr. Drum. I tell you this so you will know, once and for all, that far from being blind to what I'm sure you have regarded as my extramarital escapades, he accepts them as necessary.

"So, Mr. Drum, you see you have nothing to tell my husband that he doesn't already know. Now, will you get out of here with your cheap insinuations, or shall I call the chokidar and have you thrown out?"

She went to the door. I followed her docilely. All I had left was what Mojindar had seen in Washington, and what he hadn't seen when he came out of his seizure. But it was too damned little. I didn't want to see Mojindar now. It wasn't enough to start a conversation with. It was less than nothing unless I could learn—and establish—why Sprayregan's snooping had worried Ambedkar, or whoever the little Eton-rowing-crew killer took his orders from, to the point of murder.

As I reached the door, it opened. Gaganvihari Mojindar came in wearing a tight-buttoned jacket and jodhpurs, with a Gandhi hat on his white hair and a briefcase in his hand. He gave Sumitra a fatherly forehead kiss and looked with faint disapproval at the costume she wore.

Mojindar looked at me with polite curiosity. "Pardon me," he said, "but haven't we met before?"

"Yes," I said.

He waited. There was mocking laughter in Sumitra's eyes.

"The hell with it," I said. "They'd tell you it was in a dream."

I got out of there and walked up the street. The chokidar leaned on his rifle, watching me drive away.

# 12.

**F**IVE or six bluebottle flies and Marianne Wilder were waiting for me in my hotel room at the Pilgrim Hotel. The flies were the thing you remembered most about Benares, after the stifling heat. Benares may have been an unhealthy city for humans, but it was great for flies. They were fat and glossy, and seemed to buzz around with all the insolence of the sacred cows' lowing. They fed on carrion, and since here in Benares carrion usually meant human carrion, they made you feel very mortal.

"I thought you were never coming back," Marianne said.

"If that's an invitation to dinner, it's accepted. But I thought by now you'd have Stewart Varley blurting out act three of his life story."

Marianne didn't smile. Some of the perkiness had gone out of her, but in the steady ninety-degree heat that was understandable. She said, "He isn't here."

"It's a free country—for Americans. Where'd he go?"

She lit a cigarette. Her hands shook a little, so I got her a salt tablet from the wall dispenser and made her drink it down with water. "Heat exhaustion," I said. "It can creep up on you in a place like this." But she made a face anyway.

She admitted she felt better. Then she said, "About an hour and a half ago the sadhu's girl dropped by at the hotel looking for Mr. Varley. We were in his room sharing spiked lemon squash and talking. I started pumping him down at the bar, but you can imagine how it is with other reporters poking around."

I mopped the sweat off my face with an already damp handkerchief and sat down on the bed. A bluebottle dive-bombed me, learning to its surprise that I was still alive, and flew disdainfully out the window. I looked at Marianne, who was lighting a second cigarette with the butt of the first.

"Anyhow, we went upstairs and in a few minutes the sadhu's girl came. She brought a pair of dhotis and a

white linen shirt for Mr. Varley. She never said a word, but he seemed very excited. He went behind a screen and changed. Except that his coloring was wrong, he looked like an upper-caste Hindu when he came out, and an ascetic one at that. You know, with his gaunt, serious face and all?"

"He just took off with the girl? Without saying anything?"

"It was eerie. I think the girl was dumb. I mean, literally—can't speak. He must have thought he wasn't supposed to talk because she wasn't, as if it was some kind of religious ritual. She looked at him in the dhotis and open shirt, and nodded. I tried to get him to wait, at least until you came back. He hardly even heard me. I ran downstairs after them. They didn't try to hide from me. They didn't have to. The crowd swallowed them up."

I sat perfectly still while she spoke, as you do when it is very hot and you can't seem to stop sweating. But sweat kept running down my face, my shirt felt sticky, and I probably could have fried an egg on the back of my neck.

I stripped to the waist and washed myself with tepid water from the cold tap, changed my shirt, and commenced sweating as soon as I put the new one on.

Marianne said, quite ingenuously, "You've got about the nicest build I've ever seen."

At first I didn't know what to say. Then I grinned at her, foolishly probably. Then I said, "Good thing. Makes up for my face."

Marianne ogled me. "I think you have a very nice face. Very masculine." I stood there. Marianne stared at me gravely, and giggled. "You should see your face now. You look so confused. You almost look shy. Well, what did you expect? Don't you think it's only fair a gal does some leering of her own once in a while?"

I said, "If this is a proposal—"

"What's the matter, didn't you ever ogle a gal without proposing to her?" She came over to me and lightly brushed her lips across my cheek. "Here. That's what it was all leading up to. I like you. I like you, Chet. It doesn't mean I'm proposing. It doesn't even mean I want to go to bed with you—at the moment. My goodness, I do believe you're blushing."

It was the heat, of course. She stood back from me. I didn't try to lay a hand on her. We looked at each

other and started laughing. Then Marianne said, "And besides, I had an ulterior motive. I wanted you to count ten—at least ten—before you decided what you were going to do about Stewart Varley. He's searching for something desperately. You know that, don't you?"

"His wife calls it faith. I think it depends on how you define faith. I think he's looking for a man he's lost somewhere along the line. Himself."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go after him. And see if I can at least find out where to get my hands on him."

A vertical furrow appeared above Marianne's pert nose. "Isn't that kind of presumptuous on your part?"

"It's what I'm being paid for."

"He's a grown man now. He shaves himself and everything."

"His wife's a grown woman. With a pretty good idea of how she wants to spend her money."

"I don't think I like you so much now."

"Listen, kid. You didn't see him in action the way I did. There's a boy who's going to get himself hurt. At least half of it is because he wants to be hurt. I'd rather earn my money looking af—ah, the hell with it. You going to let me use that overgrown motor scooter you call a car or do I phone down for a cab?"

"If I come along you can use it."

I said that would be all right. Ten minutes later we were driving out on the Panch Kosi.

From the Panch Kosi Holy Man's hill, you could see the blood-red sun-track on the Ganges three miles away. At the hour of sunset, the Panch Kosi was not crowded. The dust had settled. It was red. Even the sadhu's loin cloth and the robe the girl wore looked almost the color of blood.

Fifteen or twenty disciples of the sadhu clustered around the platform of the pipal tree. The sadhu's immobility and the utter calm of the sunset hour gripped them. They were like statues carved from the matrix of time.

A few yards off, beyond a stand of stunted hill bamboo, a smaller clot of disciples were wrapping a dead man in a white shroud. Very softly they were chanting the Hindu hymn for the dead. *Ram nam sat hai, satya bol gat hai. . . .* After a while they carried the corpse over to the pipal tree, and four of them held it up as high

as they could. The sadhu's girl touched the holy man's lips with her hand, and touched the dead man's shroud. Then the mourners marched off with the small shrouded figure and pretty soon all you could see was their dust on the Panch Kosi.

As long as we stood there and minded our own business, no one bothered us. Darkness came quickly, and time returned with it. Some of the disciples lit a fire, there was the odor of tamarind and lentils, something fluttered by overhead and a nightjar sang its song. After a long time the sadhu's girl went down to the cooking fire. She got a bowl for the Sadhu. She fed him and returned to the fire a second time, filling the bowl for herself and squatting a little way from the fire to eat.

"I'm going over there," I told Marianne. "Stay in the car."

"I—"

"Please don't argue. You'll stay?"

Far away, I heard the sound of a car. It either stopped or drove out of hearing. "Why should I, darn it?" Marianne protested.

I took her arm. We walked back toward the little Fiat. "Well, is somebody I don't know about paying you to protect *me*?" she asked angrily.

"Fellow named Drum," I said lightly. "He likes you."

She pulled her arm away from me, but got into the car. She stuck her head out the rolled-down window to say something else. Her face was only a vague shape in the darkness. Before she could talk I kissed her lips. Her palms touched my cheeks lightly. Her lips clung. Then she drew back inside the car. A match flared. Her eyes looked troubled in its light. She lit a cigarette and blew the match out with a plume of smoke.

"Just be careful, you great big lug," she said.

I went up the hill toward the cooking fire.

The sadhu's girl was still sitting by herself. If the others heard me coming, they didn't do anything about it. The girl was sitting up staring through a screen of hill bamboo at the fire. Her eyes gleamed with reflected firelight.

She jumped up like a startled jungle animal. She crouched there, glaring a little wildly.

"Don't be frightened," I said. "Please don't be. I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to talk. Do you understand English?"



She opened her mouth. I thought she was going to yell for help. It was warm, but a shiver seemed to pass over her body. She didn't make a sound and I remembered that Marianne thought she was mute.

"If you can understand what I'm saying, just nod your head," I said.

Her eyes opened wider. She nodded.

"You took somebody out here from Benares," I said, speaking slowly. "He was a friend of mine. Did you bring him to the sadhu?"

She nodded again.

"Where is he now?"

She stared at me.

"Do you know where he is?"

She nodded.

"But you don't want to tell me?"

A wind ruffled the flames and a shadow passed over her face. Then she nodded her head.

"Does he want to be—where he is?"

Again she nodded.

"Do you live here?" I asked. "Do you sleep here?"

She looked at me blankly.

"Or do you live in Benares?"

Her head moved up and down.

"And you can come and go as you wish?"

She could. I said, "You'll be seeing him again, the one you brought?"

She nodded.

"I am his friend. My name is Drum. Can you write?"

She looked at me haughtily, then beckoned with her slim hand. I went over to her. She squatted and with a twig traced something in the sand. She had written *Drum*.

"Good. That's my name. Remember it. I'm staying at the same hotel—the Pilgrim. If you need me, if he needs me—"

There was a sound at the fire. A voice called: "Aruna. Aruna!"

She got up quickly, and touched my arm, and looked into my eyes. She nodded her head earnestly, pointing down toward the Pilgrim Road. Heavy footsteps crunched across the sand and the matted chaff of hill bamboo. I ducked out of the circle of firelight and went swiftly down the hill.

When I reached the car, Marianne was gone.

At first I figured she had walked off into the dark-

ness a few yards. I called her name softly, then louder. Fear clutched at my throat and made my voice thick. A nightjar mocked me with its song. I circled the car twice, aimlessly. I called her name again. Suddenly it occurred to me that she might have decided to go up the hill after all. I ran back up there.

The sadhu's girl, Aruna, was poking the coals of the fire with a bamboo cane. Their fuel was dried dung, and the fire had an acrid stench. One of the men at the fire looked up at me. He climbed to his feet with an angry oath, came very close, glared at me, and shouted something. Aruna stood up quickly. She touched his shoulder. He jabbered something and she shook her head. Then he grabbed the bamboo cane out of her hand and swung it at me. It whipped down across my shoulder, whistling as it came. He lifted it to strike again.

I caught his wrist and forced it back. He was a big man, but his bony wrist was narrow and delicate. He cried out as I took the cane away from him.

His companions were on their feet now. They were muttering. They moved around us, shadows wavering in the firelight. One said in English: "You have no right to come here and disturb our devotions. You have no right."

"A girl," I said. "I'm looking for an American girl."

"The only girl here," he said coldly, "is Aruna, the sadhu's servant. We seek *moksha*. You will find none but men here, and none but the twice-born. Now go."

I looked at Aruna, then at the cane. The big fellow with the delicate bones was glaring at me and panting. Aruna slowly nodded. I dropped the cane and stalked down the hillside.

I heard a hoarse shout below me and started to run. When I reached the Fiat it was rocking like a banana boat in a gale. Two Hindus on each side had planted their feet and were rocking the little Italian car back and forth. It wouldn't take much of that to overturn the Fiat. Maybe it was their idea of nonviolence, but it wasn't mine.

The first man I reached was the one that counted. He was big and bald, had a Siva crescent on his forehead, and probably outweighed any two of his cohorts. His head swung around at me. His eyes narrowed, then widened with recognition. I grabbed the side of his jaw and continued his head around in the direction he had

started it. He either had to let go of the car or risk some dislocated vertebrae. He let go of the car, ducked his hairless head, and butted me.

I felt my own head snapping back. There was the salt taste of blood in my mouth. I was vaguely aware of the Siva man's three scrawny companions still rocking the Fiat, but without the big guy they weren't able to overturn it. When I stopped reeling backwards, the Siva man tried to butt me again. I took his head in chancery down against the side of my rib cage. He writhed. His feet slapped and scuffed at the sand. One of his hands dug for my groin, but I brought a thigh around for him to play with.

His head was completely bald, but it prickled with stubble. He probably shaved it. Pretty soon he began to get heavier. I did some more squeezing while he pawed at my legs weakly. When all his weight was hanging from his neck, I let go. He fell on his face in the sand and crawled up on his hands and knees like an exhausted swimmer. His head hung. When his three scrawny thugs saw what had happened, they went loping up the hillside.

I was going to ask him some questions, although I knew the answers wouldn't mean a thing. I was a dirty pig of a Westerner who had dared to defile their devotions. It didn't matter that a girl's life might have been up for grabs. I was a Westerner, I had done what I had done, and it was enough. I didn't see how there could be any connection between the Siva man and whatever had happened to Marianne. No one could have predicted we would drive out to the pipal tree.

I crouched to go through my routine anyway. Before I could open my mouth, I heard the sound of a car starting.

Distances and directions at night are deceptive, but I thought the car was somewhere on the Panch Kosi between the holy man's hill and the city. I remembered the sound of a car before, and began to curse. We'd been followed out of Benares. And, when they saw where we were stopping, they pulled up on the road a few hundred yards behind us. Then they waited. Then they came for Marianne.

Still calling myself names, I got into the Fiat and slammed the door. I looked out the side window once and saw the Siva man, a dark bulkiness moving against

the sand. He was persistent, but he had a long way to come and he wasn't moving very fast.

I started the car, thinking that if they had anything bigger than the Fiat, and they probably did, I'd never catch them.

I went through the motions, though, swinging the little Fiat in a U-turn and speeding back toward the city on the Panch Kosi. There was nothing for my headlights to digest but the dark, silent night, and nothing for the taillights to do but choke on clouds of yellow dust.

Then the headlights suddenly seemed to leap out at the night. That meant they were picking up dust and tunneling through it. It probably meant a car. I stepped down on the gas pedal, but I already had it against the floor boards.

I saw them when it was almost too late.

The Fiat dipped forward and swerved to the left as I gave the brake pedal all I had. The tires screamed and the headlights raked through darkness and swirling dust and over robed figures scattering and a dead man wearing a white shroud and roped to two bamboo poles left on the roadside.

The Fiat stopped about five feet from the dead man. The dust rose and swirled. I got out and began to cough. Someone began to curse me in Hindi or Urdu and although I couldn't understand the words I knew he made my efforts along those lines sound like something you might overhear at a Friday night bingo party. Maybe I should have thanked him. Instead I called out:

"Did another car come this way? Few minutes ago?"

There wasn't any answer I could understand. The dust was so thick I never even saw them except for the brief instant before I'd almost run them down. I got into the Fiat and drove on up the Panch Kosi past the many shrines, all torchlit now, and the university. I didn't see another car.

I drove over to the police station near the Darjeeling Gate. It was a two-floor masonry building with the saffron-white-and-green flag of India fluttering outside in the beam from a spotlight planted in the ground. I went up the steps and heard music blating from a radio inside. A sleepy-looking old man whose head was shaved except for a gray topknot and who wore jodhpurs and a shirt stained with betel juice, lifted his head from where it had been resting on a desk which had been old when

the British Governor ran the show in India, stared at me, brought his eyes into focus, and showed me his black teeth.

I asked for the chief, and he told me, "The collector is off duty, sahib. The collector works regular hours." His voice was a whine of self-pity barely audible above the blat of the radio. He got up and went to where the radio was perched on a shelf on the back wall. He lowered the volume.

"You wish to report an incident?" He waited, staring through me, his sad eyes fixed on a point in space somewhere behind my head. Before I could answer, if answering would have done any good, I heard footsteps creaking overhead.

"Who's up there?"

His mouth was a black hole in the puckered tan flesh of his face. He didn't have any lips that I could see. He said, "That is the assistant collector. Very European." The footsteps creaked some more. "He detests quiet contemplation. But then, he is an eater of meat."

The stairs were through an archway alongside the shelf which held the radio. When I reached the top, the radio was blatting full force again. I found myself in a short, dark hallway. There were three doors, one of them with a strip of light under it. I went over there to knock, but the door opened before I reached it.

The assistant collector was a surprise. He wore a white linen suit, and it was spotless. He had dark hair and a dark face and very shrewd eyes with pale blue pupils. He didn't need a shave. He was smoking a cigarette in an ivory holder. He was a stocky man, no more than five-six, his shoulders were only a little narrower than the cargo bay of a flying boxcar, and he didn't have any neck I could see.

His head tilted forward. His voice was basso and rumbled up from a chest as puffed out as a pigeon's. He said, "T. Gopaldaswami Banerjee, at your service. Come in, please."

I followed him into an office with the usual police assortment of chairs and desks and half a dozen filing cabinets which had been green and now were rusty. He sat down. I sat down. I showed him my papers which said, among other things, that I had come to Benares along with the United States Observer Team.

And we talked. Or rather, I talked. He was one of

the best listeners I have ever met, chain-smoking cigarettes in his ivory holder, not saying a word but holding you with those pale blue eyes and grunting every now and then. I told him about Marianne. I did not tell him about Varley. I made it seem as if Marianne had been doing a story on the Panch Kosi Sadhu.

Banerjee asked, "But why would anyone want to kidnap an American magazine correspondent, Mr. Drum?"

His eyes were bland. He might have believed me. Or he might have thought me the biggest liar to visit India since Bulge and Krush packed their bags.

I shrugged. "This is my first visit to India, Collector. Far as I know, it's Miss Wilder's first trip, too. Miss Wilder is a trained observer, but we still might have stepped on someone's toes. The way I understand it, the followers of someone like the Panch Kosi Sadhu can be pretty sensitive."

Collector Banerjee removed the burned-down cigarette from his holder and used it to light a new one. He leaned forward across his desk and said: "Why did you come here and tell me this, Mr. Drum? Because surely you cannot expect me to believe you have told me the entire story? Even assuming, as you suggest, that Miss Wilder's investigations along the Panch Kosi were most unpopular and most unwise, why would anyone want to kidnap her?"

"I'm not a cop," I said.

"But you *are* a cop. India is not unfamiliar with private inquiry agents, Mr. Drum. Most of ours were former policemen. And you?"

"Something like that."

"Then please look at this from my point of view. You came here and told me a story. Perhaps it is true. Perhaps all of it is true—as far as you took it. But you haven't told me the entire story. Have you?"

"She's missing," I said. "She may be in danger. If I figured I was equipped to handle it, I wouldn't have disturbed your sleep."

"You private inquiry agents are all alike. I worked five years in Calcutta, Mr. Drum. I know. You work outside the law when you can. You use the law when you must."

"You cops are all alike," I said. "I've got a job. I've got a client. When they're police business you'll hear about it."

"I am no fool, Mr. Drum. If you want a fool, I suggest Manbir downstairs. Your inquiry license means nothing in my country. Your personal code of ethics concerns me still less. If you want any help from this office, tell me what you really think happened to Miss Wilder."

I stood up. He stood up and wrapped a smile around the ivory cigarette holder. I said, "Sure, I'm playing it close to the vest. You think I like to? You think I wouldn't like to drop it all in your lap and visit the Taj Mahal or something? I've got my reasons and my reasons aren't personal, but they sure as hell aren't your business. You think I came here for you to lecture me?"

The smile went away. He clamped his teeth on the cigarette holder and stared at me.

I wasn't finished. "You'll help me," I said. "Miss Wilder's a pretty blonde and she's an American. That ought to be enough of a description. You can put your ear to the ground in places I can't, even walk; that's why I'm here. You'll help me, Collector. I'm sending a wire to the American Ambassador in New Delhi and one to the *Time-Life* bureau in Calcutta. That's why you'll help me, if you can't find any other reason."

I went to the door. He took the cigarette holder out of his mouth and stared at it. He said, "No one has ever threatened me in my own office before." His smile was as fleeting as an octogenarian's sex urge.

"Does it go down on the blotter as a kidnaping?" I asked.

After a while, he nodded. I thought I had an ally. The only balm I could give him was: "If I find out anything you can use, I'll call you."

He nodded again. I went downstairs and outside. Manbir was slowly growing deaf in front of the blating radio.

Benares' telegraph office was located, as telegraph offices will be, in the railroad station. I sent a wire to the American Embassy in New Delhi, saying that an American citizen, Miss Marianne Wilder, the *Life* correspondent in Benares, was missing and that foul play was feared. I said that the police here in Benares had been notified. I sent the same wire to the *Time-Life* bureau in Calcutta, suggesting that they forward a picture of Marianne to the police in Benares, attention of Assistant Collector Banerjee.

I drove back to the Pilgrim Hotel and parked Marianne's car. By that time I was thinking she might have been a gal with a secret story brewing. A ten-rupee note got me the key to her room, but an hour's search revealed nothing more embarrassing than yesterday's unwashed laundry. I wondered who had followed us out on the Panch Kosi, and why. Marianne had spent a couple of hours alone with Stewart Varley, had seen him leave with Aruna, who had been sent to fetch him by the Panch Kosi Sadhu. It didn't seem to mean much, but if Marianne had wanted to wander off in search of a story without my hanging around, she wouldn't have decided to do it on foot on the Panch Kosi. All that was left was foul play.

It was a lonely thought and it scared me more than I wanted to admit. It rattled around in my head like dice in a box. I went down to the European Bar and bought a drink for the first American reporter who showed up. He was a skinny New Englander named Schrunk who worked for a string of Midwestern newspapers. He knew Marianne, he said. He made some lewd suggestions about what he would like to do with Marianne and offered the information, after his third drink, that she was a snob. Listening to Schrunk, I couldn't blame her.

He was some reporter. When he finished his fourth drink, which he said was his limit, he left without even finding out who I was.

I bought what was left of the bottle of Scotch and took it upstairs to my room. I showered, and had a drink, and began to sweat again. The ceiling fan groaned and creaked. The bluebottle flies buzzed. I crawled in under the mosquito netting and worried myself to sleep.

When I awoke it was still dark. Somehow I knew I wasn't alone in the room. I waited, listening. I didn't move.

I could hear him breathing. A hand I couldn't see parted the mosquito netting. I made a grab for it but missed.

He chuckled and said, "Put your pants on, Mr. Detective. We're going for a ride."

He didn't have a sledge hammer this time. It was a good thing. If he did and had wanted to use it, I'd have been a dead man.

I got dressed and went outside with Rukmini.



# 13.

**HIS JEEP** was parked behind the Pilgrim Hotel, and although it was a hot night the canvas sides and top were in place. The plastic side windows had been scratched so that you could barely see through them.

Rukmini got in behind the wheel and started the jeep. I didn't say a word. It was his show. We drove for about five minutes through dark streets. We rattled over cobblestones. Once or twice I thought I caught a vague glimpse of the river through the darkness. On the narrow sidewalks there were ragged beggars sleeping.

Rukmini leaned down and got something from the floor boards of the jeep. "Put this on," he said.

He thrust it at me and my fingers closed on thick cloth. I was holding a black hood, the kind they hang men in.

"You mean on my head?" I said stupidly. I knew what he meant. I wanted time, even a few seconds. I stared ahead at the yellow headlight glow, looking for a landmark. Anything I could remember.

It was a narrow cobbled street going up and around a hillside with masonry walls rising clifflike on either side. It was like fifty other streets in cobbled, hilly Benares. Rukmini slowed the jeep almost to a stop, putting it in second gear. He looked at me. "Well," he said, "you going to?"

I pretended fright. His smirk said he didn't believe it. I said, "You're taking me where?"

"To the girl, friend. As if you didn't know."

He brought the jeep to a stop, its brake drums squeaking.

"You going to put it on or do we sit here all night?"

There was a raw edge of anxiety in his voice, and at first I didn't get it. He couldn't sit still. He was fidgeting behind the wheel. He cracked his big knuckles. He lit a cigarette and took a short nervous drag and immediately killed it. He was sweating. I could smell the acrid animal stink of him. I suddenly realized, as if for the first time, that we were a long way from Embassy Row

in Washington, D.C., where I had first bumped heads with Rukmini. And I also realized what was eating him.

I said, "'S the matter, you got the itch?"

He backhanded my face. I sat there and took it. "The hood," he said.

I slipped it over my head. The heavy cloth rested on my shoulders. It was as black as the middle of the night in a cave in the Belgian Congo. Sweat broke out on my face. Rukmini started the jeep. We drove and turned and clattered over cobbles and turned again. I could feel Rukmini's weight moving, squirming under the monkey on his back. The hood smelled of sweat and wood-smoke.

In about ten minutes Rukmini braked the jeep to a stop. "Get out and stand still," he said. "Keep the hood over your face."

I felt my way out of the jeep. I stood there with cobblestones underfoot. That ought to mean we were still in the city, I thought. I heard Rukmini come around the jeep. His hand closed on my elbow. We walked.

I bumped something that might have been a door frame. I heard a key in a lock. Hinges squeaked. Something, probably Rukmini's hand, shoved against the small of my back. I stumbled forward. The door closed behind me. The hood was jerked off my head.

It was a small, bare room, and it smelled of ammonia. The floor was bare packed earth. The light came from a charcoal fire in the center of the floor. The air was thick with smoke. Through it on the far wall of the room I could see a door, and next to the door a bent old woman sat with her back against the wall. She was as still as death and looked only about half as old. She lifted a hand like a claw as we went around the fire toward her. She showed us the inside of her black mouth, black tooth-stubs and black gums and a black tongue from betel-chewing. She croaked something which Rukmini didn't bother to answer. The black hole opened wider in the seamed gray skin of her face. She was smiling at us.

"Through there," Rukmini said.

The door wasn't locked. It opened inward.

The second room was larger and more brightly lit. Two torches thrust into wall sockets, their smoke blackening the masonry walls and slate roof overhead, threw wavering red light over Marianne Wilder, who was on her

knees on the packed earth floor a little way from the middle of the room. She was on her knees because Ambedkar had beat her down to them. Her short blonde hair was matted to her head. She was conscious, and breathing hard and raggedly but otherwise silent. Her eyes were wide and afraid, and back of them, deep, deep back of them, was a scream that wanted to be born.

Ambedkar had ripped the blouse of her rose dress down to her waist. Her brassiere was torn and hung from one shoulder strap. Her skin gleamed with sweat, and so did Ambedkar's. She swayed. Long red welts marred her shoulders. One of her ears was bloody.

Ambedkar, who stood alongside her wearing only a pair of white dhotis and now not looking like a member of the Eton rowing crew at all, reached up as if he wanted to pluck something from the air over his head, going up on his toes gracefully and for maximum leverage in a well-learned rhythm, then swung his arm down in a blurring motion that whipped a thin green switch of bamboo down across Marianne's bare back.

I reached him before he could raise his arm again. He started to turn toward me. He had known I was there, of course. They had wanted me to see. It was why they had brought me.

Rukmini bellowed a warning. Fear twisted the expectant look loose from Ambedkar's face. I grabbed the bamboo switch. It was light and springy and whistled as I snapped it across his face and then backhanded it the other way, raising a welt on both his cheeks.

He cried out in surprise and pain. Torchlight raised Rukmini's shadow over us. I pivoted as he swung his forearm in a harmless-looking little arc. He held a weighted sap in his hand. It hit my biceps and instantly my right arm went dead. I dropped the bamboo switch and drove my left fist into Rukmini's stomach. He bent over. The natural thing to do was end it by following through with your right. Habit made me try it. My right arm wouldn't respond. While I tried to move it, Rukmini, his mouth open and his face gray with pain, deftly struck my left elbow with the sap. It sent an electric shock through my arm and left it as useless as the other one.

I saw Marianne on her knees again, with her head hanging forward. I went for Rukmini the only way I could, with my head lowered. He stood off and measured

me, and then he hit me. It didn't seem to hurt much. It never does when you're that mad. Later my jaw ached and swelled up some, so I guess that was where he hit me.

I felt outraged when I wound up on my back. I began to get up slowly. Rukmini was going to walk on my face when Ambedkar called him off.

For a while they argued in an echo chamber. Then the echo chamber went away and when it did they weren't arguing any longer but talking together amicably. I looked up in time to see something wetly golden in the torch-light rushing down at me. It was the contents of a pail of water. I coughed and choked on it and felt the shock clear down to my toes. Then I rolled over, got up on my knees, and stood. My arms weren't any good to me. Ambedkar smiled. At least I thought he smiled. I went for him.

Rukmini got his arm around my waist and held me. Ambedkar went over to Marianne. He grabbed a handful of her hair and jerked her head up. He held the bamboo switch over it.

"If you try being a hero again," he said softly, "she gets it across the face."

Rukmini let go of me. I leaned against the wall.

"Down," Rukmini said.

Unable to use my arms, I slid down the wall until I was seated at its base. By the time Ambedkar went out and returned with another pail of water, my left arm had begun to tingle. If it meant Marianne's life and mine, and finding Stewart Varley, I might have been able to flex the fingers.

Ambedkar stood over Marianne and poured the water out over her head. She coughed a little and bent her head and then jerked it up and started to cry. The water ran off her head and shoulders and trickled off her chin and down between her breasts. She cried softly and in despair. I turned over on my knees again and climbed to my feet and went over to her. Rukmini came toward us.

"Let him," Ambedkar said.

When I touched her, she cowered away from me.

"Marianne," I said. Rukmini was standing over us with a revolver in his hand. Marianne's skin was cold. I couldn't even put my arms around her to warm her. I could just lean against her, touching her with a limp

hand at the end of a numb arm. I was a great help. I said: "Marianne, it's Chet." And I lied: "Everything's going to be all right now."

Her lips were trembling. ". . . hitting me," she said. "I don't know where he is. I honest . . ."

"Marianne."

"Chet? Chet?"

I knelt. She came against me, blubbering like a frightened child let out of a dark room. She made sounds and if the sounds were words I didn't understand them. Her weight was on me. Her breathing changed. Her knight in shining armor had come for her. She was safe now. Safe but exhausted. She slept.

"A touching scene," Ambedkar said mockingly in his cultured tenor voice. It was exactly the right kind of cliché to bring me back to the torchlit room and Rukmini standing there with his revolver, and Ambedkar must have known it. "Are you ready to talk now?" he asked.

"No. Get something she can use as a pillow. Get something to cover her with."

Ambedkar looked at Rukmini, who went out. It was a while before he returned with a filthy rag of a blanket. Ambedkar wanted to know what had taken so long, but Rukmini just shook his head and smiled while he spread the blanket on the floor and eased Marianne down on top of it. She stirred but did not waken. He stared at her. There was a patina of sweat glistening on his bald head and the shadowy fuzz of new hair. Like the Siva worshipper's, his head was shaved. He looked up at me, grinned lewdly, and cupped one of Marianne's bare breasts with a big hand. I tensed. A knife of hate twisted in my bowels. I had never wanted to kill a man as badly as I wanted to kill Rukmini then. He lifted his other hand and pointed the revolver at me. Then he shrugged and covered Marianne with the filthy blanket.

He was still smiling, but now his smile had changed. It was a dreamy smile, a distant smile, a smile of remembered fantasies and unshared delight. Fondling Marianne meant nothing to him now. That had been for my benefit.

"She gave you a shot?" Ambedkar asked sharply.

Rukmini's smile came back to Benares reluctantly. "She had the fix ready. Man, I needed that one."

"What's the matter, couldn't you wait a few minutes?"

But Rukmini only smiled without malice. You couldn't argue with him now. You couldn't insult him. The worst you could do was stir him from his dreams, but not very far from them.

Ambedkar said to me: "I do believe Miss Wilder told us the truth. She doesn't know where Stewart Varley went. Does that surprise you? It surprises me. But of course, you know where he is, Mr. Drum. Don't you?"

"Is that what you're after?" I said. "Varley?"

"Where is he, Mr. Drum?"

"I don't know. We were looking for him ourselves. We haven't found him."

"The very words Miss Wilder used. It's a shame, then, what happened to her. Isn't it?"

He stood there in his dhotis, a small, slender, youthful man bare from the navel up. But I saw him in Washington in his tennis sweater again. I saw him handcuffed to the steering wheel of my car. I saw him in the green station wagon, bearing down through the Tidewater rain at Gil Sprayregan. I saw him on the stairs in the Indian Embassy, calmly shooting Gloria Sprayregan through the heart. He had even managed to look clean-cut and not at all villainous when he kicked Stewart Varley in the head outside the Anacostia Tavern. What I felt for him wasn't the hot, bowels-wrenching hatred I had for Rukmini. This was different. It was something you grew with. It was icy cold. It was an image of him, frozen out of time, poised on his toes to bring the bamboo switch down across Marianne's back. It was the hatred that breeds murder. It wasn't wanting to kill him in a hot flood of rage, as I had wanted to kill Rukmini. If you're normal, you never *want* to kill anyone very long. This was knowing I *had* to kill him, and knowing I wouldn't leave India until I did.

My left arm had begun to tingle as life returned to it, but the right still felt like a dead weight growing out of the shoulder socket. I took a deep breath, smelling the stale air, the charcoal fire and Ambedkar's sweat, and said, "Use your head, Ambedkar. If you believe she doesn't know where Varley is and if I don't, let me take her out of here. The American Embassy in New Delhi knows she's missing. So does the Benares collector."

Ambedkar seated himself cross-legged on the bare earth floor. He was very close to Marianne. A slight dreamy smile pulled Rukmini's mouth open lopsidedly, as if he

had a dislocated jaw. He stood in the doorway clicking the cylinders of his revolver.

Ambedkar gave me a short and unnecessary lecture about the differences between East and West. Then he said, "You are a very great way from the District of Columbia. As for the collector—" An Eastern shrug proved as eloquent as a Western. "Let me tell you about the girl, Drum. She was scared. Brave, but scared. After a little while, it was obvious she would have told us, had she known. She didn't, though. She didn't know where Varley was."

A nerve fluttered on my left elbow, and the arm was stronger when it stopped. "So the tableau was for my benefit?"

"Entirely. It's unfortunate that you don't know where Varley is. But it doesn't change things. We want you to find him."

"Why?"

"Because we want you to."

"Find him yourself," I said, but not very loudly.

Ambedkar flashed his teeth at me. "We're trying. We have people on it now. So far, unsuccessfully." Ambedkar's grin broadened. "Mr. Drum, just what are you doing in India?"

"Varley's watchdog," I mumbled.

"I see. But not a very good one. At any rate, if you find Varley, that would be in the line of duty?"

I said it would.

"Find him, then. When you do, Miss Wilder goes free."

"We going to play switch?"

"Nothing so crude as that. I wouldn't want you to have any moral compunctions. Find Varley. We'll remain in contact with you. We'll do the rest." He sprang to his feet lithely. "One more thing. Don't get any ideas about finding Varley and taking him out of the country—if you ever want to see Miss Wilder alive."

"Where can I get in touch with you?" I asked.

"You can't, so don't try. But you'll do as we wish?"

"It's my job," I said, and stood up without showing I could use my left arm. Rukmini drifted around behind me. "But keep this where you can see it," I told Ambedkar. "If you touch the girl, or if this big hopped-up clown paws her, you'll wish they carried you to Benares in a winding sheet on two bamboo poles for cremation."

Ambedkar seemed amused. "Was there something else?"

"Yes. I want to see the girl alone."

Ambedkar's slim bare shoulders shrugged. With Rukmini he left the room. The door scraped shut. It was the only way out of the room.

I woke Marianne. At first there was a blank look in her eyes, then there was fear which melted before the warmth of recognition and trust.

"Are we back at the hotel?" Marianne asked dreamily.

My throat was tight. "No, baby," I said.

Her eyes widened. She was wide awake now. "Oh, God, I didn't know. I didn't know. They have you too. You better be brave, Chet. You better be brave for both of us."

I touched her hand. She was cold and shaking under the blanket. I leaned over her, my weight on my elbows and on her body, to give her warmth. It was very hot in the room, but she was suffering from mild shock. When my weight settled on her, she sighed.

". . . whispering . . ." she said. "I got out of the car. I thought it was you. They took me and I couldn't even yell. Chet, it was like a nightmare. I wanted to tell them. I would have told them anything they wanted. I didn't know. I didn't know."

"They're letting me out of here," I said. "They want me to find Varley. When I do they'll let you go."

It was like throwing ice water in her face. She started to shake again. Her hand clutched convulsively. "I . . . can't . . . stay . . . here . . . alone," she said so softly I could barely hear the words.

I didn't know what to say. I watched her eyes brim with tears, and had another reason to hate Ambedkar. I'd never known a girl as perky as Marianne Wilder, but he'd done this to her in just a few hours.

I said, "I'll get you out. I'll come back for you."

Her eyes went past me to the door. She opened her mouth to speak but all I heard was a sob. I said quickly but without telling her her life might depend on it, "Could you see anything when they brought you?"

Furrows appeared on her brow. "Not a thing. They put a hood over my face. But I heard something."

"Yeah?"

"Like a butcher with a cleaver chopping meat and bones on a big block. And the smell."

"What kind of smell?"



She shuddered. "Benares' smell. Sickly sweet. You know, Chet. But much stronger. Like . . . like bodies burning right outside."

Maybe it was something. I wondered if they quartered the corpses for burning. I wondered if there was a special place they did it. I thought I could find out.

"Chet . . ." Marianne said.

I kissed her lips. They were cold. Her arms went around me convulsively. She didn't want to let me go.

I said some things meant to comfort her. My voice sounded flatter than the taste of last week's beer. As I stood up my eyes scanned the masonry wall and settled on one of the torches suspended there. If you were desperate enough, it might make a weapon. I went over there and reached up. The torch had been thrust into a niche. It was stuck. I yanked at it, but it wouldn't budge. Then it came loose so suddenly that I staggered backward away from the wall several steps. Just then there was a scraping sound. The door opening.

I started to turn around. Rukmini came through the doorway in a rush. I swung the torch at his head, gripping it down near the bottom with both hands like a baseball bat. I thought it was a pretty classy swing. The flame made a sound like wet wash blowing in a stiff wind, and almost went out.

Rukmini moved inside the arc of the torch. I wrapped it around his neck. We staggered together. The torch hit a wall, and sparks flew. Then the flame rose, and steadied. I looked at it. One flame became two. Rukmini's hands were at my neck. I dropped the torch and hit him with fists like bean bags. He let go of me. Inside my head I shouted triumphantly. I heard a squawking sound.

Then Rukmini did something which made all the torches go out. I never even felt it.

## 14.

**T**HE MAN lying next to me in the gutter rolled over and flung an arm across my chest.

He said something. I didn't understand the language.

I opened my eyes to ochre dawn, and cobblestones, and an embankment of sand. The man spoke again. It began to sound like a cow lowing.

The cow had a bony flank and sharp horns, and had bedded down in the gutter next to me. Its enormous pink tongue moved like a rasp over my chest again. I rolled away. The cow lowed again and the head followed me, nestling against my ribs.

I got to my knees. It was a little like running a hundred-yard dash in ten seconds flat carrying someone picka-back. Big bovine eyes stared at me. The cow was beginning to look mean. There are few things that can look meaner, close up, than the sacred cows of India. I scowled back at it. We both made a noise. Mine was involuntary. The cow's was disappointed. Flanks swaying and tail swishing flies, it went off in search of another salt lick.

I stood up and lurched toward the sidewalk. A team of wild oxen dragged a plow across the furrows of my brain. Someone had set fire to the sandpaper inside my throat. I went down the street. It wasn't a walk. It wasn't a run. Occasionally my knees had something to do with it. I went.

Rukmini had deposited me a block and a half from the Pilgrim Hotel. I made it as far as the flight of stairs going down to the service entrance, and collapsed there. Voices came and asked questions and carried me. I was set down on something soft. I was searched. A round cool smoothness prodded my lips. I drank. I gagged. It tasted like the alcohol they put iodine in to make a tincture. I was lifted, and carried.

A voice said, "He hasn't been robbed."

A second voice said it was amazing.

A third voice wrapped a sentence around the word police.

I said, "Assistant Collector Banerjee."

I was carried. A door opened. My head brushed against it. I was set down again on a bed. I thought I recognized my own room at the Pilgrim Hotel. It could have been, because they had gone through my papers.

They went away. I went to sleep.

The girl had the gray-tan skin unique to the Indian subcontinent. She wore a white robe and had a vaguely earthy but not unpleasing scent. Her dark hair hung loose and was like a waterfall.

She was Aruna, the sadhu's girl. She smiled at me timidly. By then I felt a little better. I felt as if I might live. I didn't try to sit up. She was pressing a slightly cool, slightly damp cloth to my forehead.

I said, "Did the other American send you?"

She shook her head.

"The sadhu sent you?"

She shook her head and touched one finger to my lips. A centipede with icicles for legs ran down my spine. Aruna and I weren't alone in the room.

I sat up and saw Collector Banerjee seated in the rattan chair and holding a yellow envelope in his hand. He smiled around his ivory cigarette holder. His hair was combed and he wasn't sweating. He was a guy who carried around his own interior air conditioning.

"This is yours, Mr. Drum," he said, leaning forward and tossing the yellow envelope in my lap. While I opened it he said, "The girl was already here when I arrived. She's the Panch Kosi Sadhu's helper, isn't she?"

"That's right."

"Interesting. And the telegram?"

I read it and wordlessly handed it to Banerjee. Out loud he read: "Arriving Benares first plane Baker *Time-Life* Bureau Calcutta." Banerjee took the butt from the ivory holder and lit another cigarette with it. "Then I see you sent those wires."

"Sure."

Banerjee's head jerked toward me on the squat, powerful neck. "But that didn't happen to you at the telegraph office."

I told him what had happened last night. There didn't seem any reason not to. I added, "We have a couple of things to go on now. No, make that three things."

Aruna brought me a glass of water. I drank it so fast that she got me another, and I drank that too. Banerjee gave me a cigarette. "Yes?" he said.

"Two things about the place. The burning smell—"

"May I remind you that Benares is a city-wide crematorium?"

"Sure, but the burning is done on the ghats down by the river. She was that close. Doesn't that limit it?"

Banerjee shook his head. "Benares lives for the river. Benares is built along the river. That doesn't help much."

"Then the noise," I said. "Like a butcher with a big cleaver."

"Benares is a Hindu city. There is very little meat, and almost none of it slaughtered or dressed professionally. But on the poorer burning ghats, where an insufficient quantity of brushwood is used, the corpses are charred but not reduced to ash. After the ceremonial ablution and burning, such corpses are dismembered and burned to ash in ovens." I looked up hopefully. Banerjee said, "There are thirty such crematoria in Benares."

"All right, then try this. Rukmini takes dope. Heroin or something else that's injected into the blood. The old lady gave him a shot last night. If your narcotics department can give us a list of pushers . . ."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Pushers. People who move heroin."

"We have no narcotics department. We have no narcotics problem as you have in the West. For in the East, Mr. Drum, where mysticism and the withdrawn personality, together, are socially approved, the nonmedical taking of a drug like heroin, while illegal, is not the anathema it has become in your country."

All I had left was a long face. I showed it to him.

"However," he went on blandly, "in my own office we keep a list of habitual users who, as you well know, are prone to fall into other phases of crime, and who may be valuable sources of information."

We both looked at the phone. Its presence in the room marked the Pilgrim Hotel as Benares' best. Banerjee made a call and told me the list was on its way over. I got up and started to pace. That left Aruna alone on the edge of the bed. Banerjee looked at her and at me. One of his eyebrows lifted. "And the sadhu's girl?" he said.

"I don't know what she wants."

"But you know her?"

I admitted it.

"To be sure," Banerjee said sarcastically, "you know her. For you went with Miss Wilder to do a story on the sadhu, didn't you? Come now, Mr. Drum. You have mentioned names in your story, as for example Ranjit Ambedkar and Rukmini, both of whom are known to my office. But you mentioned names only as you saw fit. You did not even make it clear whether Ambedkar and Rukmini are trying to find *something* or *somebody*. You ask my help, and you tie my hands."

"Ambedkar and Rukmini are known to your office how?"

“As extremist rabble-rousers. India for the Indians and Asia for the Asians. That was several years ago, Mr. Drum. Ambedkar is not so young as he looks. We have no recent record of them because they went to work as domestics in the diplomatic corps.”

“Feeling as they did?”

“Perhaps, if you grant a certain amount of militancy to their organization, that was according to plan.”

“Sure, but what Indian diplomat in his right mind would hire them?”

Banerjee chewed on that one for a while. I thought: It didn't have to be a diplomat at all; it had to be only a diplomat's wife. But that didn't clear up the mystery, it just made the mystery possible. In the States, Ambedkar tries to kick Varley's head in. Because he was one of Sumitra's extramarital rolls in the hay, houseboy or no, and jealous of Varley, another member of the not-so-exclusive club? Concurrently, Varley gets himself appointed U.S. Observer at the Benares Conference. To go where Sumitra was going? But Varley was a lad with more on his mind than what was inside Sumitra Mojindar's silk sari. Sure, I told myself, thinking in circles, but did Ambedkar have to know that? The answer was yes, he did. Otherwise, nothing would have pleased him as much as Varley's disappearance. On top of all that, add a xenophobic Asia-for-the-Asians organization, and make Ambedkar's motives at least partly its motives. . . .

Aruna tugged at my sleeve. She wanted something. She had come here wanting it and she still wanted it. But there was Banerjee. I didn't know what to do about Banerjee. He wanted something too, and it was beginning to shape up as a fair request.

I stalled, mulling it over. I ordered a tray of lunch on the phone and took a change of clothing into the bathroom. By the time I shaved and showered my headache had faded to a dull ache behind the eyeballs. I brought it back into the bedroom with me.

Lunch had come. Banerjee was seated with his legs crossed. Aruna had found paper and pencil and was writing. I sat down to a stew of lentils and vegetables, and ate. Aruna had finished writing but didn't interrupt me. Someone knocked at the door, Banerjee opened it, a uniformed policeman saluted him, gave him several sheets of mimeograph paper, and departed. Banerjee brought the list over to me. I stopped eating. Before I

could look at the list, Aruna came over, tugged at my sleeve again, and handed me what she had written.

It was a legible but childish scrawl. It said:

I regret to bring you news that Mr. Stewart Varley American is dead. As he wanted to be a sadhu, his body is being cremated as is our custom.

I jammed the note into my pocket and did some swearing. The list was forgotten in Banerjee's hand. I said, "Where?"

Aruna looked at me blankly.

"Can you take me to him?"

She nodded. Apparently it was why she had come.

"The sadhu knows? The sadhu sent you?"

She nodded again.

"Three pages," Banerjee said. "Very thorough. You see . . ." He had thrust the first page of the list in front of my face.

"Not now," I said, heading for the door. Aruna came with me.

"Just a moment. Where are you going?"

"Are you on duty now?"

"No."

"Then wait here. If you want to."

"What message did the girl give you?"

I waited at the door. I didn't say anything. Angrily Banerjee stalked across the room. He shook the list in front of my face and said, "You want help, but you won't give me the time . . ."

His voice trailed off. I had seen the first page of the list and he had seen my face. It was a list of names and addresses, alphabetical, mimeographed in columns. One name, the third on the list, stood out.

It was Ayyangar.

A private detective is like a ping-pong ball.

He spends his time bouncing back and forth, back and forth, Varley to the sadhu to Lady Mojindar to the Sadhu to Banerjee to Ambedkar to Banerjee, back and forth, back and forth. And then, all at once, the bouncing stops and some of the hectic, frantic scrambling begins to make sense. It can happen in the damndest places and at the damndest times.

Hotel room in Benares, India. Running water and a

private bath. Where you learn Ambedkar belongs to a fanatic Indian-Asian nationalist and anti-Western organization. Where they tell you Stewart Varley is dead. Where you find out the old woman with the black betel-nut mouth who is hiding Marianne has the same name as the butler who died in Washington either from natural causes or because he knew too much.

Aruna waited at the door. The creaking ceiling fan turned, stirring sultry air. Benerjee said, "A name there means something to you?"

"Yes."

"Ah, then if you will tell me who . . ."

"Not now." I opened the door and took a step into the hall. Banerjee touched my elbow. I turned around and looked at a small automatic in his hand. It was one of the smallest hand guns I have ever seen, hardly bigger than a derringer.

"Come in," Banerjee told me, his voice a soft feline purr of anger. "Shut the door."

I didn't budge. Aruna looked at my face and held her ground. Down the corridor, a woman opened a door, and shut it, and went waddling in search of the staircase. She wore a sari and had grease in her hair. She was enormously fat and managed to look better in the sari than she would have in a bikini bathing suit, but only a little better. The stairs made noises as she descended.

I told Banerjee, "I made a mistake. The list doesn't mean a thing to me."

"You lie." That observation wouldn't win him any gold medals. "You are obstructing justice." Banerjee's face was pale. His lips had almost disappeared.

"If that's the way you see it."

"That is the way I see it. We will go down to the collector's office now."

"Sure we will. If you use that cap pistol. But watch out you don't burn your hand with it."

I grasped Aruna's elbow. She pulled her arm away. At first I thought Banerjee had scared her off me; then I realized she just didn't want to be touched. We went down the hall through the wake of frangipani left by the fat woman.

At the desk a tall, wide-shouldered American in a rumpled cord suit was asking for Chester Drum. He would be Baker from the *Time-Life* bureau in Calcutta. The desk clerk happened to look up. His eyes met mine. I shook

my head from side to side and the smile which had commenced on his face transformed itself into a study of professional regret. I decided that desk clerks, like cops, were the same everywhere.

## 15.

**A**RUNA and I covered about a mile on foot. There are very few vehicles of any kind in Benares, mostly because they can't negotiate the steps of the ghats down by the river, and Benares lives for its ghats and its Ganges. There are more beggars in Benares than in any other city in India, and probably in the world. They mark their length in the dust behind small alms cups and beseech you with round black eyes in skeletal heads. There are also more fakirs and snake-charmers and sacred cows and fat money-changers on cotton blankets with heaps of gold and silver before them, and sadhus and lepers so far gone that have no toes and their fingers are dropping off and the only thing between their eyes and their mouth is an encrusted hole.

We passed a sadhu perched on a wall on one leg, like a crane. His beard was filthy. His bare head gleamed in the sun. The leg he stood on day and night was swollen and black with blood.

We went through a crowd and past a funeral procession, and then the cobbled street began to drop. The walls rose like cliffs on either side, the street became a steep alley dropping down to the river, and the alley was a ghat. At the bottom of the alley we were still fifty or sixty feet above the river. A broad flight of cobbled steps fifty yards wide made up the difference. The green water of the Ganges lapped at the bottom steps. When the monsoons came, the water would rise in a very few days halfway up toward the alley.

It was my first look at the Ganges by daylight. I'll never forget it. Clots of mourners waited on the steps. Swaddled corpses waited too. Other corpses were roasting over open fires on the wide lower steps. There was the sweetish carrion smell and the crackling sizzle of burning fat.



In the water, ashes were being strewn from urns brought out in rowboats. A dead tree floated by. It had company. A disembodied arm moved with the current. A dead cat, bloated belly up, nudged it. The ashes spread, and drifted. A few dozen ecstatic pilgrims, naked but for loin rags, rushed splashing into the shallows, shouting for Siva's favor, bathing themselves, ducking their heads, gargling, and finally drinking the carrion-infested water until I thought they would burst.

A hot breeze blew off the river. The crematorium smoke was sweet but acrid. I gagged on it. Aruna looked at my face and held out her hand for me. She still wasn't happy about the physical contact, but this time it was her idea. We went down the wide stairs together toward where the corpses were burning.

The mourners let us by. At the bottom of the ghat three fires were burning. The pyre on the left wasn't big enough. The fagots, almost burned out now, barely reached to the charred corpse's calves. The feet, untouched, looked as white as bleached bone.

Aruna led me to the middle fire. It had the biggest pyre and it was blazing hot, red flame roaring a dozen feet into the air and the smaller, hotter tongues of yellow flame caressing the dark nesting solidness of a man and consuming it.

Two sweating, big-chested attendants in sooty dhotis watched the fires. They held long, fire-blackened poles and every now and then poked one or another of the pyres with them. Their skin was like leather. One of them saw Aruna, grunted, and said a few words in Hindi. Aruna nodded. The leathery-skinned burner of corpses shot a contemptuous glance at me. Aruna produced a note. Leather Skin reached for it.

I said, "Hold it." I took the note and read it. Leather Skin's eyes were bloodshot from the smoke. He watched me. The note said:

Please show the bearer and her companion the effects of the dead American sadhu.

It wasn't signed. It was printed in block letters in English, still the *lingua franca* of India, although Hindi had been declared the official language. I gave it to Leather Skin, who read it or seemed to read it, and called out to his companion. They jawed for a while,

Leather Skin trotted down a few cobblestone steps closer to the water, stooped, and returned with a cardboard box the size of a small overnight bag. He dropped it contemptuously at my feet and leaned on his pole and gazed out across the Ganges.

I squatted on my hams and opened the box. It contained a white linen suit which I had seen Varley wearing, and a wallet. I went through the wallet quickly. It was a big breast-pocket billfold and contained Varley's passport, his driver's license and some traveler's checks which he had signed but not counter-signed.

I stood up, leaving the box where it was. My eyes stung from the smoke. The sweetish carrion odor had made my stomach queasy. Aruna watched me out of wide eyes. I asked Leather Skin: "You speak English?"

"Yes, sahib."

I moved my chin in the direction of the funeral pyre "Is this the American sadhu?"

"That is right, sahib."

"Who brought him?"

"Disciples of the Panch Kosi Sadhu."

"When?"

"As we closed last night, sahib." He shrugged expansively, as if to say that was all he knew. He had an unctuous voice and a fawning manner, but he was a large, powerful man, and his eyes hated me silently and implacably.

"They say how he died?"

"No, sahib."

"Were there marks of violence about the body?"

"None that I noticed."

"But they didn't say how he died?"

"Wait. I seem to remember. There was talk. An American . . . his head newly shaved . . . the sun . . . it was the sun killed him, sahib. You wish the effects sent to your hotel? There is a charge, but it is nominal, I assure you. As for the ashes, they will be strewn on the Mother of Waters. He died happy, sahib. If he was a sadhu, he died seeking *moksha*. He will find it, truly and eternally, when his ashes mingle with the Mother of Waters. Is there something else you wish, sahib?"

I said: "Yes. Roll his body out of the fire."

Aruna gasped. It was the only sound I had heard her make. I breathed the sweet smoke. My lunch bobbed up in my throat. Leather Skin said: "That we cannot do."

"You'll do it," I said.

Leather Skin said something to his companion. The other man looked surprised before he looked angry. Leather Skin said something else. The other man displayed dirty teeth and a moronic laugh. They both grasped their blackened poles firmly and thrust them, charred points forward, into the pyre. The muscles stood out on their backs. They bent their knees, then straightened. The fire sighed. The blackened corpse rolled, and settled back on the pyre. They started all over again. The corpse rolled. Burning fagots clung to it as it fell off the pyre. It landed on the broad step with a thud and the crisp sound of flaking char.

I went over there. It took some doing. I don't like to think about the rest of it, but it had to be done. Sometimes I dream about it at night. Then I get up and drink more than I should and some of the times, but only some of them, I can get back to sleep.

I found an unburned stick, squatted and prodded the charred skull with it. The pressure of the heated and boiling brains had cracked the skull. White liquid oozed out and ran over sluggishly, like thick hot cream.

Priscilla Varley's words came to me as if she'd spoken them five minutes ago. *He wears a steel plate in his head where part of his skull was smashed by shrapnel.*

It was a skull. It had cracked open. I had to look at it. I looked. It was only bone.

I got up. The river tilted and leaped up at the sky like a green wall in an earthquake. Then it dipped giddily back into its course. Pilgrims down there splashed and gargled. Leather Skin scraped his pole on the cobblestones.

I grabbed the shoulder of Aruna's robe and swung her around to face me. My hand left a sooty imprint on the robe. I said, "When Varley left the Pilgrim Hotel he was wearing a pair of dhotis. He didn't have his suit and he didn't have his wallet. Someone went and got them. Did you?"

She didn't answer, of course. She couldn't. But her eyes filled with tears and her face came all to pieces and she cried silently.

I shook her. She didn't stop crying. "Was it the sadhu's idea?" I asked.

I was mad. I wasn't thinking. The patient mourners looked up from their shrouded corpses. I pivoted. Leath-

er Skin was glaring at me. I said, "That note wasn't signed, but you did what it told you to."

He shrugged his sweaty shoulders.

"Who sent it?"

He smirked and said something in Hindi. His companion aired his moronic laugh again. I hit Leather Skin in the face and he skittered backwards and tripped over the corpse which wasn't Stewart Varley. I looked down at him. I was still mad. Maybe I was going to kick him.

I saw what he had tripped over. It was like seeing it for the first time. I retched, and doubled over, and was sick.

When I straightened up, a dozen hands were on me. Voices shouted. They held me while Leather Skin hit me. He was strong, but he didn't know how to get his shoulder behind a right cross. I pretended to be more hurt than I was. The crowd swirled between us before he could try again. I looked around for Aruna. She had slipped away.

A couple of policemen carrying lathis and looking tough and competent fought their way through the mob, did some questioning and some listening, and escorted me up the steps of the ghat. Once or twice they had to swing their lathis.

At the top of the steps they had a car, and the car took us to the police station near the Darjeeling Gate. When Manbir saw who it was, he went right upstairs after Assistant Collector Banerjee.

## 16.

**B**ANERJEE came down, and he came down in a seething rage. He ranted for ten minutes. He swore with such physical expressiveness that sweat flew in droplets from his hands and face. Then he jabbered in Hindi at the two cops who had come in with me. He swung on them so suddenly that they cowered, expecting to be hit. Manbir, his radio forgotten, sat at his battered desk taking notes, twisting his topknot with his left hand, chewing betel nut furiously, dribbling juice like blood down his

chin and onto his shirt front. The cops answered Banerjee timidly. He seemed satisfied with what they told him. Blood, which had suffused his face, flowed back where it belonged. His voice lowered to—merely—a roar. Then he threw back his head and began to laugh. There was no doubt about his laughter. A little more of it and they'd have had to treat him for a broken neck.

Banerjee whirled on me. Sweat flew. "You interfered with a corpse-burner at his holy work," he said, his voice gone suddenly soft. "You struck him on a sacred burning ghat." He paused to light a cigarette. I had never seen him without one so long. "Your time of obstructing justice, Mr. Drum, is ended."

He meant I was going to jail, where I couldn't do Varley any good and couldn't help Marianne either. I said, not altogether sure it was a lie, "I was on my way over here when the trouble happened. I told you to wait for me, didn't I? I also told you I'd give you the story when I thought it might do my client some good."

"You mean such as now, when the alternative is a prison term for you?"

"I mean such as now, when I'm bucking heads with a bunch of international fanatics."

We batted it around. Now that I wanted to sell, Banerjee pretended his reluctance to buy. He was bluffing; in the East they call it saving face. After a few minutes I thought he'd saved enough, so I said:

"My whole story—plus what I saw on that list."

"In exchange for?"

"My freedom. I don't have to ask for cooperation. You're a cop. I'll get it."

Banerjee dropped into a chair. In the fierce afternoon heat his tirade had exhausted him. He dismissed the arresting officers. He was limp. He leaned forward and sweat dripped from his nose. Manbir had filled pages with his notes. They were scattered on his desk. I looked at him, and at Banerjee, who assured me the notes were necessary. Probably they were. The story, like all such stories, did not run in a straight line.

I opened up. If I held back anything, it was less important than the color of the socks I wore the day I drank three Martinis with Mrs. Stewart Hoffman Varley. Gil Sprayregan: his assignment, his fears, and his death. Priscilla Varley: her husband and his affairs. Ambedkar at the Anacostia on Good Hope Road. Ambedkar, prob-

ably in Tidewater Maryland. Gloria Sprayregan's murder which wasn't murder. Rukmini and the green Merc station wagon. A P.I. with a penchant for travel, and Priscilla Varley's offer. India: Varley, the sadhu, Aruna, Marianne's kidnaping and Sumitra Mojindar's sex appeal. In short, the works. I had to spill it. I wasn't a private dick after the butler who'd absconded with the family heirlooms. I wasn't a private dick setting up divorces at a couple of hundred bucks per. I wasn't even a private dick who got his bulldog teeth stuck in murder and wouldn't let go even when the cops hollered. I was a private dick deep in international intrigue sprinkled with sudden death and political dynamite. I was swimming out of my depth. I knew it, and Banerjee knew I knew it. Finally I got to the part which went:

"The name's Ayyangar. There was a butler by that name at the Indian Embassy in Washington. He died, possibly violently, because he knew too much."

Banerjee consulted his list. Ayyangar was a crone, he said. She'd been peddling narcotics for thirty years. No one ever knew what became of all her money.

"She married?"

"No, I don't think so."

The bottom started to drop. For all I knew, Ayyangar could have been the Jones or Smith of India.

"But she does have a brother who, I believe, was employed as a domestic in the foreign service. In fact, I'm sure of it."

We made plans. At first Banerjee was for raiding the Ayyangar address right away. But I was worried about Marianne. We decided it would be safe to bring in half a dozen pushers or so for routine questioning. Banerjee said that happened all the time. About half the pushers in India were professional stool pigeons. No one but the cops knew which half. India started to sound more like the U.S.A. all the time.

Naturally, one of the pushers brought in for questioning would be the Ayyangar crone. If they knew the score, Ambedkar and Rukmini wouldn't even work up a sweat over it. Embellishing where I had to, I'd tell the old lady about her brother, then put the screws on her. If I got her mad enough, or scared enough, or both, she might deliver Marianne to us without a fight.

It was a good plan, a damn good one, only it didn't work out the way we planned it at all.

"What about Mr. Varley?" Banerjee asked me.

I chewed on it. "Maybe we ought to let them think he's really dead. Could you do that?"

Banerjee nodded slowly. "I can plant an item with All-India Radio's local station. They're bound to pick it up. Would that help you?"

"It might help Marianne Wilder."

We shook hands. Banerjee said he would call me as soon as they brought the Ayyangar crone in. Banerjee also said, "I misjudged you, Mr. Drum. You're a brave man. You're a very brave man."

Maybe he had it wrong. Maybe I was just dumb.

It was almost four o'clock when I hit the lobby of the Pilgrim Hotel. I went into the bar and ordered an arak on the rocks. It still tasted like what they mixed iodine with to make a tincture. I washed it down with good Scotch. Time crawled like a centipede missing every other leg. I worried about Marianne. I sweated about Varley. I had another drink and took my whisky breath over to the desk in the lobby.

"There was another wire for you, Mr. Drum," the Anglo-Indian clerk told me. "But this time, having seen you leave, I kept it at the desk."

He gave it to me and I opened it to read that the Embassy in New Delhi had passed my problem on to the consulate in Calcutta, whose proximity was such that they could render me better service. It was worded like the letter from the dry-cleaning plant that has lost your pants and admitted it only with reluctance.

"Also, Mr. Drum," the small, narrow-shouldered Anglo-Indian said, "a Mr. Wallace Baker, a journalist from Calcutta, I believe, called in person."

"He leave a message?"

"He insisted on going upstairs." The Anglo-Indian showed me a delicately arched eyebrow. "I have not seen him come down."

I stuffed the Embassy telegram in my pocket and went up to my room. The louvre door wasn't locked. That's what I get, I thought, for walking out on Assistant Collectors of Police. I opened the door. A ton of bricks wrapped itself around my neck.

It had been aimed at my jaw, but I side-stepped it. It belonged to an arm and the arm belonged to the big, broad-shouldered fellow in the rumped suit. He sobbed,

cursed me, and swung again. It was a roundhouse right that Man Mountain Dean could have stepped inside of. I went inside and tied him up. He butted with his head, got his left hand loose, and whacked at my kidney with it. He wasn't very scientific in his fighting, but he could really hit. I tied him up again. He butted, and got his left hand loose, and whacked at my kidney with it. I sighed, let go, stepped back, and clipped him one. His eyes rolled, but he wouldn't go down. I pushed him. He fell across the bed, then sat up sobbing.

I got a glass of water and sloshed it in his face. He spluttered. He looked up at me with grief and rage contorting the kind of masculinely homely face which some women find attractive.

"You son of a bitch," he sobbed. "Banerjee told me all about you. What's the matter with you, you want to see them kill the girl?"

I grabbed his lapels and he came up with a surprised look on his face. I shoved him toward the door. He was big and didn't shove easy. "Okay," I said, "if you know all about me you can scam."

He turned around. He was panting. If he had a gun in his hand he'd have shot me. He didn't. He said, "I'm Wally Baker, *Time-Life* in Calcutta. I came here to do what I could to help. I saw Banerjee. I was waiting here to beat you black and blue."

I said, "I joined Banerjee's team. I'm waiting for a call from him."

He didn't hear me. "Your telegram was a kick in the gut," he said. "I'm in love with Marianne Wilder." He smiled at his own folly. "When I'm at my most romantic, she calls me Brother Bear. I want her to marry me." He was about thirty-five, had a deep baritone voice and had come suddenly unraveled so that he had to tell someone about it. Still, he was an engaging guy. He went on, "But you don't give two hoots and a holler for that. Jesus Christ, you pack a wallop!" He fingered his jaw.

I told him about Marianne. He was a two-hundred-pound pacer and went to work on the rattan rug with the soles of his shoes. When I finished he said, "What do they want this Varley for?"

I shook my head. "The Benares Conference kicks off in the morning. Maybe it'll give us some idea. Maybe Banerjee already knows something. If he does, he isn't talking."



"They hurt her?"

I hadn't told him that part. He held my eyes, waiting for an answer. I said, "She was beaten," and watched the big fists clench and the warm brown eyes go cold.

Just then the telephone rang.

It was Banerjee. "Got the Ayyangar dame?" I asked. "I'm afraid not. There's been some trouble."

Wally Baker looked at me. I shook my head. His jaw worked. I asked Banerjee, "What kind of trouble?"

"The collector."

I said a four-letter word.

"After all, Mr. Drum, I'm only the assistant collector. I was called away from the office. Manbir typed up his notes and the collector came in and saw them. He fears that if we delay long enough to intimidate the Ayyangar crone, dire consequences might befall Miss Wilder. He therefore wants the Ayyangar place raided right now. This afternoon."

"He's got it all bass ackwards," I shouted into the phone. "If the raid backfires on him, we'll be right back where we started from. Worse. But if we had the Ayyangar dame on our side and it backfired, at least she might be able to tell us where they took Marianne. Doesn't he see that?"

"No. He is the collector."

I said the same four-letter word, applying it in a brief sentence to the collector.

I thought I heard Banerjee chuckle. Then he said, "Stated somewhat less succinctly, those are my sentiments. I am not calling from the office, Mr. Drum, but from outside. I believe I can convince the collector to postpone his raid until tonight. I will do so if I can. That may give you time to reach the Ayyangar crone first."

"What's her address?"

He told me, and I wrote it down. "She have a phone?"

"We know of none. There are less than ten thousand telephones in the entire state of Uttar Pradesh. What will you do?"

I said I didn't know yet. I said I would try something if he could keep the collector off until tonight. Then I asked: "I take it you don't think much of this collector of yours as a cop."

There was a silence. Finally Banerjee said, "The collector is a charming man, educated in England, handsome . . ."

“But what kind of cop?”

Another awkward silence stretched out. “I called you, Mr. Drum,” Banerjee broke it. “I also shook hands with you, something a Hindu rarely does with a stranger. I was guilty of misjudging you. Now I think that if anyone can free Miss Wilder, you can, not the collector.

“Oh, by the way, All-India Radio’s local station has the story of Mr. Varley’s death. It has already been broadcast in Hindi and will be broadcast in a while in English. He died of a severe sunstroke.”

That was how the States got the story that our Observer at the Benares Conference died the day before the Conference began, but if you read the newspapers you already know that.

Banerjee wished me luck, and waited for me to hang up. I lit a cigarette, blew smoke at the floor, looked up, pointed the cigarette at Wally Baker, and said, “Here’s your chance to help.”

“I’ll do anything. What’s Banerjee’s bad news?”

I told him.

“What time is it?” he said.

It was a quarter to six. “We ought to have two hours,” I said. “Maybe two and a half and just possibly three, depending on how long Banerjee can stall the collector. When it gets as dark as it’s going to get, look out.”

“What d’you want me to do?”

“We’ll go over to the Ayyangar place. They know me, but they don’t know you. You’re a reporter. That’s what you’re going to be over there. You’ve heard about Ayyangar being murdered in Washington. That’s how we’ll put it. Murdered. Provided the old lady’s there alone, or provided you can talk to her alone.”

“If I can’t?”

We went downstairs. “Here are three options,” I told Wally Baker. “If she’s all alone—if you’re dead sure of it—we ought to be able to walk off with Marianne.”

“But there won’t be much chance of that?”

“Right. There won’t. If one or both of them are with her, but if you can corner her alone, give her the full treatment so she thinks your newspaper or magazine thinks Ayyangar met with foul play at the hands of some of his fellow domestics who have since left the States for India. That’s option two. It’s our best bet, and it’s the one I’m hoping for. If you get her mad enough, tell her the cops are coming tonight because she’s hiding the

American girl. Tell her she'd be a fool to cooperate with the men who killed her brother."

We went outside. The sun was going down in the west but wouldn't set for at least an hour and a half, and was fiercely hot. The pilgrims crowding the sidewalk looked wilted.

"And if I don't get her mad enough?"

"Stall and stick around, Wally. Play it by ear. That's all I can tell you."

"What's option three?"

"That they're inside with the Ayyangar dame and you can't get to see her alone."

"What then?"

I didn't answer right away. Finally I told him, "Then it isn't murder. Then it's just her brother's death from heart failure; you were in Benares for the Conference, and called on her for a routine statement since he worked at the Embassy in Washington."

Wally Baker's face flushed. We stopped walking. "If it were you," he wanted to know, "would you work it that way?"

"I'm a detective. I have some experience in—"

"Marianne's life may be in danger! You'll be outside, won't you?"

"Yeah, I'll be there."

"But if you were inside instead of me—and Ambedkar and what's-his-name stuck to the old lady like glue?"

I looked at him. There was no evading it. I said, "I'd make enough of an accusation so they'd keep me there until the collector pulled his raid."

"All right," he said.

I couldn't chance driving Marianne's Fiat into the neighborhood, because Rukmini had seen us in it. We didn't find a cab. It was a twenty-minute walk and every minute counted. We climbed a cobbled hill, and both of us were drenched with sweat when we reached the top. At the top of the hill we stopped at a shop that sold knives. I wished I had a gun, but that wasn't possible. I bought a small dagger with an ornate handle on which were carved three of India's three hundred million Hindu deities. The dagger had a four-inch blade, came without a scabbard, and barely fit diagonally into the pocket of my cord jacket. Wally Baker bought an English-made pocket knife and told me he felt foolish buying even that.

On the other side of the shop, the hill fell away steeply. At the bottom, framed with high walls on either side, you could see the river and the tiny scrambling figures of the pilgrims bathing in it. There was a courtyard of blue slate slabs before the sharp downgrade began. A small bazaar surrounded the courtyard and a lotus pool was a cool green jewel in the middle of it. This was the Court of the Lotus Bazaar. The steep hill led down to the Ghat of the Lotus. The Ayyangar crone lived in a house on the hill below the Court of the Lotus Bazaar.

## 17.

I GOT to know that little bazaar. It traded in all the goods of the East, but most of all it had sellers of brushwood and kerosene for the burning ghat at the foot of the cobbled street that ran down to the river from the Court of the Lotus Bazaar. There was more haggling done over the sale of brushwood and kerosene than over anything else, the mourners rending their clothes, beating their breasts and yanking their topknots to save a few annas or a half rupee, the vendors angrily spitting blood-red gouts of betel juice and looking more bereaved than the mourners if the bargaining was fierce and the prices began to drop.

After one swing around the bazaar, I the only Westerner and feeling about as inconspicuous as Ibn Saud had been walking up Pennsylvania Avenue—I heard the chopping block sound that Marianne had remembered. It drifted up the alley on a thin haze of blue smoke which the slight hot wind blowing off the river carried to the Court of the Lotus, but at the base of the hill the steps of the burning ghat dropped away too steeply, so you couldn't see anything down there. The haze had the acrid-sweet burning smell which I'd come to associate with cremation.

The Ayyangar house was the last one on the left at the bottom of the hill. Wally Baker had gone in there about forty minutes ago. Ever since, the fat red sun had refused to slide toward the horizon, the hands of

my watch were glued into place, and every minute was an hour.

Then suddenly the sun fell. It is the only way to describe sunset in the tropics. The sun fell and there was maybe ten minutes of red twilight with the sun-track gone from the river and the vendors closing their stalls, and then it was dark.

I went down the hill toward the Ayyangar house. It had no windows in front. There might have been windows in back, if it had a courtyard. Otherwise, air came and left through a hole in the roof. Across the cobblestones of the alley was a larger house, a structure of two stories with windows in the upper story and a small rectangular lotus pond out front with stunted almond trees guarding it. The windows showed no light. I went in among the almond trees and took up my vigil. The cleaver thudded into its chopping block. The unseen bodies burned and the smoke smelled. A voice with a lot of timbre chanted the hymn to Ram. And far off, so far off that I thought it might have been my imagination, the rhythmic strumming of a sitar was the night's slow-cadenced metronome.

It was eight-thirty on my watch when a fleet of overheated cars roared into the Court of the Lotus. They made so much noise they might as well have come with sirens wailing. But I'll say this for them—once they came, they were quick. Before the sound of the last motor had faded, crouching figures came scooting down the alley. They fanned out in front of the Ayyangar house, seeking cover. Two of them joined me in the little grove of almond trees. I didn't budge; for a while I didn't breathe. One of them crouched very close to me. His automatic rifle smelled of oil and he smelled of unwashed body. He was muttering to himself, possibly to bolster his courage.

Ten cops, I thought. Maybe twelve. Three jeeploads or four, if they'd come with any kind of equipment. I took a look. Night had swallowed the cops. I saw nothing but the fire-glow at the bottom of the alley. Then one of the jeeps started down the hill with a roar and a clatter. It pulled up just in front of my position. Two men jumped out. They left the motor idling.

They swung a searchlight mounted on the jeep at the front of the Ayyangar house. A dazzling blue-white tunnel cut across the smoky alley to throw a circle of light

on the door of the Ayyangar house. One of the men from the jeep picked up a megaphone and bawled into it in Hindi.

Silence louder than thunder answered him.

The man with the megaphone tried it in English, calling: "Come out of there one at a time with your hands on your heads!"

He tried another dialect. It might have been Urdu. The only thing he got was a sore throat.

The cop who smelled was getting nervous. He fiddled with the safety catch of his automatic rifle. He pointed the rifle at the circle of light across the alley. He fidgeted, rested the rifle butt at his feet and mopped his face. He raised the rifle into position again, muttering.

The man with the megaphone had returned to English. This time he bawled: "Surrender or we'll open fire!"

The cop who smelled died a thousand deaths waiting for the signal to commence firing. I figured he wasn't the only one. Any minute I expected to hear the distant stitching or nearby explosive clattering of an automatic rifle.

The man with the megaphone put it down and said something to the other fellow who'd come down in the jeep. I couldn't see them very well in the darkness, but neither was short and stocky enough to be Banerjee. The other fellow, the driver, saluted. He raised a hand to his lips. He probably had a whistle. It would be the signal the automatic riflemen were waiting for. I didn't think riddling the soft masonry walls of the Ayyangar house would do Marianne and Wally Baker any good, but I wasn't the Benares collector.

Before the jeep driver could blow his whistle, the door in the round white glare of the searchlight turned black.

It wasn't a door any longer. It was a doorway. It had opened. The house was dark. The cop who had done the shouting, who was probably the Benares collector, struck down the hand of his driver. No whistle blew for the moment.

I realized for the first time that the noise at the crematorium had stopped. The fire-glow was fading on the water. I thought bitterly: Banerjee had given us two and a half hours, but we hadn't been able to do anything with them. It wasn't anybody's fault.

The silence stretched and was complete except for the half-heard sitar. That and the single dazzling beam of

light piercing the darkness gave what was happening the quality of an opium dream. The dream exploded in a scream of terror.

I saw a glow in the black doorway. I didn't know what it was. Neither did the collector. He told the driver to blow his whistle. The scream became a wail. The whistle shrilled, and as the police poured out of their hiding places and started across the alley, the glow emerged from the doorway.

It took three blind staggering steps. It was a human figure, and it was on fire. It burned like a torch. It raised arms like two smaller torches. Flames engulfed it and leaped from it. As it staggered out of the beam of the searchlight it started to fall.

A single shot echoed in the alley along with the sound of breaking glass. The big searchlight was snuffed out.

I was up and running from the stand of gnarled almond trees before the echoes had stopped bouncing across the alley. On the roof of the Ayyangar house I had seen the muzzle flash. I collided with a cop. He was running, like the others, toward the human torch still burning about ten feet from the doorway. We both fell down. His rifle clattered on the cobblestones. As he got up I hit him in the belly and he went down again. I picked up the rifle and ran with it.

There was still a faint fire-glow on the water at the foot of the Ghat of the Lotus. Silhouetted against it and running down the hill were five figures. I didn't know who they were, but they had dropped down from the roof of the Ayyangar house using the human torch as a diversion. I hoped two of them ran reluctantly. Even as I ran after them they plunged out of sight as if the ground had swallowed them. It meant they had started down the steep stone steps of the ghat.

Voices shouted behind me as I reached the steps. An automatic rifle opened up, stitching a pattern of death in the night. Tracer bullets made orange streaks in the darkness, showing the flat trajectory of the rifle fire. It was about four feet to my left. It swung over toward me. I ran down the steps. Bullets struck stone somewhere above my head and sang off into the night.

They were just getting into a skiff. It had been moored at the end of the ghat and probably was used to take the ashes of the dead to the bosom of the Mother of Waters. It was drifting loose now. The glow from a low,

open-topped kiln silhouetted three figures already in the skiff and two others wading up to their knees and pushing the little boat out of the shallows. Both of the waders wore dhotis. I called for them to halt. Someone fired a pistol at me. It was the only answer I got. I dropped to one knee, raised the automatic rifle to my shoulder, and fired a burst purposely far to the right of the waders so I wouldn't hit anyone in the skiff. Then I fired again, letting the tracer bullets guide me in.

The tracers made a bright, flat arc, the orange streaks rushing along it to disappear in the body of one of the waders. He fell over in the water. The other wader, who had not been hit, fell into the skiff. They began to pole it away from the ghat.

I rushed down to the water's edge and plunged in. The shallows were knee-deep. The soft, muddy bottom pulled at my shoes. Two of the figures in the skiff were standing up. They were fighting. I heard shouts behind me. I took four splashing steps to where the water lapped at my waist. I dropped the automatic rifle and started to swim. About a second later the police coming down the ghat steps opened fire.

The skiff was rocking and making no headway now. If Ambedkar or whoever had the gun wanted to kill his prisoners, there wouldn't have been any fight. But he wanted to hold onto them.

An arc of tracers struck the gunwale of the skiff. Everyone went overboard. The skiff drifted away. The figures in the water were about twenty-five yards away from me. Two of them were thrashing in the water, still fighting. I sought bottom with my feet, but the water was over my head. I swam toward them. There was no more firing from the ghat. Someone swam over in my direction, then went underwater. Hands tugged at my belt, pulling me down. I went under, gagging on a mouthful of water. I fought back to the surface. The water smelled of sewage and rot. I groped blindly down with my hands. My left hand closed on hair. I pulled. The tugging at my belt stopped and a head broke the surface alongside of mine. I jerked it up. Feet kicked at me slow-motion, underwater. I looked at the face. It was Marianne.

She didn't see me, or didn't recognize me. She was hysterical. I had to hit her.

Then there was splashing in the water all around us.



Heavy hands grabbed me. I was ducked and came up choking. I was ducked again. Then they dragged me out to where I could stand and finally threw me down on the edge of the ghat. Someone kicked me. It was a while before they realized they were kicking the wrong guy.

The police dragged Marianne out of the water too. They got the skiff also, and they got Wally Baker. They took the man I had shot out of the water and set him down near me. He had a shaved skull and a topknot. I had never seen him before. He was dead.

They took us back up the ghat and up the alley to the waiting jeeps. Wally Baker was unconscious and had to be carried. Marianne had to be carried too, but I knew she would be all right. I was worried about Baker, though. He was as limp as a dead man.

They roared with us through the streets of Benares to the police station at the Darjeeling Gate. The cops in the jeep with me talked like conquering heroes.

The only ones they hadn't been able to find were Ambedkar and Rukmini.

## 18.

YOU KNOW, Mr. Drum," the collector sahib told me two hours later, "perhaps we ought to keep you in our lockup until the Benares Conference is over."

He smiled, which was something. He was veddy, veddy English, this collector. His name was Percy Machari, he was Anglo-Indian, was tall with red hair and bland blue eyes and gray-tan skin, and was convinced his men would have walked off with Ambedkar and Rukmini except for me.

I didn't argue with him. It wasn't true. From where I'd been standing the cops wouldn't have noticed the five figures dropping down from the roof and heading for the river if they hadn't noticed me going after them. But the collector sahib's suggestion was dry English humor, and all the dry English humor since the Battle of Hastings wouldn't keep me in his lockup. I figured it wouldn't hurt to let him have his joke.

“Unfortunately,” he told Banerjee, “you realize that there will be no apprehending these two men—this Ambedkar and Rukmini—now. For, with the death of the Ayyangar woman, there is no one to connect them with the house on the Ghat of the Lotus except the Americans.”

The Ayyangar crone had been Ambedkar’s diversion. She had burned brightly and her face was black char, but the police had made positive identification on the basis of smallpox scars on her feet, which hadn’t burned at all.

It had been a crowded two hours. Banerjee had awaited the convoy at the Darjeeling Gate station. He and the collector sahib had jawed a few moments in Hindi, then the whole convoy had swung around and taken us to Benares’ best hospital, which is the second story of the Destitute Hindu Pilgrim Shelter about a quarter of a mile from the Darjeeling Gate. They brought out stretchers for Wally Baker, who was unconscious, and Marianne, who was either unconscious or in a deep, almost comatose sleep. They took a gander at me and allowed as I could walk. I went inside with them.

A few minutes later, Marianne awoke hysterically. She looked at me and cried, “Wally! Wally?”

I touched a finger to her lips. Her head dropped back on the pillow and she glared wildly about the white-walled hospital room, at the two young Indian doctors and the nurse, and at me. Her eyes softened when she saw me the second time. “Chet,” she breathed, “we aren’t there any more, are we?”

I shook my head and smiled at her. Her eyes misted. “Where’s Wally?”

One of the doctors tapped my shoulder. “The miss-sahib must rest, please sir.”

Wally was on the next bed. Marianne saw him and tried to get up, but they wouldn’t let her. From where Marianne was, Wally looked as if he was sleeping. He wasn’t, though. They had given him something to keep him under. He had a fractured skull. He probably got it jumping from the skiff. It was amazing that he had still managed to fight afterwards. They put him on the critical list.

Banerjee came in. “How is the American reporter?” he asked.

One of the doctors told him about Wally, standing in

the doorway so Marianne wouldn't hear. They couldn't really tell about his chances until they X-rayed his skull to check for brain damage.

"And the girl?"

The nurse and the other doctor had taken over. They were moving Marianne to the adjacent room and would give her something to make her sleep. The doctor told Banerjee that what she needed more than anything was a good night's sleep and some added rest. He stared at me. "The same wouldn't do you any harm, sahib," he said.

Banerjee wondered if Marianne would be well enough to make a deposition tomorrow evening. The doctor surprised him by saying it would be better if Marianne left the hospital to make it, as they didn't want her to brood over Wally Baker. Banerjee said he would call and arrange it.

Marianne asked for me, and I went into her room. The nurse gave her two yellow capsules and a glass of water, which Marianne obediently took. The nurse was plump and dark. "Five minutes, sahib," she told me.

Already Marianne was drowsy. Her eyes were glazed. She held out a hand and I took it. Her skin was cold. "Wally's going to be all right, isn't he, Chet?"

"Yes. You go to sleep."

She grinned then. "That Brother Bear. Storming in there like that. A regular old hero. What did he think his name was, Chester Drum? He didn't have a chance. He didn't even fight much at first. He wanted to be taken."

Her eyes closed. I thought she was asleep, but she wouldn't let go of my hand. She opened her eyes. "Find out the name of that stuff, will you?" she said. "My head's spinning and spinning. It's better than hundred-proof bourbon." Her eyes widened. "Chet, is it safe now? Will they come back?"

"You're safe. You're safe here."

"Wally's in love with me," she said. "Been for a long time. He's a rock, Chet. Steady and secure. Weather any storm. Do you mind if I talk about . . . those pills . . . never been this drunk in my life."

It was the sleeping pills and fatigue. She went on: "Listen, you've been around. Can a gal love . . . two men at the same time?"

"You don't love me, Marianne."

"It scare you? Old confirmed bachelor?"

"You don't love me."

". . . spice. Any gal in her right mind would take all her vacations with you if she could. You're the vacation type. Because you can have more fun than anyone I know. But you can also be grimmer and sadder. Wally's a rock. Get you in out of a storm. Safe harbor . . . I'm talking rot." She tried a grin. It barely reached her lips. "You, you're a regular old manic depressive."

"I forgot to take my Miltown along this trip," I cracked. Feebly. I liked Marianne more than I wanted to admit. But I'd got all tangled up in matrimony a few years back, it hadn't lasted six months, and I was no longer in the market. Besides, all you had to do was take one look at them to know Marianne and Wally Baker belonged together. She'd put the bubbles in his champagne; he'd keep her from boiling away. The only thing Marianne and I would have together would be a rocket's flight once around the moon and then the long fall.

The nurse came back. I leaned down and kissed Marianne's forehead. "Don't go far," she said sleepily.

"I'll be outside, baby," I told her.

After that, Banerjee's boss cracked his veddy, veddy English joke. Banerjee had spoken only when he had to. He was still mad because the collector sahib had left him in the Darjeeling station during the raid.

"You mean Ambedkar and Rukmini are free now?" I asked the collector. "You're calling off your dogs?"

"But yes, Mr. Drum. We must. Even if we can prove they stayed at the Ayyangar house, with the Ayyangar crone dead, how could we prove they kidnaped the American reporter?"

"Because she'd say so. Because Baker would back it up. And because I would."

"And their motive?"

I looked at Banerjee. He studied his fingernails. "Because they were holding her hostage while I went to find the American Observer for them."

"And you found him?"

"No."

The collector sahib clucked his tongue. "They wanted him, Mr. Drum, for what reason?"

"I can't answer that."

"You don't wish to?"

"I don't know."

There wasn't much else that could be said. The collector sahib was a funny bird, proud of the English blood in his veins and his Sandhurst education, but prouder still of his country, India. He wouldn't upset the Benares Conference applecart for anything in the world, not when, starting tomorrow morning, the new India played host to twenty-one nations of the new Asia and Africa. Apparently he thought rounding up Ambedkar and his sidekick, if they could have been rounded up, wouldn't do the Conference any good. He didn't come out and say it, but he didn't have to.

I hung around the hospital until midnight. They weren't going to take X rays of Wally Baker's skull until the morning. Marianne slept soundly. Banerjee and the collector sahib went back to the Darjeeling station, Banerjee leaving word that he wanted Marianne to make a full statement when she was strong enough. The doctor said he would call the assistant collector tomorrow.

I left about half an hour after Banerjee and the collector sahib, and went back to the Pilgrim Hotel. That late, Schrunk was the only reporter in the bar. His liver was probably as hard as other people's ribs.

"Find her?" he said.

"Who?"

He leered at me. "The Wilder twot."

"I never said I was looking for her."

"She ain't been around."

I wasn't especially annoyed with Schrunk, but I didn't like him. I was annoyed with being pushed around, and beaten, and given no cooperation, and half drowned, and not being able to find Varley, and not being able to prevent what had happened to Wally Baker, and not even what had happened to the Ayyangar crone. I was annoyed with myself, so I told Schrunk, "What do you do, save your grammar for the column you write?"

"No offense," he said. "I didn't know it was like that between you and Marianne Wilder."

"It isn't like anything."

He bought me a drink. I couldn't talk him out of it. He wanted someone to drink with. Then he put a newspaper down on the bar in front of my face. "Seen this?"

It was a copy of the Benares edition of the English-language *Delhi Times*, tonight's edition. The headline

**was: AMERICAN OBSERVER DIES ON EVE OF BENARES CONFERENCE.**

I read the article, which was a rewrite of Banerjee's leak to All-India Radio. "They don't give a crap for us," Schrunk said with drunken bitterness. "The first I seen of it was in the paper."

That wasn't surprising, considering where Schrunk spent his time. He solaced himself with another drink. I bought a bottle and went upstairs with it.

It was very hot in my room. I turned the overhead fan on and left the louvres open. I took off my shirt and pants. I itched all over from the filthy Ganges water. A mosquito whined in my ear. I had a shower, got into a fresh pair of shorts, and stretched out on the bed. The mosquito came back with his friends. I took the bottle of Scotch under the mosquito netting with me and belted it. I thought of Marianne and Wally. I ducked out of the netting and called the hospital to ask about Wally, but there hadn't been any change.

I drank some more. I had one of those sharp, eyeball-plucking headaches, there was a knot of pain high up on my right arm, my left arm throbbed with dull pain from shoulder to wrist, and in general I felt ready to go three short rounds with Little Bo Peeps's kid sister.

I thought of Schrunk. I put the bottle down and laughed. Not at Schrunk. Who the hell was I to get high and mighty about Schrunk? At least he did his solitary drinking at a bar. I got up, and dressed, and drove over to the railroad station in Marianne's little Fiat. I sent a cable to the Senator who'd recommended me to Priscilla Varley. It said: TELL P.V. DESPITE WHAT SHE READS IN THE PAPERS BABY IS ALIVE AND KICKING. I was being indirect and cryptic, not cute, because there was no telling who might get to read the cable before it left Benares. On the other hand, Priscilla Varley would suffer until she got some news from me.

I went back to the hotel. When I drank this time it was different. Sending the cable, somehow, had done it. I was almost too restless to sleep. Whatever happened, I was through being kicked around. In the morning they would know it. They would know it all the way up to their Gandhi-hat-wearing Prime Minister, if necessary.

That was to be the morning of the day a lynch mob came for me.

# 19.

I CALLED the hospital before breakfast. The circuits were busy, but finally I got through to Marianne. She sounded better than I had expected. The X rays had already been taken, she said, but although they showed no brain damage and no pressure on the brain, Wally was still in a coma. Her voice caught when she told me that.

I said, "The cops will probably want you to make a statement this evening."

"The doctor told me. He thinks I ought to go there instead of having them come here. But if Wally's still like this I won't leave him."

"Good. Then don't."

"Why? There's nothing to worry about now, is there? Is there, Chet?"

"If Wally's better and you change your mind, don't go down there unless Banerjee—he's the stocky guy who looks like he has no neck—escorts you personally."

"If something's the matter, tell me."

"Nothing's the matter, kid."

"You're worried about—about Ambedkar, aren't you?"

"Nothing's the matter, kid. I just trust Banerjee, that's all." But I couldn't reassure her. I began to realize the doctor was right: the sooner she left the hospital the better off she'd be.

"Call again soon, Chet?"

"Maybe I won't be near a phone."

"Where are you going? What are you going to do?"

"Some loose ends, baby."

"Varley?"

"Depends."

She tried a laugh. "All right, be the strong silent type." The laugh choked off. "Just take care of yourself. Please, Chet."

I went downstairs and had breakfast.

Benares was a different city. The change was almost miraculous. For one thing, the Pilgrim Hotel hummed with new guests wearing turbans and fezzes and either

robes or the cardboard-stiff, peak-labeled, double-breasted, chalk-striped business suits which were the ubiquitous uniform of reluctant Westernization in the East. For another, the stink of offal and sewage in the dusty, dirty streets was almost obliterated by the gasoline exhaust of the hundreds of cars provided by the Indian government for the lesser lights of the Conference who hadn't been given housing in the pre-fab village near the university.

I drove out along the Panch Kosi Road in the Fiat. An enormous crowd milled outside the university building in which the Asian-African nations would map out the future of their part of the world. The hot, dusty path from the parking lot to the main entrance was strewn with flower petals. Flag-waving throngs lined the path. The roar of ten thousand voices crested through the crowd, and all of it wasn't cheering. When some members of one of the European Observer Team went by, the ten thousand voices howled derisively and then commenced a deep-throated chant in a language I didn't understand. It was a primeval cry for blood and it worked like a magnet on the short hairs at the back of my neck. There were no demonstrations, though. Not right then, there weren't. . . .

I trudged along in the dust behind a party led by a huge man wearing a lavender turban. He was very popular. Despite my obvious Western appearance, the mercurial crowd took me as one of his entourage.

The guards at the door did not. I stood at the base of wide, polished stone stairs, stared up at double doors intricately carved in the Hindu fashion in a marble facade more Moghul than Hindu, and showed the papers which said I was a member of the U.S. Observer Team. No one was there to toss flower petals like perfumed confetti, as had been the case with the man in the lavender turban, but they let me pass.

Inside, there was a long dim marble hall which led to a wide rotunda. Men in chalk-stripe suits carrying briefcases hurried along the hall. At the center of the rotunda was a fountain. The spray cooled the hall and the rotunda as effectively as air conditioning.

Halfway to the information desk beyond the fountain, I stopped dead. A man was coming toward me, short and trim in his chalk-stripe suit, his darkly pleasant, earnest young face that would have looked better over Brooks Brothers worsteds. He had what remained of a



raised welt on each cheek where he had been struck with a switch of hill bamboo.

My fingers curled instinctively into fists as I took a step toward him. He backed away warily, looking around. "Don't do anything foolish, Mr. Drum," he said.

I hung a pint-sized smile on my face and said, "You're safe here, buddy. It's a different world. As a matter of fact, you're just the guy I wanted to see."

"Yes?" He smiled too. He was Eton rowing crew again. He was more a chameleon than any man I have ever known. The smile wandered back where it had come from and he said, "May I extend my condolences at the death of the American Observer?"

He was—just possibly—rattled to see me. But when the smile returned there was mockery in it. "It's a pleasure to welcome you to our Conference."

"Listen," I said in what I hoped was a reluctantly self-effacing voice, "I'm a babe in the woods when it comes to this diplomatic game. How do I go about presenting myself to Sir Gaganvihari?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You see, they didn't have time to appoint a bona fide new observer. As a detective, I . . ."

"No, no. I can't believe it!" The smile was condescending now. "A private detective!"

"It's not official, of course."

"Oh, but this is wonderful. The United States Observer to the Benares Conference—a private detective."

"Just a plain private eye," I said defensively, "and I'd see your point. But I was with the F.B.I. a few years back."

"The F.B.I.?" His face had gone chalky. "I underestimated you, Mr. Drum. My apologies."

He went with me to the information desk, where I asked for Gaganvihari Mojindar. He was already in the hall. He would probably be in the hall most of the day. Would I care to wait? I looked at Ambedkar. He looked at me and smiled.

"Attend the first session of the Conference, by all means, Mr. Drum." He scribbled something on a white card. "In the event of lengthy or late sessions, each delegation has its private lounge here at the hall." He handed me the card. "Here is the location of the Indian lounge. Shall we say, directly after the session ends? I could introduce you personally to Sir Gaganvihari."

“His houseboy?” Big deal, my tone said.

Now it was Ambedkar’s turn to bristle defensively. “In the New India, Mr. Drum, one’s background doesn’t matter. Besides, like the Prime Minister, I am a Brahmin. Until later, Mr. Drum?” I gave him a doubtful stare. He said, “A confidence for a confidence. Before the Conference ends, Mr. Drum, you may see me in the hall addressing the delegates. Until later?”

I nodded, and followed the briefcase and chalk-stripe suits to the Benares Hall of Nations.

An usher looked at my papers and led me to a seat high on the rim of the cup-shaped hall, only three rows above the point where field glasses would have done any good. I sat down and the usher went away. It seemed to be the European-American section; I didn’t see a single chalk-stripe suit.

I followed the long beam of a spotlight through the smoky haze and saw, far, far below, a black African who was slowly pounding the lectern to pulp with a fist only a little smaller than a bowling ball while he roared in a deep earthy basso what had to be invective in a language I had never heard before.

The man to my right poked my arm. It hurt, but he couldn’t know that. He smiled, took off his earphones and said, “Hello there, Mr. Drum.” It was Meadows, the Embassy driver on loan to the Observer Team. Apparently he was more than a driver—he had been taking notes in a steno pad. “Isn’t it a son of a bitch,” he whispered, “what happened to Mr. Varley?” The smile had dropped off his face. He looked bewildered. I realized that all these people around me, that everyone in the vast hall, thought Stewart Hoffman Varley, Jr., was dead.

I nodded. Meadows pointed to the back of the chair in front of me. “Why don’t you try the phones?”

A pair of earphones hung there. You had a choice of four holes for the plug: English, French, Hindi or Cantonese. I plugged the earphones in, put them on, and heard an unimpassioned high tenor version of the black African’s basso.

The big African’s tirade was typical of about a dozen others that first day of the Conference. Gaganvihari Mōjindar, the African declared, had stuffed the Western Observers down all their throats. They did not want Western Observers. They could do without Western Ob-

servers. Their every move would be frustrated by Western Observers. Did the NATO powers invite Asian-African Observers to their meetings? They did not. Did the U.N. invite non-U.N. members? They did not. Besides, wasn't it clear to the chief delegate from the host nation that the Western Observers wanted (a) to make fun of, or (b) to subvert the Conference?

Shouts of approval greeted and followed each speaker. It was very hot in the hall, particularly up where we sat. There were planned demonstrations, too, with marchers carrying posters and shouting at the top of their lungs. The Benares Conference began to remind me of a political convention.

Speaker followed speaker, drumming the theme home. University of Benares students, sweat pouring from them, circulated through the hall with tepid lemon squash. Three or four Western Observers were carried out, unconscious from heat prostration. After a few hours of it, the raw, angry hatred for the West became as palpable as the hot, humid air and the clothes which hung with limp wetness.

Then, toward the close of the afternoon, Gaganvihari Mojindar's frail figure mounted the podium and stood before the lectern. I couldn't see his face. He had a very small voice and spoke in Hindi. After the machine-gun pace of some of the earlier speakers, the translator had no trouble keeping up with him. He had three arguments. The angry delegates shouted each of them down. The first was a plea for self-restraint among the delegates, a condemnation of the hydra-headed mob in all their nations whose hatred the delegates reflected, and a reminder that that hatred was being beamed to the entire world. It took five minutes for the sergeant at arms to restore order. The second said that since certain nations hadn't earned the right to membership in the U.N., such comparisons did not apply. At this point the Red Chinese delegation stalked out of the hall and the sergeant at arms had an even harder job. The third said that the delegates at Benares must borrow mistakes from the past performances of neither West nor East, had nothing to hide and thus should welcome the foreign observers, and should look with hope to the future instead of with old hatreds to the past.

Gaganvihari Mojindar sat down. The delegates hooted for a solid twenty minutes, then Mojindar mounted the

podium again. He was a small figure in white, with a Gandhi hat on his head. He raised both hands and the hooting became a steady rhythmic chant. He waited, a sad, tired smile on his face, until the chanting subsided, when he said, "If you are determined to bring this Conference down in ruins, at least do not go back on your word to the Western governments, whose Observers have come to Benares at our invitation, until this evening's session, which shall be addressed by a surprise speaker."

There was a buzz of angry speculation, but the first session of the Conference was adjourned until this evening.

When Meadows and an Englishman who had been seated near us headed for the Observer bar, I excused myself and pointed my nose in the direction indicated on Ambedkar's little white card.

Sumitra Mojindar opened the door of the Indian lounge for me. She wore a red-and-silver silk sari and a gold ring in her nose piercing one nostril and a ring in each ear too. Bracelets jangled on her arms. Her hair, which she usually wore drawn back tightly from her forehead and across her skull like patent leather, hung loose and glossy in black waves lapping at her shoulder blades. Her amazing amber eyes were windows on another more pagan world. If how she was made up meant anything, Sumitra Mojindar had gone native.

She had a scowl for me and lifted her arms as if to bar my way. The heavy bracelets jangled.

"All dressed up and no place to go," I said. "Want company?"

"Why did you come here, Mr. Drum?"

I shrugged. "To hear your husband stand them on their ears, for one thing."

"Yes. He did that, didn't he?" She backed into the open doorway a few inches. I tried a flanking movement and barely made it inside before she shut the door.

"What do you want? I thought I made it clear the last time we met . . ."

"I'm supposed to meet Ambedkar here. If you're playing hostess, didn't he tell you?"

She shook her head, the three gold rings moving. "I haven't seen Ranjit Ambedkar all day."

"He's going to introduce me officially to your husband. You see, I'm the new U.S. Observer here."

The heavy bracelets jangled again as she lifted one hand to her head in a theatrical gesture of surprise and smiled at me. "The incredible, unpredictable Mr. Drum," she said. "Although, as you probably realize by now, in politics my husband and Ranjit Ambedkar are worlds apart."

"They're worlds apart how?"

"First we ought to have a drink to your success. From private detective to unofficial ambassadorial rank—that's a considerable move. Well, isn't it?"

I followed Sumitra through two long rooms laid out like a railway flat. Beyond them was a door which she opened with a key and beyond the door was the pleasantly metallic odor and barely audible hum of an air-conditioning unit. The room contained functionally modern furniture in teak, rattan and glass. There was another door, closed, on the far wall, a window which contained a quarter-ton air conditioner, a picture of Gandhi in his round glasses and Gandhi hat on the wall, and nothing more deadly than a tray on a tea-and-glass cocktail table which held a crock of Holland gin, an ice bucket and some glasses.

Sumitra sat on the low rattan sofa behind the cocktail table and poured two drinks over ice. "Holland gin," she said, "is a weakness of mine which my husband deplores. You see, it isn't homespun—to misuse a word which has wide coinage here in India."

She handed me a glass and we toasted each other. "To the new unofficial Observer," she said, and drained her glass. I drank my Holland gin only after she had taken hers: Holland gin is to gin as vermouth is to wine—it has the kind of aromatic odor that can hide anything from sulphuric acid to potassium cyanide. Not that I expected Sumitra Mojindar to poison me, but she was up to something and it wasn't off the top of her head. I congratulated myself on realizing that while she refilled our glasses. I hadn't said anything about my status being unofficial; she had, which probably meant she'd been in a huddle with Ambedkar.

I'd been feeding them curve balls all the way. The leak to All-India Radio on Varley's death. The inevitable New Delhi *Times* pickup of it. Passing myself off to Ambedkar as the new unofficial American Observer. I didn't know yet what it would all add up to, but I had built myself up in Ambedkar's eyes as a substitute Stew-

art Varley, and he had wanted Varley bad enough to risk kidnaping and murder.

He didn't have Varley now. He had settled for the next best thing. He had me.

"Like it?" Sumitra asked.

"If you like gin it's the best straight-drinking gin there is."

"You don't know the trouble I have getting it. They transship it for me from Portuguese Goa. Another?"

This time we toasted Mojindar's defiant speech. Sumitra downed her gin in a gulp and I was right behind her. Then I remember looking at the bright orange-brown crock the gin came in and telling myself two was my limit this afternoon even if Sumitra wanted to drink a toast to every Observer in Benares, since I wanted a clear head for whatever was coming. Then the tall narrow crock wavered like a slow, watery dissolve on a TV screen.

I blinked. Sumitra said something. I didn't quite make it out. I yawned. Sumitra got up and seemed to be moving through clear but swirling water. Her bracelets jangled and her arm brushed against the crock of Holland gin, which fell off the cocktail table and shattered on the floor.

"My," she said, her voice coming back clear and strong, "that was clumsy of me."

I wandered over to the sofa, stumbling only once en route, and flopped there on the base of my spine with my limbs feeling like lead. My jaw dropped and I gulped air. Sumitra was standing now.

Whatever she had put in my drink had slammed into me suddenly like a pile-driver. But, I told myself, dreamily confused, that doesn't make sense. She drank the same stuff. She guzzled it. It had to have been perfectly safe.

There are knockout drops and knockout drops. The ones Sumitra used came and went in waves, attacking my senses one at a time. I couldn't hear the air conditioning. Then I could hear it but couldn't see Sumitra. Then I could see her and she didn't look so good. She looked green in the face, but at least she could stand. Then I couldn't feel the sofa under me, but seemed to be floating in a black cloud as wide as India and as deep as the sea. Then, when sensation returned, I got up and lurched toward Sumitra.

She said something which I didn't hear. I tried to

grab her. I felt silk and smelled jasmine and heard a jangling, but didn't see her. I clung until the black cloud came to engulf me. My knees thudded on the floor. I still clung. I could feel the silk of her sari slipping through my fingers. She pushed me and very gently I floated over on my back in the pool of spilled Holland gin.

I did not remember getting up, but I was on my feet. I saw Sumitra walking toward the door through which we'd entered the room. She got bigger and smaller, bigger and smaller. She opened the door and closed it quickly. I remembered thinking: another drop of the stuff and I'd have been out until the monsoons came. But apparently it had been measured out with an eyedropper in a steady hand. Two drinks—just enough to make me come all unhinged but not enough to put me out.

Sumitra hadn't gone anyplace. Someone else was in the room. Then he blacked out and the door closed audibly.

It was Ambedkar. They stood together talking. First I saw them, then I heard them, then I smelled the spilled Holland gin and clasped my hands behind my head and floated.

In a dark dreamy world I heard—

Ambedkar: "He out?"

Sumitra: "Look at him."

"He's trying to get up."

"He'll never make it to the door."

"How do you feel?"

"Weak. Awful. It would help if I could be sick."

"Then go inside and get it out of your system."

"Is there time?"

"Yes. What did you take?"

"Ghee. Clarified butter. To line the stomach." A noise, like an unhappy drunk might make. Unsteady footsteps.

"Here. I'll help you."

"Hurry."

Everything went away.

Breathing was easy. Everything else was work. I crawled a little way. Experimentally I opened my mouth to yell. I yelled. It was about half as loud and almost as deep as a mouse's squeak. I got up somehow. The first step was the hardest. Gravity helped me with the second and third. I looked up. The door was at a slant and didn't seem to be any closer.

Then I saw Ambedkar. He was flashing on and off like a neon sign. He had a small automatic in his hand.

"You won't need that," Sumitra said.

"Better rest for a minute."

"No. I'm all right now."

"Then you're ready?"

"What time is it?"

"We still have ten minutes."

"Hadn't we better hurry?"

"If you're ready."

"I'm ready."

"Remember, all you have . . ."

"I know what I have to do." Sumitra's bracelets jangled.

Then they shut off the sound track. I smelled jasmine again. Sumitra got down on her knees in front of me. She made a grab for my hair and tried to lift my head up, but the crew cut didn't help her. A hand supported my chin instead. She was very close. Her amber eyes had darkened to a muddy color and her face was pale. She breathed through her mouth and with her free hand made claws. She raked them down my cheek, drawing blood.

"Rip his clothes," Ambedkar said. I began to think there was hope for me: I could hear and see at the same time.

Sumitra's strong tan fingers tore at the lapel of my cord jacket. I started to fall forward. The cloth ripped and a button dropped to the floor. Sumitra leaned down over me and rubbed her cheek against mine. When she moved back there was a smear of red on her cheek.

"Well?" she said.

Ambedkar studied us like a stage director. He looked nervous now, as if something very important was going to happen very soon. "Now come here," he told her.

Sumitra stood up and went over to him. I tried standing too. I reached my knees and swayed. I was close enough to the cocktail table to grab it and hold on. It was the only thing that kept me from falling. They seemed to know exactly what the mickey they had given me would do. They didn't pay any attention to me.

"This," Sumitra said with faint, unexpected contempt in her voice, "is the part you're going to enjoy."

Ambedkar seemed genuinely hurt. He complained: "How can you say that?"



"I know your proclivity. I ought to, don't you think?"

"Perhaps you would rather Mr. Drum did it?" There was a whine of self-pity in his voice, as if what he really wanted to say was, Nobody understands me, not even you. He had come into the room as if he owned it, but steadily Sumitra had gained ascendancy over him. That might have been something I could use, if I had been in a position to use anything.

In his right hand Ambedkar held the small automatic. With his left he grasped the front of Sumitra's sari and pulled. The gun in his right hand was like a leaf in a wind. The strong silk did not tear.

"Give me the gun," Sumitra said contemptuously.

Ambedkar gave it to her, and used both hands to tear the silk. Finally there was a ripping sound and Ambedkar stepped back. Sumitra's sari was torn from right shoulder to waist. She wore nothing under it. Her skin was tanned satin. Her small, firm right breast was exposed, the rosette puckered and the nipple erect.

"Well?" she asked Ambedkar again.

"Help me carry him over to the sofa."

"No. Wait."

Sumitra bent down near me. Her arms went around my head. Ambedkar grunted but did not speak. Sumitra pulled my head against her, turned her body slightly and let go of me. There was a red smear on her bare breast from the blood on my cheek.

After that Ambedkar pulled the cocktail table out of the way and they dragged me to the sofa and draped me there. Ambedkar put the cocktail table back where it belonged. Panting slightly, Sumitra watched him. No one said anything for a while.

What they were planning was as subtle as a taxi dancer's perfume. I didn't know who was supposed to walk in on us in a few minutes, but it was pretty obvious what he would find. He would find me apparently in the process of raping the wife of the chief delegate of the host nation at the Benares Conference. And probably he would find Ambedkar clobbering me to account for any inability to get up on my hind legs.

Ambedkar opened the door I had entered and looked outside. Then he said over his shoulder, "There's no one out there. You'll hear his footsteps before he opens the other door. He won't come in very fast. He can't. When you hear him . . ."

“I know what I have to do.”

“. . . start screaming and fighting with Mr. Drum. I'll come to your rescue and—”

Ambedkar's voice went off like a snuffed flame goes out. At first I thought it was the mickey acting up again, but Ambedkar's lips weren't moving. His jaw hung wide and his eyes were round O's in his face. From where he was standing he was the only one who could see the other door. He had been wrong about footsteps; we hadn't heard any. And the door had opened silently .

A quavering, old-man voice said:

“If all this has been arranged for my benefit, miss-sahib, you might as well proceed with your scream.”

Sumitra whirled as if she'd been on wires. In the open doorway across the room stood Aruna and the Panch Kosi Holy Man.

## 20.

THE SADHU came into the room. His withered legs moved stiffly. One arm was around Aruna's shoulder. The girl looked scared. The sadhu's knees and elbows were like melons in his pipe-stem limbs. He wore clean saffron dhotis and carried a staff in his right hand. He had been cleaned and scrubbed for his surprise appearance at the evening session of the Conference, but his sun-blackened skin was creased and wrinkled like very old leather and a very faint odor of dry rot and decay had entered the room with him.

Ambedkar threw the first door open, the knob banging against the wall. If his face meant anything he was going to run and run like hell.

“Come back in here,” Sumitra said. Her voice was steel. “Shut the door.”

Ambedkar turned around like a marionette. His face was a mask of self-pity and defeat. His eyes were bewildered, his lower lip twitched, and he uttered a single wordless cry of despair. But obediently he closed the door.

“We have lost nothing,” Sumitra told him. “The sadhu and his girl found Mr. Drum attacking me. Mr. Drum

was quite frantic. With this gun he killed both of them.”

The sadhu said something to Aruna. Terror glazed her wide eyes but she shook her head.

I watched Sumitra lift the gun. With Aruna beside him trying to help, the sadhu got halfway back to the door. His frail legs moved like sticks. His joints creaked. His frail arms tried to thrust Aruna in back of him.

I got up off the sofa. All the blood drained from my head and I swayed there. Then I lurched toward Sumitra, overturning the cocktail table. Ambedkar took two steps and hit me in the face and I went down.

Then Sumitra fired. The little gun jumped in her hand. Mute Aruna opened her mouth—and screamed. With each shot the sadhu’s emaciated body jerked. Aruna screamed again. The sadhu cried out to her, and she turned and ran. Sumitra emptied the clip at the holy man. He didn’t fall until the gun was empty, then fell bonelessly, as if Sumitra’s bullets had healed his body of its stiffness.

“Go after the girl,” Sumitra said. She wasn’t even out of breath.

Ambedkar ran after the girl. I don’t know how long he was gone. My brain was absolutely clear. Move, it said. Get up. Get up now. I lay there. My body was dead. There was the smell of cordite in the room and the jangle of Sumitra’s bracelets as she stalked around the room like an impatient tigress. The dead sadhu hardly bled at all. After a while Ambedkar came back.

“I couldn’t find her.”

“Fool.”

“What could I do?”

Sumitra came over to me. I heard running footsteps and voices as she crouched over me. The automatic was thrust into my hand. My fingers were squeezed around it. Sumitra started to scream. Ambedkar kicked me in the head. It was his specialty.

Two elephants with the high cranium and comparatively small ears of the Indian pachyderm lumbered trumpeting across the steps of a burning ghat at each other. At the last moment, to avoid crushing the single body awaiting cremation on the ghat, they reared ponderously on their hind legs.

Each elephant had a lady mahut perched high on its enormous head. Sumitra Mojindar in spangled circus

tights was one of the mahuts. Priscilla Varley, similarly attired, was the other.

I was the body on the burning ghat.

The Sumitra Mojindar elephant scooped me up like a teak log between tusks and trunk, and lumbered off with my arms and legs dangling. Trumpeting, the Priscilla Varley elephant went away. It was one hell of a bumpy elephant ride up the wide stone steps of the ghat, and one hell of a dangerous elephant ride through the streets of Benares with wild angry crowds chasing us, shouting, and waving torches in my face. In her spangled circus tights the Sumitra mahut sat above it all, gloriously out of reach. She smiled down at me.

A voice made the kind of sound voices make coming out of nightmares. It was my voice.

I sat up, drenched with sweat. I was on a canvas cot in a small, hot room. Faces peered at me. A single bare bulb on a chain glared overhead.

"He's coming out of it," Assistant Collector Banerjee said.

I looked at him. Soft hands, not Banerjee's, touched my face. Banerjee was smoking a cigarette in his ivory holder, and sweating. "The mounties," I said. "Always trust the mounties to get there in the nick of time."

"I beg your pardon?" Banerjee said.

The soft hands stroked my head. When they reached the soft lump of pain in back, I winced. Something cool was placed gently against it.

"I mean," I said, not yet successfully identifying the soft hands, "you rescued me."

"No, we didn't."

I said something like, "Huh?"

"You are being used," Banerjee explained, "as a 'patsy.'" His voice put quotation marks around the word patsy, to show he knew it but knew it didn't belong to his language. "The police were called. The police came for you. By that time word had been leaked—intentionally, I suppose—to the crowds. The crowds were very ugly. We brought you here in an armored car. The crowds wanted your blood, and still want it. You killed the Panch Kosi Holy Man."

"Like heck he did!" the voice that belonged to the soft hands said indignantly.

I located a face in shadow. Her blonde hair clung damply to her head, there were smudges on her cheeks,

and she had a wan smile for me. It was Marianne Wilder.

"How do you feel, Chet? We were so worried about you."

I considered it. I didn't feel at all bad. Weak, but not bad. In fact, I felt good. Suspiciously good. Too good. I said so.

"Rauwulfia," a sleepy voice said. It belonged to Manbir.

"Rauwulfia," Banerjee repeated. "Your Western scientists only know those derivatives of rauwulfia, like reserpine, which are used medically as tranquilizers. But here in India the root of the rauwulfia plant has been used as a drug for thousands of years. You were given an overdose."

"Knockout drops," I said.

"With a euphoric 'hangover.'" Banerjee was still using quotation marks. "Also, you probably had a nightmare. Rauwulfia, you see. Further, your blood pressure is probably dangerously low. Stand up, if you can."

I tried it, swinging my legs over the side of the cot and pushing against the canvas with my hands. He was crazy. I didn't feel bad. I felt marvelous, in a carefree, dreamy way. Who cared about the crowds outside? I could hear the muted sound of their voices. Somewhere not far away, glass broke. But there weren't any windows in this room. There was a staircase, going up. I decided we were in a cellar—probably the cellar of the Darjeeling Gate Police Station.

I stood up. Manbir caught me as I swayed. Everything rushed out of my head and went around and around.

"Have a smoke," Banerjee said. A cigarette was shoved between my lips and a small cardboard box in my hands. "Keep smoking. It raises blood pressure."

I ate smoke for a while. Marianne made sympathetic noises. My head stopped spinning.

"They started gathering half an hour after you were brought in," Banerjee was saying. "They're not just rabble, Drum. They're organized, I would say. And this I know: we don't have enough strength to keep them out of here forever."

"They want me?"

"They want the murderer of the Panch Kosi Holy Man. They want the man who tried to rape the wife of Gaganvihari Mojindar."

"They didn't waste any time getting the word around."

“Organization. Can you tell me exactly what happened?”

“Why?”

“The collector. He’s been on the phone with Conference officials. Another mob has gathered there and wants the foreign observers, the Westerners, to go home. They’re organized too. They even have posters and banners, but I suppose that doesn’t interest you.”

I smiled. Banerjee must have considered it in poor taste; he stared at me gravely. We both lit cigarettes and I said: “Hell yeah, they have posters and banners. They’ve been planning it for days. Remember I told you they wanted Varley, the American Observer? They needed a fall guy. If they could make the world’s worst villain, when the time came, out of the American Observer, and if they could swing into action at once—don’t you see? They’d kick us all out and have the kind of closed Conference they wanted.”

“But they couldn’t have known that Sir Gaganvihari would bring the Panch Kosi Holy Man to the Conference as his ‘trump card.’”

“No, of course they couldn’t. They didn’t have to. Not as long as Sumitra Mojindar was playing their game with them. Wouldn’t attempted rape have been enough? You see,” I went on, chain-smoking and talking quickly, “they hadn’t planned on killing the sadhu. But the sadhu walked in on them before they were ready for him.” I told them everything that happened from the moment I met Ambedkar near the fountain in the rotunda of the Conference Building.

When I finished, Banerjee mopped the sweat off his face and said, “The police found you in the Indian lounge at the Conference Building. Ranjit Ambedkar, they were told, had subdued you. The gun that had killed the holy man was in your hand. Lady Mojindar was hysterical, but not hysterical enough so she couldn’t accuse you of trying to rape her and shooting the sadhu when he walked in on you. As I said, you had to be taken here to the Darjeeling Gate Station in an armored car.”

Marianne said, “I’d just arrived to give my statement about last night.” She shuddered, and smiled a little. “They’re giving both my men a rough time.”

“How’s Wally?”

“Out of danger, thank God. He needs rest. Plenty of rest.”

I turned to Banerjee. He stood near the cot, an anxious frown on his swart face. Manbir sat on the edge of the cot, a bent old man in white dhotis who looked as if he were asleep sitting up. "They've got us up the creek without a paddle," I said. "If you manage to save my skin, but if there's no way of proving I didn't kill the sadhu, the extremists will probably win their way at the Conference."

Banerjee nodded glumly. "Tonight's session has been canceled. Tomorrow morning's session will be crucial. Crucial."

"On the other hand," I said, "if they bust in here and hang me from the nearest pipal tree—"

"How," Marianne demanded, "can you even talk about it like that?"

"—then the Western Observers will have to go home because it will be too dangerous for them to stay in Benares."

"We could not manage to 'save your skin,'" Banerjee said. "The collector is upstairs now trying . . ."

His voice trailed off. Upstairs, something thudded heavily. There was a roar of voices, and a second thud. More glass broke, several pair of feet pounded on a wood floor, and a high tenor voice shouted exultantly in Hindi above the roar of the crowd.

Percy Machari, looking very British Colonial in jodhpurs and a sweat-stained white shirt, came pounding down the stairs.

"Have you made up your mind, Collector?" Banerjee asked him.

The collector ignored the question. "Ten minutes," he mumbled. "Perhaps five. They're having a go at the door with a battering ram." His eyes, blue eyes they were, caught mine. "If I knew for certain you really did it, Mr. Drum, I daresay I'd strangle you with my own hands." He looked away, shocked at his own lack of restraint.

"If you keep Drum here," Banerjee said, "they'll kill him."

"Yes, they'll kill him." The collector showed his teeth in a smile, but his blue eyes were bleak and hopeless. "And if I permit his escape?"

The battering ram thudded. Banerjee said: "They'd break in here and tear us apart with their bare hands."

Percy Machari groaned. *Thud* went the battering ram.

Banerjee paced back and forth. He wore boots, and the leather creaked. "There's another way," he said at last. "We can all get out. They're rioting all over Benares, Collector. We have four able-bodied men upstairs and there are the three of us down here. Waiting for the mob, with or without Drum, we're worse than useless. But there are seven of us—to fight elsewhere if we're needed."

"And Drum? And the girl?"

Banerjee turned to me. "Collectors," he said. "We're still called by the old name, the name of the police under British rule. Tax collectors, Mr. Drum. Hardly popular—in India or any country."

I didn't know what he was driving at. The battering ram thudded again and for the first time there was the sound of splintering wood. Four frightened men, swart and sweating and carrying lathis and .45's which they hadn't used probably because they feared the lynch mob might get the idea too, came running down the stone steps to cluster around the collector and jabber nervously in Hindi.

"Since this is an old collector station," Banerjee told me with a wry grin, as if he too had been fed an overdose of rauwulfia and felt somehow euphorically aloof from what was happening, "it has been provided with what all tax collecting agencies everywhere ought to have—an escape hatch."

Upstairs, wood splintered again. The strident tenor voice was loud, triumphant—and very close.

Marianne's hand groped for mine. She was trembling. The collector, with a great-white-father expression on his Anglo-Indian face, was listening to his worried subordinates. Every time the battering ram thudded and wood splintered, Manbir looked up sleepily, his eyes slits, his small bony fists clenched. I had the notion that if the time came Manbir, for all his apparent lethargy, would not sell his life cheaply.

I stood up lighting another of Banerjee's harsh cigarettes. Dizziness washed over me in waves, but this time I didn't need Manbir to support me. I said, "We going to use your escape hatch?"

Banerjee asked the same question of Percy Machari. The great-white-father expression fell off the collector's face, to be replaced by a look of uncertainty and indecision. "If only," the collector muttered, half to him-



self, "we had time to sit down and discuss this like proper gentlemen."

Over gin and tonics, no doubt, I thought. Banerjee gave me a look of disgust and swung around away from me. There was a holster on his hip with the big black handle of a Webley .45 automatic protruding. I lifted it out and pointed it in the right direction and told the collector: "Move."

The four policemen from upstairs were armed. Banerjee said hastily, "He wants us to lead him to safety. To safety!" They never dropped their guns. They never tried to use them.

It was Banerjee who slid the cot to one side and moved the rug under it. If there was a ring in the floor I didn't see it, but in another moment Banerjee had a square trapdoor gaping. One at a time we went down a wooden ladder. Even Percy Machari didn't protest now: he'd wanted someone to make the decision for him.

Banerjee, the last one down, pulled the trapdoor shut and left us in darkness. First, though, I had heard a final splintering of wood upstairs as if the door had finally yielded. Banerjee slid a bolt home and came down the ladder after us.

We felt our way along a dry cool passage with a musty underground smell. Marianne held my hand, our bodies brushing now and then in the darkness. I remembered another time, on a strand of beach at night along the Ganges, when we had walked like that. Events to fill a lifetime had happened to both of us since then.

Banerjee's voice said in the darkness: "Somewhat less than a mile, Mr. Drum. It lets us out on the river. We police will return to the city, where we are needed. And you?"

Marianne laughed nervously. "We'll keep on walking until we reach New Delhi or Calcutta or somewhere safe."

I told Banerjee: "I'm a murderer. I'll remain a murderer unless someone can find Aruna, the sadhu's girl."

He said nothing. Marianne's breath caught.

"Will you take Miss Wilder with you?" I asked Banerjee.

"The heck with that, Chester Drum!" she cried. "You left me behind once before, and look what happened."

I didn't argue. It must have been the rauwulfia.

"You're going after Aruna?" Banerjee wanted to know.

“Yeah. I’ve got to.”

“You don’t have to. You can flee. There’s a boat on the river, always waiting.” But he knew what my answer would be.

I surprised him by saying, “We’ll take the boat.”

A breeze stirred ahead of us. The darkness was less intense. Then all at once we were on hard clay and the river lapped and reeds rustled in the night wind. The collector suggested that we ought to accompany the police, but he suggested it neither loudly nor insistently. A hand grasped mine. It was Banerjee’s. “Then you’re going after her?”

I said I was.

“Once again, Mr. Drum, I offer you my hand.”

The collector and his men tramped away down the river bank. Banerjee and Manbir parted the reeds at the edge of the water and found the boat for us. It was a round oxhide vessel with a single paddle. I helped Marianne in, climbed in after her, and took the paddle.

“They will also realize the importance of finding the girl Aruna,” Banerjee said. “She holds the key to—everything.”

“To everything,” I said.

Banerjee pushed the boat out into the water. I had his gun and his good wishes and a paddle. I began to paddle.

## 21.

I KNEW ONLY of one place to start looking for Aruna, so that’s where we went. For a long time there was only the steady dip of the paddle, the receding sound of rioting in Benares, oddly like the hum of a swarm of bees with an occasional frenzied cry rising clear and distinct above it, and the rustle of wind in the dry river-bank reeds. Marianne, hunkered down in the round oxhide boat, was a darker shadow against the gleam of starlight on Ganges water. We didn’t speak at first. Then Marianne whispered: “What’s that?”

A fire glowed on the bank a couple of hundred yards ahead of us. I paddled the oxhide boat out into deeper water, then lifted the paddle so we’d drift by. The hymn

to Ram floated across the Ganges like the wail of a tormented soul.

We passed two more campfires before I paddled the boat back toward shore. The little vessel had no draught at all; I beached it on a stretch of damp sand and helped Marianne out.

"Maybe you ought to stay here," I said.

"I won't argue about it. I'm going with you."

"Scared?"

"Let me tell you. But it'd be worse staying, not knowing."

I felt the weight of the heavy Webley automatic in my jacket pocket. I took the paddle and carried it over my shoulder. We climbed up the sandy embankment and went through a field of wild oat grass. In a little while we reached the Panch Kosi. It was deserted. For twenty minutes we walked north, looking for the Panch Kosi Sadhu's hill. Then I decided we had paddled too far upstream, so we turned around and walked back along the Pilgrim Road. Trays of arati, the sacred evening fire of the Hindus, burned like red eyes in the pilgrim shrines along the way. Once a covey of startled birds burst into flight twenty yards ahead of us. Marianne sobbed and clutched my hand. We kept walking.

"There it is," Marianne said at last.

The hill loomed on our right, blocking off starlight. The huge pipal tree stood like a gnarled, many-armed giant frozen in an attitude of perpetual prayer, twisted body bent, limbs straining upward. We went up the hill.

We didn't see the campfire until we were almost upon it. The coals had burned low and the fire had been built in a depression in back of an outcropping of rock fifty feet beyond the pipal tree. Tainting the still night air was the acrid odor of burning dung. A heavy man with a robe which looked white in the starlight on one side and saffron in the glow from the dung fire on the other lay huddled near the fire.

I went the last twenty feet alone and I went on hands and knees. He stirred once restlessly, moaning in his sleep. Then he sat up suddenly and stared intently across the fire. I shoved the muzzle of the Webley against his ear and said: "It's a gun. Don't move."

His shaved head, gleaming in the firelight, turned. His eyes reflected the firelight. He had a white crescent on his forehead.

His mouth opened, but he didn't speak. Marianne came up, carrying the paddle. I let him see the gun.

I said, "We're looking for the girl. Aruna."

"Gone. With the sadhu. You . . . Englishman. I knew you would bring nothing but trouble."

"The sadhu is dead."

"Fool! Don't you think I know? Don't you see that all his other disciples are gone? Gone?" His lids lowered. At first I thought he had fallen asleep sitting up, but then his lips moved and he said very softly, "The sadhu will return. It is his karma. Don't the fools know? In another body, young, strong, healthy—the sadhu will return. I await a sign. I will have a sign. The fools! The blind . . ."

He went on, droningly, burrowing into a trance. I slapped his face, hard. His head jerked back and his eyes opened wide.

"The girl," I repeated. "The sadhu's girl, Aruna. We've got to find her. Do you understand that? Her life's in danger. She saw them murder the sadhu. She knows who did it. Did she come here?"

". . . And if they kill her?" he said musingly, softly. "Worlds after worlds. Cycles of worlds. Can you doubt she will be born again, born better each incarnation, that soul among souls, until she achieves *moksha*, until the peace that surpasseth all understanding . . . under the laws of karma . . . can you doubt it?"

"Get up," I said.

He got up, flinging a handful of sand. Marianne cried out. I hit him coming up and felt a knuckle on my left hand jump out and into place again. He swayed but did not go down. His eyes in the firelight were like red glass.

"They'll hurt her," I said. "She'll die violently."

"Aruna? You are mad. Aruna? Shanti Aruna. With great peace. Fool. English fool. You should be on the ghats or at the shrines praying to Siva with ashes on your head. Fool who will be reborn an ass or a pig among men. Leave me in peace, you with your talk of the violence of men, as if this world matters . . ."

"The sadhu thought it mattered. The sadhu left his tree and went into Benares."

He sighed. "I tried to talk. I wanted to tell him. An ox stood heavy on my tongue and I could not speak. That the world is one, he said. It must be known, above every-

thing, that the world is one under the great World Spirit." He was trembling.

"They were going to kill her. I saw. I was there. She ran screaming from them."

"I wanted to speak. I . . . Aruna? The mute one? The shanti child, the little one of peace? But she could not talk, she could not scream. How can this be?"

"They shot him. Dying, he protected her with his own body. Don't you see, he wanted her to get away. He wanted her to live."

For a long time the Siva man did not speak. The ashes of the dung fire hissed and settled. Far away across the river a wild dog howled.

"If she were hiding, if she feared for her life . . ." he mused. And, with wonder in his voice: "If she is no longer mute . . ."

"I heard her scream."

" . . . then it is because the sadhu wishes her to carry his message."

"You know where she's hiding?"

"I can guess."

"Then take us there."

"But it is a forbidden place."

"Where?"

Abruptly he asked: "Who killed the sadhu?"

He went to the fire and kicked sand on it with his bare feet. Darkness settled over us like a pall. He could have made a break for it then. He must have known that, and must have known I knew it too.

"Why," he said, "did they have to bring their worldliness to Benares?"

"You could have asked the sadhu. The sadhu thought it was important."

"The sadhu is dead. Who killed him?"

"An organization that wants to isolate Asia from the rest of the world, and maybe India from Asia. If they have a name, I don't know it. The sadhu thought what they wanted was wrong."

"Who, Englishman? Who are they?"

"They killed the sadhu. They made it look like I did it."

His shadow moved in the darkness. He said, very slowly, very clearly, "Did you?"

"Would I be looking for Aruna?"

"Yes. You say they're looking for her."

I didn't say anything. Neither did he. We'd come as far as we could, talking. Down on the Panch Kosi, the trays of sacred fire were like fireflies. Far to the south, almost at the limit of vision, the sky glowed. Benares, City of the Dead, where all Asia waited. In the darkness I gave the Webley .45 to the Siva man. I waited, then said:

"All right. You have the gun." I heard Marianne's breath catch. "Now take us."

Something prodded my hand. It was the butt of the Webley. I took it.

"I will show you the way," the Siva man said, "if you name them."

"I know only three of them. Sumitra Mojindar. And two men who work for the Indian Embassy in America: Ranjit Ambedkar and Rukmini."

His voice hissed like a snake preparing to strike. "The Malabar woman," he said. "I know her. Yes, yes, I will lead you. The fools. The violent ones. Don't they know that the only way is the way of peace, the Mahatma's way, the *satyagraha*?" He snorted like an animal emerging from water. "As if I can talk." I wondered if he was smiling. I wondered if he ever smiled. "Yes," he said at last. "They would know where to look for her. Come. Hurry."

Behind the pipal tree of the Panch Kosi Sadhu the land dipped and went level through fields of oat grass and hill bamboo, then began to climb steeply through dense wild growths of thorny berry bushes. The Siva man, now that he was committed, moved like a swift silent wind and more than once had to wait impatiently while we caught up with him. I don't know how high we climbed nor how far we went. It seemed to take a long time. There was no road, not even a cattle path.

The clumps of berry bushes became sparse; jagged outcroppings of rock replaced them, and over these the Siva man went as surefooted as a goat. Here in the high hill country a wind sprang up. The Siva man's robe billowed in it like a sail.

My breath rasped, my lungs burned, and the last half-hour or so I had to help Marianne climb the steeper rocky hills. Finally we reached a road. It was unpaved, hardly more than a cow track. Tirelessly the Siva man began to trot along it. I took Marianne's hand. She gasped, and ran with me.

The road followed the shoulder of a bluff. It was a terrace between lower and higher hills. It was a treadmill on which I ran with Marianne, and always had been running, and always would run. It was the path from death to death, through the follies of life, that the Indian mystics traverse.

Marianne let go of my hand and collapsed to her knees. "Chet . . . go . . . I can't. . . ."

But I stayed with her. Pretty soon the Siva man came back for us. He was hardly winded, but he spoke without hope. "We are too late, Englishman," he said.

We walked with him. Marianne's breathing came in gasps. Two hundred yards ahead the road turned. Beyond the curve, something dark loomed. It was a truck parked in the middle of the road. Above it a high masonry wall blocked off starlight. "Already they have come to the sanctuary for her," the Siva man said.

I went over to the truck. I touched the hood. It was hot. The cooling, contracting metal of the engine ticked. Just then something roared and reverberated behind the wall.

Gunfire.

We ran to the gate. It was wrought iron and ornate with carvings from the multitudes of the Hindu pantheon. Beyond it torchlight glowed in a courtyard between thick walls. Shadows moved in there.

The gate was not locked. I pushed and one of its leaves swung heavily and noisily on rusted hinges. The courtyard ran the length of the outside wall, maybe a hundred yards in each direction from the gate. Torches spaced on the wall threw alternating pockets of light and shadow. The inner wall, a dozen yards across the courtyard, was the façade of a building forty or fifty feet high with small dark holes of windows near the top and big bas-relief metal doors showing more gods and demons than the gate had. The courtyard was crowded with people in small dark clots like flies on the carcass of a dead animal.

A gnome of a man barely four feet tall, and wearing rags, brought a smell of earth and rotting flesh over to us. In the torchlight his face was a catastrophe with sunken cheeks like holes poked in soft dough, with faint gleam of eyes in deep black sockets and with no nose at all. The Siva man spoke to him in Hindi. The gnome

listened, jabbered animatedly, and pointed at the ornate doors of the sanctuary. At first I thought his fingers were merely short and stubby, but then I saw they were missing their final joints and were hardly more than jagged finger stumps. He was a leper.

The Siva man took the paddle from Marianne. I cocked the Webley. Another shot rang out inside the sanctuary, echoing. A dirgelike sound rose from the beggars and lepers in the courtyards.

"They are here," the Siva man said. "Bringing their violence, their profanation, into the shrine of Siva." He was shaking with rage, as if this final, although expected, profanation was more than he could bear. He threw back his head and cried out with swollen arteries bulging and pulsing in his neck, "Siva, O Mahadeva! Slay them! Slay, O Mahadeva! O Destroyer of the Universe, give strength to my arm!" He swung the paddle in a blurring arc overhead like a dervish with a sword. Then he ran at the heavy metal doors of the shrine. I almost expected him to batter them to pieces with his paddle.

He pulled at a brass ring half the size of a cartwheel. The door opened outward ponderously with gods and demons in sudden swinging motion. Brandishing the paddle, he plunged into the shrine.

I told Marianne to wait outside. She complained that this was probably the biggest story to come out of the Conference. Another shot rang and echoed in the shrine, louder now that the door was open. The beggars and lepers wailed and some came across the courtyard.

"With them?" Marianne said, jerking her head toward the mob. A stone clanged against the metal door. A hand that was all bone and shiny yellow skin plucked at my jacket. I brushed it away, took Marianne's arm, and ran inside.

At once our footsteps echoed. Trays of arati fire on pedestals shed lurid light in which incense smoke drifted and coiled. We ran across a large square chamber with a single monstrous statue, twice man-size, at its center. The statue had four arms and five faces with three eyes each. It wore tiger skin and a necklace of skulls and neck-entwining serpents. It sat astride a gilded bull and carried a trident in one hand and an hourglass in the other. It had the crescent of Siva on its forehead. At the feet of the gilded bull lay a dead man in dhotis with his brains blown out the back of his head.



Marianne sobbed. Bare feet shuffled on the tile floor behind us. I swung around. Half a dozen of the courtyard people had come into the shrine. We sprinted, shoes sharply striking and echoing, to the far wall of the chamber.

We reached an archway with arati burning in a niche and a heavy bronze door. There did not seem to be any locks in the Siva shrine. The door swung when I pushed it.

We entered Walpurgis Night, Benares style.

Near at hand the trays of arati burned steadily. In the middle distance they flickered. Further, they winked like distant stars. It was a vast room with four doors like the one we had entered. The ceiling was lost in utter darkness above. In the middle of the room stood a pillar of stone eighteen or twenty feet high, its base resting on a stone lotus. This was the lingam, the symbol of Siva as Creator, which stands at the center of all Siva shrines. In front of it, like tenpins, sat the holy men of the sanctuary.

They were flesh and blood, but they might have been carved from stone like the lingam. They sat in the yoga position, legs crossed and arms crossed, right foot upon the left thigh and left foot upon the right thigh and crossed hands grasping the big toe of left and right foot, and bearded chins slumped to concave chests. Eight of them sat that way. Two of them, legs still crossed, had fallen over on their sides. They had been shot.

Ranged before them and about twenty paces closer to where I stood with Marianne just inside the door, were four men, one big and one small in chalk-stripe suits and two really big fellows in dhotis, and a woman in a sari. The bigger of the two men in Western-style clothing was doing the shooting.

He had taken dead cold aim at the third of the human tenpins, and he was waiting for something. At last the little man in the chalk-stripe suit spoke. He had a tenor voice and he could speak Hindi as well as he could speak English. It was Ambedkar. When he got no answer, the big man fired. The third sadhu fell, legs still crossed and knotted. He never made a sound.

I looked around. Arati light glowed, pulsed, flickered. I couldn't see the Siva man anywhere but I knew he was in here somewhere, making his way from arati ped-

estal to arati pedestal armed with his paddle and belief in his god.

I raised the Webley to eye level and extended my arm. Ambedkar spoke again. None of the sadhus answered him. I got a good sight-picture of the broad back of the other man in Western clothing. He would be Rukmini, of course. When he raised his own pistol and pointed it at the next sadhu, I fired.

Lurid light rose and fell. The Webley jumped in my hand, roaring. In the immense, high-ceilinged room it went off like a cannon in an echo chamber.

Its only effect was to make Rukmini spin around and fire blindly. I had missed. His pistol spat yellow flame in the twilight glow of the arati fire. One of the big fellows wearing dhotis turned too. He had a rifle. He lifted it to his shoulder and fired. A bullet whanged off the metal door behind us.

I jerked Marianne with me and went down on hands and knees behind the nearest arati pedestal. It was round, four feet tall, almost as wide as a telephone booth, and supported a tray of burning oil on which a wick floated. I stuck my head around the side of the pedestal. They hadn't seen us yet. They had fired blindly. Rukmini and the fellow with the rifle were running zigzag in opposite directions ducking in and out among the arati pedestals. They wanted to come at us from two sides of the room. I snapped a shot off at Rukmini, and missed. He didn't return the fire. Ambedkar and the woman in the sari, who must have been Sumitra Mojindar, and the fourth man, had disappeared.

Then I saw the Siva man.

He had crouched behind a pedestal in the path the fellow with the rifle had been taking. He stood up all at once like a statue come to life and the fellow with the rifle had time for a scream but not time to bring his rifle up before the Siva man brought the edge of the paddle down on his head with a sound like splitting a watermelon with a woodsman's ax.

The rifle clattered on tile, then the Siva man retrieved it. I didn't wait to see what he would do. "Stay here," I told Marianne.

Her eyes were—big. Her mouth hardly opened. "I'll stay here," she said.

I ran crouching toward where Rukmini had disappeared among the pedestals. A shot roared and echoed.

Marble splinters flew from the pedestal in front of my face. This time Rukmini had seen me. I waited. I heard the click-tap, click-tap, click-tap of his shoes and the answering echoes which made it impossible to locate him by the sound. It was cool in that high-vaulted room, but I was sweating. My heart was beating much too fast, and shallowly. It was the rauwulfia. The sweat on my skin was cold and clammy.

I lifted my head for a quick look around. Rukmini's pistol roared instantly, the bullet clanging off the metal arati tray on the pedestal in front of me. I fell flat and to one side as the tray overturned. Burning oil cascaded down. It bounced and splattered in smaller and smaller globules like mercury. I remembered how the fellow with the rifle had screamed. I thought it was worth a try. I opened my mouth and let go like a stuck pig.

Almost at once I heard the click-tapping of Rukmini's shoes again. He was coming close. His arm appeared around a pedestal. Then his shoulder. He wasn't twenty feet away. I lay on my back with my elbow propped on the marble floor. His face came into view, the bald head gleaming, at the same instant that he brought the muzzle of his pistol around and down at me. That was also the instant I squeezed the trigger of the Webley and sent a bullet crashing up through the base of his jaw to his brain.

He fell face down in a puddle of still-burning oil. I got up and ran toward the lingam. Ambedkar, I thought. And the other fellow in dhotis. I didn't know if either of them was armed. And Sumitra Mojindar. We had the Siva man's rifle. We had my Webley. That and the rauwulfia made me feel pretty good.

I went around the pedestal. I almost tripped over the Siva man. He didn't have the rifle. He was down on his stomach with a black gleam of blood on his hairless head. I crouched there and listened to his breathing, which was irregular but deep. I started to get up.

I saw Ambedkar in profile making his way stealthily around a pedestal not fifteen feet away, crouching, carrying a rifle in his hands and moving with the elaborate care of a child in a cap-pistol ambush. I raised the Webley, pointed it at him, and pulled the trigger. It went click. Ambedkar spun around. I straightened up and pulled the trigger again. The Webley responded with another click. I hurled it and it struck Ambedkar's arm

just as he fired, the rifle jerking to one side and the bullet whining harmlessly away. I dived behind an arati pedestal. There were voices in the vast inner shrine now. Bare feet shuffled. I waited for Ambedkar. There wasn't anything I could do except wait. I could hear his shoes on the marble floor. If I got out from behind the pedestal he would shoot me down. If I waited he would come for me with the rifle. I waited in a crouch.

His footsteps stopped on the other side of the pedestal. He couldn't be sure I was unarmed. I took my shoes off and threw one of them in an underhand arc to my right. It landed and rolled. Ambedkar ignored it. I might have heard him laugh.

I flipped the other shoe up over the pedestal to distract him and give me a chance, not a very good chance, to run for it. As I did so I saw the tray of arati fire sitting there, the flame floating and dancing on the sacred oil. I heard an oath, which probably meant that the shoe had come down on Ambedkar's head or shoulder. Now he would expect me to make a break for it. What would I do in his place? I would move back a step or two and wait with the rifle on my shoulder and my weight on both feet ready to spin in either direction and fire when my quarry darted to left or right.

I didn't go left or right. I went straight up and I pushed the tray of arati fire over. I heard oil sloshing, metal clanging, flames hissing, and a single hoarse scream. Then I darted around the pedestal.

Ambedkar had dropped the rifle. He crouched in a pool of burning oil. Oil had burned off his hair and gone down his face in two fiery runnels. He half-turned and spread his arms wide as if he wanted to embrace the Siva lingam across the room. He ran toward it. This was what the little tentative flames licking at his clothing had been waiting for. They flared. They burned brightly. It was as if retribution had been in the hands of the Ayyangar crone. I remembered the intensity of my hatred and my vow to kill Ambedkar. All that was left of them now was the bitter taste of gall in my mouth. Ambedkar was a torch that fell and smouldered.

I picked up the rifle and ran toward the holy men seated before the lingam. One of them surprised me by lifting a withered arm and pointing. I started to turn, and saw Sumitra coming toward me. She wasn't five yards away. She held a small automatic up with both

hands. Her hands were shaking. She must have seen what had happened to Ambedkar. I took two steps toward her, not raising the rifle. She shot at me.

Something seared my left arm. I got the small handgun before she could shoot again. With her small hard fists she struck my chest, sobbing. I caught one of her hands and led her to the lingam. She came docilely.

The Siva man was there. So was the other big fellow in the dhotis. The Siva man had gone behind the holy men to the rough stone surface of the lingam, running his hands across it. A lump the size of a lemon stood out on the back of his bald head. The fellow in the dhotis was down before the holy men, blubbering. No one paid any attention to him.

Then Marianne came running. Tears were on her cheeks. She couldn't talk coherently. "Oh, Chet . . . when I heard . . . the way you cried out . . . I thought . . ."

Her hand touched my left arm. The sleeve was wet with blood. It probably looked much worse than it was. Marianne said something, but I didn't hear her. For a while I leaned on the rifle and listened to the roaring in my ears. Then I looked up.

The Siva man had found a door in the lingam. He had known it was there of course.

Aruna came out timidly, uncertainly. Behind her, wearing dhotis and needing a shave, was Stewart Varley. He blinked. After the darkness inside the lingam, the arati light must have been painful to his eyes. He saw me and nodded. His face was gaunt and grave. He had changed. The old Stewart Varley would have given me his best ingenuous smile; the new one said, "I sent Aruna to tell you I was dead. I'm sorry. I needed time. I thought I had found what I wanted. . . ." His voice trailed off in embarrassment. It must have been a new emotion for him.

"And?" I said. I had given the rifle to the Siva man, who stood guard over Sumitra. The lepers from the courtyard who had entered the inner shrine were silent now, unseen, waiting.

Varley's hands gestured to take in the shrine of Siva. "They accepted me without question," he said. I looked at the row of sadhus. I felt nothing one way or the other about them. There are some things you just can't understand. Varley said: "They sit here, doing nothing."

Something of the old grin returned fleetingly. "Or perhaps they do everything a man should do."

"What about the corpse Aruna showed me?"

"In Benares? He was a dead man, that's all. He was one among thousands."

"Are you going back?"

I don't think he heard the question. He said, "Would you believe it, I'd already advanced to the stage of light trance. It's autosuggestion. It . . . But that doesn't matter now. When they came for Aruna, I took her inside the lingam. There's a peephole in there, for use in the shrine ceremonies. I saw what the sadhus did. The big men in dhotis came and moved them. They would crawl back painfully and resume the lotus position in front of the lingam. They were protecting Aruna with their lives. Finally Ambedkar told Rukmini to shoot them. It was the only way. They love her. She was the servant of their leader, the Panch Kosi Sadhu. Is he really dead?"

I nodded.

"It's a great loss, Drum. You can't begin to realize how the people of India and how the leaders of all Asia looked to him for guidance. I had just one talk with him before I came here to join his disciples. He was a simple man and his way was not the way of the West, but he knew profound truths and he was the greatest man I ever met . . ."

Aruna had been in a daze. She had come out of the lingam with head bowed and eyes shut. Now she raised her head. She saw Sumitra and flung herself at her, shouting, "You killed him! You killed the sadhu!"

Sumitra did not try to protect herself, but the Siva man pulled Aruna off her. His eyes were big with astonishment both because he had heard Aruna speak and because she had attacked another living creature. Then for the first time I saw him smile. It lit up his whole face. "Aruna," he said, holding her. "Little Aruna. And would the sadhu have wished that?"

Aruna shook her head. The Siva man was still holding her. I stood with Varley and Marianne.

Alone for the moment, Sumitra turned and ran.

There was a sighing. Figures appeared among the fire pedestals, shuffling, dressed in rags. The lepers of the courtyard. They heard Aruna's accusation. Didn't the miracle of her speech mean it was absolute truth? Mean it was a command to them?

They fell on Sumitra. Rags moving in the lurid light. Animal sounds. They surged like a tide back out into the courtyard with her. I ran after them with the Siva man. The first light of dawn had come to the hills above the river and a cold wind, the only cold wind I ever felt in India, blew. The gray rags that were men fluttered in it. The Siva man roared at them in Hindi. I fired the rifle over their heads into the cold hill dawn.

Finally the wind stirred them or the Siva man's words prevailed or the rifle frightened them. They settled in clots about the dirty courtyard. It seemed as if they had never moved at all.

I went to Sumitra. Her body was twisted grotesquely and there was blood on her face. She tried to get up, but couldn't. She glared up at me defiantly and opened her mouth. She was dying.

"Don't try to talk, Malabar woman," I said.

Calling her that made her smile. "India must make its own way in the world," she said. "And Asia. Isn't it so?"

I didn't answer her. I said, "Lie still. We'll get help."

"Tell me, Drum, please, what did your Mr. Sprayregan really learn? Ambedkar told me . . . I didn't know at first . . . he found out we . . . Ambedkar and I, more than lovers . . . working from inside the Indian Embassy, deceiving my husband so we could subvert the Conference . . ."

Sprayregan and his wife had been killed for nothing. Sprayregan had found out only what all Washington knew and failed to understand. But I said, "He knew all about you, Malabar woman. He was the best private detective in Washington. I guess Ambedkar was right: he had to kill him." I thought she would die more easily believing that.

She whispered, "He should have killed you too. He tried."

"What about Varley?" I said.

"That? He didn't want to kill Varley. He had no reason to."

"In fact, once Varley got himself this India assignment, you and Ambedkar probably wanted him alive. He was tailor-made for you, wasn't he?"

"In Washington, Ambedkar was very jealous . . . of Stewart Varley. He was working both ends against . . . our cause and his own personal feelings . . ."

“So beating up Varley out in Maryland had nothing to do with the Conference?”

She smiled up at me. Her eyes were glassy. “Who says . . . Sprayregan was the best detective in Washington? You are, Mr. Drum. You have to know . . . all the answers, don’t you?”

I didn’t say anything. She tried to sit up. Then the smile went off her face and she said, “I wish you had never come to India, Drum,” and she fell back, and was dead.

The Siva man had sent someone for the police. They came an hour after dawn and they took Aruna in an armored car to the Conference. I learned about it afterwards at the hospital, where I shared Wally Baker’s room with him. They didn’t have to probe for the bullet: it had gone through the flesh of my arm without touching bone.

Aruna’s story lined the Conference delegates up behind Gaganvihari Mojindar. He never left the Conference, despite what had happened. The Benares Conference, like all such meetings, did not accomplish anything specific. But the wedge that might have been driven even further between East and West was not, and on the final day of the Conference above the burning ghats of Benares, the delegates voted unanimously, with the Chinese and Vietnamese abstaining, to hear a speech by the American Observer who, it was said, learned much in India.

That was the speech you know about, of course, if you followed the Benares Conference in the papers and news-magazines. It was one hell of a fine speech and I heard it on the radio with Wally Baker and Marianne. All-India Radio carried it in a dozen languages. Stewart Varley spoke of the World Spirit which the Panch Kosi Sadhu had died for, and maybe the words of his speech were the sadhu’s and maybe they were Varley’s. That didn’t matter. There was the life of contemplation, Varley said, and there was the life of action. Each was a good life, in the East and in the West. Each was necessary. Each was part of being human, and each had its role to play in fostering international understanding. Although he didn’t come out and say it in so many words in that speech, Varley devoted himself to the life of action.



He was given a standing ovation and when he returned to the States he was a big man in the State Department overnight. But you already know that, too.

I remained in Benares until Wally Baker was well enough to travel. *Time-Life* was giving him and Marianne a well-earned vacation, and we flew back to the States together. They would be married soon, they said. Marianne almost expected me to resent it, but I didn't. I told them I would be a staunch friend of the family, and meant it.

The morning before our flight we drove out to the sadhu's hill on the Panch Kosi. Gaganvihari Mojindar had gone out there right after the Conference ended. He sat in the lotus position under the pipal tree. Aruna served him. The Siva man was very proud of her and proud of Mojindar too. The Siva man said:

"We lost a sadhu, and we gained one. It was our karma, as it was yours to get Mr. Varley back."

Maybe he had something there. The new sadhu sat under the pipal tree in dappled sunlight. He was frail and slender with a shock of white hair and serene, unmoving eyes. He looked amazingly like the old one.

I left India with only one question unanswered. I never found out if Ayyangar had died naturally, or had been murdered because he knew too much or demanded too much. I didn't say good-bye to Banerjee, who was too busy rounding up the fanatics Ambedkar's one surviving henchman led him to.

It was raining at Washington National Airport when our Air France plane landed. Priscilla Varley was waiting for me with an umbrella, my expense money and two thousand dollars. She thought her husband was cured, she said. She thought his new dedication was wonderful. She thought I was wonderful too. She said I had earned the two thousand dollars.

I didn't feel much like arguing with her.

**THE END**  
*of a Gold Medal Original by*  
**STEPHEN MARLOWE**



## **HER HANDS AWOKE ME.**

**They were cold and moving up and down my back. She was breathing on my neck and her breath was not cold.**

**She had crawled into bed with me.**

**She was wearing exactly what I was wearing and I felt her body pushing softly against mine.**

**“And only a few hours ago,” I said reproachfully, “you tried to kill me.”**

**T H I S   I S   A   G O L D   M E D A L   B O O K**

**LITHO'D IN CANADA**