

Weird Tales

May
1954

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PREDICTION!



BY CURTIS W. CASEWIT

"The book of life is a supreme book
which one can neither open nor close.
One would like to return to one's favorite page,
But the page where one dies is already under the thumb."
S. Prudhomme.

I

ALL this happened to my friend Herbert Geoffrey Ragsdale after the war when English ladies returned to sniff at the mimosas of Nice and rich gentlemen from Switzerland were again found hanging in the Eucalyptus trees of Monte Carlo after they had gambled away their life savings.

This is not a story of murder although there is a corpse in it, nor of love, despite a blonde American actress, a Spanish count, a *Prefet de Police*, and the idealistic man from Vienna. It is the story of Ragsdale, essentially, Herbert Geoffrey Ragsdale, from whom I had not heard for eight years, when, in his bold handwriting, I received the following letter:

London, July 1946

Dr. François de Beaumont
Villa Olivette
Cimiez near Nice
France

Dear François: Must leave my empire and dash down to the

Riviera for a spot of excitement.
I've no doubt you'll provide it.
Cordially,

Rags

I understood at once what he meant by "empire"; he had become a tremendously wealthy man, making money out of automobiles, beer and a new glass-cutter, and later by investing this money wisely. But why did he say "excitement?" I thought the first thing to do would be to give a party for him. I could not predict then that each person I invited should play a rather sordid role, contributing to a chain of unfortunate incidents.

I meant well, for instance, when I called up Max Brody.

He was the man classed as Spanish count, but I knew that he was neither Spanish nor a count. His real name was Brodi-poulus, and he did a remarkable business in Swiss francs and American cigarettes. He happened to have the best connections in the black market, and be it for my cuisine or my medical practice, there existed no commodity

he could not find. Max Brody was a plump man with wavy hair who had a penchant for antic trips and dangerous ventures, although he never did anything more strenuous than placing a daily carnation into his buttonhole.

"Max," I asked, "are you still interested in mountain climbing?"

"Mountain climbing? Of course!"

"Herbert Geoffrey Ragsdale is on his way. You have heard of him, have you not?"

"Yes," said Brody. "Herbert Ragsdale! What a man! He financed the Himalaya trip. When was it? 1939, yes! And then he took part in it!"

"I am giving a soiree for him. What I need are two geese and half a dozen trout."

"Ah."

"Also several pounds of coffee. Two boxes of *chocolats*. And my cellar is empty."

"Am I invited?"

"If you bring these things, yes. You will be reimbursed, as usual."

"*C'est parfait*," said Max Brody. "I will come."

I CALLED up the *Prefet* of Nice.

His name was Pellin and it had sometimes been useful to know him.

"You have a good memory,"

I said. "Do you remember a young *Anglais*, ten years ago, who rented a noisy car which he drove through the hyacinths of the Albert Premier gardens? And thereafter to Cannes at top speed?"

"Yes, François. We fined him ten thousand francs."

"Your memory does not fail you. Perhaps you will recall that he has many funds in France. Assets in England. Interests in America. Cartels and so on."

"Should I be impressed?"

"No. Only this time more cautious. He is a friend of mine. I would not like him fined again. Tell your gendarmes. Also, you are invited to a party I will give in his honor."

Pellin accepted. He was a hollow-chested man with a thin mustache who could tell the most unusual things about the political world which would entertain Ragsdale.

We needed a young woman, of course.

I telephoned Angela Sinnt, the American actress. She had a little-girl air and at the same time maturity. I liked her. I liked her for Ragsdale whom I presumed lonely after his second divorce.

"I want you to meet a very handsome man," I said. "I have not seen him for eight years. What I recall are blue eyes, reddish-blond hair and a sharp profile."

"But—"

"A golfer. An excellent tennis player. He also boxes."

"*Cheri*," she said for she often called me that when she was happy, "*Cheri*, you've convinced me. When is it?"

"Next Saturday. He attends to business in Paris just now. He will arrive by the *train bleu*."

II

SO YOU see how blithely it all started.

I meant well. I could not predict what would happen. I could not know that each person, the olive-skinned Max Brody, the shrewd Pellin and even the gentle Angela Sinnt, would add to Ragsdale's misfortune.

My gravest mistake was to invite Ludwig von Hoffenberg. He lived in a decayed house beyond the port, a house surrounded by shabby cypresses overlooking the cliffs and the sea. Hoffenberg had no telephone. I wrote him a note. I knew he would come.

A day after these contacts were made, I read in the *Paris Herald*:

"Herbert Geoffrey Ragsdale, the Briton who succeeded in turning to gold everything he touched, the man who renovated the French refrigeration industry, the man who designed a new automobile, is finally on his way to the Côte d'Azur for a well-

earned rest. He will stay at the Ruhl in Nice."

Ragsdale arrived in the afternoon that July Saturday. The weather was perfect. Nice sparkled. You see, this was another curious thing; this superb July weather at the Riviera, the blueness of the sea, the whiteness of our palaces. This gaiety was to contrast with the horrors that beset us later.

I fetched Ragsdale from the station. He looked as I had described him, only more so: the perfect leader, the sportsman, tanned, muscular, and everything about him spelling success.

We drove down the *Avenue de la Victoire*, and along the sea front to his hotel. A porter unloaded the many suitcases—all initialed H.G.R.—his cameras, golf things and tennis racquets.

By 5 P.M., after a short rest, lunch and shower he was at my house. We made the rounds; I showed him the terrasse where Boris, the butler, was just setting the long table; I showed him the view from the roof-tower where we could see the Mediterranean at the horizon. Then I took him back to the study and let him see my new Picasso. Years ago he had liked paintings. He had changed.

"A painting," he said, "is a distortion of fact."

That was when it all started. Hoffenberg stood behind us. We

heard his shy voice as he remarked, "Sometimes it is better not to see reality."

Ragsdale turned sharply and gave a little laugh. "Not see reality? That's the viewpoint of a coward."

"Or an idealist?" said Hoffenberg, blushing.

"Oh, *pardon*," I said. "I have not introduced you two."

Hoffenberg bowed. He was an odd-looking man with round shoulders and thick spectacles. His clothes always needed pressing and his hair was too long.

"I'm a realist," remarked Ragsdale. "I believe in coming to grips with the present. Only the present counts."

"How about the future?" asked Pellin. They were all standing behind us now: the thin-lipped frail Pellin, Max Brody with the inevitable carnation in his buttonhole and the lovely Angela Sinnt.

"The future? I'm not afraid of the future. I accept it."

"Then you believe in destiny, Monsieur?" asked Hoffenberg.

Boris arrived with a tray of *aperitifs*. We each took one.

Ragsdale asked, "What do you do, Mr. Hoffenberg?"

"Me? I am a—"

"Do not tell him, Ludwig. He is good at judging people. Let him guess!"

"I won't have to. I'll tell you."

We all waited. Ragsdale look-

ed at Hoffenberg. There was a brief skirmish of eyes between them.

"Your friend is a frustrated writer or a poet or a philosopher."

"Close but not right," I said.

"I am an astrologer," said Hoffenberg.

Just then Boris waved us toward the terrace.

III

THERE were flowers on the table and the silver sparkled. Two champagne buckets were filled with ice. Boris is a fine servant. I seated Ragsdale at the head of the table so that he could see the roofs of Nicé beneath him and, by turning, the mountains above. I placed the Astrologer beside him and Angela opposite.

Boris came with the hors-d'oeuvres and by the time they were eaten and the *roti* on the table, Ragsdale had already quarrelled with most of us; with Pellin about the French wines and Scotland Yard, with Brody about fashion, and with me about medicine. Half an hour later, they were back to astrology.

"Destiny in the stars!" Ragsdale was saying in his clipped English voice. "Fiddlesticks! A man like me makes his *own* destiny!"

There had long been an unease

among these present, an expectancy, a reckless waiting for something to happen, and later, as they were slicing their cheeses and sipping at their wine, an embarrassed silence. Ragsdale had created an antagonism amongst them. He had an arrogant answer for everything Hoffenberg said. Frankly, I did not know how to cope with this. It was a difficult situation, one that shocked and surprised me.

"I'm amazed at the gullibility of man," Ragsdale said. "And you quote people like J. Pierpont Morgan. The Vanderbilts. And all these American film stars!"

"They used astrology, yes. Hoffenberg was very patient; I liked the softness of his voice which contrasted with his appearance.

"And you actually believe you could forecast my future?"

"Indeed. Astrology is a science. A matter of mathematics."

"Good," shouted Ragsdale. "I was born at five minutes after three o'clock on the morning of May 22nd, 1906. Then tell me. *Tell me now! How—am—I—going—to—die?*"

He delivered this question like the slap of a glove. His huge shoulders were hunched forward as if to attack the Astrologer; his face was fiercer than I had ever seen it, the nostrils dilated, eyes under the bushy brows narrowed. Again there was a stoniness on

all faces! My guests were holding their breaths, and waiting for Hoffenberg's answer. Even Boris had stopped twirling his bottles in the bucket. I suddenly knew that they were all despising the tycoon and that I had made a great mistake in bringing him.

"Well, Hoffenberg?"

THE Astrologer turned his round head toward me as if seeking advice. I could give none. I had never felt as inadequate.

"Listen," Ragsdale told him rudely, "you brought your books and charts, didn't you? Isn't this why you're here?"

"No prediction is absolute—"

"You don't seem to be so sure, now do you?"

"And the prediction of death is least of all absolute. Constellations change. I prefer not to—"

"And if I insist?"

"I would rather you did not—"

"François, what's his fee?"

"Forgive me," I said. "Mr. Hoffenberg does not seem to like—"

"I don't care what he likes, and at this point as if to hide his harshness, Ragsdale smiled showing his teeth. But the damage was done. There was an icy silence and no one, of course, was eating.

"What's your fee, Hoffenberg?"

The Astrologer looked into

his glass. Softly he said: "10 pounds—14,000 francs."

"I'll pay double."

"It is not a question of money."

Ragsdale insisted even more, so that after liqueurs and coffee the Astrologer fetched his paraphernalia and called Ragsdale into the study where he took notes.

BORIS had meanwhile removed the table and we remained in our wicker chairs on the terrace, looking through the arabesques of the railing. I could not find one subject to entertain them with. It seemed like the frustrated silence of strangers in an elevator. There was no doubt that Ragsdale had left a very bad impression. Since the days of Cambridge he had certainly changed. Eight years was a long time. He was very wealthy before the war, and a little pompous, but he had never behaved like this. There was in him a new superciliousness which I could not analyze. Perhaps the money had gone to his head and I knew that I had made a grave error to let him meet Hoffenberg.

After awhile, Ragsdale returned, and when the conversation was slowly resumed, with Brody telling about his luck at roulette, and Angela asking questions and Pellin listening, I drew Ragsdale

away from the others. We crossed the study where Hoffenberg was now working, to the other side of the house where a balcony opened to the terraced fields above us. The vines were dusty and a last redness was on the mountain crest.

For a moment we stood quietly, inhaling the balmy air.

Then I said, "Rags, in your letter you spoke of excitement. That was why I invited Hoffenberg."

"Good try, François."

"I am sorry he was uncooperative."

"That's his privilege." Ragsdale nodded toward the study where Hoffenberg hovered over his books. "Twenty pounds changed his mind though!"

I ignored the remark. "It is a woman I invited you for."

"I'm through with women."

"Have a look at her—" I made him turn his head so that he could see Angela on the terrace. She was smiling, and looked graceful in her white linen dress.

"Angela just finished a picture."

"What part did she play? A vamp?"

"A nurse— Ragsdale went on smoking, resentfully. I suddenly recalled his reaction when I had introduced them several hours ago; she had been in Europe so long that she had risen

and stretched her hand out. He had taken it, tense, his teeth clamped together.

"She is no *femme fatale*," I said. "Nor quite like other actresses. She is lonely."

He did not answer, looking at the mountain where the lights went on. I continued to cater to him for I knew not what reason. Perhaps I was trying to revive my old camaraderie with him; perhaps it was on account of Angela whom I liked. Presently she turned her head with languor. She did everything with languor. Brody was flirting with her.

After awhile, Ragsdale said, "François, you'll never understand this, being French. But I can get along *without* women."

"Can you? I must contradict you at that point."

"I'll let you. But once *my* mind is—"

"Rags, tell me—what has changed you so?"

"Some other time! Let's get back to the others, shall we?"

IV

HOFFENBERG had joined the group on the terrace. He had his threadbare briefcase on his knees. He rose when he saw us appear through the French doors. There hung again a silence in the air, until Ragsdale broke it. "I say! I want everybody to stay here. I want everyone to

witness this twenty-pound horoscope!"

The Prefet got up. "I enjoyed the dinner, François." And before I had time to stop him, he left.

Max Brody stayed a little longer. Then he shook my hand, ignored Ragsdale and asked Angela whether he could drive her to Nice. "Thank you very much, but no," said Angela, and Brody left with a "*Bonne nuit!*"

"Well," asked Ragsdale, unruffled. "Are you ready, Hoffenberg?"

"I am not, Monsieur. I will need another day."

I suggested that they meet on my beach strip in Cannes two days later. Then I accompanied the Astrologer down the stairs, to await Boris with the car. We stood in the darkness under the umbrella pines. Stars were over us.

"How long is your friend to stay?" asked Hoffenberg.

"Six weeks, perhaps eight. He came for a *repos*."

"He must not remain here. He should leave."

"Leave? Why?"

"You see, François, his horoscope is very bad. Tragedy. A terrible tragedy. If he leaves, it may not happen."

I said nothing. I heard Boris open the garage door, switch on the light and back the car out over the gravel.

"There is an advantage in astrology. One can warn a man so that he can master fate."

"Then warn him!"

"He will not heed my words," said Hoffenberg. "Help me. Send him away."

"It is impossible," I said. "I cannot do anything. The appointment, Ludwig. It has been made—"

"Please! Please! Tell Ragsdale I cannot cast his horoscope!" There was an urgency in the Astrologer's voice, and I saw his face in the darkness; the lines that creased his forehead. But then Boris arrived with the car.

"You have promised," I said. "With him you cannot break a promise."

Hoffenberg shook his head and then climbed into the car. They drove out of the gate and I stood under the trees for awhile, staring down at the lights of Nice which shone like pearls.

When I returned to the study, Ragsdale was leaving. He seemed surly till the last moment. He had his rented car downstairs but did not bother to offer Angela a lift.

V

AT LAST I was alone with her. I promised myself not to mention Ragsdale.

"Angéle," I said, "the evening was bad. I am sorry."

She did not answer immediately. I watched her hands; they were round and very soft. She wore no jewelery. Just the round soft hands.

After awhile she asked, "Do you know Ragsdale well?" Her face was serene, open.

"Once I did. Why?"

"Once?"

"Yes. He is not the same man."

A late ship gave a melancholy sound. It was the night steamer to Corsica.

"He is suffering," said Angela. "I would like to help him."

She leaned forward and I saw as in a close-up the fine lines in her face—lines, no doubt, of disappointments and the wear of life.

"François," she said, in a whisper almost. "Ragsdale interests me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Angéle."

I contemplated the twisted path of the human heart. Here was a man who did not wish her, who was hard and reluctant; who bore her a passionate grudge for what women had done to him. And there she was drawn to him; for just these reasons:

"I'm very busy," she said. "I'm studying several scripts. Hollywood wants me back. So I don't know how long I'll stay here, but—"

"I will do my best," I said.

VI

TWO days later I picked up Hoffenberg. I had never been to his house, if such it can be called. One of the windows is stuffed with paper, and the brick walls sag as if they cannot support the roof. And his two rooms—I then saw them only for an instant, for Hoffenberg was ready—looked like antique shops. I had never seen such dirt and disorder, and such accumulations of worthless objects.

We drove to Cannes and found Ragsdale on the beach. He was in his bathing trunks, sprawled in a deck chair, *Leica* beside him. His massive body was drenched with oil and his face glistened in the sun.

"You brought the scientist," he jeered. And to Hoffenberg: "There's a chair. Sit down! I hope you made up a good story!"

I wanted to leave but he forced me to stay.

Hoffenberg opened his briefcase and withdrew a number of neatly written sheets and a chart, covered with black ant-like signs.

"Mr. Ragsdale," he asked. "Are you absolutely certain you want this? I mean *absolutely* certain?"

"Of course I want it. Never mind the preambles!"

"I dislike this responsibility. I can still return your check—"

"I daresay not!"

"You have an excellent brain, Hoffenberg began. "A brain that grasps. It gave you financial success."

"You've read the papers!"

"I do not read papers, Mr. Ragsdale. Not anymore. I judge from stellar conditions."

Hoffenberg looked up, awkwardly, as if requesting permission to continue.

"Go on!"

"You despise weakness. You are frequently angry. You are too sensitive—and much too impulsive. Too much energy, intensity, passion. That is why—"

"I know what I am. I'm not interested in a character analysis."

"That was the reason you divorced, I wanted to say. You had two divorces. You suffered the loss of many women—"

"Suffered? Ha. Why don't you talk about the future?"

"I will." Hoffenberg turned the pages of his script. He was a curious mixture of crankiness and kindness. "I predict that you will fall in love—"

"Me? In love? You heard that, François? I hate women. I despise the entire calculating scheming lot of them!"

"Love and hate sometimes go hand in hand."

"An old thought, dear fellow."

"You will reach this woman. You will have her. And lose her."

"If I can't fall in love—and I can't!—it's impossible to lose a woman. You're not very logical."

"Life is not very logical." Hoffenberg pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his heavy spectacles. He did this very methodically. Around us bathers ran, chasing one another, and children skipped over the sand. The Mediterranean was bluer than I had ever seen it, and the air smelled of salt.

"Why don't you make this short, my friend. *How shall I die?*"

The Astrologer hesitated, pulling the spectacles over the bridge of his nose. Then slowly, "Remember, Mr. Ragsdale, *you* wanted me to say this."

"Yes, I. I'm not afraid.

"You will die—in the arms of a woman."

I WATCHED Ragsdale, saw his eyes become smaller, his broad dominant face turn into creases, and then the first peal of laughter, followed by another, until, hands over his stomach, he laughed so hard that his entire body rocked.

"Give me a towel, François, he shouted and as I handed it to him, he wiped his perspiring chest and face. "Arms of—a—woman, eh? But that's pleasant, man! Darn pleasant—" He turned to me still shaking with laugh-

ter. "François, wouldn't that be good? Jolly, jolly good! Tell me, you ought to know!"

"You're mistaken, said the Astrologer. "It will be an unpleasant death—"

"Unpleasant, eh? I'll tell you again, *Herr Professor*, I hate women. I loathe them! I wouldn't be seen near a woman. And therefore I won't die in the arms of one."

"Nevertheless it will be so.

"I must give you credit. You're not only fantastic but also original!"

"The dying will be slow. It will take several days. And no one will help you. You will be surrounded by people and they will let you die."

"Ridiculous," shouted Ragsdale. "Help? And I can't get it? You're insane, man. The pound still has *some* value!"

Hoffenberg rose and handed the dossier and his card to Ragsdale. "You understand that constellations change. Please come back and see me again. Nothing is final."

After he had gone—he caught the bus back to Nice—Ragsdale asked me why Hoffenberg limped.

I had never told him about it. "Torture," I said.

"Torture? How?"

"He made a prophecy to an evil man in his country. An evil prophecy—"

"Death in a woman's arms?"

"No. A violent death. Asphyxiation."

"And it happened?"

"Yes. The man died in an underground bunker just off the Wilhelmstrasse. The bunker was hit by a bomb. But before this happened, the man had put Hoffenberg in irons, telling him to take back the prediction. Hoffenberg refused. So they smashed his knee bone with a hammer, blow by blow. That was when Hoffenberg left Hitler's General Staff."

"General Staff?"

"Yes," I said, watching a speedboat at the horizon. "You see, Rags, at the time of the dictator's march into Vienna, Hoffenberg lived there. He was, as I told you, famous."

Ragsdale opened his mouth to answer and then closed it again. He was impressed. I told him how the new masters forced Hoffenberg to work for them, how he became one of the top five astrologers who guided every action of the *Fuehrer*, until he made the prediction to his aide.

VII

I HAD no important appointments so that I spent the day at the beach. Ragsdale was a magnificent swimmer. I could not help thinking of Angela. I had not forgotten her request; but I

did not mention it to Ragsdale. I would not admit to myself that Hoffenberg's prediction held me back. Frankly, whatever Hoffenberg's past and his celebrated record, I did not believe in revelations of this genre. I occasionally had Hoffenberg at the house as one would invite a violin player or a Hula dancer—merely as a new type of amusement for my friends. Some of them followed Hoffenberg's advice, even to the extent of delaying business transactions or the purchase of a villa. But nothing like this had ever happened before. Hoffenberg had never made a fatal prediction; and not once did I have an occasion to doubt his ethics. In fact, I liked him. I sympathized with this round-shouldered limping Austrian who had never done any harm.

But I kept quiet about Angela.

She phoned me the same evening. I was smiling about the amount of diplomacy she employed to make me keep my promise. In what delicate words she tempted me! She used her most languid voice. I could imagine her in a telephone booth, just back from a game of tennis, the blond head pressed to the phone, her lips parted, her delicate skin flushed, and her feet in sandals, placed sideways on the floor. Ah, *l'amour!* I promised again.

Next day I had lunch with Ragsdale at the Ruhl.

It was difficult for me to understand what Angela saw in him.

He was very handsome, of course, with two sharp lines leading down from under his eyes—blue eyes—to the chin. It was an unusual face, perhaps, because it showed a combination of energy and sensitivity. But as a person he had changed completely. Everyone disliked him. Pellin had phoned, inquired about the outcome of the horoscope, and, as I remained silent, voiced his antipathy. Brody had not phoned—he seldom did—but I knew that he too, felt a distaste for Ragsdale. Only Angela wanted to know him better. While we had our coffee I thought again of her request. There was no opportunity to speak of it.

Afterwards we walked along the Promenade which was sun-baked and overcrowded as always at this noon-hour. In the *Jardins* we sat down on one of the iron-wrought benches. These gardens are filled with people every summer: little nurses in uniforms with their young flock, my compatriotes from Paris, Calais and Grenoble who come for their vacations, and then of course, the usual habitués, old ladies mostly, who also graced my medical practice, absorbing quantities of capsules into which we

put nothing more than water, to cure their imaginary ills.

WE WERE looking at all these people, and gamblers, the international riff-raff, the matadors from Barcelona, German tourists and the many white Russians. There was this mixture of haste and leisure which one finds at the Riviera.

After awhile, Ragsdale said casually, "I say. What became of this—blonde creature? The Ingrid Bergman from the party, I mean."

"Angela?"

He nodded.

"Why do you ask?"

"I would like to see her."

Just then someone sat down beside us and we got up and walked on, out of the gardens and toward the ocean.

"I thought you hated women?"

"I do. I do."

I looked at the beach and saw hand-waving *Nicois* and bathers in crazy bathing costumes, and a steamer at the horizon. The sky was splashed with blue. I did not look at Ragsdale.

"What're you avoiding me for? You don't think I mind what this—charlatan said!"

"He's not a charlatan."

"All right, chappie. Then he's not." And softly, "Still, François, I would like to see her."

I was afraid. I did not believe Hoffenberg's predictions, not

really, even if this first one had come true. I thought it a coincidence. Still, I was afraid. But one could not change Ragsdale's mind, once it was made up. He was the most obstinate man I had ever met.

So I said, "You are lucky. Angela likes you." And gave him her address.

VIII

WHAT happened after that seemed rather curious. He did not come to the villa. One day in August I received a note in his large script:

"Dear François:

We're taking long walks, spend many hours together. We saw Beaulieu; we drove up to Grasse, and visited the Perfume establishments. We're playing tennis and golf. We swim and participate in the many fêtes and soirées the Riviera offers.

Cordially,
Rags."

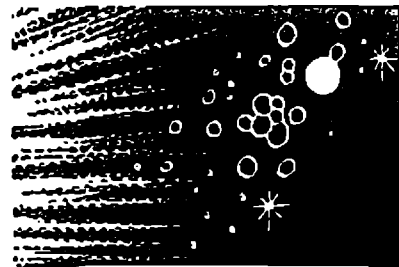
Not a word of thanks, of course. Ragsdale was not a man leaning to gratefulness.

I could have phoned him at the *Ruhl*, but I did not wish to interfere in his life. Besides, I was busy with my English ladies. As for Angela, I did not hear from her. I was glad about their idyll *à deux*.

Driving down the Rue Lamar-

tine one September afternoon I saw them both; they made a handsome couple which invariably stood out from the crowds. They were at a little kiosk which dispenses *jus de raisin*—freshly pressed grapes—he in a polo shirt and she in slacks with a ribbon through her hair. They did not see me as they toasted to each other, Angela with her arm through Ragsdale's. Perhaps I am a sentimental man because I imagined him talking now, propounding his difficulties and Angela absorbing them. There was a chance for him, perhaps, to adapt himself.

I considered the matter as closed. Once he phoned, another time she wrote, and by fractions I learned that they had become important to each other. She sent him little gifts: an invitation to



the opera one month, a new tennis racquet the next, and he despatched, morning for morning, two dozen freshly-cut roses and every Sunday a box of candied marrons or Sicilian peaches. He never did anything in halves. Chivalry or rudeness; love or hate, I felt victorious. And I had forgotten Hoffenberg.

IX

THEN, one day in October, Ragsdale came up to my house. I had just returned from the clinic and sat on the terrace, eating figs from a basket. He fell heavily into a wicker chair. He had had too much sunshine, and his face was peeling. I pushed the basket toward him but he shook his head.

"I want you to do something for me."

"Yes," I said, "What?"

"Contact Angela."

"Oh?"

"Something has gone wrong. I can feel it."

Below us, a little donkey was pulling a big cart, loaded with olives. A man was hitting the donkey.

"How can you feel it?"

"Little things, François. He lit a cigarette and waved the match out with quick movements.

"What things?"

"Like her lack of time, for example. She says she has no time. You know how little she speaks. It's hard to understand. I don't know what happened."

"The predictions—did you ever mention them to her?"

"No, No. Of course not."

"Do you believe in them?"

"I don't. I absolutely don't! You should forget about this mumbo-jumbo!"

I remained quiet which forced

him to speak. "Forget about the predictions!" And then louder, "She doesn't want me. Say the truth!"

"How can I know, Rags?"

"You're a doctor. You're supposed to understand human nature." Softly, "And you're my only friend. Please get in touch with her."

"Surely you can arrange these things yourself. You have known her for a long time."

"Now, please! Get in touch with her!"

It was strange how he said this—with humility almost. Something was happening to Ragsdale. As he followed me inside I noticed that he had lost his erect gait; he seemed bent.

I poured him a glass of *Pernod* and helped myself to one. Then I went to the phone. "Rags, may I ask you something?"

He was very tense; his cheekbones stirred. "Do," he said. "Ask! I'm at your mercy!"

"I mentioned this before, Rags. On the rear balcony. It is this, what has changed you so? I mean, since Cambridge?"

He was leaning against the wall, the Picasso at his left; a palm pot in a metal frame to his right.

"Last year—when I came back from the Himalaya expedition. I met a woman. In Torquay. You know where it is. South Coast of England. I—loved her."

He reached into the palm pot and tore a fragment off the plant.

"Yes, Rags."

"Oh, rot. Why don't you phone first? Angela should be in."

"Later. You tell me about the woman in Torquay."

"I wanted to marry her. My third marriage. But one evening I found her with another man."

"That can happen."

"But never like this!" He tore another bit off the plant and squeezed it between his fingers until the juice ran out of it.

"Women are hypocrites. They're insensitive. One day she became aloof, you see. I knew something was wrong. She always went out nights. Had no more time. Going to the library, she said. One evening I followed her. Not a detective, François. But *me!*

"She didn't go to the library. She went down to the beach. I watched her. She was there with the other man."

"I am sorry," I said, understanding him much better. He had thawed; suddenly he became human.

"I will call Angela now," I said.

Ragsdale stayed next to me, his eyes glued to the receiver as I picked it up.

"Rags," I said. "A little favor. Go on the terrace while I speak to her. Yes?"

X

WHEN he had gone, I dialed Angela's hotel. She was in.

"*Comment çà va?*" I asked.

"I am well, *cheri.*"

"He is here. Ten meters from me. And with problems."

"Problems?" She was always the same: self-possessed and confident. And a little vague.

"He would like to see you."

"I've much work," she said.

"I told you. I'm studying a script. Might have to leave any day. I—"

"Tell me, Angèle. Did Rags ever speak about the horoscope?"

"No. Why?"

"It does not matter. What happened to you two?"

There was a pause. I felt childish. One could go too far in trying to bring people together, especially when they were as complicated as Ragsdale.

Then she said softly, "He has changed."

"How?"

"I can't put my finger on the spot. It's hard to explain, François."

"Try!"

"It's a fear," she said. "As if—well, as if he were afraid to lose me."

"Does he have reasons to fear this?"

"Perhaps."

"Why, Angela?"

"I liked the boldness in him."

This was his major quality, François. Boldness. Strength. A daredevilish streak. He's lost it—"

"Angèle," I pleaded, "could you not see him once more?"

I spoke to her for awhile, watching Ragsdale on the terrace, his massive hands on the railing, the back turned to me, and then again, as he strode back and forth, impatiently.

Angela finally agreed to meet him the next evening. I gave him the news. He seemed relieved. Thereafter we spoke of this and that, and then he mentioned the fact that he needed soap and cigarettes. I promised to contact my only source for these things: the man named Max Brody.

XI

THE next evening, while Ragsdale went to see Angela, I drove to Brody's house. It was at the sea front, a white stucco affair, very small, really, but surrounded by an enormous wall. Light beams were on the house when I arrived, a measure—as he explained it once—against burglars. He wore no carnation because he was in a house coat.

"How does your friend get along with Angela?" he asked.

"Why does it interest you?"

"Why? I wanted her. Ragsdale stole her."

"My regrets," I said. "There are other women. The Côte d'Azur abounds with beauty."

"The demoiselle appealed to me," said Brody. "I like Californian apples better than those from Nice. And what gives me the honor to see you?"

"American cigarettes. A quantity."

"For whom?"

"For me."

He went down into the cellar where he kept all his things and returned with a shoe box, and a string round it. He always delivered black market merchandise in a shoe box.

When I paid him he asked, "What happened to Ragsdale's horoscope?"

"Nothing special," I said. "*Au revoir!*"

Two days later, on my way back from the clinic I parked my automobile near the Ruhl and carried the shoe box up to Ragsdale's room.

His expensive luggage stood in an even row against the wall. Copies of the *London Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* were in the waste basket. He did not greet me, but went on filling a last suitcase. He was in shirt-sleeves, and looked tired.

"So we're going to lose you," I said.

"There won't be much lost."

"Quite the reverse. And what happened?"

"What *happened*, François? And you ask me?"

"I am not Nostradamus."

He dropped a pair of trousers into the case, snapped the lock and stared at me. His hauteur, his arrogance, all gone.

"Sit down," he said. "I'll tell you."

I sat down.

"She has cheated me. You understand that? Cheated me!" His eyes widened. His flat hand knocked on the table. Veins stood out from the hand. He was still impulsive.

"So tell me," I said.

"It was very simple. Very simple. I went down to her hotel around nine. Just as you arranged it. They're serving cocktails outside. You remember she promised to meet me there. I was early."

"All right. And then?"

"I didn't go inside. I got up after awhile and went to the beach."

"Yes," I said, with a premonition.

"They've an old bathing cabin there. I walked toward it. Over the pebbles. Silently. Not a detective. But *me!*"—

"*And there she was!* I saw her profile in the moonlight! Like I see you now. And against the wall with her: a man. Close. Close, I tell you!" He sat down on the window sill, breathless.

"Rags. Do not speak more."

It was a monstrosity. I thought of Angela, the frankness in her face, the finesse of her person. I believed Ragsdale; I was sorry for him, and then, momentarily, I wondered whether it could be his imagination. She was to meet *him*. It was impossible. But at the Riviera nothing was quite impossible.

Ragsdale got up, pacing the room. He told me how, through the impact of the moment, he just stood there, in the night and said nothing and thought nothing, and how, afterwards, he walked away, weakness in his knees. He did not inquire at her hotel. An hour later, in his room, rage came over him and he tore up all the pictures she had given him. He showed me the shreds in the waste basket.

"But, Rags," I said, "this is not the end of everything. You can ski in Chamonix. Why not go there for awhile—no?"

"No," he said.

"Or the Carneval of Nice, soon. Or—"

"I'm leaving," he cried. "For good."

He went on packing I looked out of the window. The sky was clear and blinking with stars.

"The prediction," I said—and I don't know why I said it for it immediately infuriated him. "Do you believe in it?"

"No," he shouted. "How often should I tell you? Though

I've a surprise for you! I'm on my way to Hoffenberg."

"A good idea," I said. "He advised you to come."

He opened a drawer and pulled out the horoscope in the astrologer's dossier. He threw the dossier into the waste basket. There were little lights dancing in Ragsdale's eyes now, as he advanced toward me. "And I've another surprise for you. The reason I'll see Hoffenberg is *not this!*" and he pointed to Hoffenberg's sheets. "It's something quite different!"

"What?"

"The man I saw with Angela looked like a frog. Just like your astrologer!"

"You are absurd, Rags. You are not in your right mind—"

"Hang it all, man! Keep your opinions to yourself!"

"Let me drive you."

He pushed me out of the room. "Thanks. My plane leaves at ten. See you tomorrow morning. And I'm going to Hoffenberg *now.*"

With that he slammed the door in my face.

XII

I WENT to the desk phone and dialed Angela's hotel. *Perhaps she can explain,* I thought. The hotel told me that she had checked out. Checked out three days ago! So she had not even been in Nice that evening,

unless she moved. If she had left she had no doubt tried to reach me before. I had not been home since morning. Perhaps there was a letter from her. I called the house. Boris answered.

"Boris," I said excitedly. "Please look through today's mail."

He did and quoted the names of the senders. There was a letter from Angela Sinnt. "Open it," I said.

He hesitated.

"Open it, Boris. And quickly!"

He read in his broken English:

"Cheri:

A telegram came from my agent. Must leave in two hours. Tomorrow I should've seen your friend Ragsdale. I'm sorry I can't. I've tried to reach him; he was out. So I wrote him a note. It left with the same mail as this. Thanks for everything.

Amour. Angéle.

I put the phone down incredulously. So at the beach it had not been Angela, nor her ghost, but simply another woman. And Ragsdale, hypersensitive as he was, had seen things. His mind had, so to speak, repeated an event.

Just then Ragsdale stepped out of the elevator. His cuffs were not buttoned and a tie hung out of his white suit.

"Wait!" I called as he rushed past me.

He turned and I went toward him. "It's all been a mistake, Rags. A terrible mistake. Angela has left. She is on her way to America. The evening you had to meet her she was—"

"Prove it!"

"Ah, I will. I will! She wrote you a note. It must be here."

We went to the desk.

"My mail. Herbert Geoffrey Ragsdale."

The clerk nodded and put his hand into Ragsdale's box.

It was empty.

"It is the mail, I said. "The mail in Nice is sometimes slow—"

Ragsdale's eyes narrowed. Of course he did not believe me. I wanted to tell him about Angela's message but he ran away, pushing through the revolving doors out into the *Promenade*.

I stared after him. He could not find a cab and jumped into a trolley. He had Hoffenberg's card. I wondered what I should do, and decided to drive to the astrologer's house. I had to warn him. I had to prevent a mishap. And perhaps he could revise the horoscope.

XIII

I PASSED the trolley and caught a glimpse of Rags as he stood in a cluster of people,

tourists and women and black-haired children. I imagined the stench and oily odors. I knew I would get to Hoffenberg's house before Ragsdale could.

He had to cross the Paillon river and the *Vielle Ville* where there were no more palms and marble palaces. He had two kilometers through crooked lanes of the old town where prostitutes stood at the corners and where squat women with aprons argued from window to window, across clothes-lines. And then down through the tin-can-littered streets to Hoffenberg's miserable abode above the sea.

XIV

I REACHED Hoffenberg's house from the *Corniche* Road.

After parking my car, I walked along a stone wall. Below me were rocks, and tiny roads twisting themselves to the sea. As I approached I could observe the astrologer through a curtainless window. He sat at a dusty desk; with books heaped up around him and on tables and chairs. Shreds of tapestry hung from the walls, and faded dust-covered etchings and paintings.

I knocked.

"Come in, he called and when I entered, he rose slowly, painfully.

"Ludwig," I said, "Ragsdale

is on his way here. He is in a bad state. You must hide."

"There is no reason for it.

"As you wish, Ludwig. But do me one favor."

"Yes, François."

"He does not believe your horoscope. At least he says so. But just in any case, Ludwig. Tell him the forecast is not correct. Say to him that nothing will ever happen."

Hoffenberg looked at me quietly from behind his thick lenses.

"It is important," I went on. "You understand that. Two predictions already came true. But you must tell him he is safe."

"I can examine his horoscope again."

"No. No. Do not examine anything! Just tell him that—"

"Do you wish me to lie then?"

I shuddered. "Lie? Do you mean it will happen? The woman, the—"

He sat down, not answering. Somewhere a water tap dripped. Rhythmically.

"Ludwig! You must help me, you hear? The man will kill someone. Or kill himself. Find a way—"

Again he did not answer.

"Think! We only have ten minutes."

We had ten seconds.

Steps crunched on the road above. They were coming down.

Ragsdale jerked the door open. He looked at the disorder, the dirt, and then advanced toward the wall, not noticing Hoffenberg who turned livid, nor me, but staring at the wall.

"Angela," he cried. "There. There! I knew!"

I tried to follow his panicky widening gaze, past Hoffenberg now, past a floor-lamp, past a ridiculous-looking cat which I had not seen before. It all happened so quickly; he scrambled toward the wall, toward a painting which he now covered so that I could not see it, and then I heard a savage blow, another "Angela, Angela!" uttered in Ragsdale's hoarse voice, and then the sound of glass, smashing onto the floor. A cloud of dust rose. Ragsdale himself stood against the wall, facing me, in a pose of hostility. His suit was soiled and splinters glittered in his bleeding knuckles.

I went toward him. He seemed nailed to the spot, gasping and staring at me. Sweat covered his face and his hair stood up, virtually.

"I hate her," he cried. "I loathe her."

HOFFENBERG moved toward him, from behind the table.

"And her picture! *Hers*. How did it get here?" He stared at the astrologer, all the frustration,

all the accumulated terror of the past years boiling within him.

He clutched my arm just as I wanted to examine the painting.

"It is a *Degas*," said Hoffenberg. "The dancer—"

"So you see it is not Angela! It was all a mistake—" Passion, I thought. He sees you everywhere, Angela. "Let me show you," I added.

But he held on to my arm, vise-like.

"Ludwig," I said, "do pick up the painting."

Hoffenberg did not move. It was curious how he stood in the center of the room now, small, puffy-cheeked, gazing into his cigarette-filled ashtray. And as for Ragsdale, he seemed as if in a trance, a sudden softness in his blood-streaked eyes, a softness because with one hysterical blow against the inanimate thing—the painting of a woman—he had released his hatred.

But then he walked past me out of the house.

"—wait a moment! My car—"

But he was already out of sight. I heard the clatter of his footsteps rushing into the darkness.

I wanted to run after him. But I am not a young man.

"Ragsdale," I shouted. There was no answer, except from the waves.

"Hoffenberg," I said, "we must find him. His injury—it is grave. You saw his hand?"

The astrologer nodded, but only turned to the painting, picking it up from the floor. Its frame was broken, its glass shattered, with Ragsdale's blood on it. It was *Degas' Star*, yes, the lovely dancer, her hair crowned by a ribbon, with the sea in the background.

"Ludwig," I said, "you must come with me. Let us look for him. As a doctor, I—"

"It is too dark. The cliffs are dangerous."

"Then what can we do?" I was slowly losing my senses.

"Inform the police. Ask them to search with lights—"

I asked Hoffenberg to let me have the painting so that I could show it to Rags when he returned to the hotel.

WHEN I arrived at the *Prefecture* that night, I found my friend Pellin on duty. A cigarette was jutting from the corner of his mouth. "Ah, François, how content I am to see you! I have bought a little yacht. You are invited to a party I will give on it this weekend—"

I interrupted him and explained Ragsdale's situation, and asked Pellin to send a squad at once. All the beaches should be searched, as well as the shopping districts and the old town. Pellin

listened with interest, impartially like a policeman.

"I comprehend, he said, touching his thin mustache with the tip of his finger. "I will take care of it. But just tonight, François, we are expecting a political demonstration."

"But this is a matter of life and death!"

He raised a thin hand. "I will handle it, François! But not tonight. Tomorrow—"

My throat was constricted as I walked out of Pellin's office. You see, the *Prefet* had done many things for me; I could not understand that he would fail me now.

XV

IT WAS midnight when I reached my house in Cimiez and two in the morning when I returned to Ragsdale's hotel with Angela's letter and the *Degas* which I had made into a bundle. Ragsdale had not come in; so I went to his room and left the bundle, some gauze, disinfectants and a note that he should tentatively attend to his wound when he came in. I also left a message at the desk to inform me as soon as Ragsdale should return.

I spent a sleepless night and a day and another night, shuttling between Hoffenberg's house, the *Prefecture* and the *Ruhl*. The next day I was called

out to Villefranche, which is only six kilometers from Nice. A woman was very ill; I gave her a prescription when a message came from the clinic. Ragsdale's hotel had phoned them; he was in his room.

I left Villefranche as quickly as I could. The curves on the road to Nice are very sharp. And the road is lonely. My car broke down where it is loneliest.

By the time I was in Ragsdale's room, I knew that he was in a very bad way. I also knew that Pellin had never sent his men out; although I could never prove it.

Ragsdale lay on his bed, shaking with fever. Everything, the swollen arm, with the thin red line stretching up from the wrist, the hollowed cheeks, the jaundiced skin, and his breathing—the shallow hurried breathing—everything pointed to blood-poisoning. He was beyond transfer to the clinic, but not beyond hope. But what I needed was penicillin.

The drug was only available in the black market; I knew only one man who had it. It was Max Brody. Everything depended on him.

I phoned his house. He was out. I left the *Ruhl* number.

Then I asked the hotel kitchen to send up some boiled water, and when it was brought, I attended to Ragsdale's injury the

best I could. He was wet with perspiration and his clothes were torn, his white suit black. Somehow his body seemed to have shriveled.

I waited for Brody's call, pacing back and forth, with Ragsdale slowly dying and the sky outside bluer than ever and the wide sweep of the Bay gay with boats and sails.

Finally I reached Brody. He had just come in.

"Max," I said with emotion. "I need penicillin. I will pay any price."

"What happened?"

"I—"

"What happened?"

"Ragsdale—it's his only chance."

"François! How I wish I could help you. But I have none of that drug." The receiver clicked. Brody had hung up.

When Rags came out of his delirium, I rushed toward his bed.

"I will do everything I can, I said although I knew that nothing could be done. "But the painting—it was not Angela! And I have her letter to me."

He watched me out of sunken eyes; his lips were parched. He moaned, "Show me—"

I opened the bundle and clean-

ed the painting. It was faded, this Degas copy, yes, and as I wiped the dry blood away, I all at once saw something I had not noticed before because that night at Hoffenberg's I had been much too frantic.

I saw that the woman in the picture had her arms stretched out!

The prediction! A shiver went down my back.

"Show me," he moaned.

I gave him the letter.

"No, the picture—"

"You are tired now, Rags. I—"

With a last effort: "The picture—!"

I gave it to him. He stared at it, unseeing, I hope, and then fell back against the cushion, and the frame fell over him.

Later I shakily left the room and passed the desk.

"Monsieur," said the clerk, "we have some mail for Herbert Ragsdale."

I turned Angela's letter over in my hand. I sent it back to her later, without opening it, and I never saw her again, nor did I dare to write her. You see, I did not wish to destroy one last hope; that in this one instance Hoffenberg was wrong and that she, perhaps, this lovely American woman, had spoken of love.