

# THEY WRITE...



## MICKEY SPILLANE

"Contrary to what most people expect, from my books, I've never shot a woman in the stomach nor beat up a man with my bare fists. I like people, especially children—I have two. I like animals—I have 10 cats and dogs. And I like guns—I have 10—although I've never used them on anything more deadly than a target. My philosophy? A simple one: If a guy wants to read, I'll entertain him."



## IVAR JORGENSEN

"I was born 36 years ago in a little fishing village in Norway. We moved to this country when I was eight. After I graduated from college, I got a job with a construction company which sent me to Japan, where all my youthful idealism and knowledge went into building bridges. I spent five years following December 7, 1941, in the Air Force, blasting bridges. I started to write after the war—and the only building I intend to do from now on will be with words."



## RICHARD MATHESON

"I sold my first story to my mother for 8c. My fictional outbursts were thoroughly activated when my sister gave me a typewriter for my thirteenth birthday. But for the grace of Smith-Corona, I'd probably be a plumber today. In addition to writing, I make fancy airplane parts out in Los Angeles where I live, and where I plan to write more and better science-fiction-fantasy."

# fantastic

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"THE

# VEILED WOMAN



A STORY BY  
**MICKY SPILLANE**

*No modern-day writer is more widely cussed and discussed than Mickey Spillane. Critics regard him as most of us regard the atom bomb, leading magazines dissect him with unloving care.*

*Why? Because the Spillane emphasis is on sex and sadism, his milieu the boudoir and the underworld, his men ruthless, his women svelte, passionate and immoral. That's why everyone hates Spillane — except his millions of readers and his banker!*

*The editors of Fantastic take pride in presenting the first science-fiction story by Mr. Spillane.*

L ODR's soft warm hand shook me awake. "Sh-h-h, Karl. Don't say anything." I could barely hear her. "There's someone downstairs."

The .45 I kept under my pillow was in my hand before I had my eyes fully open. The bedroom was in total



darkness because of the heavy curtains covering the windows, and the only sound was the almost inaudible purr of the air-conditioning unit. I pressed the fingers of my free hand lightly to Lodi's lips to still her whisper and to let her know I was now fully awake.

I swung my bare feet to the floor and stood up. The fact that I was as naked as one of Mike Angelo's cherubs didn't occur to me then, and even if it had I wouldn't have wasted time looking for a robe.

Moving on tiptoe, I crossed the room and was careful about shooting the bolts on the door. I could hear nothing from downstairs, but that didn't mean no one was down there. Lodi's almost incredibly sharp sense of hearing was something I had learned long ago not to doubt. Twenty years among the perils of the jungle develops the senses like nothing else, and the African jungle was where Lodi had come from.

With the door opened wide enough for me to slip through, I stepped into the upper hall. Still no sound. A tomb would have been noisier. No light either. It was like walking through a bottle of ink.

Still no sound from below. I wasn't surprised. Whoever was down there wouldn't be a common garden-variety burglar. Burglars didn't come out here in the wilder-

ness eighty-odd miles north of New York City in search of loot.

I went down that flight of carpeted steps like a jungle cat stalking its prey. The damp chill of early morning began to flow across my skin, reminding me of my lack of clothing. At the foot of the stairs I froze in my tracks, listening, making sure the safety catch on the .45 was off.

More silence. Nothing stirred, nothing breathed. Had Lodi been mistaken after all? Had her nerves, under a growing strain for almost two months now, finally started to give way? I refused to believe it. . . .

And then I heard it. A sound so slight that only keen ears straining to listen would possibly have caught it. The chink of metal against metal, and that only once.

The study. The wall safe was in there; a vault actually, built by the previous owner. It would be the natural place for an intruder to start his search.

Silently I crossed to the study door, the gun ready in my fist. The door, I discovered, had been left open no more than an inch or two to enable the man in there to catch any sound from outside the room.

Slowly, with almost painful care, I pushed the door inward. As the space between its edge and the jamb widened, I saw a circle

of light fixed on the combination knob of the vault. A man was standing there, one ear pressed to the metal surface of the vault door, his fingers slowly manipulating the dial. He was alone.

I leaned forward and groped along the wall until my fingers found the light switch. I flipped it, flooding the room with light, said, "Cheerio, you son of a bitch," and shot him through the head.

The sound of the heavy .45 was like an exploding bomb in the confines of that small room. Blood and brains and bone showered the vault door and the black-clad figure melted into the rug.

"Karl!" It was Lodi calling from the head of the stairs. "Darling, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Go on back to bed, baby. I'll be up in a minute."

"Did you . . . did you — ?"

"I sure as hell did. I'll tell you about it over grapefruit in the morning."

I crossed the room and knelt beside the body. There wasn't much left of him above the eyebrows, and what was below them was a face I had never seen before. The pockets held nothing personal that might identify him. An oiled-silk packet containing as nice a set of burglar tools as you'd find anywhere, but that and a half-empty pack of Philip Morris made up the total.

I didn't like that. In fact, I liked it so little that I scooped the .45 off the rug and stood up, all in one quick movement.

Too late! Before I could turn around a silken drawl said, "No further, Mr. Terris. Stand perfectly still."

I said a couple words under my breath but that was as far as I went. I heard the rustle of silk and the sound of light steps coming toward my back. "Let the gun drop. . . . Now, kick it away from you."

I could smell her now: the music of an expensive perfume and the nice female smell of a lovely woman. The drawl said, "You may turn around now and lower your hands. Any more than that and I'll shoot you through the knee."

She was wearing black, broken only by a white appliqued design just above the left breast. A pastel mink jacket hung casually from perfect shoulders and she was as blonde as a wheat field. It would have been a shame for her not to be beautiful, and beautiful she was, and not with the standard, nightclub kind of beauty that's almost commonplace these days.

"Which knee?" I said.

"I know all about you, Mr. Terris," she said coolly. "Forty million dollars and a sense of humor. Only I don't want any of either."



"That's a relief," I said. "What do you want?"

She was standing in front of me, a gun large in her hand, a slight smile tugging at the corners of an almost sensual mouth. Her eyes went over me frankly and with something more than faint approval. "Do you find the evening oppressively warm?"

I glanced down at my naked body, then back up at her. "I'm sorry. Would you like to wait while I run up and get into my dress suit?"

"I'm afraid we can't spare the time." She walked over to a lamp table and whisked the large scarf off it and tossed it to me. "Do something with this," she said. "I find your — well, your masculinity a little overpowering."

The scarf was on the skimpy side but I made it do. She leaned against the back of a lounge chair and went on pointing the gun at me. "And now back to business, Mr. Terris. I came here for that machine you brought back from Africa."

"You're not strong enough to lift it."

"Are you?"

"Just barely."

"That's fine. My car is waiting. You can carry it out and put it in the trunk."

I shook my head. "No dice, Blondie."

"You'd rather have a bullet through your leg?"

"Any day," I said. "Because some day the leg would heal, the bone would mend. And then I'd find you and I'd kill you. Nice and slow, then use your guts for shoe laces and your spine for a necktie rack."

She smiled. "Tough guy. We know all about you. I don't scare, Mr. Terris, but neither do you, unfortunately. Threatening you with personal injury is a waste of time. I told them that, but they wanted me to try it anyway. Well, I tried."

Without taking her eyes off me, she raised her voice. "Stephan. Gregory. Come here."

Two men, one large and bull-necked and with a face like a dropped melon, the other slim and white-faced and black-eyed, appeared in the doorway behind her. Both held guns in their right hands.

"Mr. Terris refuses to frighten, gentlemen," the girl said. "Go up and get Mrs. Terris. Tie and gag her and put her in the car. Let me know when you're ready to leave."

They turned silently and started out. I said, "Hold it." They kept on going. I said, "Call off your dogs, Sadie."

Her quiet voice stopped them as though they'd run into a wall. Her confident smile revealed flawless teeth. "Yes, Mr. Terris?"

"There is no machine. There never was."

Her smile now was almost sad. "Lies won't help. In fact, I'm surprised you even bother to try them on me."

"I mean it, Sadie. The first time I heard about my having a machine was ten days ago. Two men broke into my apartment in New York and demanded I hand 'the machine' over to them. You may have read about it in the papers."

The gun in her hand stayed as steady as Mount Hood. "Yes. You killed them both. With your bare hands, I believe — or was that just tabloid talk?"

"No."

"They were bunglers, Mr. Terris. I am not. Do you give us what we came for, or do we take your wife instead?"

My muscles began to ache from the strain of not jumping straight into the muzzle of her gun. "I'm telling you, Sadie: there is no machine. Somebody's given you a bum steer."

Her sigh was small but unmistakable. "Fifty-three days ago," she said, "you arrived in New York aboard a small steamer which you chartered at Dakar. This was almost exactly two years after your small plane crashed somewhere in the interior of French Equatorial Africa while you were searching for a uranium deposit in that section of the continent. Your government combed the area for weeks without finding

any trace of your plane, and you were given up for lost. Am I correct so far?"

"The newspapers carried the story," I said.

"Your arrival in New York," she went on in the same even, unhurried voice, "created a major sensation. The country's richest, handsomest, most eligible bachelor had returned from the dead! Only the bachelor part no longer applied: you had brought back as your bride the world's most beautiful woman. I believe that's how she was described — although no one has been able to see her face clearly through the heavy veil she constantly wears. In fact, no one but you knows what your wife looks like. True, Mr. Terris?"

I shrugged and said nothing.

"You then placed your bride in the penthouse suite of a building you owned in Manhattan. You engaged no servants; you had no callers. No one — I repeat, *no one* — was permitted to enter your apartment. You were called to Washington to report on the success of your search for the uranium deposit. You stated that your mission was a failure. As a loyal and patriotic citizen — as well as one of the wealthiest — your statement was accepted and the matter closed."

She paused to raise an eyebrow at me meaningly. "Closed, that is, until two weeks ago. For it was

about that time that a man and his wife were found dead in a small hotel in Nice. The cause of death was so startling that an immediate investigation was made. Do you know what killed those two people, Mr. Terris?"

"Measles?" I hazarded.

Her jaw hardened. "Radiation, Mr. Terris. A kind of radiation sickness not known before. Those two people died of cosmic radiation!"

"Do tell!"

She took a slow breath and her eyes bored into me. "Further investigation established that the dead couple had been exposed to the radiation roughly five weeks earlier. At that time they were occupying a cabin on a small steamer en route to Sweden. By a strange coincidence, Mr. Terris, it was the same steamer that brought you and your wife to America a few days before. By an even stranger coincidence, they had occupied the same cabin used by you and your wife. But the ultimate in coincidences, Mr. Terris, is that you had been in Africa in search of a fissionable material!"

"As you've pointed out," I said, "a matter of coincidence."

She shook her head. "I'm afraid it's not that simple. The inescapable conclusion is that, while in Africa, you discovered some method of trapping and converting the power of cosmic radiation.



Either you found some natural substance that would do this, or — more likely — you were able to construct a machine that would do so. The residue from some leakage in the machine's operation was picked up by the unfortunate couple who next engaged that cabin, causing their deaths."

"No machine," I said. "I don't know what you're talking about. Go ahead. Search the house. But tell your goons to keep their hands off my wife. I mean it."

She wasn't listening. "Any country, Mr. Terris, who controls the secret you've learned will own the earth. As usual, your own government has only just learned



the facts as I have given them to you. I happen to know that within a few days you'll be summoned to Washington and asked for the secret you hold. My government wants it instead — and we mean to have it!"

"If I had anything like what you're talking about," I said, "why wouldn't I have turned it over to Washington before this?"

She smiled. "I think I can answer that. It's well known that you are against war — that you narrowly escape being called a pacifist. To turn this secret over to the military of your government might very well lead to war."

"And in the hands of *your* government?"

"Peace, Mr. Terris. Peace because no other country or coalition of countries could prevail against us. Universal adherence to the principles of true democracy — the people's democracy."

"You mean communism, Sadie?"

"Exactly."

"Love that people's democracy," I said. "Slave labor, purges, secret police, rigged trials, mass executions. Good-bye, Sadie. Sorry, no machines today."

"You prefer that we take your wife?"

"A word of advice," I said.



"Keep your nail polish off my wife. Otherwise I'll spend the rest of my life and forty million dollars, if it takes that long and that much, finding you and your stooges. And when I do, I'll be judge, jury and executioner. You'll die like no one ever died before."

My words were just words, but my tone and my expression were something else again. The color faded in her cheeks and the gun barrel wavered slightly. But her smile was steady enough and faintly mocking.

"I think you mean that," she said quietly. Her free hand moved up and settled the mink jacket closer about her flawless shoulders. "But I've learned long since to pay no attention to threats. . . . Last opportunity. Do you hand over what we came for."

"You talk American real good, Sadie. They must have fine schools in Leningrad."

Her lips twitched. "Westchester, Mr. Terris. And one of the best finish—" She stopped abruptly and all expression faded from her lovely face. "Where is the machine?"

I spread my hands. "You're slipping your clutch, Blondie. No machine. I told you that."

Her patience began to break up. "You fool!" she blazed. "You're actually going to hand us your wife rather than surrender it? You're as cold-blooded

as a snake, Mr. Terris!"

"You can call me Karl," I said.

She stepped back and nodded to the two men behind her. They came forward cautiously, guns ready, circled until they were behind me. I went on looking at the blonde, memorizing every line of her face, the lobes of her ears, the curve of her nostrils, the shape of her eyes. Suddenly the muzzle of a gun ground savagely into my back and a hand closed firmly on one of my naked arms. Before I could twist away the needle of a hypodermic lanced into my shoulder, the plunger thudded down and I staggered back.

I stood there panting, still staring at the girl. I could feel my lips curl back in a strained rictus of hatred. A buzzing sound began to crawl into my ears.

"It had better finish me, Sadie," I said around my thickening tongue. "If I come through this, you'll feed five generations of worms."

She was leaning slightly forward, her eyes glittering, the tip of her tongue touching her parted lips, her breathing quick and shallow, watching the drug take hold of me. The gun in her hand was forgotten.

I tried to lift an arm. Somebody had tied an anvil to it. The City Hall was glued to my feet. The room clouded, wavered, then slowly dissolved. I fell face forward into the ruins. . . .

A voice said, "You made two mistakes, Sadie. You let me see your face and you said too much. Just a little too much, but enough."

It was my voice. I was talking out loud, coming out of it. I opened my eyes and rolled over and looked at the ceiling. Back of my eyes somebody had built a fire and left the ashes.

After a while I tried getting to my feet. It seemed to take a long time, but I finally made it. I stood there holding onto the back of a chair and let my eyes move around the room.

Sunlight was fighting to get in through the half-closed Venetian blinds at the two windows. The man I had shot earlier was still dead on the floor, with a pool of almost black blood under what was left of his head. The vault door stood wide open with its contents scattered. The rest of the room had the look of being worked over by a platoon of Marines armed with bayonets. Upholstery had been ripped to shreds, pictures were torn from the walls, drapes were piled in one corner, bookcases had been cleared ruthlessly.

Anger began to rise inside me. I crossed to the ruins of the small bar in one corner of the room, found a bottle of bourbon and drank a solid slug of the contents.

The stuff almost put me back on the floor, but when the first shock passed my brain was working again.

I went up the stairs at a wavering run. The bedroom door stood open and Lodi was gone. The room itself was as much a shambles as the study downstairs, and the rest of the house was no better.

"It's all right, Lodi," I muttered. "They won't dare harm you. They'll wait a couple of days for me to get good and worried, then they'll get in touch with me and try to make a deal. Only I'm not going to wait that long."

In the kitchen I ate toast and drank four cups of scalding black coffee. Then I went back into the study and picked up the phone and called a number in the Lenox Hill section of New York City.

"Eddie? Karl. Now get this. I want all year books for the past ten years put out by all the finishing schools on the East Coast. Have them in your office two hours from now. . . . How the hell do I know? You've got an organization; put it to work. As fast as they come in put people to work going through them to pick out every girl who lived in Westchester County at the time she was attending school. The girl I want is around twenty-five or twenty-six, so tell them to keep that in mind. You've got two hours, and I don't want any excuses."

I slammed down the receiver while he was still talking and looked around for the gun I had dropped on the rug the night before. It was still there, half buried under papers from the vault. I went back upstairs to shave, bathe and dress, then found a shoulder holster for the .45 and slid my suit coat on over it.

I walked out the front door and down the driveway. It was getting on toward ten o'clock and the sun was hot on my shoulders. In the valley a mile down the slope was the nearest highway to New York. Cars and trucks moved along the concrete ribbon, looking like ants on a garden path.

My convertible was where I had left it the day before. I was checking the tires when the sound of an engine coming up the gravel road to the house froze me. I stepped behind the car and unbuttoned my coat and waited.

A gray Plymouth turned into the highway and stopped and a man in his early thirties got out from behind the wheel. There was no one else in the car. He saw me standing there, nodded and started toward me without hurrying. He wasn't anyone I knew.

When he was about twenty feet away I slid my hand under the left lapel of my jacket and said, "That's close enough, friend."

He stopped abruptly and stared at my right arm, a puzzled look

on his smooth, not unhandsome face. "I'm afraid I don't understand this. Are you Mr. Terris?"

"That's right."

"I'd like a word with you."

"Sure," I said. "What word would you like?"

He smiled crookedly. "I wish you'd take your hand out of there, Mr. Terris. It gives me the feeling you're about to pull a gun on me."

"That," I said, "is the general idea. Just who the hell are you?"

He kept his hands carefully away from his body. "The name is Granger, Mr. Terris. I'm an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Would you like to see my credentials?"

"Not especially," I said. "What is it you want?"

He laughed shortly. "Well, to put it bluntly — you! It seems there's a Congressional committee meeting in Washington this afternoon and they want you there. The AEC, to be exact. I was asked to come up and — ah — escort you there."

I recalled that the blonde had said something about that a few hours earlier. Whatever her pipeline, it certainly was reliable. I shook my head. "Sorry, Mr. Granger. I won't be able to make it. Another engagement — a rather pressing one. Good-bye."

He wasn't smiling now. "Afraid you don't understand, sir. I have a subpoena calling for your appearance at that hearing."

"That's different," I said. I took my hand from under my coat and walked over to him. "Can I give you some breakfast before we leave?"

Granger eyed me warily. "No, thanks. I've had breakfast. We'd better be getting into New York. We're catching a twelve-o'clock plane. I suppose you'll want to pack a bag."

"Good idea," I said and turned and started back to the house with him beside me. We went up on the porch and through the front door. Granger took one look at the wreckage from last night's activities and his jaw dropped. "What hap —"

That was as far as he got before the edge of my hand caught him sharply on the back of the neck. He folded like a carpenter's rule, out cold. I caught him before he hit the floor and carried him into the living room. I found some strong cord in the kitchen and bound his hands behind him and his feet to the legs of the couch, careful not to cut off the circulation.

He opened his eyes while I was finishing up. "You're making a serious mistake, Mr. Terris."

I tightened the last knot and straightened up. "You won't be too uncomfortable. Mrs. Morgan, the cleaning woman, should show up about two this afternoon and she'll cut you loose. Incidentally, you'll find a body in the study.

My work; I'll tell you about it some day."

I was out the front door before he could protest further. The convertible came alive under my foot and I roared down the curving gravel side-road to where it joined the highway.

### III

At eleven-thirty-six I pulled into the curb in front of an office building on Madison Avenue in the Seventies. I rode the elevator to the ninth floor and entered the first door to a suite that took up most of one corridor. The legend on that door read "Edward Treeglos, Investments." The only investment involved was the money I invested to keep the place staffed and functioning. I had set it up, under the management of Eddie Treeglos, a former college friend of mine, five years before, at the time I came into the vast holdings from my father's estate. Its purpose was to handle matters too confidential to be taken care of by the mammoth organization, further downtown, known as The Terris Foundation.

I passed the receptionist before she could get her nose out of a magazine, and charged into Eddie's private office without bothering to knock.

He was behind his desk, his sharp-featured intelligent face bent over a pile of thin, outsize volumes

bound in everything from leather to glossy stock. He looked up as I came in.

"Did you know," he said, "that four out of every ten girls attending finishing school on the East Coast come from Westchester County?"

I said, "When I want percentages I'll ask for them. What have you got?"

He gestured toward the pile of volumes. "Help yourself, play-boy. The pages with Westchester babes are marked, and I've got six girls in the other offices going through more books. If I never see a sweet innocent school-girl face again it'll be fine with me."

At one o'clock I was still going strong, flipping pages, scanning face after face, as many as thirty to a page. One of the office girls brought in sandwiches and coffee; they cooled and were finally taken away without my even noticing them.

Slowly my hopes were beginning to dim. Maybe that blonde was cleverer than I had supposed. Her seemingly careless remark might have been a deliberate plant to throw me off the track. If so, she was too good for her job; she should have been the head of the entire Russian M.V.B. And then, just when I was about ready to sweep the books to the floor with rage, I spotted the face I was hunting for.

I came close to missing it

entirely. She wore her hair different then and her face was fuller. But the angle to her nose and the high cheek bones and the slope of her jaw were unmistakable. She stared up at me from the glossy paper, the eyes wide and direct, the same faint curl to her lips. *Do you find the evening oppressively warm, Mr. Terris?*

Under the photo were several lines of type. They told me her name was Ann Fullerton, that she lived at 327 Old Colony Drive, Larchmont, New York, that she was a political science major. She belonged to a swank sorority, was vice-president of her senior class and had been mixed up in a lot of campus activities that probably would make fascinating reading for her children — if she lived long enough to have any.

My eyes went back to the mocking smile. "Laugh, baby," I muttered. "Laugh while you can. Your belly will make me a fine dart board."

Across the desk, Eddie stared at me open-mouthed. "Take it slow, pal. You sound like a god-dam tax collector."

I ripped the page out, shoved a pile of the books to the floor and pulled the phone over in front of me. "Tell the help to forget it. I've found what I'm after."

"Sure, sure. You feel like telling me what's going on?"

"Next week," I said. "You got a Westchester phone directory?"

He shrugged, reached out and flipped a lever on the intercom and told the receptionist to bring one in. I leafed through the Fullertons and found an Eric Fullerton living at the same address in Larchmont shown on the page from the year book. I dialed the number.

"Fullerton residence," a man's voice said.

I made my voice brisk and business-like. "Is this Mr. Fullerton?"

"Mr. Fullerton is not in, sir. Caldwell, the butler, speaking. Is there a message?"

"I'll talk to Ann Fullerton," I said.

The silence at the other end lasted long enough to be shocked. ". . . I'm afraid there's some mistake, sir. Miss Ann Fullerton died almost a year ago."

"What!"

"Yes, sir."

I got my chin up off my necktie. "Look — uh, Caldwell. Is Mrs. Fullerton there?"

"Yes, sir. Who shall I say is calling?"

"My name is . . . Carney. Alan Carney."

"One moment, Mr. Carney."

The receiver went down and I lit a cigarette, getting over the shock. There wasn't the slightest chance that the girl in the year book and the girl who had held a gun on me a few hours before were not one and the same. I had

studied her face much too carefully to be mistaken.

A quiet voice said, "This is Mrs. Fullerton."

I said, "I hate to bother you, Mrs. Fullerton. I had no idea, of course, that your daughter . . ."

"I understand, Mr. Carney."

"You see, it's very important that I get in touch with a former friend of Ann's. A girl named . . . Taylor — Mollie Taylor. I wonder if you could tell me anything about her."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Carney." Her voice sounded flat, almost weary. "You see, I didn't know Ann's friends. She hadn't lived with us for nearly two years before her death."

I said, "Would you mind giving me her address at the time? It's just possible somebody there could help me."

"We never knew her address, Mr. Carney. Ann was employed by an importing company. Anton & Porkov, I believe it was called."

"In New York?"

"Yes. I don't know the street address."

I wrote the name on a pad. "You've been very patient, Mrs. Fullerton. I know how painful all this has been for you. But would you mind telling me the circumstances of your daughter's death?"

There was a lengthy pause during which I expected her quietly to hang up the receiver. When she finally did speak I could barely

hear her. "Ann died in a warehouse fire. I'm afraid that's all I can tell you. Good-bye, Mr. Carney."

A dry click told me the connection had been broken. I hung up and sat there staring at my thumb. All I had to do now was find a girl who had died months before, but who last night had engineered the kidnaping of my wife. Lodi's secret was now known to at least three people other than me. I should never have taken her out of Africa. I thought of her in the hands of those two silent ghouls and the blonde and a cold fury shook me. The mere fact that they had discovered what was behind Lodi's veil meant they must die. How they would die would depend on how they had treated her.

Eddie Treeglos was watching me wide-eyed. I tripped the lever on the intercom and said to the receptionist, "Get me the street address of Anton & Porkov, importers." I closed the key and leaned back in my chair and looked at Eddie through the smoke of my cigarette. "Does that name — Anton & Porkov — mean anything to you?"

"Can't say it does."

"My wife was snatched last night, Eddie."

"We'll get her back, Karl."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, we'll get her back." I got up and walked

across the office and slapped my hand hard against the wall. For no reason. I turned and came back to the desk just as the intercom buzzer sounded. I moved the key again. "Well?"

"There is a listing for Anton & Porkov at 774 West Thirty-first Street, sir. The phone number is Clinton 9-5444. Also a listing for Sergi Porkov at 917 East Sixty-eighth. Butterfield 4-6793. It's the only other Porkov in the book, so it may be the same man."

I wrote it all down and closed the line. "I want a full report on that outfit, Eddie. They're importers; Washington should give you a line on them. No direct inquiries; I don't want them to know they're being checked. You've got half an hour."

"You're the boss."

"Yeah." I tossed the page from the year book across the desk to him. "Ann Fullerton. Check the police files to learn if she's got a record. Call Osborne at the FBI and see if he's got anything on her. And anything else you think of."

"Right."

I moved my hand and the .45 was in it, pointed at him. All he did was blink. "Just finding out if I've still got the speed," I said.

He nodded. "I never even saw your hand move, brother."

"That's nice to know," I said. I picked up the slip with the addresses and phone numbers on it, folded it small and put it behind

my display handkerchief. "I'll call you in half an hour. About Anton & Porkov."

"Okay."

I gave him a brief nod and walked over to the door and out.

#### IV

I stopped off at the Roosevelt Hotel and had lunch in the Men's Grill, then supplied myself with a handful of change and entered one of the phone booths. I put through a person-to-person call to Senator McGill at the Senate Building in Washington. My father had put him in office almost sixteen years before, and kept him there. When you own between forty and fifty million bucks in one form and another you need a loud voice where it can be heard.

His secretary told him who was calling and he came on the wire very excited. "Karl, you young idiot, are you trying to ruin me?"

"That's what I like about you, Senator," I said. "Always worrying about your friends rather than yourself."

"Oh, stop it! Have you any idea what the penalty is for attacking a Federal officer?"

"How did he work it so fast?" I asked. "I figured Mrs. Morgan would be untieing him about now. What's behind all this subpoena business anyway?"

His voice was desperate. "You're in trouble, boy. The AEC



says you lied about not getting anything useful out of Africa. They have good reason to think you came out of there with some kind of gadget to do with cosmic energy, whatever the hell that is. You better get down here and straighten things out before it's too late."

"Nuts to that," I said. "I got something a lot more important to take care of. Get them to call off their dogs."

His voice went up four octaves. "You think I'm the President? Not only does the AEC want you for questioning, but you're charged with attacking an FBI man and committing a murder! You grab a plane and get out here in nothing



flat. Demarest of the Attorney General's office called me not more than half an hour ago and said they were getting out a general alarm to have you picked up."

"Get it cancelled."

"I tell you I can't! What's more, they've issued a subpoena for your wife. Word's gotten around she's the one who gave you that gadget, and this business of her going around heavily veiled, no one ever seeing what she looks like, is beginning to look mighty suspicious."

"You think I give a damn how it looks? I'm telling you, get these alphabet boys out of my hair. Or are you tired of being a senator?"

"Don't you threaten me, you young upstart! I was making laws in this country while you were still soiling diapers. My record —"

"Stick your record," I cut in. "You get that general alarm withdrawn and those subpoenas held up or I'll plaster the darker side of your precious record over the front pages of every newspaper in the country."

He was still sputtering when I slammed down the receiver. I went into the Rough Rider Room at the Roosevelt and had a couple of bourbons to settle my lunch and get the taste of politicians out of my mouth. My strapwatch showed 2:10. I went out into the hot sun and slid behind the wheel of the convertible and drove through a blue fog of exhaust

fumes until I reached the 700 block on West Thirty-first.

It was a crummy neighborhood. Ancient loft buildings and sagging tenements and fly-specked delicatessens and cut-rate liquor stores and wise punks hanging around corner taverns. It stunk of dirt and poverty, with an occasional whiff of stale water and dead fish from the Hudson River a block to the west. A puff of tired air moved through the littered gutters and blew dust in my face.

I parked behind a truck half a block from 774 and waded through dirty-faced brats and sloppy-breasted housewives until I reached a corner drugstore. There were a couple of phone booths at the rear and I called Eddie Treeglos from one of them.

"What've you got, Eddie?"

"A thing or two. One, Sergi Porkov, alias Sam Parks, is one of the top Russian agents in this country. At present he is reported to be somewhere in Mexico. He's a tall blond guy, in his early forties, looks like a Swedish diplomat — at least that's the way my source of information described him — and has three rather large pockmarks on his left cheek. Two, Maurice Anton, his former partner in the importing firm, died of cancer at Morningside General Hospital four months ago. At that time Porkov sold the importing business to a man named Luke

Ritter; no record on him but he's suspected of being a front man for Porkov. That's it, Karl."

I breathed in some of the booth's odor of cheap cigars. "Anything on Ann Fullerton?"

"Yeah. Identified by a close friend as one of the victims of a fire nine months ago at a warehouse owned by the Fullbright Radio Company. Body was too badly burned for the parents to make a positive identification, but a purse under the body was hers. It was in the papers at the time."

"Who was the friend that made the I. D.?"

"Nobody seems to know. I'm working on it."

"Anything else on her?"

"Well, she was one of these college pinks. Carried banners on a couple of picket lines, belonged to several commie front outfits and so on. But right after she left school she dropped out of sight and nobody seems to have heard of her until she got too close to the fire. Except for one possible connection."

"Let's have it, Eddie."

"Here about eight, nine months ago, Sergi Porkov came up with a new girl friend — a knockout of a blonde named Arleen Farmer. The similarity in initials could mean something."

"You can bet on it," I said. "Got an address on her?"

"She was living with Porkov

at the Sixty-eighth Street address."

"Nothing else?"

He sounded aggrieved. "My God, isn't that enough? You only gave me half an hour."

I cut him off, got out the list of addresses and phone numbers the girl at Eddie's had given me, and looked up Porkov's home phone. I stood there and listened to the buzz come back over the wire. No answer. I let it ring a dozen times before I decided that Anton & Porkov was the place to start.

I hung up and stopped at the cigar counter for cigarettes. Outside, the sun still baked the street. I walked slowly on down to 774, a loft building of battered red brick, four floors, with a hand laundry and a job printer flanking the entrance.

The lobby was narrow and had been swept out shortly before they built the Maginot Line. It smelled like toadstools in the rain, with a binder of soft-coal smoke held over from the previous winter.

A thin flat-faced kid with horn-rimmed glasses and a mop of black hair was propped up on a backless kitchen chair outside a freight elevator, buried to the eyebrows in a battered copy of Marx's *Das Kapital*. I brought him out of it by kicking one of the chair legs.

"Fie on you," I said. "You ought to know that stuff's rank

bourgeois deviationism."

He looked up at me like a pained owl. He couldn't have been much past seventeen, if that. "I beg your pardon?"

"Now take Trotsky," I said. "There was a boy you could learn something from. Yes, *sir*. He had the right slant, that boy."

The kid's expression said he was smelling something stronger than toadstools. "Such as?" he snapped coldly.

"Search me. I'm a States Rights man myself." I indicated the cage. "How's about cranking this thing up to the fourth floor?"

He closed the book, leaving a finger in to mark his place. "Whom did you wish to see?"

"You figure on announcing me?"

He sighed, registering patience. "No, sir. That's the offices of Anton & Porkov. They're closed."

"This time of day? What will the stockholders say?"

He came close to saying what was on his mind, but changed it at the last moment. "Mr. Ritter hasn't come back from lunch yet."

"What about the rest of the help?"

"There is no one else, sir. Only Mr. Ritter."

"Certainly no way to run a business. Where does Luke have lunch? At Chambord's?"

"No, sir. At the Eagle Bar & Grill. Around the corner, on Twelfth Avenue."

I was turning away when he added: "And for your information, sir, Leon Trotsky was a counter-revolutionary, a tool of Wall Street, a reactionary and a jerk. Good afternoon."

I was halfway to Twelfth Avenue before I thought of an answer to that.

## V

There was the smell of beer and steam-table cuisine, but not much light. I stepped inside and waited until my eyes adjusted to the dim interior. Four men were grouped at the bar discussing something with the man in the white apron, and further down the room another man in a crumpled seer-sucker suit sat at a small round table wolfing down a sandwich. A tired-looking blonde waitress was folding napkins in a booth at the rear of the room. I leaned across the bar and, during a sudden silence, beckoned to the apron. "I'm looking for Mr. Ritter."

A thumb indicated the man at the table. The silence continued while I walked back there and swung a chair around and sat down across from him. His head snapped up and I was looked at out of a pair of narrow dark eyes set in an uneven face that seemed mostly jaw.

"Mr. Ritter?"

". . . What about it?"

I said, "We can't talk here."

Let's go up to your office."

He said, "Hah!" and bit into his sandwich and put what was left of it down on the plate and leaned back and chewed slowly, with a kind of circular motion. "What we got to talk about?"

"Not here," I said again. "You never know who's listening."

"I don't know you. What's your name?"

"My name wouldn't mean a thing to you, Mr. Ritter. Let's say I'm an old friend of Maurice Anton's."

His jaws ground to a halt and for a moment he seemed not to be breathing. Then he took a slow careful breath and his hands slid off the table and dropped to his knees. "Maurice, hunh?" he grunted. "Well, well. And how is Maurice these days?"

"He hasn't been getting around much," I said. "They buried him four months ago."

He went on staring at me without expression. The waitress got out of the booth and carried the folded napkins over to the bar. Ritter brought up a hand and picked up the heavy water glass beside his plate and emptied it down his throat. When he set it down again he kept his stubby fingers around it.

"Like I said, mister," he growled, "I don't know you. You got something to say, say it here. Otherwise, beat it."

I lifted an eyebrow. "That's no

way to talk to a customer, Luke. Let's go up to your office."

"Customer, hell! You smell like a cop to me!"

There was no point in wasting any more time. I moved my hand and the .45 was in it, down low, the muzzle resting on the edge of the table and pointed at him. "Your office, Ritter," I said very quietly.

His whole body twitched spasmodically, then seemed to freeze. Behind me the voices went on at the bar. Ritter's eyes were glued to the gun and his heavy jaw sagged slightly.

"You can stand up now," I murmured. "Then you walk on out the door and straight to 774. I'll be riding in your hip pocket all the way; one wrong move and you'll have bullets for dessert. Get going!"

He wet his lips, still staring at the gun, and started to get up — and an arm and a pair of female breasts came between us. That goddam waitress.

She got as far as "Will that be —?" before Ritter grabbed her with one hand and threw the water glass at my head with the other. I ducked in time, but my gun was useless with the girl between us. Glass broke, somebody cursed, the blonde screamed — and I moved.

I bent and grabbed Ritter's ankle and yanked. He fell straight

back, taking the girl with him in a flurry of suntan stockings and white thighs. I tried shoving her aside to ram the .45 against Ritter's ribs, and he clawed out blindly, trying to hold her, caught the neckline of her apron and ripped it and the brassiere beneath completely away. This being July she had dressed for comfort; and any lingering doubt over her being a true blonde was gone forever.

The blonde let out a screech that rattled the glassware and tried to get out from under. Somebody plowed into me from behind and I rammed against her, both of us crashing down on Ritter. I lost the .45 when my hand hit a chair leg, and a second later I was buried under an avalanche of humanity.

Fists, feet and knees banged into me from all angles. I managed to turn on my back and draw my knees up, then snapped my feet into the barman's belly, like the handsome hero of a Western, and threw him halfway across the room into a pinball machine.

It let me get to my feet. Ritter was running for the door, the blonde was trying to crawl under a table, giving me a view of her I would never forget, and facing me were the four guys I had first seen at the bar.

No sound but heavy breathing. The screen door banged behind Ritter. The barman began slowly

to untangle himself from the ruins of the pinball machine, like a fly pulling loose from a sheet of Tanglefoot.

I said, "Get the hell out of my way," and walked straight at the four of them. The one in front of me looked plenty tough. He put up his fists in the standard boxing position and came up on the balls of his feet and took a couple of dancing steps toward me. I said, "You look a little pale to be Joe Louis," and slammed a hard right to his chin. He fell straight forward and I sidestepped and caught the next man by his belt and shirt-front and threw him into the pyramided bottles and mirror behind the bar. It sounded like Libby-Owens blowing up.

The remaining pair goggled at me and got out of the way. Not the barman, though. He took one look at the wreckage behind the bar, let out a bellow of rage and pain and charged me head-down. I stepped aside and put out my foot. He tripped and went sprawling into the booth where the blonde was crouched, landing squarely on top of her. I hoped they both would be very happy.

I scooped my gun off the floor and headed for the front door. Just as I got there a blue uniform pushed through a knot of spectators gathered outside and opened the screen. One of New York's finest — big and wide and handsome. He took one look at the gun

in my fist and reached for his holster. I yelled and jumped forward and nailed him on the side of the jaw. The blow spun him in a limp circle and he fell halfway into an open phone booth. A few of the hardier members of the mob outside let out a yell and started to come in after me, but sight of the gun melted them like snow in Death Valley. I realized, however, that leaving by the front door would be foolish at best, and more than likely ruinous. That left the back way, if there was one, and I headed in that direction.

A swinging door let me into a combination store room and kitchen, with a bolted door off that. I shot the bolts and opened the door and stuck my head out for a cautious look around. A narrow alley, crowded with torn papers, overflowing garbage cans and big fat blue-bottle flies buzzing in the hot sun. The stink would have taken top honors from a family of skunks, but it was nothing I couldn't live through.

Nobody in sight. I slid the gun back under my arm and trotted along the uneven bricks toward Eleventh Avenue, a block to the east, past loading platforms and the rear entrances to the buildings fronting on Thirty-first Street. Most of them had street numbers chalked up for the benefit of delivery men, and my mind was already made up by the time I reached 774.

A sagging wooden door with four glass panels, three of them broken, the fourth coated with dust and cobwebs. There had been a lock on it once, but that was a long time ago. I peered through one of the broken panes. A dim and dusty corridor led toward the front of the building, with a closed door at the far end.

There was no time for advance planning. Any moment now cops would be pouring into the alleyway with blood in their eyes and guns in their hands. I pushed the door open, getting a complaining groan from rusty hinges, closed it carefully behind me and went quickly along the passageway to the inner door. I listened for a long moment, heard nothing but the faraway mumble of traffic, then turned the knob and gave it a small even tug. The door swung toward me an inch or two and I put an eye to the crack.

He was still there, no more than twenty feet away, in exactly the same position, still gulping down Marx and looking as though it agreed with him.

And between us, in the same wall as the elevator, was the entrance to the building stairs.

As a cause for rejoicing it left a good deal to be desired. Getting to those stairs without the kid seeing me depended on just how strong a hold Marx had on him. Three or four steps would get me



there, but the door had to be opened as well, not to mention the one I was standing behind. Of course, I could always shove my gun in his back, tie and gag him and dump him behind something, and use the elevator. But it would be a hell of a lot better to leave him undisturbed in case the cops came snooping around hunting for me.

I took another minute to study the kid's position. He was facing three quarters away from me, one shoulder propped against the wall, head bent over the book. To see me at all he would have to turn his head halfway around. No reason for him to turn his head unless I stumbled over my feet on the way.

It went off without a hitch. I was across the open stretch of hall and through the stairway door and had it closed again and my back against it within the space of six heartbeats. Now that it was over with, I had the feeling I could have driven an oil truck past the kid without his knowing it.

I climbed the three flights, found the door at the top unlocked and stepped into the hot dry air of a narrow hall with office doors, closed, lining both walls. None of the frosted glass panels had legends painted on them until I got down to the far end of the corridor. Three of the doors there,

side by side, had the words "Anton & Porkov — Importers" painted on them in black, with the additional word "Entrance" on the one in the center.

I was standing there eyeing the center door and wondering if the thing to do was knock first, when a telephone suddenly shrilled behind the door on the left. I froze. A second ring broke off in the middle and the heavy voice of Luke Ritter said, "Yeah? . . . Not yet, no. . . . Any minute now. He was due in from Mexico City two hours ago. . . . I doubt it, Max. I called her but nobody answered. She probably met the plane. . . . I'll be right here."

The sound of a phone going back into its cradle. Some more silence behind the door. Then a chair creaked and another voice said, "That eye don't look any too good, Luke." It was a light, smooth voice, almost feminine.

"It hurts like hell," Ritter growled. "I'd like to get my hands on that bastard for about one minute. One minute's all I'd need!"

"You make him for a cop?"

"Naw. A cop would've pushed his badge at me. I figure him for a private dick trying to get a line on Porkov. He'll hear about it when he calls me."

"Any chance of the guy showing up here?"

A dry short laugh. "I sure as hell hope so, brother. The minute

he walks into the lobby, the punk downstairs will ring our private buzzer. That's all the notice I want!"

I went on down to the third of the three doors marked Anton & Porkov and tried the knob. Locked. Nothing was easy for me today. This was an old door, fitting the frame loosely after many years. I reached in behind my display handkerchief and got out the nail file I carried there. It was thin enough for my purpose; I hoped it would be long enough. By pressing the knob hard away from the jamb I was able to slip the point of the file against the slope of the spring lock. It moved slightly, then snapped back with a light, almost inaudible, click. I opened the door. Nothing moved inside. I stepped through and closed it tenderly behind me.

It was a large square room, dim in the afternoon light filtering through a single unwashed window. Heavy wooden packing cases were stacked to the ceiling in two of the corners. A roll-top desk held a clutter of invoices, bills and loose papers. A communicating door was unlocked and I passed through it into the center office. This one held metal files, a desk with a typewriter on the shelf, several chairs, a washstand behind a black lacquered screen in one corner. I could smell dust and, very faintly, a touch of cologne. Another door, closed, led to the

first office, with the murmur of voices straining through it.

I went over to it, making sure my shadow wouldn't appear on the pebbled glass. The voices went on mumbling. The .45 came out, cool and comforting against my palm. I began a slow turning of the doorknob, the way they take the fuse out of a blockbuster. The door gave just enough to tell me what I wanted to know.

I slammed it all the way open with a hard movement of my knee and said, "Merry Christmas, you sons-a-bitches!"

That was as far as I got. Luke Ritter was behind a desk, tilted back in a swivel chair and looking at me with a twisted grin. He was alone. Even as I realized he couldn't be alone, something swished through the air behind me and the room exploded into a pain-filled void of stars. I felt myself falling as from a great height, then the stars were gone and nothing was left.

## VI

Water trickled down my face and under my collar. I swam up from the depths into a pale green world of twisted shapes. Another wave of water poured over me and I sneezed suddenly, sending a lance of pain through my head.

I opened my eyes. I was flat on my back. Up above me floated a pair of pale balloons with gro-



tesque faces painted on them. I blinked a time or two before my eyes focused, and then the balloons were faces after all. The familiar undershot jaw, slept-in features and dark eyes belonged to Luke Ritter; but the other was a pale cameo of delicate perfection, the face of a dreamer, a poet, a faerie prince. Eyes of azure blue widened appealingly, perfect lips parted to show beautiful teeth and a voice like muted viol strings said, "You want I should rough him up some more, Luke?"

"You did fine, Nekko," Ritter said. He drew back his foot and slammed his toe into my ribs. "All right, snoop. Up you go."

I rolled over and got both knees and one hand under me and tried to stand up. My head weighed a ton and was as tender as a ten-dollar steak. A hand came down and took hold of my hair and lifted me three feet in the air. The pain almost caused me to black out a second time. The edge of a chair hit me under the knees and I sat down, hard. The room moved around a time or two, then lurched to a stop. It looked only slightly better that way.

I could see my gun over on a corner of the desk, much too far away to reach by any sudden move on my part. Ritter gave me a cold smile and went around behind the desk and sat down in the swivel chair. He reached out, lifted the .45 by its trigger guard,

swung it idly back and forth between thumb and forefinger and looked at me over it.

"You're kind of a secretive guy, mister," he grumbled. "I kind of went through your wallet while you were sleeping. Some money, but no identification. Just who the aching Jesus you supposed to be?"

"The name's Trotsky," I said. "My friends call me Cutie-pie."

Ritter stopped swinging the gun and lifted a corner of his lip. "Nekko," he said quietly.

A small hard fist came out of nowhere and hit me under the right eye. It hurt, but not enough to get excited about. I turned my head far enough to look at the beautiful young man called Nekko. I said, "Hello, honey. How're the boys down at the Turkish bath?"

His flawless complexion turned scarlet. He lashed out at me again but I moved my head quickly and he missed. He tried again, instantly, but his rage made him careless and he got too close to me. I lifted my foot hard and caught him squarely in the crotch. He screamed like a woman and fell over a chair.

Ritter bounded to his feet, came quickly around the desk and hit me high on the cheek with a straight left. No one had ever hit me harder in my life. My chair went over backwards with me in it. The back of my head hit the

carpet and the light from the desk lamp blurred in my eyes. Ritter, his mouth twisting in a snarl, followed me down, trying to hit me again, this time with the gun. I took a glancing blow on the shoulder and grabbed the gun hand and tried to bite it off at the wrist. He slammed a fist into my throat and I vomited against the front of his shirt. That was when I got the barrel of the .45 behind my left ear and I went to sleep again. . . .

When I opened my eyes I was back in the same chair. Ritter was over behind the desk mopping his shirt front with a wet handkerchief and swearing in a monotonous undertone that sounded like the buzz of a rattler. Nekko sat in a straight-backed chair tilted against the wall. His azure eyes stared at me with distilled hate through a veil of blue cigarette smoke. A good deal more important was the short-barrelled .32 revolver he was holding against his thigh.

My head felt like a busted appendix and my throat wasn't any improvement. I sat there and caught up on my breathing and thought bitter thoughts. The room was ominously quiet.

Ritter finally threw the handkerchief savagely into a wastebasket and lifted his eyes to me. "Let's try it again," he snarled. "Give me your name."

"Take it," I said. "I can always get another."

"You come busting in here with a gun, smart guy. All I got to do is call in the cops and you end up behind bars."

"Ha ha," I said.

He stood up casually and came over to me and swung the back of his hand against my face. I rolled with the blow but that didn't help much. I tried to kick him in the shin but missed and it earned me another belt in the face. I felt my teeth cut into the inner surface of my cheek and the salt taste of blood filled my mouth.

Nekko slid out of his chair and jabbed the .32 against the back of my neck. Ritter bent down until his face was inches from mine. His breath was the reason they'd invented chlorophyll.

"Your name, you son of a bitch!"

I spat a mouthful of blood squarely into his eyes. He belled like a branded bull and swung a punch that started from the floor. Even though Nekko's gun was boring into my neck I jerked my head aside. The fist whistled past my ear and knocked Nekko's gun clear across the room.

It was my chance — maybe the last one I'd get. Before Ritter could recover his balance I slammed a shoulder into his gut and knocked him across the desk. Nekko was already across the

room, bending to pick up the gun. I picked up the chair and threw it. It caught him in the ribs and spun him against a filing case. I jumped for the gun, snatched it up and turned, just as Nekko, his small white even teeth gleaming behind a crazed snarl, sprang at me. I took one step back and hammered the gun barrel full into his half-open mouth. He sprayed broken teeth like a fountain and his scream was half gurgle from the blood filling his mouth. He staggered back a few steps clutching his face, then collapsed into a sobbing heap.

I wheeled, just in time to see Ritter leveling my own gun at me from the opposite side of the desk. The look on his face told me he meant to blast me down and worry about the consequences afterward.

The .32 jumped in my hand with a spiteful *crack*. A red flower seemed to blossom under Ritter's left eye. The .45 dropped from his extended hand and bounced once on the blotter. Ritter turned in a slow half circle, took a wavering step going nowhere, then fell like the First National Bank.

I stood there, listening. Doors didn't slam, no feet came running down the hall, no one yelled for the police. Evidently the rest of the fourth floor was deserted, and from any place else ~~that~~ single shot could have been the slam-

ming of a distant door or the filtered backfire from a car. The only sound was the bubbling sobs from the crumpled and no longer beautiful man known as Nekko.

I went behind the desk and looked at Ritter. He was as dead as Diogenes. I picked up the .45 and slipped it back under my arm and came back to where Nekko lay. Picking him up was like picking up a bucket of mush. I flopped him into a chair and took a handful of his wavy blond hair and shook him.

"Arleen Farmer," I said. "Where do I find her?"

His mouth dripped crimson like a fresh wound. The shattered stumps of teeth winked through the red. A vague mumble ground its way into the open. His eyes were completely mad.

I gave his head another shake. "Arleen Farmer," I said again. "Where is she?" I slapped him across the face and wiped the blood on his coat. "Talk, damn you!"

"... do'n' know . . ."

I hit him squarely in the nose. More blood spurted. His eyes rolled up and he fell off the chair. I kicked him full in the mouth. Even the stumps went this time. I tore off his necktie and bound his hands behind his back and left him lying there. My only hope was to find an address book that might give me additional leads to the kidnapers of my wife.

I stepped over what was left of Luke Ritter and started through the desk drawers. I was halfway through the junk in the center one when the phone rang.

## VII

I stood there staring at the phone under the cone of light from the desk lamp. It rang a second time before I reached out and took up the receiver. "Yeah," I said, trying to pitch my voice to the same dull rumble I'd heard Ritter use.

A soft feminine drawl came over the wire. "Luke? Did Max call you?"

My fingers tightened against the hard rubber and my lips pulled back into an aching grimace. It was the voice of the blonde responsible for snatching my wife. I fought down a wave of pure fury and said, "Yeah. A while ago."

"All right," the soft voice went on. "When he calls back, tell him Sergi wants the woman brought to his apartment at ten o'clock tonight. Use the rear entrance and the service elevator. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"That's all." A click at the other end told me I was alone.

I put down the instrument with slow care, suddenly aware that my hands were shaking slightly. Ten o'clock. I looked at my strap-watch. Six hours yet. Either I had

to find out just who this "Max" was and where he had my wife, or I must wait all those hours before I could do anything about getting her back.

A liquid groan reached my ears from across the room. I looked up in time to see Nekko moving weakly on the floor like a dying insect. I walked over and caught him by the collar and yanked him to his feet. "Last chance, sweetheart," I said. "Where do I find Max?"

He hung there, his eyes glazed, his mouth slack, and said nothing. I brought up the .32 and raked the sight across one cheek, laying it open to the bone. "Give, damn you! Where do I find Max?"

Pain took the vacant look from his eyes and brought a groan from his tortured lungs. The battered lips writhed, forming words that were too faint and indistinct for me to interpret. I put my ear close to his mouth. "Tell me again."

". . . warehouse . . . full . . . radio . . ."

Bright blood came spilling from his mouth and he went slack in my grasp. I stared at the blood, realizing it was arterial blood. Something had given way inside of him from the treatment he had taken; perhaps a broken rib had punctured a lung as the result of his being hit by the thrown chair.

He died in my hands. I let the

body slip to the floor and went back to the desk. Nekko's last words had been too vague to be useful. "A warehouse full of radios" could have meant anything. I tackled the desk again, looking for a lead.

At the end of half an hour I had gone through those three offices as thoroughly as it is possible to go through anything. No file of private phone numbers, no personal papers of any kind. Only a lot of bills of lading, invoices, etc., on miscellaneous merchandise being shipped abroad.

I was at the washbasin in the center office when the phone rang again. Before it could ring a second time I was in there and lifting the receiver. I took a slow breath and said, "Max?"

"Yeah, Luke." Nothing distinctive about the voice. "You hear from Porkov?"

"Bring her to his apartment. Ten tonight." I tried desperately to think of a question that would help me and not make him suspicious. The slightest doubt in his mind could ruin everything. But before I could come up with something, the voice said, "Check," and I was holding a dead wire.

I returned to the center office and looked at my face in the mirror over the washbasin. There was a bruise on my right cheek and a slight discoloration under one

eye. I rinsed the taste of blood from my mouth, washed a few evil-smelling spots from my coat lapel and went back to wipe fingerprints off the furniture and the file cabinets. The two dead men lay where they had fallen. Sight of the man called Nekko brought his words back to me. "Warehouse full of radios." It was entirely possible that Lodi was being held in some warehouse, but the fact that there were radios in that warehouse was no help at all.

A faint memory nagged at the back of my brain. Somewhere in Nekko's last words was a key — a key that tied in with a piece of information I had picked up during the day. I went over it again, word by word. "Warehouse" . . . a blank. "Full" . . . just as blank. "Radios" . . . I frowned. Was it "radios" or "radio"? All right, so it was one radio. That made no more sense than —

And then the missing piece fell into place. Eddie Treeglos had told me earlier in the day that Ann Fullerton had died in a fire at a radio company — the *Fullbright* Radio Company!

I grabbed the Manhattan telephone directory and leafed through to the right page. No listing for Fullbright Radio. The classified directory drew the same blank. But there had to be a — wait! The company was supposed to have burned out; the fire that



EMSH

had "killed" Ann Fullerton.

I dialed Eddie Treeglos. "Eddie, that Fullbright Radio outfit you told me about. I can't find them listed in the latest phone books. See what you can find. I'll hang on."

He came back almost immediately. "1220 Huber Street. A few blocks below Canal Street. 1220 would be damn near in the Hudson River."

I put back the receiver, used my handkerchief to wipe away the prints and went out into the corridor. Nobody around. I took the stairs to the third floor, stopped off there and rang for the elevator. The moment I heard the heavy door clang shut on the first floor, I trotted down the steps. The cage was still up there when I went out the front door to the street.

My watch showed the time as 4:45 and the sun was still high and still hot. I walked back through the heat and the stink to where I had left the convertible. It was still there and still intact. Considering the neighborhood, it could have been otherwise. I got in and drove on down to Huber Street.

## VIII

It was a small narrow building of ancient red brick crammed in between a cold storage warehouse and a moving and van outfit. The

front entrance was boarded up and the smoke-grimed bricks told the story. A wooden sign below the broken second-floor windows read: Fullbright Radio Corp. It looked about ready to fall into the street.

I drove on by and turned the corner. Halfway along was the entrance to an alley. I parked well above it and got out. Sunlight glittered on the river's oily swell across the way. A pair of piers jutted out into the water, pointed like daggers at the Jersey shore. In one of the slips a rusty freighter stood high out of the water, its hold empty of cargo. The reek of hot tar made my nose twitch in protest.

A few doors above the alley was a hole-in-the-wall smoke shop with two shirt-sleeved men in front of it consulting a racing form. I walked past them, turning my head to look at a sunbleached advertisement for La Palina cigars in the window. The two men didn't look up. I would have had to eat oats and run five-and-a-half furlongs in 1:03 first.

This alley was cleaner than my last one. Wire refuse containers were piled high with empty cartons and there was the clean odor of excelsior. A panel truck was backed up to the loading platform of the cold storage plant, but the driver was nowhere in sight. A few steps more and the fire-blackened rear of the Fullbright Radio Cor-

poration was where I could reach it.

Two windows on either side of a strong-looking door. The windows still had their glass and bars besides, and the door had a new look. I went over and leaned against it and delicately tried the latch. My first break. It was unlocked.

After a long succession of bad breaks, a good one makes you suspicious. I chewed a lip, hesitating. I looked both ways along the alley. Empty as a campaign promise. I let the door swing inward a foot or two and peered through. A big room that went all the way to the front of the building, strewn with fire-blackened timbers, wrecked partitions and charred furniture. The acrid odor found after a building burns, no matter how long after, bit into my lungs. I stepped inside and closed the door, breathing lightly, and looked around. A warped metal door in one of the side walls had a floor indicator over it, but I was reasonably sure the elevator would be out of order. Even if it wasn't, the sound would alarm anybody in the place—and I didn't want to alarm anybody. Not even me.

I picked my way gingerly through the wreckage until I was nearly to the front of the building. A narrow staircase hugged one wall, its bannister sagging. What

had once been a strip of carpeting covering treads and risers was now little more than flame-chewed threads.

It looked strong enough. I went up one flight, using the balls of my feet only and staying close to the wall. At the top things looked much better than they had downstairs, although the smell was as strong. There was a line of wooden and glass partitions, with a desk, a filing case and three chairs in each where the salesmen took orders from wholesalers. Or so I figured it out. The glass on several of the partitions was broken, but that was the only damage.

I prowled the entire floor and found no sign of life. I moved quietly, opening doors without a sound and closing them the same way. Nothing.

The third floor was split by a wooden partition that extended clear to the ceiling. The half I was in had been completely cleared out, leaving bare boards and a layer of dust you could write your name in if there was nothing better to do. I stood at the top of the steps and eyed a closed door in that partition. I could see no reason for the door being closed. You have a fire and the boys with the ladders and the gleaming axes come and put out the flames and hack a few holes and go away. Then you haul out what is left and move it down the stairs and away and that's all there is to it.



Why go around closing doors?

I took out my gun and went over to the door. No sound came through it. I turned the knob slowly and pushed it open carefully. Not very far open. Just far enough to see the broad back of a man playing solitaire at a table under a shaded light globe hanging from a ceiling cord.

Against a side wall was a day-bed and on the bed, her back to me, lay a woman fully dressed. I didn't need to see her face. It was Lodi. Lodi, whose beauty of face and figure was beyond the dreams of man once that initial shock had passed. Lodi, whose secret I had managed to keep from the prying eyes of the civilized world; Lodi, who had given up so much to be with the man she loved.

I slipped into the room and came silently up behind the man at the table. He laid a black seven on a red eight with clumsy care; studied the next card in the pile, then peeled three more from those in his hand.

I said, "You could use the ace of clubs."

He jumped a foot and started to rise. I hit him on the back of the head with the gun barrel and he fell face down on the table, out cold.

"Karl!"

Lodi was struggling to sit up, her arms tied at her back. I went

over and tore away the ropes and gathered her into my arms and kissed her until she was breathless.

"What have they done to you?" I demanded finally.

She shook her head, fighting back both tears and laughter. Her long dark hair needed a comb, but for my money it had never looked lovelier. "Nothing really, Karl. They were stunned, of course, when they saw my face for the first time. I think they were even a little in awe of me. They made me get dressed and brought me directly here."

"How many of them actually saw you?"

"What does it matter, darling?" She shivered. "Let's leave this horrible place. They'll be —"

"No," I said. "I've got to know."

"Four, Karl. The blonde girl and those two strange men with her and the man you found here."

"They ask you questions?"

She shrugged. "Something about a machine, and they seemed to know about the rays. At least the girl did. I pretended I couldn't understand her."

My own gun was back under my arm. I took the late Mr. Nekko's .32 out of my coat pocket and said, "Wait for me at the top of the stairs, Lodi. I've got a matter to take care of before I leave."

Her luminous eyes were trou-

bled. "You're not going to kill him, Karl?"

"He saw you," I said flatly.

"But people will find out some day, darling. They're bound to. You can't go around —"

Her voice faltered and broke. She was staring past me, fear suddenly filling her eyes. A voice said, "Let the gun fall, my friend."

The .32 dropped from my hand and I turned slowly. It wasn't the guard after all. Standing in the doorway were the same two men who had accompanied the blonde to my home the night before. Both were holding guns.

I said, "Relax," and showed them my empty hands. The slim one gestured at the man lying half across the table and said, "Wake him up, Stephan." There was a faintly foreign sound to the words.

The burly one of the pair lowered his gun and started toward the table. The other said in the same bored tone, "Turn around, both of you," to Lodi and me, and allowed the gun in his hand to sag slightly.

I moved my hand and the .45 was out from under my arm and speaking with authority. The first slug struck Gregory above the nose and tore away half his head; the second one ripped the entire throat out of the guard, who had chosen that second to sit erect;

the third caught Stephan as he was pulling the trigger of his own gun. Something made an angry sound past my ear and buried itself in the wall behind me with a dull *thunk*.

Blood, bodies and the smell of cordite. Lodi was swaying, her face buried in her hands. I picked up her light cape and the hat with the long heavy veil lying on a table next to the bed and said, "Get into these, quick. We'll have to move fast if we're going to leave before the cops get here."

She obeyed me numbly and we went quickly through the door and down the two flights of steps. Faces peered through the broken windows at the front of the building and somebody yelled at us.

We ran swiftly through the mounds of rubble to the rear door. I opened it and looked out. The alley appeared as empty of life as before. The panel truck was still backed up to the loading platform next door. I turned and beckoned to Lodi, and when I turned around again, five calm-faced men with drawn guns stepped from behind the truck to face us.

"Take it kind of easy, Mr. Terris," one of them said mildly. "We're government officers."

## IX

The committee meeting was called for 10:00 a.m. at one of the

hearing rooms in the Senate Building. Lodi and I got there about fifteen minutes early, escorted by a couple of extra-polite agents from the FBI.

Senator McGill was already in the waiting room outside. His mane of white hair didn't look quite as neat as usual and his heavy face was more red than florid.

He was upset enough to forget to shake hands. "Karl! My God, man, do you realize what a bad time you've given me?" He stared curiously at Lodi, who was heavily veiled, her arms covered with white gloves that ended under the sleeves of a long, high-necked dress. "Good morning, Mrs. Terris," he said, civilly enough. "I hear you've had something of a bad time of it. I do hope you're fully recovered."

"Thank you," Lodi said shortly.

He drew me to one side. "Don't hold anything back from them, Karl," he pleaded in an undertone. "They're sore as hell. Unless you can do some mighty tall explaining, you're going to be charged with everything from murder to spitting on the sidewalk! The way you were moving around, I'm surprised they even found you."

"I discovered how they did it," I said. "Granger, the FBI man I tied up out at the house, knew what car I was using. They put the license number on the police

radio and some squad spotted it parked near Huber Street. There were a dozen Feds in the block ten minutes later, and the sound of shooting did the rest."

The door to the hearing room opened and a young man beckoned to us. I took Lodi by the arm and we walked in and sat down at a long table. Across from us were several dignified-looking men in conservative business suits. Two of them I already knew: Millard Cavendish, the ranking member of the AEC; and Winston Blake, a sharp-featured bantam-rooster of a man, who wore elevator shoes and sported a black-ribboned pince-nez. Blake and I had taken an instant dislike to each other the first time we met, shortly after my return from Africa, and I knew he would be out for my scalp this time for sure.

Millard Cavendish sounded a gavel and brought the meeting to order. He was a tall, thin man with deep hollows under his cheeks and a shock of iron-gray hair that kept sliding down over his high forehead. He said, "Your name is Karl Terris and you reside in Clinton Township, Catskill County, in the State of New York. Is that correct?"

I looked at the girl behind the stenotype machine and said, "That is correct."

At this point, Winston Blake, who had been staring hard at

Lodi, cut in to say, "Mr. Cavendish, will you order this woman to remove her veil? I see no reason why she should keep her face covered during this hearing."

Before Cavendish could open his mouth, I said, "That veil stays on, Blake."

The little man bristled. "Speak when you're spoken to, sir! We're running this hearing."

"Then go ahead and run it. But the veil stays on."

Cavendish said quietly, "This is a hearing, Mr. Blake, not a style symposium. Let's get on with this, shall we?"

"I think Mr. Terris should be reminded," Blake snapped, "that it is within the province of this committee to cite a witness for contempt."

"Let's hope," I said, "that none of its members gives me a reason for being contemptuous."

Behind me somebody smothered a chuckle. Blake's face turned a fiery red. The gavel smacked its block once and Cavendish said, "Mr. Terris, you appeared before this committee some six weeks ago upon your unexpected return from Africa after an absence of two years. At the time of your disappearance you were, as a volunteer, engaged in mapping an area of French Equatorial Africa by air for the United States Government. The purpose of this aerial survey was to locate unusually rich deposits of fissionable

material believed to be somewhere in that locality. Am I correct thus far?"

"Yes, sir."

"In your appearance before this committee earlier you stated, under oath, that you failed to locate such deposits, that you had no idea where, if at all, they were located, and that the photographs taken of the locality had been destroyed at the time your plane crashed. This, too, is correct?"

"Yes, sir."

Cavendish fixed me with a not unkindly eye. "Do you, at this time, wish to enlarge on that testimony?"

"No, sir."

The chairman picked up a sheet of paper from a thin sheaf next to his right elbow, studied it briefly, then put it down and looked sharply at me. "Mr. Terris," he said, "twelve days ago a Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Mather died under mysterious circumstances in the south of France. An examination showed both had died of being exposed to cosmic radiation of a highly concentrated form. Exposure took place, it has been established, between thirty and thirty-five days before their deaths. Further investigation revealed that the couple were aboard the tramp steamer *City of Stockholm* at the time of such exposure. Now, it is a matter of record that you chartered the

*City of Stockholm* at the port of Dakar, in Africa, for the purpose of transporting you and your wife to America. Furthermore, the cabin you and your wife occupied during the crossing was the one occupied immediately afterward by Mr. and Mrs. Mather. An immediate investigation was made of the ship and your cabin by qualified scientists, and a faint but unmistakable trace of radiation was found therein. By this time the radiation was far too slight to harm anyone, but the fact remains that it was found therein. In view of these facts, and in view of the purpose behind your original visit to Africa, this committee again asks if you wish to correct your previous testimony."

"No, sir."

There was a general shuffling of feet and shifting of chairs by the rest of the committee. Blake leaned toward the man to his left and whispered something in his ear. The two of them engaged Cavendish in a muttered colloquy pitched too low for me to hear, even if I had wanted to, which I didn't.

Senator McGill bent over me. "Damn it, Karl, what are you trying to pull? They've got enough evidence to pin perjury on you ten times over! This is your country; why aren't you willing to help it?"

I looked up at him. "Senator,

if anyone's going to teach me patriotism, it won't be you. Now kindly get the hell away from me!"

Lodi reached over and put a gloved hand on my arm and squeezed it understandingly. Behind the heavy veil she was watching me, I knew, with deep concern.

Millard Cavendish had concluded his discussion with the rest of the committee members. He looked me directly in the eye and the lines of his face were stern.

"I have some questions to ask you, Mr. Terris. Please let me remind you that this committee is empowered to ask these questions and to demand a truthful answer to each. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly."

He nodded shortly. "I will ask you, Mr. Terris, if you brought into this country, at any time, a device or machine having to do with cosmic radiation or energy?"

"No, sir."

A wrinkle deepened between his eyes. "Then how do you explain what happened to the Mathers, and the finding of the experts who examined your cabin on the *City of Stockholm*?"

"That, Mr. Cavendish," I said, "would be a matter of conjecture on my part. I recognize this committee's right to ask me questions, but I do not believe it can demand conjectures."

The wrinkle became a frown. "Then I will ask you, sir: do you

know how the cosmic radiation got into that cabin?"

"The question," I said, "is do I *know* how the radiation got into that cabin. The answer is no."

Winston Blake said, "This man is deliberately evasive. I say he should be cited for contempt for his last remark, and for every succeeding remark of its kind."

"Is that supposed to intimidate me?" I asked.

The gavel came down, hard. Cavendish said, "Let's keep our tempers, gentlemen. . . . Mr. Terris, while you were in Africa, did you come into contact with any device, manufactured or natural, that had to do with cosmic radiations or energy?"

"I did."

It took a moment for the reply to get a reaction. There was a sudden babble of voices behind me and the members of the committee stiffened in their chairs. Cavendish rapped several times before order was restored.

He said sternly, "As a patriotic American, Mr. Terris, you must have a sound reason for withholding such information from your country. This committee would like to hear that reason."

I said, "I yield to no one on the strength of my patriotism. But I'm not going to confuse patriotism with chauvinism. By revealing the location of the machines used in controlling and con-

centrating cosmic energy, I would bring death and destruction not only to a peaceful and innocent people but to the rest of the world."

Millard Cavendish sighed. "This nation is not a warlike one, Mr. Terris. Possession of this secret, judging from what you say, would make America so powerful that no other nation, or coalition of nations, would dare launch a war."

I laughed shortly. "Secret weapons as a deterrent to war are useful only as long as they are controlled by one nation. Need I remind you that spies invariably manage to get their hands on such weapons and peddle them to other nations?"

Winston Blake said, "I'm getting tired of this nonsense." He leaned across the table and stabbed me with his chill blue eyes. "I'll put this in words of one syllable for you, Terris. We want this secret and we want it now. Either you give us the exact location of these devices, or whatever they are, or you'll be branded a traitor to your country in the eyes and ears of every one of your fellow Americans. You're a rich man, I'm told. Well, this is one time your wealth isn't going to save you."

I said, "It's fatheads like you that guarantee my silence."

His face turned a violent crimson and for a moment I thought

he was on the verge of a stroke. "I want this man arrested!" he bellowed. "I'll show him he can't vilify a member of this body and get away —"

The banging of the gavel cut him off. Cavendish said frostily, "Mr. Blake is ready for your apology, Mr. Terris."

"Then let him earn it," I said, just as frostily. "I don't have to take that kind of talk from him or anybody else."

By this time Blake was on his feet. "I see no reason to continue questioning this witness. His reasons for refusing to turn over to us such vital information are patently the usual Communist Party line. A man like this deserves to be named a traitor — and if we can't make that stick, let him answer for his unprovoked assault on an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, as well as the brutal slaying of six men in something less than twenty-four hours."

Beside me, Lodi spoke for the first time. "Tell them what they want to know, Karl. It doesn't matter."

I stared at her, aghast. "You don't know what you're saying! Do you want your people to go through what the rest of the world has suffered? Have you forgotten what happened to them that first time?"

Her voice was firm. "You know

the kind of protection my people have, Karl. Ten thousand planes couldn't find our city in hundreds of years if they didn't want to be found. Tell these men the whole story. I don't want the man I love to be hated by his own country."

I placed a hand lightly on her veil. "Do you want them to know about you? Do you want this veil stripped away for the world to see? Do you want to be laughed at, shunned, hear every so-called comedian toss off a collection of gag-lines about you?"

"It doesn't matter, Karl. Your real reason for refusing to tell them is your wish to protect me, not my people. I know that, and it must not be that way. All that does matter is your love for me."

They were listening to us. The room was silent as a morgue. I took a deep slow breath. "Is that the way you want it, Lodi?"

"Yes."

I rose from the chair and looked at the men behind the table. "Okay," I said. "I'm going to tell you a story. It's a story I want the world to hear from my lips, not to learn through a lot of distorted secondhand accounts. Bring in the newsmen and the spectators."

"We're running this, Terris," Winston Blake said coldly. "I see no reason to —"

"You're not running it now," I said. "Either I tell it my way or you can sweat turpentine and



not get a word out of me. It's strictly up to you."

An almost invisible smile was tugging at Millard Cavendish's fine lips. He said, "I suggest a compromise. Newsmen, yes; but no spectators. Any part of Mr. Terris' story that can be a threat to our national security will not be published. Is that satisfactory to you, Mr. Terris?"

Once more I looked at Lodi. She nodded ever so slightly. I said, "Bring 'em in and let's get this over with."

It required only a few minutes before the press seats were filled. Curious eyes bored into us, but more of them were on the veiled woman next to me than anywhere else. Cavendish rapped his gavel lightly once and said, "We're ready to hear you, sir."

I stood there, bending forward slightly, one hand resting on the table. I said:

"Two years ago, I crashed my plane in an African jungle hundreds of miles from civilization. The reason for my being in that part of the world is known to everybody. I was injured in the crash and lay at the edge of a clearing for hours in great pain before I finally blacked out. When I came to, I found myself in a vast underground city, attended by the kindest, most generous people who ever lived. These people nursed me back to health

and made me one of them. They trusted me, and when I fell in love with the daughter of their ruling family, they gave her to me as my wife.

"I learned the history of this race. Many thousands of years ago this race lived in four great cities on the surface of the Earth. These were cities of great beauty, of towering spires and luxurious homes. The rest of the Earth was just emerging from the Paleolithic Age, and nothing broke the peace and contentment of their lives.

"And then one day a vast armada of airships swooped down on these peaceful people. Bombs leveled the four cities and those who did not die were taken away as captives. When the enemy finally left, the few survivors sought refuge in underground caves."

Everybody in the room was hanging on my words. A few of the reporters were taking notes, but most of them simply listened with open mouths. I took a couple of steps down the room and came back and stood there, resting a hand lightly on Lodi's shoulder.

"These people I'm telling you about," I went on, "had the knowledge of great power. They knew how to harness cosmic rays—a force sufficient to blow this globe of ours into atoms. They could have constructed weapons that would make the H-bomb something, by comparison, you

could shoot off in your fingers!

"But they used this power for more important things. With it they illuminated their caves to the brilliance of sunlight. As the centuries passed, their numbers increased until the population was back to where it had been at the time the attack had come. But they chose to remain underground, so that never again would they be attacked; and except for a few surface guards, none of them ventured out of those caves."

I paused again, this time to look at the three men across the table from me. Cavendish was leaning back in his chair, staring fixedly at my face; Blake was staring down at the pince-nez in his hand; Rasmussen, the third man, sat with his chin resting on one palm. The silence was absolute.

"One of those surface guards found me," I said. "Instead of killing me, he brought me to safety. I grew to love those people, made one of them my wife, and through her and them I knew happiness for the first time in my life."

"But there was one factor I forgot to take into consideration, gentlemen. We call it homesickness. I wanted to go back, to leave that paradise, for the doubtful benefits of what we call civilization. And against my better judgment, knowing exactly what it would mean to her, I brought Lodi with me."

I stopped long enough to pour water into a glass and drink it, then lit a cigarette and went on:

"This brings me to something I failed to mention earlier. These people had learned the secret of longevity. I knew men and women three and four hundred years old who looked and acted younger than I did!"

A murmur of astonishment and open doubt ran through the room. I kept right on talking, getting it all out before my vocal cords gave up:

"Cosmic radiations were the answer. Ages of exposure to those rays had resulted in an inherent immunity to harmful effects. Once every fourteen days each of these people exposed himself to a full charge of the energy; by doing so old age was held back. But after such exposure they gave off for a few days rays that would kill any ordinary man who came in contact with them. They knew this, of course; I was given a series of injections immediately to keep the emanations from harming me."

"There's not much left to tell you, gentlemen. Lodi went with me in my repaired plane. We landed near Dakar the following day; I chartered a ship for our trip to America. Unknown to me, however, Lodi had exposed herself to the customary charge of cosmic energy shortly before we left her people. As long as she wore the proper clothing no one would be

harméd; but by undressing in her cabin, she left a concentration of the rays. By the time we reached this country she was no longer a threat to other people; but the Mathers were unfortunate enough to occupy the cabin too soon afterward."

I spread my hands. "Except for one more incident, that's the story. The incident concerns a group of Communist agents who learned what had caused the Mathers' deaths. They assumed I had brought back a machine that produced cosmic energy, and to force me to turn it over to them they kidnaped my wife. In getting her back, I'm afraid, a few people got hurt. It makes for a nice touch: in kidnaping my wife to force me into giving them the 'machine,' they had the machine all along!"

I sat down and knocked the ash from my cigarette gently into a tray. No one said anything for almost a minute. Then Winston Blake carefully lifted his pince-nez and placed it firmly astride his nose.

"Of all the arrant nonsense I ever heard," he snarled, "this concoction I've just listened to takes the prize. By what evolutionary freak did a race of people shoot up ahead of cave men to produce the wonders you told us about? And this air raid; I suppose it came from Saturn!"

I shook my head politely. "No, sir. From Venus. And evolution had nothing to do with the people of the caves, Mr. Blake. They came originally from Mars!"

I got out of my chair and helped Lodi to her feet. "You want proof, Mr. Blake. Then by God you'll get proof!"

Before any of them realized what was happening, I tore away the veil covering Lodi's face, then hooked my fingers under the high neckline of her dress and ripped it and the underclothing beneath completely from her lush and lovely body.

"Go ahead, you lousy ghouls," I said. "Take a good look!"

The collective gasp was like the rustling of a strong breeze. For the skin of the most beautiful woman of two worlds was a rich and luminous green!

## X

It was after two o'clock by the time we drove into New York City, and by that time the newspapers were out with the story. At Lodi's insistence I stopped at a stand and bought two of them. The banner head on the *Gazette* said: HOW GREEN WAS MY MARTIAN, and the managing editor had made his bid for a salary increase by having the words printed in green ink. The *Standard* headline was less imaginative but more factual: TERRIS

## MYSTERY BRIDE FROM MARS!

We were nearly to the Westchester county line before Lodi put aside the papers and leaned back to let the air cool her burning cheeks. I said, "That's only a small sample, baby. They'll crucify you from now on."

"I don't mind, Karl. If you don't."

"You'll mind," I said. "You'd have to have the skin of a rhinoceros not to mind. To the rest of the world you're a freak and freaks pay a high price for living."

"Will it matter so much to you, Karl?"

"It won't get a chance to," I said harshly. "We're going back, Lodi. Back to your people for the rest of our lives. I've had enough of my kind; let them blow themselves to hell and I'll like it fine."

She laid one of her delicate hands over mine on the wheel. "They are your people, darling. You can't run out on them, on the responsibilities your great wealth gives you. You'd be terribly unhappy before long."

It was my turn to squeeze *her* hand. "Not as long as we're together, Lodi."

After several miles of silence, Lodi said, "At least they're not going to try to find where my people are."

"Not after they got the details of the power they'd be up against,"

I said. "The theory of the rest of the world will be: 'Let sleeping dogs lie'—no matter how tempted any nation gets to pull a fast one."

Shortly before five-thirty I swung off the Taconic Parkway and followed the private road on up the hill to the house. The late afternoon sun dappled the lawn through the trees and a tired breeze moved the leaves with a whispering sound. Lodi opened the car door and picked up her veil preparatory to getting out.

I said, "Forget the veil, baby. You'll never wear it again."

She smiled, the slow warm smile that had knocked me for a loop the first time I'd seen it. "You're sure you want it to be that way, Karl?"

"Absolutely."

She left it lying crumpled on the seat and we went up the porch steps together. I unlocked the front door and followed her into the entrance hall—and a tall, slender blond man stepped from behind the short wall of the dining room and pointed a gun at us.

He flashed his teeth and said, "I was beginning to think you hadn't paid the rent. Close the door, please—and keep your hands away from your body."

He looked like a Swedish diplomat, all right, and there were the three pock marks high up on his left cheek. Sergi Porkov. It couldn't have been anyone else.

And just to wrap it up for sure, Ann Fullerton, in figured crepe silk that did a lot for her wheat-field hair, appeared in the opening behind him. She was carrying a good-sized patent-leather bag under one arm and she looked cool and neat and very, very lovely.

I started to say something but Porkov cut me off with a small gesture of the gun. From where I stood I judged it to be one of the old model Walther P-38's. Not exactly a cannon, but at the moment he didn't need a cannon. He said, "I think you had better lift your hands quite high and turn around. Both of you. Slowly."

We had a choice. We could turn around or we could refuse — and get shot down on the spot. We turned. He slithered up behind me and let a soft meaty hand prowl my body. He was smart enough to hold the gun so that it actually wasn't against me. He snaked out the .45 from under my arm, made sure it was the only weapon I carried, then went to work on Lodi. She couldn't have hidden a penknife in what she was wearing, but that didn't keep him from trying. I heard her gasp slightly a time or two, and while my muscles crawled I kept them from getting away from me.

He finally stepped back. "I think we will go up the stairs now. In case of unexpected visitors."

We went up the stairs and into the sitting room between the two

master bedrooms. Porkov waved us into a couple of the lounge chairs there and then sat down on the edge of one across from Lodi and me. The Fullerton girl remained near the hall door, just standing there looking a little pale, a pinched expression around her full lips.

Lodi leaned back in her chair and folded her hands. She had the Oriental trick of turning completely impassive when things weren't going right. Porkov crossed his legs and wagged the gun carelessly at her. "Green or not," he said admiringly, "you're still the best-looking woman I've ever seen."

I said, "Maybe you'd like to change off for a night or two."

He turned his teeth on again. "It is a thought. Rather a good



one. But I'm afraid not. No. I have other plans for your very charming and very beautiful green wife."

I said, "I'd like a cigarette."

"By all means! Perhaps your wife would like a last one also."

From the doorway Ann Fullerton said, "Sergi! You're not —"

Without turning his head he said, "Shut up! Speak when you're spoken to."

I lit a cigarette for Lodi and one for myself. My hands weren't shaking, but not because they didn't want to. I said, "So you're going to pull the string on us. I wonder why. Not for the secret 'machine,' I'm sure. You must have read all about that in the papers by this time."

He swung his crossed leg idly. "No, my friend. Not the machine. We slipped badly on that, Ann and I. No; you took the lives of six of the men associated with me. In effect, you made a fool out of me as well. This last is unforgivable, Mr. Terris."

"Then you won't accept my apology?"

He eyed me almost admiringly. "You are a brave man, sir. I like brave men. . . . Tell me, Mr. Terris, do you love your wife?"

". . . We weren't planning on getting a divorce."

He nodded, satisfied. "I don't intend to kill you, my friend. Not, that is, unless you literally force

me to — which you may very well do. It will be an interesting experiment, this — to learn if grief can drive a man to ignoring the law of self-preservation. I know it has done that to some men."

"I haven't the slightest idea," I said, "what the hell you're talking about."

He bent forward across his knee. "Killing you, sir, would accomplish nothing. As they say, your troubles would be over. Dead men feel nothing: no pain, no anguish of soul, no regrets. But when a man loses the one thing he holds most dear, something he has suffered for, endured hardship for, fought for — that loss is, to him, more horrible even than death. In your particular case, Mr. Terris, it would be your wife."

Something with cold feet walked up my spine. I bit down on my teeth, and it was almost a minute before my throat could form words. "You can't afford another mistake, Porkov. You'll take a full helping of hell if you so much as start a run in one of my wife's stockings. People who know me will tell you that."

He said, "You fascinate me, Mr. Terris," and lifted the gun and shot Lodi three times through the left breast.

Through a twisting nightmare of incredulity I watched my wife droop like a tired flower. Then

her body sagged forward and she toppled out of the chair to form a pathetic heap on the rug. Death had been instantaneous.

I stood up the way an old, old man stands up. I started toward Porkov. I was in no hurry. I wouldn't live to reach his throat anyway. But that was where I was going.

From the doorway, Ann Fullerton took a gun out of her bag and shot Porkov through the head. Before he hit the floor she was standing over him, pulling the trigger again and again. He caught the full load and even after the gun was empty she went on pulling the trigger in a frenzy of hatred and revulsion until I took it gently out of her fingers.

She turned on me, her eyes burning, her breasts shaking, her body trembling. "I killed him, Karl. I love you! I want you! Right here! Now! Now!"

You don't explain those things. Not at the time, nor later. Nor ever. The blood sang through me and her body was hotter than any fire and mine was just as hot.

I was sitting on the bed when she came out of the shower. She was as naked as the palm of a baby's hand and she smelled of bath powder. She came over and sat down on the bed beside me and put both arms around me.

"We'll put all those other things out of our minds, Karl, darling."

Her voice was like the purr of a cat. "I loved you from the first moment I saw you. We'll go away, Karl, and we'll have each other, and that will be all we'll ever want. Just us two . . ."

I didn't say anything. She got up and went over to the vanity and began to run the comb through her hair. She was what the boys who invented Valhalla were talking about. She had a body that would melt a glacier from across the street. She was everything a man wanted in a woman if all he wanted was a body.

Very slowly I reached under the pillow and took out the .45. I held it loosely in one hand and raised my head and said, "Turn around, Ann."

She turned around and saw the gun and all the color ran out of her face. "No, darling. No! I killed him, Karl. I killed the man who shot your wife. He would have killed you too. I saved your life!"

I said, "Sure, baby, you did fine," and fired twice. She caught both slugs full in the belly. I could hear them go in from clear across the room.

I put the gun down and smiled a little looking at her. I said, "The worms will love you, darling," and got up and walked over to the telephone.

I wondered what the cops would say about finding her naked that way.