

# Cosmopolitan

AMERICA'S BEST FICTION AND FACT

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## To Catch a Thief

BY DAVID DODGE

**T**he *agents de police* came for John Robie sooner than he had expected.

It was a hot summer evening. Crickets saved monotonous fiddles in the garden, and a bullfrog boomed bass notes, John was buttoning his wallet and passport into the pocket of his jacket when first the crickets, then the bullfrog stopped their music. The sudden silence told him that the *agents* were outside.

He knew they would have surrounded the villa before approaching it. But it was nearly dark, and he had one way out they might not think to cover. He waited until the doorbell rang, willing them inside the garden wall, close to the house, before he stepped out on the *terrasse* where he slept on warm nights, climbed the low railing, balanced himself, and jumped.

The man in the garden below heard shoes scrape on the railing, but he was too startled to shout at first, and the escape took only seconds. Although John could not see the tree branch he jumped for, he knew it would be there when, flat out on his face in the air, he reached for it. As his feet went down he bent at the hips, kicked hard on the upswing, released his hold, and soared over the high garden wall with inches to spare. He came down in the lane beyond the wall and was running for the shelter of an orchard on the hilltop before the *agent* let out his first bellow.

By the time they came through the garden gate to hunt for him, their flashlights bobbing like bright balloons in the dark, he was safe in the orchard. He left the orchard on the far side and set out in the direction of the seacoast.

It was a ten-kilometer walk. He avoided the highway, making his way through vineyards and the heady, sweet-smelling flower patches his Provençal neighbors grew for the perfume factories. He came out of the last flower patch at Cros de Cagnes in time to run for a bus that was about to pull out, and found it empty except for the driver and (Continued on page 153)



Among the  
bejeweled and beautiful  
women of the Riviera, a man  
must know the combination  
to hearts as well as safes--  
and even the coldest  
crook is sometimes  
dangerously distracted

*Coby Whitmore*

ILLUSTRATED BY COBY WHITMORE

## To Catch a Thief (Continued from page 42)

ticket taker, who paid no attention to him after he had paid his fare. He decided he would be either safely out of the country or on his way to a French jail before they had occasion to remember his face.

None of the passengers who boarded the bus before it reached Cannes looked at him twice. He left the bus opposite the municipal casino and joined the strollers along La Croisette, the promenade skirting the beach. By keeping to the beach side of the promenade, where lights were dim, he avoided showing his face until he reached the Hotel Napoléon, a shabby cousin of the newer and finer hotels nearer the casino and yacht harbor.

There was nothing he could do about the concierge in the hotel lobby except nod a greeting and pass by, his nerves tight. The faded red carpet had a new patch since his last visit, but Bellini's sign was still there. It read:

**HENRI BELLINI**  
INSURANCE—SALES AND RENTALS  
TOURIST AGENT  
IMPORTS AND EXPORTS—DOMESTIC HELP  
INTERPRETER—STENOGRAPHER  
INVESTMENTS  
MEZZANINE FLOOR

He went up the stairway, resisting an urge to look back at the concierge.

He found Bellini reading a newspaper in the cluttered cubbyhole that was both his place of business and living quarters. Bellini had the paper spread on his desk in the fan of light from an old-fashioned desk lamp. He peered at John from under the lamp, with a wide smile of welcome.

"I was wondering about you," he said, chuckling. "Have you seen your latest publicity?"

He tapped the newspaper.

John said, "I saw it."

Bellini chuckled again. He was always the same—round, oily, and happy. A German soldier had broken his shoulder with a rifle butt during the Occupation, and the bones had not been set properly, so the shoulder stayed hunched up against his ear in a permanent half shrug of good humor. He had the ingratiating and smooth air of a confidence man. Besides pursuing his legitimate activities, he was an importer of smuggled goods, a black-market operator, occasionally a receiver of stolen property, and John Robie's best friend.

"What are your plans?" He beamed.

"I'm leaving the country. The police came for me this evening."

"And you?"

"Off the terrasse and over the wall."

"Like old times," Bellini giggled. "I would like to have seen the flic's faces."

"I've seen all I want of them. Can you fix this for me?"

He laid the passport on the desk. Bellini looked down at it, then up again, still beaming.

"What do you want done?"

"Change the name and number, set my birth date back ten years, and forge a current stamp. I'll dye my hair, pad myself around the middle, and have a new photograph taken. The only pictures they have of me are newspaper prints dating back to before the war. They won't have any reason to look twice at one more middle-aged American tourist among thousands."

"You aren't afraid of extradition?"

"They'll forget about me when they learn I've gone and the thief keeps operating."

"Will he keep operating, John?"

"He'll have no reason to stop."

Bellini chuckled again. John said, "Did you think that Le Chat had come back?"

Bellini lifted his good shoulder expressively. John said, "It isn't Le Chat."

Bellini nodded, satisfied. "I wanted to hear you say it yourself. Now, what can you do about this newspaper article?"

"I told you. Run. It's either that or eighteen years in prison."

THE SENTENCE originally had been twenty years, the maximum under French law for the theft of which he had been convicted. They had never legally proved him guilty of any of the other thefts. He had served twenty-two months of his time at La Maison Centrale de Fontevault-l'Abbaye before war came and an occupying German army took over the management of the prison in 1941.

The Germans set him free, along with the other thieves and murderers who were his jailmates. The entire prison population was loaded into trucks late one night, driven to the Unoccupied Zone, and turned loose to provide a problem for what was left of Free France. Most of the murderers repaid the gesture by joining the maquis, where they could practice their trade on their liberators.

John went with them. He met Bellini in the maquis. Bellini was not a convict, just a businessman with good connections in le milieu, the French underworld, which he declined to use for the benefit of the Germans. They broke his shoulder instead of shooting him, another mistake. He organized his own band of maquisards, for which the only entrance requirement was a willingness to kill the invaders.

Neither he nor any of the group ever asked how John, an American, got into a French prison. They knew he was Le Chat because he had been convicted as Le Chat. Le Chat had been famous on the Côte d'Azur for three years before his arrest, as much for his physical agility and climbing skill as for the peculiarities of his technique as a thief—never an accomplice, never a weapon more dangerous than a glass cutter, never violence, and never an identification, other than the nickname, until a receiver of stolen goods sold him to the Sûreté Nationale after an argument over prices. That was all anyone knew. John did not talk during his trial or afterward. Bellini, who was talkative himself, admired close-mouthed men.

"Although I would have betrayed you to the Sûreté myself, if I had been able," he told John, giggling. "You gave me a good deal of trouble."

"Was I in your territory?"

"You were. Every time you brought off a theft, my organization felt the heavy hand of the law." Bellini giggled again. "I trust you have no plans to return to the Côte after this unpleasant business with the boche is finished. If you do—"

"I don't. Not as a thief."

"You have reformed, then? An encouraging success for the French prison system."

John shook his head and smiled. Bellini amused him. "Retired is a better word. I've put away enough money to keep me. And thieving is too risky, now that they know my face."

"Good. Good. I should not like to be your business rival."

John said, "We would make better partners."

They made good partners in the maquis, and both survived until the end of the fighting came, for them, with the landing of American troops near St. Tropez in 1944. Only three of John's prisonmates were still alive: Jean-Pierre, an amemic murderer; Le Borgne, a one-eyed ex-burglar, and Coco, who had earned his living before the war with a *casse-tête*, or skull cracker. They went their own ways when the band broke up. Their prison records had been destroyed by the Germans and the Sûreté Nationale let it be known in le milieu, unofficially, that no man who had fought in the maquis need worry about an unfinished prison term, as long as he remained respectable.

JOHN meant to remain respectable. He had several million francs under various names in various banks. Though the franc deteriorated badly during and

after the war, what remained was still a comfortable fortune for Provence. He bought a villa near Venice, using his own name, and registered with the local commissariat. No one came to inquire if he was the same John Robie who had been sentenced to twenty years at La Maison Centrale de Fontevault-l'Abbaye for jewel robbery. But the commissaire de police from the village made a friendly call on his bicycle.

He was a short, broad man with sharp eyes. His name was Oriol. They talked about the weather and the grape crop, and drank a glass of wine together.

"You have a comfortable home, M'sieur Robie," Oriol said. "You deserve to enjoy it, having fought for it. I know your record—with the maquis, I mean. I was in the maquis myself. Before that, I was a police clerk. At the cour d'assises, in Nice."

It was plain enough. John had been tried before the cour d'assises. He said nothing, waiting.

Oriol went on. "You are welcome here. I must only warn you that, as a foreigner, your field of employment is restricted. You understand me?"

John said, "I have all the money I need to live on. I hunt a little in season, swim when the weather is good, and dig in my garden. That's all I have any intention of doing."

"You should be very content here, then."

They shook hands when Oriol left.

LATER John accepted an invitation to a glass of wine at the commissaire's home, and through him met others of his neighbors—peasant farmers, villagers, and a big, pleasant, well-mannered man he went bowling with on Sunday afternoons and knew only as Paul until he learned, with surprise, that Paul had a title, le comte du Pré de la Tour. Paul owned a small domaine not far from John's villa, which he pretended to farm for profit, although he was independently wealthy. Actually the domaine was a summer rest home for his wife, Lisa, who was dying of tuberculosis. They were hopelessly in love, and they both knew she did not have long to live. John, who came to know them well and liked them both, wondered what would happen to Paul when Lisa was dead. Paul's emotional dependence on his wife was something that John, who was dependent only on himself, found hard to understand.

But when Lisa died at last, after John had been at his villa nearly three years, something happened to drive Paul's problem out of his mind.

Oriol made another call on his bicycle, and declined a glass of wine. The refusal was so unusual that it warned John of what was coming. Even then it was a shock when Oriol said bluntly, "Did you ever, during your time with the maquis, know a man named Le Chat, John?"

"I know the name."

"He was a jewel thief. He began here on the Côte, before the war. I think he may have returned."

Oriol took a newspaper from his pocket.

John read the story. A Belgian woman staying at a hotel in Menton had lost jewels valued at three million francs to a thief who had entered her room in the night by swinging down from the cornice of the roof. No one had seen him, but from all the signs he had gone back as he'd come, pulling himself up over the cornice from a window ledge four stories

above the street. The newspaper article remarked on the thief's boldness and agility, and the man who wrote it clearly had never heard of Le Chat, because although the comparison was a natural one, Le Chat's name was not mentioned.

John said, "I remember reading about Le Chat years ago. This man's technique seems much the same. But it isn't the same thief."

Oriol looked at John woefully. "Can one ever be positive?"

"I can. Le Chat was killed during the Resistance. I had the report from a man who saw him die, Oriol."

They did not talk further about it. But when Oriol pedaled away, he still had not tasted his wine.

Several thefts were reported during the weeks that followed—at St. Jean on Cap Ferrat, at Antibes, at Juan-les-Pins, at Monaco and Monte Carlo. All were gathering places for wealthy summer visitors. The thief stole nothing but cash and jewelry, as John had always done, and seemed by his actions almost to be attempting a conscious imitation of Le Chat. The Monte Carlo theft was a duplication of one John had himself brought off in Nice. The thief climbed from a hotel marquee up one of its supporting chains to a third-floor window, cut a hole in the pane to get at the lock, and made his entry.

After that, John knew his own arrest would be only a matter of time. The amnesty that Oriol had extended to him was an unofficial one, legally nonexistent. As soon as anyone publicly made the inevitable comparison between new thief and old, Oriol would have no choice.

It was the Paris edition of the New York Herald Tribune that first suggested the connection. Only the chance that it was an English-language paper gave him his opportunity to escape. Oriol could not read English and did not hear of the story until several hours after John had read it and made his preparations.

Twelve years had passed since his trial, but the Herald Tribune had the old story in its files, as well as a rumor: Was it true that Le Chat, the famous climbing jewel thief of prewar days, was again operating on the Côte d'Azur, and was it also true that, because of his good record as a maquisard during the Occupation, Le Chat had been granted amnesty from the completion of an unfinished prison term? Was this what accounted for the failure of the police to make a single arrest in connection with the latest series of robberies? Was Le Chat immune from the law?

There was more of the same, with John's photograph, a fuzzy snapshot taken at the trial, on the front page of the paper that lay on Bellini's desk.

Bellini said, with a chuckle, "So now you are abandoning us?"

"I'm going to save my neck, if I can. I'm not abandoning anyone."

"What about Jean-Pierre, and Coco, and Le Borgne? And fat old Bellini?"

John shook his head, puzzled. "What do you have to do with it?"

Bellini giggled. "You do not have a subtle mind, do you, John? Let me draw you a picture."

He leaned back in his chair, putting his stubby fingertips together.

"You remember I told you once of the trouble you caused me in your time? This thief has brought it again. Pressure on Le milieu has been increasing for

weeks. They are trying to pop him to the surface like a seed from a grape, and they squeeze everybody in the process. Yesterday they arrested two of my Moroccans for nothing more serious than cigarette smuggling. It will grow worse for all of us, now that the thief has been identified as Le Chat, rightly or wrongly. By tomorrow I expect—"

"Why worse for you? They know I always operated alone. What can they expect to get by putting pressure on you?"

"Information. A betrayal. Who are known to be your friends since the days of the Occupation? Jean-Pierre, Coco, Le Borgne, and I. Who came out of prison with you and can be sent back at any time? Jean-Pierre, Coco, and Le Borgne. They are respectable now, or nearly so, enough to stay out of trouble with the fics, except for having known Le Chat. That will be very dangerous for them until the thief is caught."

"The Sûreté will take him in time. They're slow, but they never give up."

"Certainly they will take him in time. In the meantime, what if they take Jean-Pierre and Coco and Le Borgne? And all my Moroccans? What then?"

John turned away. He walked to the window to look out at the calm sea. After a long time he said, "What do you want from me?"

Bellini's smooth voice answered, "Your clever thief's mind. With that, and my organization, and the camouflage you already have planned for your escape, we can take him ourselves. I have studied your thefts and his, and I tell you honestly I thought you were not. He thinks as you did, robs as you did, mocks the police with his actions as you did. You see what an opportunity it gives you. You can put yourself into his mind, plan the thefts he will make, take a step ahead—"

"—and go back to prison if I slip," John finished.

"Yes. There is that risk. We all took bigger risks for each other in the maquis, John."

John still stood at the window. Miles off shore, the lights of a passing steamer winked across the water, heading for Marseilles, Gibraltar, the Atlantic, and America.

And safety, he thought.

Aloud, he said, "Where can I hide for a few days to change my appearance?"

Bellini chuckled. "With Jean-Pierre, in Marseilles. I have already made the arrangements."

He stayed three days with Jean-Pierre before he returned to Cannes as Jack Burns, of New York City.

Bellini had done well with the passport. It testified that Mr. Burns was in the insurance business, that he was forty-four years old, and that he had entered France as a tourist two weeks earlier. The passport photo showed a heavy-bodied, middle-aged man with black hair receding sharply at the temples. The face was still John Robie's face, but the balding Mr. Burns did not look at all like the blond, muscular young thief whose only existing photograph was a twelve-year-old press snap.

"The boches did you a favor when they destroyed your prison records," Jean-Pierre had said, working carefully with a razor to change John's hairline. "But the body is known, even if the face is



forgotten, so no disclosures on the beach. You must wear the padded shoes and the belly harness at all times in public. Never let your shirt come open. You have too much meat in the arms and shoulders." He added innocently, "Where did you earn the muscles, John?"

"You never asked in the maquis, Jean-Pierre."

"I withdraw the question. To continue: You have in your new luggage modest shorts, knee-length in the British style. You must take the sun at Cannes, since all tourists do that, but never the water. Wear the shorts and half sleeves on the beach. Use the dye I have given you at the hair roots as necessary, and shave your temples daily. Finally—" Jean-Pierre hesitated, half ashamed to express what he felt—"catch the *salope* quickly. The *fics* have called twice to hint about what can happen if Le Chat is not turned in soon. I have thirteen years yet to go at La Maison Centrale, John."

"I have eighteen," John said. "I'll do my best. Au revoir, Jean-Pierre."

**E**ARLY afternoon he appeared, wearing shorts and half sleeves, on the tiny private beach of the Hotel Midi, only a few hundred yards from Bellini and the Hotel Napoléon but in a different world. The Midi was popular with Americans, as the Napoléon was not. There were dozens of guests of Mr. Burns's approximate age and comfortable financial status. Among them he was as inconspicuous as one fish in a school. Paul or Oriol might recognize him, but Paul, at last report, was still in Switzerland, and a small-town commissaire like Oriol had no business to bring him to the Hotel Midi. As for the Sûreté, John had confidence in Jean-Pierre's camouflage.

There had been no further thefts reported in the newspapers, and no mention of his disappearance from the villa. It made him uneasy at first, but he concluded that Oriol was protecting his own skin. A commissaire who knew Le Chat's face well would be a great help to the Sûreté, but he would first have to confess that he had had Le Chat in his hands and let him go free. The consequences would be, at the least, the loss of his position. John counted on Oriol's peasant caution to keep him from the confession. It left him free to think about the capture of the thief rather than his own danger.

"He'll move either here in Cannes or in Nice, next," he told Bellini. "At least I would, and I've got to figure he'll operate the same way if the scheme is going to work. He's covered Menton, Cap Ferrat, Antibes, Monte Carlo, and Monaco to

date. There are still other possibilities, but the wealthiest people come to Nice and Cannes, and the season will be over soon. He won't pass up the two most popular resorts on the Côte."

"Good. Good." Bellini beamed approvingly. "I am glad to hear you speak so confidently. Which will he choose first?"

"I don't know. Since I'm here in Cannes I may as well stay here and wait for him. I've already picked one prospect that would be irresistible to me."

"Who?"

"Maude Stevens, an American widow. She's here for the season with her daughter, Francie, and a red-leather jewel case. I've satisfied myself about the quality of the stones she wears, and I know they're insured by Bonds of London. Can you get me the insurance valuation through your connections?"

"I'll have it tomorrow. Anything else?"

"No. Unless—" He stopped.

Bellini said curiously, "Unless what?"

"Unless you can find out why a woman who owns an entire oil field and who strings diamonds on herself as if they were beads has a daughter who never wears jewelry of any kind. Not even a bracelet."

"To attract attention, undoubtedly. She seems to have attracted you."

"She has," John admitted. "I don't understand her."

"And what you don't understand worries you. Is that it?"

"Not exactly. Almost."

He would have said rather that Francie Stevens puzzled him. Her failure to ornament her ears and throat and fingers was not due to modesty on her part, because her street clothes, like her bathing suits, were always striking, intended to catch the eye. He did not think, as Bellini did, that she avoided jewelry for the same reason, but it was too clearly a deliberate gesture of some kind to be overlooked. The summer season on the Côte offered every woman an opportunity to make a display of whatever personal ornaments she owned. Francie was noticeable because she displayed nothing, neither rings nor earrings nor a ten-cent-store brooch. This peculiarity, together with an obvious lack of interest in most of the things that brought other summer visitors to the Côte, such as gambling, was strange. Otherwise she was another pretty girl, with a good figure and the Irish attractiveness that goes with blue eyes, a fair skin, and dark hair.

The mother was no puzzle. She was in her early fifties, friendly, plump, nice looking, and a plunger at roulette. John spent an evening standing behind her chair at the Palm Beach casino, leaning

forward to make small bets on red or black whenever she placed her own bets, so he could look unobtrusively at her rings. He won consistently. Mrs. Stevens, a loser until then, began to cap his counters with her own larger bets, finally up to the table limit of a hundred thousand francs. She won nearly two million francs. They were great friends before the luck changed.

The next evening she hailed him in the hotel lounge from a table where she sat with Francie and one of the string of admirers Francie always had with her. "Lucky! Lucky Burns! Come over here! I want to buy you a drink."

He had to join them. Introducing him, she said, "This is the man I was telling you about, Francie. Mr. Burns, my daughter Francie, this is Leon, sit down, Lucky, we're all in the family, what will you drink? Look!"

She showed him a pin she was wearing. It was a small diamond dog with emerald eyes. He judged that it represented an investment of five or six thousand dollars.

She said proudly, "Bought it this morning, at Cartier's. All your doing, Lucky." "I should have let you make my bets for me. I was too timid."

"You never accumulate if you don't speculate, as they say in the oil racket."

John laughed, "In the insurance business, we say, Never bet against the percentage. But it's the wrong theory for roulette."

"You an insurance man? That's fine. You can insure the dog for me. Bonds will be mad, but I've got to do something to pay you for bringing me good luck."

He declined the business on the grounds that he was vacationing. He added his opinion that Bonds of London was certainly one of the most reliable insurance underwriters in the world, and from that point the conversation turned, without his help, to the jewel robberies. As a result, he learned that Maude Stevens kept her jewel case in the hotel safe except when she took it out to make her selection of stones to wear for the evening.

He did not learn why Francie never wore jewelry. Francie did not talk about herself, or much about anything else. She was there at the table, well-mannered, attractive, smiling when a smile was necessary, and remote.

**H**E TRIED to avoid them after that. But while Francie never did more than exchange a casual greeting with him when they met, he could not escape Maude Stevens. His search for other potential victims of the thief took him

nighly to the nearby casinos, at Palm Beach and Antibes and Juan-les-Pins, where jewels glittered the most brilliantly. Afterward came the drudgery of learning names, and who occupied what summer villa, their household habits, when the servants went to bed and what dogs barked during the night, how shadows fell against a window. This work occupied him regularly from one or two in the morning until dawn. He needed the earlier hours to make his unobtrusive appraisals under the bright lights of the gambling tables, and whenever Maude Stevens caught sight of him, which happened often, she would welcome him with cries of, "Lucky! Lucky Burns! Come over here! This wheel is ruining me!" He could never escape after that, and she attracted so much attention that he could not remain inconspicuous. He finally went to Bellini for help.

Bellini giggled, incredulously. "You want a what?"

"A girl," John said. "A poule, if you can't do better. Mrs. Stevens won't leave me alone. I need someone to go around with me and keep her off."

"I see," Bellini nodded. "Someone young and pretty, of course."

"It doesn't matter, as long as she speaks English. Mr. Burns isn't supposed to understand French."

"I have just the girl for you. And not a poule, either."

He wrote a note on the back of a business card, which John carried to La Plage Nautique, one of several small public beaches along La Croisette, where he was to ask for Danielle. He found the signboard of the beach without trouble, and saw from it that the concessionaire and *professeur de natation* at the beach was named Claude. The signboard made no reference to anyone named Danielle. But Bellini had sent other Americans there with his card, and while John stood snapping the square of pasteboard against his finger, a girl in a Bikini bathing suit came up to him, smiling.

"I am Danielle, m'sieu. Do you want to talk with me, or Claude?"

He gave her the card, thinking, Damn Bellini. I can't use this child.

She was nineteen or twenty, small, blonde, and as pretty as a flower. Her figure was still the figure of a young girl, slim and small-breasted. She could have been Mr. Burns's daughter, the youngest of three or four.

But he told her what he wanted, feeling like a fool as he explained that he was alone in Cannes, didn't speak the language, felt out of place without a companion in the casinos, and would pay well for what she could be sure was strictly a business arrangement. While they were talking the *professeur de natation* joined them, grinning professionally at a prospective customer.

Danielle introduced him. John said, "Tell him I don't speak French, but that I'm pleased to meet him."

Danielle translated, and explained what John wanted of her. Claude's reaction was so freely expressed that John had trouble pretending not to understand.

Claude said, "Tell the fat type to go break his head. I'm not going to have him massaging your legs every night under a table."

"They're my legs, not yours. And it's easy money."

"Naturally," Claude shrugged expressively. "Well, they're your legs, as you

say. But slap his face from time to time, or I'll do it myself."

He strutted away. He was a small man, hardly taller than Danielle, but muscled like a weight-lifter. Smooth ropes rippled in his brown back above the swimming trunks. John thought idly, An excellent climber, and then, with a stir of excitement, Thief?

The excitement did not last. He knew it was ridiculous to suspect a man only because of overdeveloped arm and shoulder muscles. Besides, he did not think Claude was clever enough to be a thief. Not a thief like the man he had to trap.

For several nights Danielle and he had dinner together before going on to the casinos. He would buy her a handful of counters when he bought his own, and she liked to play, but she insisted on turning everything back to him whenever she won. Actually she cost him very little, and she was a pleasant companion to have. As he had hoped, Maude Stevens left him alone, except for an occasional friendly shout across the roulette table. He continued to look for his baits.

While Francie's mother lost interest, Francie's own interest increased. He caught her eyeing Danielle speculatively one night when they had dinner at a boite where Francie was also dining with one of her several admirers. The next evening when he came down to the lounge where Danielle waited for him, he found her talking with Francie.

Francie said hello, and they exchanged a few words about the weather before she left. Afterward, while he and Danielle were dining, he asked her what she and Francie had been talking about.

"We were only sparring," Danielle said. "She had to strike up an acquaintance and make the preliminary openings before she could get around to what really interested her."

"What was that?"

"You."

JOHN LAUGHED. "You don't miss much, do you, Danielle?"

"No," She smiled. "I couldn't have told her anything anyway. Could I?"

He passed the opening deliberately, and turned the conversation.

Danielle talked freely about herself when he prompted her. She had learned English in the French schools, and improved it while working as seasonal lady's maid, governess, or companion-of-the-evening for English and American visitors to the Côte, jobs Bellini got for her. Between times she worked for Claude at La Plage Nautique. Her main value to him was her attractive appearance in a Bikini, which helped bring male customers to the concession.

She was frank about it. John said, "I should think Claude might resent having his customers stare at you."

"He has nothing to resent. I only work for him."

"I thought he acted—proprietary, the day I first talked to you."

"Because he swelled his muscles at you?" She laughed. "Those muscles! They're all he has. Nothing upstairs."

"There's nothing between you, then?"

She said seriously, "There will never be anything between me and any man who has neither money nor brains. Mr. Burns. We Frenchwomen have learned to be practical about such things."

"It's an honest answer. Here's to you, Danielle."

"Here's to you, Mr. Burns."

He was lifting his wine glass for the toast when he saw Paul.

He took a mouthful of wine and put the glass down carefully. Paul sat alone, facing them at a table on the far side of the restaurant. In the dim light, John could not see Paul's eyes, but something about the way Paul held his head told him that Paul's attention had been attracted. John turned his back, called the waiter, paid his check, and left with Danielle. Paul did not follow them.

But the narrow escape disturbed him. He told Danielle that he had changed his mind about going to the casino that evening, and when she mentioned another job that Bellini had offered her, as personal maid to the wife of a British knight then staying at the Midi, he welcomed the opportunity to suggest that she take it. It gave him the excuse he needed to finish with her. With Paul in the neighborhood, he could no longer safely visit the casinos and risk recognition in the bright lights of the gambling tables. He would have to prepare his traps with the baits he had already chosen.

There were three. Mrs. Stevens was the first and best. His second choice was the wife of a wealthy American, George Sanford, who owned a reconstructed castle, the Château Combe d'Or, on a hilltop overlooking Cannes. Mimi Sanford's magnificent emeralds were as famous as the gala parties she gave every season. The third bait was a Brazilian woman named Souza, whose husband applied the income from several coffee plantations partly to baccarat and partly to diamond and sapphire bracelets for his pretty wife. John had already explored the garden of the villa Souza rented for the summer, as well as the grounds of the Château Combe d'Or. He went again to Bellini for help.

"I'll want half a dozen men; strong, active, and handy with a skull cracker. Like Coco."

"Coco will cooperate. And Le Borgne, if you want him. I'll pick four others."

"Good. I'll talk to them this evening. Have them here at seven o'clock."

"The plan progresses, then?"

"I hope so. I'm ready, if he comes."

He did not tell Bellini about Paul because he did not want to talk or think further of his own danger. He went down to the beach determined to relax in his deck chair, put all thought of danger out of his mind, stop thinking entirely until seven o'clock came. But he had barely settled himself when Francie Stevens, in a startling zebra-striped bathing suit, waded from the sea and calmly sat down on the sand near him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Burns," she said, smiling up at him.

He had never seen her smile like that. It gave her face animation, a vitality that had been lacking until then. She looked like a girl in love, or someone facing immediate and exciting danger.

She said, "I want to ask you a question, Mr. Burns. It's rather personal. You won't mind, will you?"

He shook his head, feeling his muscles tense and the hair rise on the back of his neck, half sensing what was to come. She said, "You're Le Chat, aren't you?"

GOOD MUSCULAR control had always been his most valuable asset. He kept his face blank. "I'm what?"

"Oh, you don't have to pretend with me. I'm not going to give you away. It's thrilling, knowing a famous jewel thief.

I like thrills." She poured sand over her toenails. "You don't know how dull it is, following Mother from one resort to another all year round, protecting her from phony counts who try to marry her and phony dukes who borrow money and forget to pay it back. She's much too friendly for a woman with her money. And those diamonds!" She shook her head. "I don't wonder they caught your eye."

He managed a chuckle. She said sharply, "Stop acting like Mr. Burns. I told you that you don't have to pretend with me."

"Whom shall I act like?"

"Yourself, John. That's your real name, isn't it?"

"I prefer Jack."

"I prefer John. You can call me Francie."

"All right, Francie."

There was nothing he could do but mark time, wait to see how much she knew or had guessed. She went on conversationally, "Naturally I have to look out for Mother all the time. When I read about the—you—in the newspapers, I was sure you'd be around sooner or later. At first I was expecting somebody tall and athletic and muscular, but then I realized that one solitary man couldn't possibly do all those tricks you're supposed to do, planning everything so carefully and climbing drainpipes and things. It pointed too clearly to a superman. So I knew you wouldn't be a superman at all, just somebody ordinary like Mr. Burns. And there was Mr. Burns, right under my nose."

"Very logical. If I'm not a superman, how do I—"

"You're a gang. You're the front man—and the brains, of course."

"Thank you. Have you identified any of my helpers?"

"Only one, so far. The cute French girl; Danielle, isn't it?"

John's laugh was not forced, this time. He said, "How do I use her?"

"By planting her as a maid with Lady Kerry, as you did this morning. I thought you would probably try Mother first, but of course she's never had a personal maid, and inside help is always useful, isn't it? What are the famous Kerry jewels worth?"

"As far as I know, nothing."

It was true. Every thief in Europe knew that the once-valuable Kerry originals had been sold, one by one, to bolster the sagging family fortunes. What remained were worthless copies.

He said, "I don't suppose you'd believe that I never met Danielle until a few days ago."

"Certainly not. You don't think I'd talk to you like this if I weren't certain that you are—who you are, do you?"

"Unless your womanly intuition is infallible—"

"My womanly intuition told me there was something strange about an insurance man who declined business and praised a competitor. I was engaged to an insurance man once, so I know better. I cabled him in New York, and asked him to check up on you." She smiled wickedly. "You don't exist, Mr. Jack Burns of New York City. So?"

He stretched. It gave him a chance to swallow, ease his tight throat muscles. He said, "Your boyfriend could have made a mistake. But assuming, for the moment, that he didn't, what now?"

She frowned. "I'm not sure. It depends on how far you've gone with your plans for Lady Kerry. Personally, I'd suggest that you rob Mother first. Her jewels are worth seventy-two thousand five hundred dollars, according to the insurance policy."

He thought he had misunderstood what she was saying. But she went on. "You can't have the diamond dog, of course, because it isn't insured yet and she wouldn't get her money back. But the rest is more than enough, and with me in the same suite to leave my door open, it will be easy. She's careless about taking the jewel case back to the hotel safe when she comes in late." Francie stood up, brushing the sand from her bare legs. "We'll have to work out the details later. I'm going to finish my swim now. Meet me in the lounge at eight o'clock, and we'll conspire over a drink."

"I'm afraid I can't conspire tonight, Francie. Any other time—"

"You'd better, if you know what's good for you. Eight o'clock sharp, John."

She smiled again, turned, took a few running steps, made a clean dive into the shallows, and swam away.

HE WENT immediately to the Hotel Napoléon. Climbing the last few stairs to the mezzanine, he saw Bellini in the doorway of his office talking to a stranger, an elderly man with a fierce guardsman's mustache. He went on by the two men without turning his head, but Bellini called him back.

"Ah, Mr. Burns! Can you spare a moment? I have the car you wanted to rent. If you will step into my office—but excuse me! Have you gentlemen met? Mr. Paige, Mr. Burns."

They shook hands. John said, "The car can wait, if you're busy."

"Not on my account." Mr. Paige twisted his mustache tip. "Just leaving. Counting

on you to do your best for us, Bellini. Good-by. Pleasure meeting you, Mr. Burns."

He jerked his head abruptly at John and walked away, twisting the other mustache tip.

IN NAME the office, Bellini giggled helplessly for a minute. When he could speak, he said, "Mr. Paige wants to get in touch with Le Chat. Mr. Paige, meet Mr. Burns."

"Who is he? Scotland Yard?"

"An agent for Bonds. He wants to make an offer for the stolen stones before they're broken up and fenced off."

"How did he come to you?"

Bellini shrugged his good shoulder.

"My connections are known in the trade. Unfortunately, as I told him, they are useless in this case. I have made inquiries in Marseilles, in Lyons, in Paris, everywhere. Not a single stone has yet been offered. I think this thief may be even more clever than you were, John."

"I'm beginning to believe it myself. I've slipped."

He told Bellini of the bombshell Francie had exploded in his face. For once, Bellini did not laugh.

"We can still get you out, if she does not talk immediately," he said. "Tonight I will send you back to Marseilles—"

"I can't run, Bellini. That would certainly make her talk. I've got to stay and play her game, keep her interested until the traps have a chance to work."

"She can betray you with a single word, John."

"She will, if I don't meet her at eight o'clock. There's no use talking about it. I'm in, and I can't get out. Have you been in touch with Coco and Le Borgne and the others?"

"They'll be here in an hour. If they're on time."

They were on time, arriving on one within five minutes of the hour. Coco and one-eyed Le Borgne were both stouter and grayer than they had been in the maquis. The other men were strangers to him.

Coco did not recognize him. Le Borgne, after one sharp surprised glance, looked at the ceiling and whistled soundlessly.

John said, "Is the camouflage so bad, One Eye?"

Le Borgne said, "The camouflage is very good. But with only one eye, I have to look at the picture, not the frame, as others do."

Coco growled, "What are you talking about?"

"Le Chat, bonehead."

Bellini chuckled. John saw recognition come into Coco's face. He said



doubtfully, "No!" then, "Yes!" and took John by both arms. "Le Chat. My old boche-strangler! What a pleasure!"

Another man, young and dark and with an evil gypsy face, said viciously, "Le Chat is no pleasure to me! The fics had me in the tank for two days because he came into my neighborhood. I say cut his—"

Before the gypsy could finish, Coco had whirled his hand plunging toward the pocket where he kept his *casse-tête*. The gypsy reached as quickly inside his own coat, but before either man could pull a weapon Bellini said mildly, "That will do. Le Chat has the floor. Be quiet, and listen."

No one ever argued with Bellini. They listened.

JOHN TOLD them of the other thief, and of his own plan; what he had done; what he hoped to do. He showed them the sketches of the grounds around the Souza villa and the Château Combe d'Or; how they could approach unseen; where to hide; where to expect an entry. He said, "Both women wear their jewels when they go out, so if he makes an attempt he will do it when they are at home and asleep. I don't know when he will come, or if he will come at all. If he does, you have to be ready and waiting. Quiet him down as quickly as possible, and bring him here. Bellini will take care of the rest."

He gave them other instructions. It was the gypsy who said impatiently, "It's clear enough. What do we get out of it?"

He was not prepared for the question. He had counted so much on the common interests of Coco and Le Borgne and himself that he had not thought about the other men. While he hesitated, Bellini said, "He has stolen a hundred million francs' worth of jewelry, mostly insured per Bonds. Bonds man offers twenty per cent for the recovery, no questions asked. It will make a nice melon to cut for those who participate in the capture."

Several men nodded. The gypsy said grudgingly, "All right. When do we start?"

John said, "Tonight."

He divided them into two groups: Coco, the gypsy, and a quiet man named Michel to cover the Souza villa. Le Borgne and the others for the château. His final warning was, "It will be like the maquis again; patience, caution, concealment. If a chance comes and you miss it, we won't get another. That's all."

The gypsy said, "That isn't all. What are you going to be doing while we squat all night every night under a bush, eh?"

Coco said pleadingly, "Let me crack him, John. Just one."

"Be quiet, Coco. I have my own trap to watch. I expect him to come to me first, if he comes. In that case, all you have to do is share the reward."

"I'd like it that way," the gypsy said, grinning.

Mrs. Stevens was the bait for John's personal trap.

He had been watching the trap for four nights. She ordinarily came in from the casinos around one or two in the morning, Francie never later and often earlier. According to John's timing, they were both sound asleep by three o'clock, leaving an hour or an hour and a half before the early summer dawn for a thief to make an attempt at the red-leather case that remained in Mrs. Stevens' room only when she slept. By complaining to the

hotel desk about noisy neighbors, he had arranged a change of rooms to one in which the bathroom window opened into the same narrow light shaft as the bathroom window of the Stevens suite, on the floor above.

The light shaft offered the only possible access to the suite, short of a precarious climb across the brightly lighted front of the hotel or a forced entry through one of two doors protected by an inner bolt. The first was too risky, the second a practical impossibility. John was confident that if an attempt were made it would be by way of the light shaft, and that he could bottle his man whether the thief came from above or below. But the whole success of the trap depended on the faithfulness of his watch during the important hours before dawn, and it was a bad blow when, keeping his appointment with Francie at eight o'clock, he learned that her invitation to conspire over a drink was in fact an invitation to act as her escort for the entire evening.

"You're taking me to Monte Carlo," she said. "I want to gamble."

"Why the sudden urge? And why Monte Carlo? You don't have to go that far."

"I want to go to Monte Carlo. You should know better than to argue with me, John. Think of all I can do for you." He did know better than to argue with her. She was as unpredictable as a child.

They drove to Monte Carlo in a car that was ostensibly for public hire but was actually Bellini's own car, driven by one of his men. John evolved, and discarded, several impracticable plans to handle the drive, kidnap Francie if she showed signs of intending to gamble later than one o'clock. But the problem was solved for him in another way when during the drive, Francie again brought up the subject of her mother's jewels and said, almost as if she knew what was in his mind, "You couldn't steal them tonight anyway. They're in the safe until she gets home, and she's going to stay out at least until breakfast working on a long-distance roulette system somebody told her about. All you could get would be what she's wearing. And this."

"This" was a magnificent necklace of diamonds and rubies that she wore. John had seen it before, on her mother's throat. He did not know why Francie, against her habit, had chosen that evening to wear jewelry. He asked her.

She took a long time to answer. She said at last, abruptly, "Because you're an honest thief. I have no illusions about you."

"I don't think I understand."

"You would if you could see the vultures Mother attracts with her diamonds wherever she goes. I've got so I distrust the slightest friendly gesture from a stranger toward her. I'm always thinking, 'Is he only after her rings, or does he hope to marry seventeen oil wells?'" She laughed bitterly. "It's a nasty state of mind, don't you think?"

"So you keep from raising doubts about yourself in your own mind by offering no diverting attractions, such as a string of beads. Is that it?"

"I suppose it's silly, but it's the way I feel. Let's talk about something else, John. Let's forget that I'm going to inherit the seventeen oil wells as well as the jewels, and that you're a thief. Let's just have a good time."

They did have a good time, against his expectations. They played roulette and

baccarat, danced, drank champagne, and enjoyed themselves so thoroughly that he forgot, for once, the prison sentence hanging over his head and the difficult job he had yet to accomplish. During the course of a dance they bumped into George and Mimi Sanford, slightly drunk and very gay. The Sanfords greeted Francie as an old friend and were delighted to meet Mr. Burns. They both reminded Francie, in a breath, that she and her mother were expected to attend the gala that would take place at the Combe d'Or the following weekend, and then danced away. Mimi Sanford's famous emeralds sparkled at her throat, safer there than they would have been at the chateau where Le Borgne and his men kept their patient guard. If John could have seen the Brazilian woman's sapphire and diamond bracelets glittering as publicly, and as safely, he would have had not a care on his mind. For the night, he was really Mr. Burns, enjoying a vacation.

They did not get back to the hotel until bright daylight and until he left Francie at the door of his room. Both of them had lived up to their agreement not to talk about jewels, thievery, or oil wells. It was Francie who broke the agreement. "Shall I get you an invitation to Mimi Sanford's gala?" she asked. "Her parties are famous. So are her guests, and they all compete with each other to see who can display the most jewels."

"I'd almost forgotten that I'm a thief. No invitation, thanks. Your conscience would hurt if I made off with the emeralds. Take good care of your mother's necklace, Francie. I'd hate to have anyone else get it."

"I will." She touched it lightly. "This is the first time I've ever worn a necklace without hating it. I'm glad you are a thief, John."

"I'm glad we had such a good time. Good night. I mean good morning."

He went to his room feeling oddly contented. He was beginning to like Francie, although he felt sorry for her. He thought it was unfortunate that she could not shed the burden of the seventeen oil wells as easily as he discarded Mr. Burns when he took off the disguising body harness and padded shoes. He lay down on the bed, stretched, yawned, and was nearly asleep when the thin, frightened screaming began on the floor above.

It was Maude Stevens' voice. Over and over again, endlessly, she screamed, "My jewels! My jewels! My jewels!"

HE DRESSED quickly, assuming the protection of his camouflage against eventualities. Before he finished, the screaming had stopped. There were other sounds now, shouted questions, the slam of a door, the whine of the elevator.

He hesitated only momentarily before running for the stairs that led to the floor above. It would be out of character for Mr. Burns not to respond to screams from the Stevens suite, since he had left Francie there only a few minutes before. He did not stop to wonder how he had blundered, how the thief had brought it off. It was more important to preserve his characterization and avoid another blunder. He hurried up the stairs and past several doors where half-dressed hotel guests questioned each other.

Mrs. Stevens' door was closed. Mr. Paige, the Bonds agent, was knocking at the panel.

Mr. Paige, like John, was fully dressed.

Unlike John, he was neatly shaved as well. He gave no sign of excitement except to twist his mustache points nervously between raps at the door.

John said, "What is it?"  
"A theft, I think." Mr. Paige rapped again. "Don't know, for sure. Lady screaming about her jewels. Oh, you're Mr.—"

"Burns. We met at Bellini's office."  
"Quite. Quite." Mr. Paige added, too casually, "Friend of Mrs. Stevens?"

"I just brought her daughter home from Monte Carlo ten minutes ago."  
"I see. Of course you would—"

The lock clicked. The door opened. Francie stood there, her face white and, John thought, angry.

Mr. Paige produced a leather folder, letting Francie see the identification card and photograph it contained.

"Bonds, of London," he said politely. "Hear the screaming, and thought I'd better investigate. We carry the insurance on your mother's jewelry, you know."

"You've suffered a loss, then. It's been stolen."

"I suspected as much." Mr. Paige looked briefly at the sparkling necklace she still wore. "May I come in?"

She stepped aside to let him by. When John hesitated, she beckoned him in with a quick demanding gesture, then closed the door and locked it.

Mrs. Stevens lay on her bed in a rumpled nightgown, her hands over her eyes, making small, tragic moaning sounds. Mr. Paige paid no attention to her, but went at once to the jewel case, which stood open on a commode, then to the open window. While his back was turned, Francie beckoned again to John.

He followed her through the connecting bathroom into her room beyond. The bathroom window opening into the light shaft was wide open. It might mean something, or nothing.

**I**N HER OWN room, Francie closed the door and put her back to it.

"Very neatly done, Mr. Burns," she said coolly. "You didn't need my help after all, did you?"

"That's ridiculous, Francie. I was with you all the time. Even if I had help, you told me yourself that she'd be out all night and that the jewels would be in the safe. I don't know what brought her home earlier than you expected, but—"

"The system didn't work. She lost all her money."

"I didn't know that. How could I possibly have arranged—"

She interrupted him angrily. "I don't know what you arranged or how you did

it or who stole them, except that you were behind it. I told you you couldn't have the diamond dog until it was insured, but you took it anyway. Now I want it back."

"I haven't got it."

"Find it. I'll give you until six o'clock this evening."

"And if I don't?"  
Her eyes flashed. She said, "Don't forget your alibi! It's good only as long as I don't talk."

"Francie, listen to me. I—"

He stopped. There were noises in the bathroom. From behind the door Mr. Paige's voice said, "Miss Stevens! I say. May I see you for a moment?"

"Just a minute, please." She lowered her voice again. "I've already phoned the desk and told them to send for the police. You'd better be out of here before they arrive. They won't be curious about you as long as I protect you, and I won't talk before six o'clock. You can find me on the beach this afternoon until then."

"I'll tell you now, I can't do it. If you'll be sensible—"

"I'm just beginning to be sensible. It wasn't clever of you to play your game with me last night. It will be less clever of you to be late this afternoon. Go out that way."

She motioned to the door that led to the hall.

Any further argument with her in her angry state of mind was useless. He left.

**A** SMALL crowd of hotel guests, mostly half-dressed, had gathered in the hallway. He went in the other direction, toward the elevator, and when he saw that the elevator was coming up the shaft, continued on down the stairway. He passed through the lobby without haste, through the revolving doors, and to the promenade outside, where he stopped to light a cigarette.

It gave him an opportunity to look both ways up and down the promenade, which was nearly deserted at that early hour. The police were not yet in sight. Directly across the promenade from the hotel, and facing it, stood Paul.

Paul's big, solidly built figure was unmistakable. John took two puffs at the cigarette, weighing relative risks, then set off along his side of the promenade. He let his shoulders sag and his stomach push forward, but it was useless. Paul came across the promenade and fell in step with him.

Paul said, "Mr. Jack Burns?"

"That's my name." He did not break his stride.

"Mine is Paul du Pré. Can you spare me a few minutes?"

"If you don't mind walking. I have an appointment."

"Not at all."

They continued down the promenade, side by side. A dusty Citroën with a buggy-whip radio aerial mounted on one rear fender made a quick turn out of a side street and hummed past them. John did not turn, but Paul looked back.

The Citroën stopped in front of the Midi. Several men in plain clothes got out and hurried into the hotel.

"That was the Sûreté," Paul said. "Are they after you, John?"

"They think so."  
"Another theft?"

"Yes."  
"They walked on for half a minute in silence. Paul said, "You're safe enough, for the moment. Let's sit down and talk."

**T**HEY SAT on one of the benches that lined the promenade. Paul said, "Is that a false stomach you're wearing?"

"False stomach, padded shoes, hair dye, false eyebrows, and forged passport. What do you want with me, Paul?"

"Not a great deal. Who was the girl with you the night you ran from me?"

John's reaction was one of anger. He said, "Did you hunt me down so I could introduce you to a girl?"

"No. No." Paul made an apologetic gesture. "I shouldn't have asked it that way. But I've been thinking so much about her. I haven't even been able to sleep. That's why I was here so early this morning. I had you traced from the restaurant because I had to ask you about her. Didn't you notice how much she looked like Lisa?"

John's anger went away. He knew how deeply Paul had been hurt by Lisa's death. He said, "A little."

"They could be twins. Not as Lisa was when you knew her, when she was dying, but as she was when I married her. John, I must meet the girl."

"It shouldn't be hard. She's working temporarily as a maid for Lady Kerry, at the hotel, but ordinarily she's at La Plage Nautique most of the day. You can see the signboard from here." He added, "You know there can't be two Lisas, Paul."

"I know. I thought that if I could talk to her, see her as she really is, I might be able to get her out of my mind." Paul passed his hand over his eyes. "I've got to do something about it. What's her name?"

"Danielle. That's all I know."

"She's—nothing to you?"

"Nothing at all, professionally or personally. If that's all you want with me, I still have an appointment."

Paul straightened his shoulders and

tried to smile. "I'm not really as thoughtful as you think I am, John. What can I do to help you?"

"Nothing, except tell me how long you have known who I am."

"Le Chat, you mean? Three years. Oriol let it slip."

"What is he doing now?"

"Nothing. He says nothing, won't discuss your disappearance, and won't let his men talk about it. But you made a bad enemy when you went back on your word to him."

"You're certain I went back on my word?"

Paul nodded in the direction of the hotel. "It's pretty obvious, isn't it? But I didn't come to preach, John. I want to help you. If it's money you're after, I have plenty, more than I can spend."

"I don't need money."

"Why do you steal, then? It can't be just for the thrill. And sooner or later, as clever as you are, you're bound to slip. When that time comes—"

"When that time comes, you can visit me in prison and say 'I told you so.'" John stood up. "Leave me alone, Paul. Forget you ever knew me. Good-by."

He had not gone a dozen steps before he regretted the abrupt cruelty of his last words. They had been provoked by Paul's assumption that, because a thief was operating again on the Côte, it had to be he. But it was the natural assumption, one that everyone else had made. Paul was no different from the others, except that he was still a friend. Paul would not betray him, whatever he thought. Although he knew he should have tried to tell Paul the truth, it was his instinct, his training, to confide in no one, keep his own counsel, go his own way alone. He had never learned to have confidence in anyone except himself. And Bellini.

**B**ELLINI, in rumpled pajamas, was talking on the telephone when John arrived. Bellini waved to a chair, and continued to listen to the tinny crackle of sound coming from the telephone receiver. From one or two questions he asked, John knew he was getting a report of the robbery through his pipelines.

He hung up at last, chuckling merrily. "So the first trap failed," he said. "At least our reasoning is sound. He's here in Cannes, and we anticipated the right theft. Let's hope we're as logical about the others. What happened to you?"

John explained, and told of the hopeless position in which he now found himself because of Francis's demand. He said, "I have until six o'clock to produce a five-thousand-dollar diamond-and-emerald dog."

"Would there be a duplicate somewhere? If so, the money is a small matter. Even a cash settlement, perhaps."

"Cartier's doesn't make more than one of a kind. And the money wouldn't satisfy her. She wants the dog itself. It's become a personal issue between us."

"Have you considered telling her the truth?"

"As a last resort, yes. I'd rather think of something else."

"What are your objections to it?"

"The distrustful thief's mind, I suppose. She has only me to give away, now. She'll have us all on a leash if I tell her; you, Coco, Le Borgne, Jean-Pierre, the others."

"We're all in it together, John. Don't let that hold you back."

"I still have until six o'clock to think about it," John gestured at the telephone. "What did you learn? Did he go up the light well, or down?"

"Down. No clues except a hole cut in the skylight at the top, and signs where a rope had been fastened. He came down the rope, in through the bathroom window, cut around the lock of the jewel case, and climbed back up the rope while Mrs. Stevens snored. There are several ways off the roof. The daughter discovered the theft when she went into her mother's room to replace the necklace she had been wearing. That's all, except that our friend Mr. Paige is taking an active interest in the theft and does not get along with Commissaire Divisionnaire Lepic, who is handling the investigation for the Sûreté. I gather that Lepic seems much too unperturbed by the theft for Mr. Paige's satisfaction. What this calm attitude signifies, I cannot guess."

**H**E MAY be making the same kind of plans we are. I wish him luck. Anything else?"

"So far, no."

"Then tell me if any of the people for whom Danielle has worked at one time or another were ever robbed."

Bellini blinked. "Elaborate, please."

"It's an idea I've had since Francis accused me of heading a gang. Suppose she's right, in effect. Suppose it's not a single thief, but two, or an organization. Claude, the swimming professor, has no brains, but he can climb. Danielle can't climb, but she has brains. And working, as she does, from the inside, she can spot the stones, get the theft all set up for Claude—"

"I know his pick on poor Claude, John? I know him well. In fact, since I own the concession at La Plage Nautique, I am his employer," Bellini chuckled. "Why not any of many equally muscular professeurs? Or, for that matter, anybody in the south of France able to climb a rope?"

"Because Claude has Danielle to think for him. The others don't."

Bellini said keenly, "You are impressed by Danielle?"

"I am. She has a good head, and a state of mind that reminds me of my own when I was her age. It's only an idea, but before I write her and Claude off, what about thefts from her employers?"

"There have been none. I assure you that I would have investigated myself had anything like that occurred. For another thing, to my own certain knowledge Claude could not have performed last night's robbery. He was, and will remain until I post the necessary forfeit, in jail."

"What happened?"

Bellini shrugged his good shoulder. "Love, jealousy, wine, and bad temper. He quarreled with Danielle about her job with Lady Kerry—whose jewels, incidentally, are worthless, as you know—then drowned his sorrows too freely and picked a fight with an agent."

"That's that, then." John yawned, and shook his head to clear it. "I've got to sleep. I haven't been in bed for twenty-four hours. Can I do it here? I don't want to go back to the hotel."

"In there" Bellini pointed to a door leading into the next room.

"Don't fail to wake me in time to get to the beach before six."

"Have I ever failed you, John?" Bellini asked amiably.

He shook John awake at four o'clock, with more news.

"Lepic has made a flat commitment to the press, promising an arrest soon. I don't like it, John. It is not like the Sûreté to promise what it cannot accomplish. He must arrest someone. If not you, or the thief, then almost certainly Le Borgne or Coco or Jean-Pierre. Or all three."

"You'll have to get word to them quickly. Tell them to dive back into the maquis and keep out of sight. Anything else?"

"Coco telephoned to complain about the gypsy. He smokes on the job, and does not have the training to be quiet for any length of time. Coco says to take him off before he gives the thing away."

"Pass the word to the gypsy that he's relieved. I'll take over his end myself, tonight—if I'm still around. If not, get someone else. Keep the traps covered, whatever happens. If they don't save me, they may save the rest of you."

Bellini put his hand strongly on John's arm. "I do not like it when you sound pessimistic, John. There can be no reason for the girl to sell you, once she knows the truth."

"I'm not pessimistic. I'm prepared. Lend me a razor. I've got to shave and doctor the fuzz on my temples, as long as Mr. Burns is still alive."

He found Francis on the beach. She was alone, reading. A chair next to hers was empty, and a beach bag stood open on the sand between the two chairs. When he set down, she looked at him briefly, then back at her book.

"Drop it in the beach bag," she said. "I haven't got it."

She marked her place and closed the book deliberately.

He said, "It's five o'clock. You promised me until six. Let me talk."

"You're wasting your time, Mr. Burns. I gave you your chance."

"Time is all I have left, Francis. Listen."

He began to talk quickly, before she could stand up and walk away. Because he had never told his story before, he did not have it formulated in his mind, and made one or two false starts before he found the real beginning.

His father and mother had been trapeze performers in a carnival that played the small New England towns. John had been trained from childhood as a trapeze flyer, wire walker, tumbler, and acrobat. He was barely of age when both parents died in a fall. He signed his first contract with a European circus touring France, and did not think to be curious about a European troupe that needed recruits from America until he arrived in Nice and found that the circus, a cooperative venture, had failed and disbanded. Stranded, broke, and jobless, he struck up an acquaintance with a friendly English couple, accepted an invitation to dinner at the villa they had rented for the summer, and returned later in the night to steal his hostess's pearls.

**I** GOT a hundred and twenty thousand francs for them, about four thousand dollars in 1936," he said. He had not looked at Francis since beginning to talk, but he knew he was holding her. So far. "It wasn't what I would have got after I learned the language and how to make my own valuations, but it gave me a start. I didn't know then that I could have gone to the nearest consul and borrowed

money to get home, and I'm not sure I would have gone to him even if I had known. The moral aspects of thievery never bothered me. The crooks of one kind or another who travel with carnivals, professional pickpockets and short-changers, had been normal people to me all my life. I was just more successful than my friends, not any different."

The Côte d'Azur had been glittering with wealth in those days, after the dead years of the Depression. He studied French, lived quietly, followed the gossip columns, and read all he could about jewels and their valuation. He planned each theft carefully, and flourished, as Le Chat, until the Paris receiver betrayed him. He told of his trial, prison, the maquis, the villa near Vence; about Paul, Lisa, and Oriol, the new series of thefts, and his escape to Bellini. When he finished explaining the plan they had concocted, he said, "I can prove enough of it to satisfy you. It's in your own interest to keep quiet and let us work it out. If we catch the thief, I'll see that your mother's jewelry is the first returned."

"I wish you hadn't thought it was necessary to bribe me, John."

He looked at her then, and knew he had won. He said apologetically, "I was talking myself out of eighteen years in prison, France. I thought a bribe might help."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I'm not used to trusting people."

"You trust Bellini, and your other friends."

"They're different. They're crooks themselves, my kind. You're not. You're like Paul—"

He was saved further explanation by the arrival on the beach of Mrs. Stevens, who was as cheerful as ever since receiving from Mr. Paige a promise of quick payment on the insurance policy. Her only resentment against the thief was because of the diamond-and-emerald dog, a complete loss.

"You'll have to help me win another, Lucky," she said, and added shrewdly, "whenever France can spare you, that is. What have you two been cooking up?"

"A scheme to win you a diamond-and-emerald dog," John said.

**A**T MIDNIGHT, he kept a rendezvous with Coco and Michel on the brushy hilltop above the Souza villa. Coco embraced him so hard his ribs cracked.

"I've been sweating silver five-franc pieces, wondering if you would make it," he whispered. "Bellini told me about the girl. She is on our side?"

"For the time being. Did Bellini tell you to keep under cover from now on?"

"Yes. Le Borgne and I set up house-keeping today in a cave back of Vallauris." Coco snickered. "Poor old Le Borgne. He has rheumatism already."

"We may all have it before we finish. Michel, cover the back of the house. You take the far side, Coco. Quietly."

They separated, creeping through the screening brush to their lookout points.

The villa they guarded was one of half a dozen widely separated houses at the extreme limit of the town. One road led up the hill, poorly illuminated by lights hanging from poles at intervals of two or three hundred meters. But one of the lights was opposite the front of the villa, effectively preventing a hidden approach from the road and leaving only three sides to cover. John's choice of entry would have been from the side he watched. There was shrubbery and shadow, and the climb to a second-story window was simple. Because there would be more than simple climbing to expect if the time ever came, he stripped to his shorts, hid the body harness and his clothing, and lay concealed in the warm grass at the lip of a culvert that passed under the roadway. Comfort was important for a long watch.

**T**HOM SOUZA came home at two-thirty. Souza drove an American car that was too large for the garage of the villa. He parked it under the portico at the front of the house. John heard the car doors slam, the grate of a key in a lock, a woman's low laugh. Lights went on in the house, burned briefly, and went out. Calculating the time it would take two tired gamblers to go to sleep, he thought, Three-thirty to four-thirty. I'd try it about four.

He moved hardly a muscle in his hiding place, watching the dim whiteness of the wall that would betray a climbing figure. Four o'clock came and passed. At dawn, a milk cart jangled up the road, and roosters began to crow. When the sun rose, the three watchers reassembled in the clump of brush on the hilltop.

"My bones ache," Coco grumbled. "When is the pig coming, John?"

"Tomorrow. The next night. Maybe never. All we can do is wait."

"Think of the reward," Michel said. "You can buy a mattress with your share, Coco."

"They'll give me one for nothing at La Maison Centrale, any time." Coco sighed.

"Ah, well. Till midnight tomorrow, John."

He slept all morning, and had the newspapers sent to his room when he awoke.

**Nice-Matin** asked editorially: **WHAT ARREST, AND HOW SOON, M. LEPIC?** The article that followed, reporting the latest

thief, was strong in its criticism of the ineptitude of the *Sûreté Nationale*, with an implication that the criticism would continue and increase until *Commissaire Divisionnaire Lepic* made good on his promise. There was no further news.

**J**OHAN'S hair was starting to show its natural color at the roots. He used the dye Jean-Pierre had given him and was shaving the light growth on his temples when the desk clerk called to say that Danielle was waiting to see him in the lounge. He wondered if she had heard, somehow, of the suspicions he had expressed to Bellini, and had come to challenge him.

But when he met her in the lounge she was as friendly and pleasant as ever, looking extraordinarily pretty in slacks and a slipover that emphasized the trim neatness of her figure.

Her costume, while attractive, did not seem appropriate for a lady's maid. He made some remark about it. She said, "I'm not working for Lady Kerr anymore. She left for Paris last night. The robbery frightened her away."

"Does she have jewelry?"

"Lots of it. Heirlooms, mostly, but they must be valuable. I went back to work for Claude this morning. Why was your friend Paul du Pré so anxious to meet me, Mr. Burns?"

Her complete candor startled him. He said, "My friend?"

"At least he said he was, and used your name to introduce himself. What is there about me that interests him so much?"

"Any young man would be interested in meeting you, Danielle. Particularly after seeing you on the beach."

She shook her head. "It wasn't just the Bikini. I'm used to that. He was different."

"What did he tell you about himself?"

"Nothing. He asked questions: Who was I, where did I come from, where was I born? He wasn't rude, just curious. I'm curious, too. Why is le comte du Pré de la Tour interested in me?"

He had not expected Paul to use Mr. Burns's name to Danielle, but there was no need to deny the acquaintance. He told her the truth about Paul and Lisa, and lied only in saying that he had met them both in the United States rather than in France. He said, "Paul saw us together one night, and was struck by your resemblance to Lisa. He couldn't get you out of his mind. That's all."

She was silent, thoughtful. He said, "You could end up as the countess, if you handle him right."

"Do you think I am completely cold-blooded, Mr. Burns?"

"No. But you said yourself that you

were practical about those things. Paul has everything you could ask for—money, brains, breeding. He was emotionally dependent on Lisa, and he needs someone to take her place. You're already there, in his mind. My advice is, stay there. You can give him what he needs, he can give you what you want. You might even fall in love with him, someday."

She smiled at that. "Thank you, Mr. Burns. It's what I wanted to know."

She stood up, holding out her hand. He took it, felt the firm clasp of her fingers, then watched her walk away. He thought he had never seen anyone lend such an air of grace to beach slacks and a sweater. Lady's maid or countess, she would always have an air.

Neither Francie nor her mother appeared all day. At midnight, he kept the rendezvous with Coco and Michel.

They took up the same positions as before. A mistral, the strong, warm breeze from the northwest, began to blow, first in gusts and then steadily, after he had settled himself in the mouth of the culvert. The wind made a rushing noise in the grass, whipped the shrubs in the garden of the villa, and made the hanging light in the road dance on its pole, so that shadows fled sideways and jumped quickly back into position. It was the kind of a night Le Chat, in his time, had liked best—moonless, with moving shadows to hide another moving shadow, a rush of wind and the rustle of leaves to hide other small sounds. The light on the pole made a creaking noise as it swung. Otherwise there was nothing to hear but the wind, nothing to see but flitting shadows and the lights of an occasional car that passed on the road.

Souza and his wife came in earlier than usual, at one o'clock. From the tone of their voices, and the angry way Souza slammed the door of his car when he left it under the portico, John guessed that their gambling had not been successful. He watched the house lights come on and go out again quickly. The Souzas were very weary. They would sleep soundly.

Fully an hour and a half after the last light had been extinguished, John heard Souza yell.

**T**HE FIRST shout was wordless, meaningless. He thought the Brazilian must be having a nightmare. He had seen nothing, heard nothing but the normal night sounds, and neither Coco nor Michel had come to report anything. Yet Souza was shouting, "A moi! A moi! Vite! Vite!" A light came on in one of the bedrooms. Souza gave another yell, this time of pain. A woman screamed. A third voice inside the house called urgently, warningly. A windowpane smashed, and a man's figure appeared suddenly on the roof of the portico, outlined by the glow of light in the road.

The rest followed in a matter of seconds. The man on the portico climbed a railing and jumped clumsily, disappearing from John's sight. Another man rushed out onto the portico, lifted a pistol, aimed carefully, and fired twice, three times. John's mind cried silently, Don't kill him! Don't kill him! He could not, from his position, see the fugitive. But he could hear the pad of running feet on the gravelled road, and he knew when the shooter scored a hit. The running footsteps ceased with the fourth shot.

He slid backward from his hiding place, ducked into the culvert, and crawled through mud and water to the far side

of the road. When he came out of the culvert at the far end, there was no sound except the tinny creak of the light on its pole, now almost directly over his head. There was a ditch at the roadside, and a screen of grass to hide him. When the man who had done the shooting came down to the road to look at the body of the man he had killed, John was close enough to hear him breathe.

He had never seen Commissaire Divisionnaire Lepic before, and did not recognize him. But the dead man lying in the road was the dark-faced gypsy, and he knew that the second trap had failed.

"Why are you so certain it was a failure?" Bellini asked, some hours later. "We caught a thief. Or Lepic did, which is better. Why could it not have been our man?"

"Because he didn't have the agility. It takes more than average strength and training to climb a hanging rope, and I doubt that he had either. I saw him jump from the portico. The thief we want is a trained acrobat, Bellini. There's no question about it in my mind. The gypsy wasn't our man."

"Lepic doesn't agree with you."

Bellini indicated the newspaper he had been reading. John said, "What he says for publication and what he believes need not necessarily be the same thing."

What Lepic had said for publication was, in effect, that he had accounted for the burglar who had been terrorizing the Côte. In spite of a generally accepted belief that the thief hunted by the Sûreté was John Robie, once known as Le Chat, he, Lepic, had never been convinced they were one and the same. Instead of wasting his time on a vain hunt for John Robie, therefore, he had, with the cooperation of M. and Mme Souza, prepared a trap, smuggling himself into the Souza villa each night from the back of Souza's car and remaining on guard inside the house.

When the thief took the bait, only M. Souza's bravery had interfered with the smooth working of the trap. Souza, grappling with the robber in Mme Souza's bedroom, had sustained a painful knife wound, and given the thief an opportunity to attempt an escape. Lepic had been forced to shoot. The bullet, intended to wound, had struck a vital spot, and the unfortunate criminal had paid for his crimes with his life.

"It didn't look to me as if he were shooting to wound," John said.

"If he believes the whole story himself," Bellini pointed out, "he must have wanted the gypsy alive, to talk. The whole thing will collapse unless he traces the stolen jewelry."

"It will collapse anyway, as soon as there is another theft."

"Still, even if he knows the truth himself, he has a breathing spell. He has escaped further criticism, for a time; he leaves the thief—meaning you—believing that all is safe for another operation; and he can remain in the field with the excuse that he is tracing the stolen stones. I think he may be cleverer than we know, John."

"If it's clever to make something out of a blunder. With two or three men on hand, he wouldn't have had to shoot."

"How did the gypsy hope to succeed, John? He knew you were watching the house."

"I told him how. He knew exactly when and where we would be on watch, and what we would look for. He did it the

other way. I suppose he got into the villa early, before we got there, and expected to leave after dawn, when we had gone. It might have worked, except for Lepic." John hunched his shoulders. "We have only the Sanford gala, now, and two days to prepare for it."

"Are we not already prepared? Le Borgne—"

"We'll have to take him off. Unless Lepic believes his own story, and I doubt that, he'll certainly cover the gala. That means Le Borgne and the others would risk stumbling over a fit if we left them on the job. We can't."

"Who will be on hand in the event the thief moves, then?"

"I will," John stood up. "As a guest."

**M**R. PAIGE noted that the commissaire divisionnaire's story, as reported in the papers, made no reference to the stolen jewelry. He arranged for an interview with Lepic and put a blunt question to him.

Lepic said, "I have not yet been able to trace any of the stones."

"It was unfortunate the thief died before he could talk."

Lepic answered woodenly, "No one regrets his death more than I."

"You're positive he was the man responsible for the other thefts?"

"I have no reason to change the story I gave to the reporters this morning."

Mr. Paige knew a quibble when he heard one, and he knew when he was wasting his time. But before he left, he said, "I think I should tell you, Commissioner, that even if your superiors are satisfied, mine will never be until the jewels are recovered. Bonds now has one hundred and twenty-two million francs involved, and we are not without influence in Paris. The jewels, Commissioner. The jewels."

Lepic cursed bitterly when Mr. Paige had gone. He was not swearing at Mr. Paige, but at the desire for personal glory that had betrayed him.

He knew he had not disposed of the thief. The trap had been intended to take Le Chat, alive. His first mistake had been in attempting to accomplish it single-handedly which would have brought the glory he wanted had it succeeded, but, failing, made it necessary for him to shoot. Still, a thief surprised in the act, dead or alive, was the symbol of success, and when he discovered that the man he had killed was not John Robie, it had been harder for him to discard the fact of success than to abandon his belief that John Robie was the man he wanted.

His statement to the newspapers had followed. Already the Ministry had telephoned from Paris to congratulate him, adding only a mild reprimand for the killing but urging the importance of a quick recovery of the stolen jewelry. Still hoping he might yet justify himself, he had failed to deny the truth of the story even then. But when Oriol, driven at last out of his shell, came to him to say flatly that he knew the dead man was not the thief, and promised to make a public disclosure of his own failure of duty, at any cost to himself, if the hunt for John Robie was not carried on, Lepic's hopes crashed.

He wasted no time damning Oriol for not coming forward sooner.

"We are both in the same boat, Commissaire," he said. "The recovery of the jewelry is absolutely essential. No one will ask further questions if we deliver

it. The whole world will begin to wonder if we do not. You're sure you can identify him?"

"As sure as I can identify my brother, and more willingly." Oriol closed his fist into a knot. "He gave me his word that he was through thieving."

"I give you my word we will both be publicly disgraced if we are not on hand to stop him before he can steal again."

"When will that be?"

"I can only make a guess. But there will be a fortune in jewels at the gala house party that begins at the Château Combe d'Or this Saturday. If Le Chat shows an interest, we may yet save ourselves."

Francie's reaction surprised John when he asked her to get him the invitation to the Sanford gala, explaining why it was essential that he be on hand.

"It's the end of the season now," he said. "All the summer visitors will have left the Côte in another week. The thief will either hole up until next year, or go somewhere else. This is my last chance."

**B**UT it's so dangerous for you, John. If you're right about Lepic, he'll be watching the party, too."

"Mr. Burns has been under his nose all along."

"Mr. Burns can't go on deceiving the whole Sûreté Nationale forever."

"I don't intend to try forever," John said patiently. "This is my last effort. If it fails, I'll leave the country and let Bellini and the others worry about themselves."

"Why don't you leave now, while you're still safe?"

"I made a promise, Francie."

"To whom?" Her voice was suddenly angry. "A gang of thieves and murderers?"

"If you want to call them that, yes. I'm a thief myself, as far as that goes. I've got to protect my kind against honest people like Lepic. Will you get me the invitation or not?"

She looked at him strangely, opened her mouth to say something bitter, changed her mind, and walked away without answering his question.

After that she avoided him, deliberately. The gala was to begin Saturday, culminating Sunday night in a huge bal masque, and he did not know definitely that he had been invited until he saw the Saturday newspapers. The gala was mentioned editorially, with a shrewdly innocent comment by the editorial writer that it was fortunate for the wealthy guests who would display their jewelry at the bal masque that Lepic was certain he had disposed of the thief. Otherwise one might look forward to the disappearance

of more jewelry to increase the robber's hoard, still undiscovered. There followed a list of expected guests, the most prominent of whom was a onetime American cinema star, now the Princess Lila, whose Oriental bridegroom had presented her with a fabulous string of pearls once the property of the Queen of Sheba. Other names on the list were those of Mme Maude Stevens, Mlle Francie Stevens, M. Jack Burns, and M. le comte du Pré de la Tour.

The news that Paul would be there was a blow. But John could do nothing about it. His plans led him inevitably to the Château Combe d'Or. He could only hope he would be able to meet the problems there as they arose.

The château was a showplace. George Sanford had invested nearly a hundred thousand dollars in rebuilding the crumbling, fourteenth-century castle on the hilltop above Cannes. Now its ivy-covered watchtower rose above a huge, many-gabled comfortable home for the Sanfords and their guests. Part of the old moat had been converted into a swimming pool, the rest planted with shrubs and flowers, and the once barren square of the courtyard was now a clipped green lawn between the pool and a flagged terrace. Several of the guests were splashing in the pool, others enjoying the evening coolness on the terrace when Bellini's driver brought Francie, John, and Mrs. Stevens up the winding hill road at sunset.

**F**RANCIE was still cold to John. He did not know if she resented his remark about thieves and honest people, or what she believed to be his stubbornness in risking an appearance at the gala. But he knew she was antagonistic and felt again a familiar desire to withdraw into himself. Only necessity made him ask her to locate for him the rooms that would be occupied by Mimi Sanford and the Princess Lila, since the famous emeralds and the Princess Lila's even more famous pearls would be logical attractions for a thief. When he had obtained her reluctant promise and paid his respects to his hostess, he asked to be shown to his room. It was important that he talk in privacy to Paul as soon as possible.

Paul's room was across the hall from his in a wing of the castle. He asked the valet to tell le comte du Pré that Mr. Burns would like to see him for a moment. Paul came across the hall in answer to his message and said calmly, "You shouldn't be here, John."

"I had to come."

"You'll have to leave, then. I'll drive down to town and telephone you, so

you'll have an excuse to be called away." "I'm not going, Paul. You have to trust me."

Paul's calm broke. He said furiously, "Trust you? Let you rob my friends without lifting a finger to stop you?" He controlled his voice with an effort. "If you don't go, I'll give you away. I swear it."

"Paul, listen! I've got to explain—"

"I'm through listening to you, John. I'm going to make the telephone call now. If you're here when I come back, I'll expose you. Get out of my way!"

He pushed John aside. John said, "Wait!" putting out his foot to block the door. Paul hit him.

The blow landed on John's unprotected chin. He did not feel himself fall, but when his head cleared he was lying on the floor. He got up and went to the window. The fading daylight had not changed, and when he saw Paul hurrying across the terrace toward the rank of cars parked beyond the moat, he realized that he had blacked out only momentarily. He was still standing at the window, rubbing his chin, after Paul had driven away when another car, a dusty Citroën, came up the hill and parked. Oriol and Lepic got out of the Citroën.

George Sanford went to meet them. His actions said plainly that they were expected, and a servant came at his call to take luggage out of the rear seat of the car. What excuse they had made to be there, ostensibly as guests, was not important to John. What did matter was that their arrival finished Mr. Burns. If he fled, Paul would betray him. If he stayed, Paul would betray him. If he fled without excusing himself, Lepic would be curious and investigate, and Oriol would identify him.

He felt almost relieved to be done with Mr. Burns as he took off the body harness and the padded shoes and packed them in his suitcase. He had changed into a gray slipper, gray flannels, and glove-leather gymnast's slippers when a rap came at the door.

**H**E DID NOT answer. The rap came again. Francie's voice said, "John."

He let her in. The room was nearly dark, and she did not immediately notice his changed appearance. She said quickly, "Come over to the window, and I'll point out the rooms. Mimi Sanford's window is the third from the angle of the far wing, under the eave. The princess has the next one this way. Next—oh!"

She had seen the profile of his body. Her voice sounded strained when she said, "What have you done to yourself?"

"Thrown Mr. Burns overboard. He's finished."

He explained what had happened. "I've



got one chance," he added. "I'm going up on the roof. They can't find me there, even if they think to hunt for me, and if the thief makes a try he'll have to do it tonight, because everyone will be up all night tomorrow for the ball. If he comes, and gets by Oriol and Lepic, I'll have him. If he doesn't come, I'll try to get to Italy before I'm picked up. I may make it."

She said nothing.

"You can do one more thing for me," he went on. "Tell them I had to leave unexpectedly. It will keep Paul from talking, and may make Lepic look for me somewhere else. And thanks for everything you've done for me, Francie. Good-by."

Her hand was limp and cold when he took it. She still did not speak. He could not see her face, but he was vaguely disappointed that she did not wish him luck. It would have been only a small gesture to make, however she felt.

He took the suitcase, opened the door cautiously, and saw that the corridor was empty.

Paul's room across the hall was on the outer side of the castle wing. Its windows opened over the gardened moat. There were no lights in the moat, no voices. He hid the suitcase under Paul's bed, then squeezed through the narrow window to the sill outside. Reaching upward, he explored the wall with his fingers until he found a crevice. He began to climb, a gray shadow against gray rock.

ON THE terrace, the valet coughed at Mimi Sanford's elbow. She said, "What is it?"

"Mr. Burns, madame. He's wanted on the telephone."

Mimi Sanford looked around without seeing her guest. She said, "He must be in his room."

"No, madame. The room is empty."

"Ask Mr. Sanford. I haven't seen him."

Mr. Sanford did not know either, and was not particularly interested. He was explaining to Lepic and Oriol why their presence at the château, although welcome, was really unnecessary, since the castle was impregnable to thieves. It was several minutes before the valet managed to invite attention to the fact that one of the guests had vanished.

Lepic's interest was immediate. Sanford could not tell him much about Mr. Burns, only that he was a friend of Mrs. Stevens and her daughter.

A moment later Mrs. Stevens, chatting about clothes with a Parisian couturière, found Lepic at her elbow asking urgent questions.

She said, "I haven't any idea where he is. Ask my daughter."

"Where is your daughter, madame?"

"I couldn't say. Probably in her room."

"Please take me to her. At once!"

They found Francie lying in the dark. She had a severe headache, and asked that they not turn on the light, but she told Lepic of Mr. Burns's message. As John had hoped, Lepic took the lure.

"We've got something!" he told Oriol on the terrace. "He doesn't answer the description, but I wouldn't expect that. Paul du Pré is missing, too. If they were as good friends as you say, du Pré would help him."

Oriol looked doubtful.

Lepic said, "If it wasn't Le Chat, why would he run as soon as we arrived?"

"Any crook would recognize the Sûreté car. It doesn't have to be Le Chat."

"Just the same, I'm going to put out

a dragnet. I think we've got him now."

"I'll stay here, just in case," Oriol said. "As you like."

John, watching from the top of the castle tower, saw Lepic drive away, and guessed his purpose. He saw Oriol speak to Paul when Paul returned to the château, minutes afterward. Paul only shook his head in answer to Oriol's questions. He regretted the blow he had struck and, learning that Mr. Burns had disappeared, refused to talk. Oriol could get nothing out of him.

Half an hour later, John had to slip over the tower parapet and hide in the hanging screen of ivy that climbed from the moat to the tower's top. Oriol had come to the tower to look over the roofs. His inspection told John that he was still prepared for, even if not expecting, a visit from the thief, and would be on guard. It meant that if the thief did not come, John must not only avoid the tight net Lepic would have spread for him before dawn but also escape from the château under Oriol's eye. He did not think he could do both. His scheme had at last reduced itself to essentials. Within twenty-four hours he must either capture the thief, or be himself captured.

Until the castle slept, he could only mark time. The guests did not stay up late, since the bal masque would keep them all awake the next night. They left the terrace, one by one, for bed. Paul and George Sanford were the last to go. The lights on the terrace went out, the heavy doors closed, bars fell into place. It was midnight, and the Château Combe d'Ouvrilly was dead for the night.

The lights in the windows went out gradually in the hours that followed. When the last window darkened, John had only starlight to show him the faint sheen of the slate roofs. He could not see into the blackness of the courtyard, but there was no need for that. The castle, built to withstand strong ground assaults, was vulnerable only to a climber. If he came, it would be over the rooftops.

A church bell rang in the distance, twice. The castle slept quietly. The bell tolled once when it rang the next time, marking the half-hour. When it rang three times, the warm night air had begun to cool perceptibly, and a breeze rustled the ivy crowning the tower.

John changed his cramped position. He was beginning to feel thirsty. If the parching mistral blew, his thirst would grow. When the wind rustled the ivy again, he turned from his watch of the rooftops to break a twig and put it in his mouth to keep the saliva running.

There was not the slightest breeze in his face. But the ivy rustled again.

HE THOUGHT, quite calmly, He's coming. No more blunders, now. Let him get on the roof, where you can see him.

The ivy whispered again with the movements of the climber, and again. It was the longest moment of John's life. He waited until the rustling stopped, and saw a figure, as shadowy and indistinct in the darkness as he knew himself to be, make its way quickly, surely, unhesitatingly out on the sharp peak of the roof below the tower.

John swung himself down the ivy ladder to the roof. The shadow was in sight for only a moment, running along the roof peak, before it disappeared. He followed as quickly, realizing that he had been seen and that the thief's sureness of foot was as good as his own,

if not better. A misstep on the steep slate roof would send either of them sliding helplessly. They could pass only along the roof peaks, diagonally in the slope of joining gables, or by way of the gutters at the eaves. He meant to force the shadow down onto the lower roof of the wing, where there were no gables to dodge around, only a straight peak ending in a sheer fall to the moat below. But the shadow almost escaped him with a tremendous leap from the ridge of one dormer to the next, which, had it succeeded, would have put him behind John with a clear path back to the tower and the ladder of ivy. The leap failed by inches. The thief came down on the slates, slipped, saved himself at the eave gutter, and scrambled to safety, with John again in a position to block him. Tiles shattered by his fall slid over the eave and clattered loudly on the terrace below.

MAKING a round of the castle corridors, Oriol heard them. Peering into the courtyard, he saw a light in one of the roof dormers, and ran rapidly up several flights of stairs to that room.

"How do I know?" an angry man in a nightshirt told him. He was one of the cooks, whose day began at five o'clock. "An elephant fell on the roof, maybe. There's a hole over my bed. If it rains—"

Oriol was already running for the stairs that led to the tower. He stopped to breathe only when he reached the rampart at the tower's base.

He could see nothing but a sharp roof peak leading into blackness. He had no light, and heights made him dizzy. But while he hesitated, he heard slates clatter again in the dark. He set his jaw, lowered himself from the rampart until he straddled the roof peak, and began to hitch himself forward.

John had himself dislodged the second fall of slates. He was being forced to take increasing risks. The thief had seen his intention and was trying desperately to avoid the trap. John lost sight of him again momentarily. When he heard the scraping noise behind him, he thought for a moment that he had overrun his quarry. But immediately he caught sight of the shadow again, almost at the drop-off above the wing, and knew someone else was on the roof with them even before Oriol called his name.

"John Robie!" The calm words were clear. "I'm coming, John. You won't escape me this time. Give yourself up."

The scraping noise continued. He moved ahead of it. The shadow moved ahead of him until it stood at the extreme end of the roof. There was no way to go from there except down onto the wing.

Oriol called again, triumphantly. "I see you, John! You'll never get away now!"

The bellowing roar of a pistol shot followed his words.

Oriol had fired into the air, meaning to arouse the household, not kill another thief. John, with his back turned, saw his own shadow in the sudden flare of light. The other shadow had vanished. As a second shot boomed, he slid over the eaves, caught the gutter for an instant, and dropped, ready to fall flat either way according to the angle of slates his feet met if he missed the roof peak.

He did not fall. Hands reached to steady him. He turned instantly to seize the figure at his side, and knew unmistakably in the first moment of contact that he had caught a woman.

She did not struggle. She whispered, "Let me go, John Robie."  
"Danielle!"

He thought she started at the sound of his voice, although it might have been his own muscular reaction to the shock. Before he could even bring his mind to accept the stunning fact of the discovery, she said urgently, "There is the first light! We've got to get off the roof!"

Another shot boomed. An angry man shouted from a window. Oriol shouted back. A second light came on, and another. John said, "Come. Follow me."

He slid down the slates to the gutter at the eave, and worked his way along it until he was over the spot where he had come up. He was not conscious of any alteration of purpose in his actions, and he never knew at what point he changed from pursuer to protector. When he thought about it afterward, it seemed wholly natural that he should be helping her to escape. He was a thief; she was a thief. Oriol threatened them both.

She could not make the necessary stretch from eave to wall. He had to make a bridge for her with his body, but once she reached the wall and found a grip she was sure in her movements.

**T**HE CASTLE was coming to life. He said, "We can't reach the ground before they head us off. The first window is twenty feet down. We'll go in there."  
"We can't go in." Her voice was steady. "Everyone is awake."

"It's Paul's room. We've got to ask him to help us. There's no other way."

Paul was in the hallway with other curious guests who had been aroused by Oriol's shots. When he came back to his room and closed the door, he found them there behind it.

His face turned white when he saw them, both dressed much alike, both with the dust of the roof on their clothes and hands to show where they had been and what they were. But he closed the door, locked it, and turned off the light.

"I suppose I know the reason for the shooting now," he said tonelessly.

"I'm sorry, Paul." Her voice was low.

He did not answer her directly. In the same dull tone, he said, "It would have been kinder to tell me the truth when I asked, John."

John had his ear to the door panel. There were sounds, voices, but none too close. He said, "I didn't lie, Paul. I held back some of the truth, and I didn't know it all myself. I don't know it all now."

He told what he did know, speaking quickly, stopping now and then to listen at the door panel. When he had finished, he said, "Tell us the rest, Danielle."

They heard her breathe, but she did not answer. John said, "We're both protecting you. We're entitled to know what we are protecting. Talk."

She sighed, once. Then she began to speak, emotionlessly, and did not hesitate again until she finished.

It was so much like John's own story that he knew, as it went on, what was to follow. He was aware of one difference between them. She was ashamed of her confession, although she did not attempt to excuse herself. He had never felt any shame.

She had been trained first for the ballet, as a child. Acrobatics and the trapeze had followed later, after a sideways of the war and a flight of German bombers had wiped out her home, her family, the ballet school, everything she knew. Relatives in Switzerland got her out of France, but they were poor farming people, and a ten-year-old child who knew nothing but toe dancing was a liability on a Swiss farm. They apprenticed her to a traveling circus, thinking her training might serve her in that field.

"I could do pirouettes on the high wire when I was fourteen," she said. "And I liked trapeze-flying. The catcher for our act was a thief himself. I found out about it when I had to hide him from the police one day. I had an adolescent's insane admiration for him, and he saw I could be useful. We made several small thefts together. He had a record, and they caught him and sent him to prison when I was eighteen. He didn't implicate me. But the circus knew, or suspected, that I had been involved. I lost my job, and the word went around to other acts. I couldn't get on anywhere in Switzerland, so I came to France, intending to find work here. Then I read somewhere about Le Chat, and—I don't know, exactly. It seemed like something that had been prepared for me."

**J**OHAN ASKED, "Did you imitate me deliberately?"

"Yes. I didn't intend to get you in trouble. I didn't even know that you were still alive. But I studied the reports of your old thefts and copied them so they would look for you instead of for me."

"When did you identify me?"

"Not until tonight, when that man called your name on the roof, and you spoke to me. I knew Mr. Burns wasn't what he seemed, but I thought you were an insurance detective, like Mr. Paige. You made it easy for me to see Mrs. Stevens, and when Bellini got me a job with Lady Kerr, in the same hotel—"

"Quiet!"

They heard voices. Oriol and George Sanford went by the door, arguing. Oriol's

voice said, "... here now, I tell you! ... couldn't have got away ... and Sanford answered, "... servants outside until morning, then, and search ... daylight. He can't escape."

The voices died away. Danielle said calmly, "What else do you want to know?"

"Why did you come here, knowing I would be here? Or didn't you see my name on the guest list in the newspaper?"

"I saw it. But I told you I didn't know who you were. I wasn't afraid of Mr. Burns."

"I suspected you, for a while, although I thought Claude was your climber. I forgot that women don't develop the same muscles. And you never let me touch you."

"I never let anyone touch me. It was too dangerous."

Paul said, "What do you mean?"

"Come over here," John answered. In the dark, he put Paul's hand on Danielle's shoulder, at the point where the muscle from the shoulder blade ran into the neck. It was like a hard rope.

"I see." Paul did not remove his hand. He said musingly, "So I'm in love with a thief."

They heard Danielle catch her breath. Paul said, "Do you have the jewelry?"

"Yes."

"All of it?"

"Yes. I was going to Holland to sell it."

"I'll buy it."

Danielle made a small protesting sound. Paul said doggedly, "I want you, Danielle. I'm not trying to buy you, just a fair chance for myself. I can trade for your immunity by turning the jewels back to the insurance company. If—"

John said, "You can't trade with Oriol. He's going to take someone in the morning, either Danielle or me. Even if Paul is willing to cooperate! Wait! Maybe it will work! Let me think!"

It was only the germ of an idea. But it grew as he thought about it. If Mr. Paige, with Bonds' powerful influence behind him, could be brought to their side—Paige wanted a recovery more than a conviction.

He said, "We might both buy out of this with the jewelry, if we're lucky."

**P**AUL TOOK his note to Francie at six o'clock. They came back together, Francie with the clothes he had asked her to bring. She was pale and hollow-eyed, as if she had not slept. She looked briefly at Danielle, almost without interest.

"I caught my thief, Francie," John said. "Now I want to get her out of here safely. I haven't time to explain, but I will later. Your mother will get her jewels

back." He added, "It's not a bribe, just information. Will you help?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Make her look enough like you so she'll pass for you at a distance."

Francie asked no more questions, for which he was grateful. Time was important. While she helped Danielle change clothes and hide her hair beneath a scarf, he gave Paul his instructions.

"Get away before Lepic arrives. Oriol will already have telephoned him, and Lepic knows Francie by sight. Oriol doesn't, so even if he stops you, which isn't probable, since he's looking for me, you can pass her off as Francie. It's Sunday, and you can be driving her: to church if he asks. Don't let anyone else come close enough to see her face."

"What about the jewelry?"

"Get it as quickly as possible and take it to Bellini with my note. After that, you're on your own. Good luck, Paul."

They shook hands. Paul said wryly, "If I didn't know what a clever crook you are, I wouldn't leave you here like this, John. Are you sure—"

"I'm sure. Bellini will buy me out."

Francie said, "I'm ready."

Danielle, dressed for her escape, held out her hand to John. "Good-by, Mr. Burns. I know it isn't your name, but it's the way I think of you. No one has ever done so much for me—and with so little reason."

"Loyalty among thieves." He pressed her fingers. "Make him a good countess."

"I'll do my best." She smiled, and turned to Francie. "How do I thank you, Miss Stevens?"

"I'd rather you didn't, yet," Francie said. "Not until you're safe. I'll still give you to the police if it's necessary."

She nodded toward John. Danielle said, "Oh," not in alarm but in understanding. Francie said, "Just so you'll know it's nothing personal, if it happens. Good-by."

John missed the byplay. He had gone to the window to watch the road. He did not breathe easily until, minutes after Paul and Danielle had left the room, he saw Paul's car go down the hill. He knew, from the time that had elapsed, they had not been stopped or questioned. He turned away from the window with a sigh of relief.

Francie stood watching him, unsmiling. He said, "Don't look so gloomy, Francie. It's almost finished. If you'll turn your back, I'll bring Mr. Burns to life again and take you to church."

He got his suitcase from underneath Paul's bed.

Lepic arrived at the Combe d'Oir only a few minutes ahead of Bellini and Mr. Paige. He had not had time to hear Oriol's full story before Mr. Paige interrupted it by introducing himself to George Sanford.

"Paige," he said crisply. "I represent Bonds of London. This gentleman is Mr. Bellini. Good morning, Commissioner."

Lepic nodded. George Sanford said wearily, "Excuse me if I seem rude, Mr. Paige, but may I ask the purpose of your call? With the police on hand, a disappearing guest, an attempted robbery, other disturbances—"

"I rather think I can end the disturbances, Mr. Sanford." Mr. Paige twirled his mustache. "My operative was undoubtedly responsible for most of them."

"Your what?" Lepic's face went gray.

"My operative." Against his expectations, Mr. Paige was enjoying himself.

"Mr. Burns, that is. He has been working with me to effect a recovery of the jewelry stolen here on the Côte. I confess that, until this morning, we were not convinced that you, Commissioner, had disposed of the thief, as you believed, and for that reason I instructed Mr. Burns to impose on Mr. Sanford's hospitality and guard against further thefts." Mr. Paige coughed. "Had I known, Commissioner, that you were taking similar steps, it would not have been necessary for my man to behave so mysteriously, and some misunderstandings might have been avoided. In any event, I must apologize for misjudging you. The thief is dead, as I learned an hour ago. His death has permitted his friends, who were holding the stolen jewels for him, to surrender them in exchange for a reward we had offered." Mr. Paige paused for proper effect. "The

Italian border. Mr. Paige had remained behind to invent further explanations as necessary, and check possible pursuit."

"It was not hard to persuade him," Bellini said. "I accepted ten per cent on behalf of ourselves and our helpers, rather than the twenty per cent he was prepared to pay. The difference was enough to buy his cooperation. He handled it very well, I thought."

"He stopped Lepic," John said. "There's nothing Lepic can do now but keep his mouth shut. Oriol is different. His mind works slowly, but once he has a chance to think, he'll see the holes. I'd like him to know the truth."

"That can be arranged," Bellini giggled. "Who would have suspected Danielle?"

FRANCIE asked, "Why did you do it for her, John?"

Bellini gave her a quick, keen look that John missed. He said, "I'm not sure. It was a way out that saved us both, and Paul needs her. I suppose it was partly because I'm a thief myself."

They drove for some time after that in silence; through Monaco, on to Menton and France. The border was very near.

Francie sat quiet, her eyes on her hands in her lap. Bellini studied her profile thoughtfully. He said at last, "It's something you should remember, Miss Stevens."

"What is it?" She looked up with a start.

"That John is a thief," Bellini nodded wisely at her before he went on. "We'll have to leave him at the border. And while borders can be recrossed, some moments appear more opportune than others. He does not have a subtle mind, as I told him once. But if you remember that, as a thief, he must take what he really wants, pursue it, have it denied him—do you follow me? Or am I impatient, and a bad guesser?"

"You are neither, Mr. Bellini," Francie's color was high. She was again the sparkling, animated girl of the beach who had learned the identity of Le Chat. "What do you suggest?"

"I leave it to your own good judgment, Miss Stevens. However, I am about to stop the car for a moment. You may wish to utilize the opportunity."

He leaned forward to speak to his driver. The car rolled to a stop.

John said, "What is this all about?"

Bellini giggled. "You will have to solve it for yourself. Good-by, Miss Stevens. The best of luck."

"Good-by, Mr. Bellini. Thank you. I hope—" She smiled, and shook her head. "No. Just good-by. Good-by, John."

She had left the car and was walking down the road in the direction from which they had come before John could stop her. She did not look back.

"Shall we drive on, John?" Bellini beamed at him. "The border is not far."

John did not bother to answer, but jumped from the car and went after her. She still had not looked back. When she heard his footsteps on the road behind her, she began to run.

It did not make him hesitate. He was a good thief, and he knew how to take something he wanted as badly as he had found he wanted Francie Stevens when her good-by brought him to the sudden, shocking realization that he was no longer self-dependent. If he did not have a subtle mind, as Bellini had said, he knew a reality when it hit him. He caught her before she had gone far. THE END

jewelry is now in my possession, and will be returned by me to the owners."

Lepic's face was like a dead man's. He said, "Who returned it?"

"One of the terms of the offer, Commissioner—"

"Who returned it?" Lepic repeated.

"—was that no questions should be asked. The jewelry is safe, the reward paid, and you yourself have publicly announced the death of the thief. There seems to be no need for anything else except to offer apologies to Mr. Sanford for the deception played on him, and to ask— Ah, here he comes now. Good morning, Burns."

John came across the terrace with Francie, on cue. He said, "Good morning, Mr. Paige. Good morning, gentlemen."

Oriol swallowed audibly. No one spoke, or could speak, except Bellini.

"I'm delighted to see you again, Mr. Burns," he said, chucking. "Most delighted!"

John did not feel really secure until he and Francie were in the car with Bellini, safely away from the Combe d'Oir and beyond Nice, driving toward