Port Afrique

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A NOVEL BY

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FOR

ESTHER AND JOY

This is a story, not a photograph. Rip and Ynez and Moussac live only in Port Afrique—which cannot be found on any map of the French African territories—but only in the story.

B. V. D.

To everything there is a season,
And a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die;
A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal;
A time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to seek, and a time to lose;
A time to keep, and a time to cast away;
A time to rend, and a time to sew;
A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
A time to love, and a time to hate;
A time for war, and a time for peace.

ECCLESIASTES

Port Afrique

BOOK ONE

A time to every purpose

COLONEL JACQUES MOUSSAC, chef de gendarmerie of Port Afrique, looked down at the dead woman on the floor as his men moved quietly around him in the living room of the big plantation house. They were very quiet, very competent, very anxious not to disturb the colonel's feelings about the woman, until finally one of the men came over to stand beside him.

'Mon colonel——' he said after a minute or two of not being noticed, but Colonel Moussac did not hear him. 'Mon colonel,' the detective repeated, touching Moussac's elbow lightly, respectfully, 'we are finished. Can we move the body now?'

Colonel Moussac took off his officer's cap and absent-mindedly wiped the perspiration from the leather sweatband with his finger-tips. 'I can't believe it,' he said slowly, as if it hurt him to talk. 'I can't believe she's dead.' Suddenly he bent down on one knee beside the woman. 'Even now she manages to look beautiful.' He glanced up from under his dark, peaked eyebrows at his assistant. 'I saw her just yesterday.' He looked back down at the woman's cool, still face. 'It seems impossible now. She's exactly the same. But something is missing.' He stood up and put his cap back on his head and sighed deeply. 'Have you ever read Aristotle, Hector?'

'No, mon colonel.'

'You should. Every policeman should. He said men share

growth with the plants and perception with the beasts, but we alone have rational spirits, a soul.'

'Sounds sensible, mon colonel.'

'Have you asked yourself, Hector, what happened in this human spirit? What changed inside to cause this?'

The detective shifted on his feet patiently and said, 'Can we move the body now?'

'Yes, yes.' The colonel sighed again. 'To the hospital first, Hector. Telephone Guillaume. I want to take some X-ray pictures.'

The detective looked at him. 'X-rays?'

'Yes. And get Armand out of bed to open his cable office. I want to send a cablegram to the United States. To Washington.'

The detective scratched the side of his nose with a puzzled look, but said, 'Oui, mon colonel,' and walked off.

Colonel Moussac stood completely still, looking down at the marble-eyed stare of the dead woman as if they were alone in the room. The blood which had run down from the bullet hole in her temple had congealed along her white skin in fine, minute branches like the delicately exposed tracing of an artery. He leaned over her a second time; with a slow movement of one open hand, he gently closed her eyelids. Georgette had been a beautiful woman full of warmth and life. Now this. Why? He sighed a little again. Aristotle was right. Always, always, it was a question of the human spirit, and that was the most difficult question of all.

The S.S. *José Harra*, bound south out of Casablanca for Capetown, ploughed steadily through the warm Atlantic seas, vibrating faintly underfoot like a skilled but tired runner.

She was growing old without the sea kindliness of some mature vessels, still tremorous and ailing from the patched bow where she had taken a torpedo one black night in the coffin corner of a Murmansk convoy. A delicate mist moved across her decks in the dark air, driven by the freshening breeze off the African coast, blurring everything and making her metal lines and angles seem soft-edged. Between torn shreds

of low cloud drift the constellation Sagittarius swung remotely in the deep upturned bowl of sky, aiming his arrow of stars at her next port of call, Port Afrique.

The skipper and chief mate were out on the bridge of the old freighter in front of the wheelhouse. They leaned idly on the rail and looked down at their strange passenger who stood unmoving up forward in the bow as if he were the only rigid part of the faintly quivering ship. Time on this west African coastal run was measured in months; their voices were calm and unhurried as they talked about the passenger.

'Funny duck, this Reardon,' the mate said. 'He goes up to the bow just about this time every evening and just stands there and stares. He's been doing it ever since we left Casa.'

'Maybe he's in a hurry,' the skipper said in his deep, slow voice. 'Maybe he wants to get to Port Afrique in a hurry.'

The mate stared down at the passenger. 'Why should he?'

'How do I know? All kinds of people in the world. Some rush, some don't.'

'Somebody in the company office in Casa said he'd been in the States in a hospital for a long time. Why should a man trying to heal up be in such a hurry to reach a hole like Port Afrique?' The mate did not care really; it was only that the passenger was a strange phenomenon and helped break the monotony of the voyage. And Reardon certainly seemed strange.

The skipper watched the dark, raincoated figure standing rigidly in the bow. Without moving his eyes he said, 'He's got something big in Port Afrique, I'd say. Paid enough to wangle his passage aboard this tub.'

'Rich? Or just carrying a roll?'

'Hard to tell with the silent type.'

Suddenly the passenger turned stiffly and came down the wet deck toward them. His raincoat collar was up and hat brim down against the light cold mist, and he moved slowly, as if half blind. Neither the skipper nor the mate shifted his weight from his elbows. Only their eyes swung with the approaching man until he walked out of sight into the companionway.

'The walking dead,' the mate said.

'No,' the skipper said, 'he's alive, sure enough. Beat me at chess last night.' He paused. 'I've seen that kind before. Complicated like a clock and all wound up inside. It's up here,' he said, tapping his head with his forefinger, 'that's where something died.'

The passenger was lying flat on his back in his narrow bunk staring with open eyes at the low overhead in the dark stateroom when someone knocked at the door. Then knocked a second time, a third.

'Mr. Reardon,' the steward's voice said in the passageway outside the door. Another quick double knock. 'Mr. Reardon.' Then the door opened and the steward stood in the doorway as a shadow outlined against the light coming into the room. He fumbled for the switch a moment, but the passenger spoke quietly in the half-dark.

'Leave the light off.'

'Mr. Reardon,' the steward said, 'the skipper sent me down. We're rounding the south breakwater now. We'll be tied up in Port Afrique before midnight.'

The passenger swung his legs over the edge of the bunk and sat up slowly. 'Before midnight?' he repeated tonelessly.

The steward misunderstood. 'Oh, we never wait for light in Port Afrique. The skipper knows these waters like the back of his hand.'

The passenger said nothing. He seemed remote, withdrawn.

'Will you want to go ashore right away, Mr. Reardon?'

'What do you mean, will I want to go ashore right away?' His voice sounded hard and edged and far away, as though he wanted to go back to thinking about something more important.

'Nothing, sir. Only I thought you'd rather wait till morning.'

'You mean you thought I'd rather get ashore right away.' The passenger stood up. 'Well, you're right. I do. I'm expecting some people to meet me. Send my stuff ashore first thing to-morrow, will you? Care of Colonel Jacques Moussac, Police Bureau.'

'First thing,' the steward said, with a little touch of embarrassment about his guess about Mr. Reardon's going ashore right away. 'I'll see to it myself, Mr. Reardon.' He turned to go.

'Wait a minute,' the passenger said. 'Bring me something to drink.'

'What kind, sir?'

'Some Scotch, if you still have some decent stuff left. Better bring the bottle.'

'Yes, sir,' the steward said, and went out shutting the door softly. The last thing he saw, just before the door closed, was the passenger dropping back into the bunk again, to stare at the dark overhead with his hands folded behind his head.

Ten minutes later, when he returned with a half-pint of Scotch, Mr. Reardon had not moved.

Four hours later, shortly before midnight, the steward came back again to find the passenger in the same position. But now the bottle was lying on its side on the deck, empty. Mr. Reardon's eyes were closed.

The steward watched him. 'Mr. Reardon,' he said quietly.

Silence. The deep dead silence of a ship whose engines have just stopped. The steward switched on the overhead light. The passenger did not stir.

A small mess of papers lay cluttered on the table near the bed, as if Reardon had been straightening things out before going ashore. The steward looked at the papers, back at Reardon's face, back at the papers. Lightly, keeping his eyes flicking back and forth, the steward poked at the papers with one finger.

Passport. American passport. And a small plastic A.G.O. card. Major Richard Reardon, A.U.S. . . . discharge papers. Walter Reed General Hospital, Washington, D.C. Citation. Purple Heart, multiple abdominal wounds. . . . Silver Star . . . assault on Leipzig, campaign of central Germany. . . . A letter in violet ink with a flowery curlicued kind of handwriting . . . *Darling*, *mon cher* . . . remainder of the letter in French. Pan-American Airways ticket stub, Washington National Airport to Casablanca. Cablegram, filed in Port Afrique two weeks ago, folded in thirds.

With one finger the steward began to lift the bottom third of the cable which covered the message. The last line . . . AT ONCE, REGRETFULLY, COLONEL JACQUES MOUSSAC. . . .

Reardon stirred sleepily on the bed and groaned, 'Georgette . . .' He began to breathe heavily.

Without taking his eyes from the passenger's face, the steward explored the small pile of papers looking for the wallet. With so much personal stuff lying around loose there must be a wallet.

Suddenly Reardon ground his teeth with the naked unmasked anguish of sleep. 'Oh God,' he groaned stiffly, 'oh God . . .' He rocked his head back and forth a moment, then his eyes began to open dully. Suddenly, with startling swiftness, they came into focus on the steward and Reardon swung himself upright quickly.

'What do you want?' he asked sharply. 'What are you doing here?'

'Pardon me, sir,' the steward said smoothly. 'They're tying her up now. You can go ashore any time you want. I'll take care of your foot locker and your other gear.'

Reardon leaned toward the bunkside table and scratched through the pile of papers on the desk until he found a crushed pack of cigarettes. He shook one out for himself and offered the steward one, then held up a match, watching the steward across the flame.

He's stalling, the steward thought, for some reason he's stalling for time.

'So we're in Port Afrique . . .' Reardon stared out the porthole and ran his fingers back through his dark military-cut hair.

Looks like a light heavyweight in his late thirties, he does, the steward thought—heavy-shouldered, competent, pair of eyes like bullets, but out of training and getting a bit too old for the ring. Short hair shot through with grey. Iron lines around eyes and mouth. A tough baby, one of the quiet kind, the suddenly dangerous kind.

'This home territory for you, sir?' the steward asked very casually over his cigarette. The dockside noises outside came

in more clearly now, and blobs of reflected light swam unevenly over his face.

'Sort of.' Reardon opened the port and stared down at the pier. 'Ever hear a song,' he asked quietly, ' "Home is where you hang your heart"?' Then he turned back into the stateroom. 'Been away over four years. That's beaucoup time.'

The steward let out a mouthful of smoke, still watching him. 'Sure is.' Something was wrong; the passenger was talking too much.

Reardon looked back at him, 'Take any money or anything else from my wallet?'

The steward took another casual drag on his cigarette. 'No, sir.'

Suddenly Reardon grasped the steward's shirt and twisted him back against the wall. 'You've been through my stuff,' Reardon said tightly. 'I can tell. What'd you take?' He twisted the steward's shirt harder, knuckling his solar plexus and ramming him into the bulkhead again.

'Nothing, nothing, Mr. Reardon. Honest, honest——'

Reardon put the flat of his closed fist against the steward's chin and punched his head softly backward. 'Give it back, goddam you.'

'Nothing,' the steward gasped, breathing hard. 'I—I was looking for your baggage key.'

Reardon released him so suddenly the steward almost fell. 'Okay,' Reardon said. 'I just want to be sure.'

Reardon separated the little clutter of papers on the desk and picked up his wallet and took out some folding money. 'This ought to keep the rain out,' he said, 'and pay for damages.'

'Thank *you*, Mr. Reardon,' the steward said, swallowing. 'If there's anything more I can——"

'No, no. Get out.' Reardon stared out the porthole again, withdrawing into himself again, hunching his shoulders slightly as if he were in pain.

Lying alongside one of Port Afrique's finger piers, caught in the stark yellow floodlights from the warehouse roof, the

S.S. *José Harra* looked like a slopesided rain-streaked mountain. The last hawsers had been warped ashore and now several seamen were setting up big, round sheet-metal ratguards on the lines.

Three men stood at the edge of the pier looking up at the towering steel side of the ship. Colonel Jacques Moussac wore his uniform of a chef de gendarmerie; the other two were in civilian clothes—tight coats, nipped-in waistlines, heavy shoulder padding, sharply pointed shoes, narrow brimmed hats—two French flics.

'What a life, Hector,' the first plainclothesman said to the second. 'When one is called out of bed near midnight, and in the rain, to stand around——'

'You talk,' the second said. 'I have a wife of less than a year lying alone at home, waiting——'

'Is that bad? At least you'll be warm again before breakfast.'

Colonel Jacques Moussac turned his face from the ship toward his two detectives. 'Shut up,' he said, 'both of you. I'm sick of your stupid conversation.' He looked back up at the ship. 'One would think this was some ordinary everyday death, an affair of drunken bums. . . .'

The flics glanced at one another under the shadow of their hat brims and shrugged a little. One must take orders from higher authority, naturellement, but when that authority is also unfortunately a philosopher? Ah yes, yes . . .

They shrugged again.

At the far end of the pier, in the darkness outside the range of the floodlights on the roof of the warehouse, a little two-seater Citroen with its motor running faced the wharf, headlights off. Its windshield wipers kept flicking back and forth like mechanical pulse beats.

Inside, the driver stared intently through the clear curved space made on the misted glass by the wipers. Even sitting in the car's small bucket seat he looked tall; a thin dark man with a narrow, worried, axe-blade face. The woman in the seat beside him was round, plump, blonde, with a young thirtyish face and a clear forehead.

'How long are we going to sit here in the dark, Emile?' she asked.

The driver did not answer. Without realizing it, his tensed foot kept revving the motor up and down, and the windshield wipers responded each time with their quickened, nervous pulse beats. Emile stared through the mist along the pier, then cleared his throat and said, 'Colonel Moussac is there waiting for the gang-plank to come down. I can see two of his flics with him.'

'I'm glad,' the blonde woman said stiffly. 'I'm glad you can see something straight for a change.'

'Listen, Diane——'

'Oh, listen yourself! Are you blind, Emile? Ever since the first day we were married I've been asking myself: when will he learn to stand up like a man?'

'You want me to go down there and give Rip Reardon a big hello? You want me to hold out my hand and say: "Welcome home, partner. Everything is fine. Glad to see you home all healed from the war, finally. We've been waiting four years for you." '

'Yes,' Diane said quietly, 'that's exactly what I want you to say.'

'With Moussac standing right there?'

'With Moussac there, yes.'

'But what if he mentions the plantation?'

'You think Rip will talk business at a time like this?'

'With Rip anything can happen. He's tough and he keeps quiet. You never know where you stand with him.'

Diane's voice hardened a little. 'Emile. Do as I say. Go down there and see him.'

The nervous pulse of the windshield wipers began to beat more quickly.

Diane swung a little in her seat to look at the profile of her husband's face in the dim glow of the dashboard light. Suddenly she put her hand on his arm softly. 'I know how you feel, Emile,' she said soothingly, like a mother to a child, 'but how do you think it will look if you aren't there when he comes down the gangplank?'

The windshield wipers slowed, relaxing a little, responding to Emile's foot pressure.

'You can't run away from an unhappy thing, Emile. She's dead. It's terrible, but that's how things are. Walk down there——'

Emile pulled his arm free. 'I can't,' he said. His thin dark face twitched. 'I thought I could when we drove down here but now I can't——'

Diane sat up straighter in her seat, and her voice changed. 'Oh God, do you always have to sound so sorry for yourself?'

'I can't, Diane, I just can't! I feel sick, my stomach's upset! I've been through too much!' The nervous windshield wipers were beating with a wild mechanical frenzy now. 'I can't stand any more!'

Suddenly he threw the small car into gear and swung it around savagely, driving back toward the centre of Port Afrique. After he turned the first corner off the pier he switched on his headlights.

'Did you hear a car, Hector?' the first flic asked the second.

'No. Let's have a cigarette.'

'This makes almost two packs you owe me.'

'Send me a bill, you tightwad.'

Colonel Moussac stepped backward, away from the edge of the pier. 'Attention,' he said, 'they are lowering the gangplank.'

The colonel was a small slender man, deeply tanned by the African sun, with two arched eyebrows like quizzical chevrons and a deceptively soft-spoken manner. He was about forty-five, but his slight build and trimness made him look ten years younger. His uniform cap sat squarely, with the faintest suggestion of a tilt; his tunic was flawless; each of his buttons gleamed; his dark moustache was trimmed precisely the same on each side. He was a man for whom everything had a place —and for whom everything was in place, if not in the world around him, then in his mind at least.

Up on the deck of the S.S. *José Harra*, the skipper came over to the starboard wing of the bridge and shouted down

through his cupped hands to the mate on the deck below. 'Let's have a big bright light rigged on the catwalk to-night, mister! The wharf rats in these godforsaken ports will climb anything for a free ride to Takoradi!'

Reardon stood on deck, a little apart from the landing activity, his collar still turned up against the night mist, hunched within his tan raincoat. Even his face was withdrawn, silent; he had the blank, drained look of a man who had come inevitably to an end of a road. His eyes were the only living parts of his face; they moved slowly, searching the half-lit darkness of the pier with inch-by-inch care.

Suddenly over the lowered gangplank an intense bright light was turned on; it threw his face into sharp highlight and deep shadow. His eyes stopped moving, and stared down at the pier.

Down there, in the mist-blurred geometry of light and blackness, he saw the three Frenchmen standing close together, looking up at the ship. He threw his cigarette over the side with one gesture and began walking down the deck toward the head of the gangplank.

The skipper and the steward were there, waiting. Two or three of the seamen stopped to watch him. The skipper began to say something as Reardon approached him, but when he saw his passenger's taut rigid face he closed his mouth. He and the steward exchanged a quick look; the skipper shook his head a little, sympathetic but baffled.

Reardon stopped at the top of the gangplank, staring downward at the three Frenchmen on the pier who had now caught sight of him and were looking upward. A big black Renault sedan, invisible until now in the shadow behind Colonel Moussac, suddenly switched on its headlights.

The skipper took advantage of Reardon's pause to step forward and touch his arm. 'I'll look forward to your next trip with us, Mr. Reardon,' he said with considerable cheerfulness, then stopped. Reardon had not heard him.

Slowly Reardon started down the steep gangplank, a lone figure on a narrow bridge from sea to land. Halfway down he turned and stared back into the light at the ship, as if he did

not want to go ahead to whatever awaited him, as if he wanted to retreat to the dark anonymity of his cabin. As he looked back upward he raised one hand, throwing a mask of shadow across his eyes, and, as though he had just heard what the skipper had said to him, he said, 'Thanks for taking me aboard.'

The skipper gripped the rail with both hands and leaned forward. 'Glad to have you along,' he said heartily. 'Maybe I'll be the one to win a game or two of chess next time, eh?' He chuckled as if they would surely see each other soon for a return match. You poor bastard, he thought.

'Thanks, skipper,' Reardon said, and raised the hand over his eyes in a half-salute, a gesture of hail and farewell. Then he turned, hunching a little more within his raincoat, and walked down the plank to the three men who were waiting for him. A Senegalese soldier, wearing khaki shorts and red tasselled fez, stepped out from behind the wheel of the big black Renault sedan and opened the rear door.

Colonel Moussac put his hand out as Reardon stepped on the pier. 'Hello Rip,' he said quietly.

Reardon shook hands. 'Hello Jacques,' he said. 'Comment ça va?'

'Ça va,' Colonel Moussac said, 'ça va.' He held the handshake a moment longer, then dropped it.

They fell into step as they walked toward the sedan, with the two plainclothesmen just a respectful distance behind them.

The skipper and the steward watched them from the deck of the S.S. *José Harra*. As the sedan began to drive away the skipper grasped the wet edge of his cap visor and pulled it lower on his head. The hearty cheerful look had gone completely out of his face. Speaking with deep disgust to no one at all he said, 'Africa.' Then he spat over the side.

The long cobblestone surface of L'Avenue Lyautey gleamed wetly against the headlights of the big Renault. A lone cyclist, wearing loose white Moslem robes, pulled over to the curb hastily as the sedan drummed by. It was past midnight in

Port Afrique, and the main street was almost empty. Two tarts with their hands on their hips and four French sailors in pompom hats and striped jerseys stood arguing loudly under a dim street lamp at the corner of Rue Voltaire.

Rip turned from the window to Colonel Moussac. 'Port Afrique hasn't changed much.'

'Ah,' Moussac said, 'but it has. Underneath. Change is inevitable, like the seasons.' He looked at Reardon in the darkness of the car, his face lighted intermittently by passing street lights. 'How about you, Rip?'

Rip looked at him. Their eyes met in the darkness. 'I suppose,' Rip said. 'Like everything else. Underneath.'

The two detectives, sitting on the jump seats in the rear of the big sedan facing away from Colonel Moussac and Rip, looked at one another. The colonel and this M'sieu Reardon, a strange pair. After not seeing one another for about four years, and then to meet again under such tragic circumstances —and to talk like this? Ah, the good Lord has made many strange types, but such as these two . . .!

'How are Emile and Diane?' Rip asked.

Moussac permitted himself the merest suggestion of a shrug. 'Quite well, I suppose. I haven't seen them since——' He stopped, then went on, '—I was surprised they were not down at the pier to meet you. I told them you were due near midnight.'

Silence. Then:

'How did Emile make out during the war?' Rip asked.

Another faint shrug. 'Some say he was a collabo, some say not.'

'And what does the chef de gendarmerie say?'

'I doubt it, personally. We were caught in the middle of the Vichy mess, to be sure, but to collaborate with the Nazis took a certain kind of venom or crude courage.'

'I don't remember Emile as being venomous.'

'Nor crude.'

Neither mentioned the word courage; Emile was no coward, but somehow courage had nothing to do with him, either.

As if apologizing for his partner, Rip said, 'Well, Emile was always a sick man.'

'To be sure,' Moussac said. 'He hath a lean and hungry look. There are many kinds of sickness.' He turned to face Rip directly. 'Forgive me, Rip. This is no way to talk to a man just out of a hospital.'

'Nuts. I'm okay now.' He wasn't, but there was no point discussing it.

'A burst of machine-gun slugs in the stomach. It's a miracle you lived.'

'Listen, Jacques. After what I've seen I believe in miracles.'

'I do not dispute it. You have the medals to prove it.'

'Getting hurt was an accident. Stupidity. They let us come through in our trucks, then cut us off.' He shook his head. 'Christ, the medals were accidental, too.'

The two flics glanced briefly at one another. One must have a certain reluctant admiration for these two crazy ones. They were talking about everything except the one important subject. Who could understand the mentalities of such types?

Rip glanced at Moussac's shoulder braid. 'So you're a colonel now, Jacques.'

'Not what the Americans call a chicken colonel,' Moussac said. 'Just lieutenant.' He waved one thin hand. 'Higher rank will come with senility.'

Silence again.

'How did you find out so much about me, Jacques?' Rip asked Moussac. 'After all, I've been away so long . . .'

Moussac sucked his cheeks in briefly, then let his breath escape.

'Georgette told me,' he said quietly. He let his breath out again.

After that they did not say another word.

The headlights of the Renault swung around into Rue Felix Faure, then into the big official-looking Place de la Prefecture; they caught a massive stone archway and a narrow striped sentry box, and stopped. The chauffeur tooted his horn and swore under his breath. One of the flics rolled the window down beside him and shouted, 'Eh, salope! Attention!'

A tall Senegalese rookie tumbled sleepily out of his box, dragging his rifle behind him. When he saw the Renault he stopped rubbing his eyes and snapped to attention. The chauffeur muttered in Bambara dialect to the sentry as he shifted gears, then drove through the archway into the courtyard.

The flic who had shouted turned to Moussac. 'Mon colonel, these rookies need a little more discipline from now on. After all, at Headquarters——'

'Forget it,' Moussac said. 'Relaxation is a priceless ability in the twentieth century. I envy the boy. If I had to stand on my feet all night guarding a prison which contains not a single prisoner, I also would sleep.'

The detectives looked at one another. What an attitude! Hopeless . . .

The courtyard was enormous, built in the colonizing days when a handful of Europeans administered chunks of Africa from a fortress; now, in more modern times, the immense bare building was a prison and police headquarters. It rose in the darkness like a vast, squat tombstone.

The sedan swung neatly beside the front steps, and the detectives stepped out. Moussac watched Rip's face, then put his hand on Rip's arm. 'If you would rather wait until morning, Rip——'

Rip looked at him. 'I've come this far. Why wait?'

As they walked into the silent building their footsteps on the stone echoed. One of the flics went ahead of the group to pull the switches which lighted the building. Each light was a single bulb in a curved reflector hanging on a cord, and, as they walked down the broad curving steps into the cellar, the group of four men appeared and disappeared in pools of yellow brightness. The deeper they went the more hollow the echo their footsteps sounded against the curved vault of the ceiling. The humid African air became cooler.

Finally they reached a long passageway lined by barred prison cells. The detective who accompanied Rip and Colonel Moussac looked briefly from left to right with a faint air of embarrassment as they passed the cells. Almost never had he

seen a prisoner here, and it bothered him. This Colonel Moussac's idea of police administration was incredible.

At the end of the corridor the first detective, who had gone ahead, stood before a heavy, beamed mahogany door recessed in the stone wall. He lifted the big crossbar as they approached, swung open the door, and turned on the light inside. After the moist warmth outside the gust of air which puffed from the open door was frigid. The room inside was long and low, lighted by a row of bare bulbs set into the ceiling; a sturdy wooden mortuary table sat at the far end; several coffin-size drawers were built directly into the cold damp stone walls.

Moussac hesitated a moment before ducking through the doorway to glance back at Rip's face. It had become rock.

They went in. As if the whole matter had been rehearsed, both detectives pulled out the bottom drawer. Inside lay a shrouded figure. All three Frenchmen heard Rip's involuntary sigh.

'Rip——' Moussac said tentatively, but Rip stood rigidly staring into the deep drawer. Moussac took off his cap and nodded a little to one of his men. The detective lifted the sheet away from the face of the corpse.

The sudden movement released a long strand of woman's hair which fell across the sleeping face. The woman looked statuesque in the pale dignity of death; there was a certain girlish innocence in the wavy black hair which curled down her shoulders and lay over the dark prison pillow beneath her head; but her body was mature, almost voluptuous, and someone had clasped her hands together in the classic attempt at a beatific attitude.

On the right side of her head, just above the ear, there was a small puckered area, clumsily repaired, where a medium calibre bullet had struck.

Moussac cleared his throat apologetically. 'This room was the only place in Port Afrique which was cold enough——' he began '—until you could get here, Rip.' He saw Rip's face and stopped.

All the blood had drained from Rip's skin, leaving him sunken eyed and hollow faced under the bare light above his

head. He held his arms tightly beside him, but his hands were shaking violently inside his raincoat pockets. A convulsive tremor ran through his shoulders, but he stiffened instantly.

Colonel Moussac nodded to the detectives again, but the moment they began to slide the drawer shut Rip broke. He grasped the edge of the drawer with both hands and went down on his knees. He leaned forward, bowing his head until it rested on his taut knuckles, and once more a terrible shiver ran through him.

Moussac crossed his arms over his chest, then slowly raised one hand and spread his fingers to cover his eyes. Then he walked out of the morgue. After a moment's hesitation, both detectives followed him. They saw Moussac go down the dark corridor toward the exit.

Standing in the passageway outside the morgue one took out his handkerchief and wiped his palms. 'It's hard to believe,' he said, 'such a beautiful woman. What got into her head to kill herself?'

'Reardon takes it very well,' the second said. 'If I came home to find my wife a suicide, I would——' He stopped and shrugged. 'Who knows what I would do?'

The first put his handkerchief away. 'After all, he saw plenty of dead ones these last few years.'

'Don't talk like a fool. War is different.'

'Well, it hardens a man.'

'Your head is hard, fool. Give me a cigarette.'

'This one makes it two packs even.'

'Send me a bill.'

'Where'd the colonel go?'

'Upstairs to his office. I didn't think he had enough wetness inside to make a tear.'

'Well, who wouldn't weep over so much of a woman? What a figure! All wasted.'

It did not seem proper to smoke so nearby, so they walked to the end of the cellar corridor. When they looked back down the tunnelled length of the passageway they could see Rip still kneeling by the side of his dead wife in the ancient bent posture of grief, like a man broken on a wheel.

Colonel Jacques Moussac's office was like all administrative offices on the west African coast. It was high, with spaced pairs of long, narrow, slatted French doors; despite a row of filing cabinets, two desks, and a tall closet in the corner, it looked very bare. In the corner, where the light would fall indirectly on it during the day, stood a small table whose surface was a chessboard; the border of the table was set with an intricate pattern of mother-of-pearl, Arabic fashion, and a small gold plate engraved with a lengthy inscription in French:

> To my friend Jacques Moussac.
> The chessboard is the world,
> The pieces are the phenomena of the universe,
> The rules of the game are the laws of Nature.
> In gratitude for many felicitous afternoons,
> Hassan, Sultan of Morocco.

The chessmen which stood on the board were carved as desert Arabs, wearing headdresses and robes; the knights were mounted Arab horsemen carrying lances; each pawn was a foot warrior carrying a short, curved dagger. The set made a subtle compliment-within-a-compliment, for Hassan was illustrating his own European attitude by violating the Mohammedan rule against graven images.

Moussac came up from the cellar corridor into the room, turned on the light, and went straight to the closet in the corner. He took a bottle of cognac from the shelf with one hand while grasping two small glasses with the other. He pulled the cork out of the bottle with his teeth, filled each glass, replaced the cork, and then tossed both glasses down, one right after the other. Then he went to his desk and sat down and waited.

When Rip came in, finally, Moussac filled both glasses again. 'Sit down, Rip,' he said, raising one of the glasses. 'Put this away.'

Rip sat down and put it away. He leaned back in his chair, and closed his eyes. When he opened them again they looked stony. 'God,' he said, 'I don't think I'm going to be able to stand it.'

'Forgive me, Rip,' Moussac said carefully, 'but you must. The living are doomed, and blessed, to go on living.'

'It's like being hit all over again. You feel skyrockets going off in your head.'

'Rip,' Moussac began, then stopped to clear his throat. 'Georgette was my friend as well as your wife. A friend from the Paris days, back home. Permit me—permit me to share your sorrow.'

Rip hardly heard him. He shook his head dully. 'Oh my God,' he said to himself. Then he stood up and began to walk blindly toward the door.

'Wait, Rip.' Moussac came around the desk. 'Sit down. Have another drink.' He picked up the bottle, but Rip's voice stopped him.

'I appreciate it, Jacques. Everything. But don't try to nurse me along. I've had a long time to think about this. Since I got your cable in the hospital back in the States. Since Casablanca.' He rubbed one hand slowly over his forehead and eyes. 'Day and night on that rusty bucket,' he said wearily, 'I've figured sixteen ways. Up and down and crosswise——'

'Rip——'

'It doesn't add up, Jacques. Two and two, but I get five!'

'Rip——'

'Don't "Rip" me, Jacques! Tell me! Why? *Why?* Her religion was against it, her whole life was against it—why should she——?' Suddenly he slammed his fist on the desk. '*Why*, dammit! My God, if somebody can just explain to me——!' He swung on Moussac. 'Jacques, I swear, if you're lying to me, if you're trying to make something easier for me——'

'Rip, sit down, sit down, please. You need sleep, you look like the devil——'

'I feel like the wrath of God!'

'Why torture yourself, Rip? A gunshot wound above the ear, powder burns on the skin, the weapon—it all added together. Suicide.' He stepped around the corner of his desk, pulled open the top drawer and took out a small bottle of

tablets. 'I'll drive you home, Rip. You'll take two of these, a mild barbiturate, and tomorrow——'

But Rip's eyes had become blank again, withdrawn, caught in some interior dream.

Moussac lifted a long official envelope out of his desk drawer; it was sealed with an elaborate embossed circle of wax. 'You might like to have these papers, Rip. Georgette's passport, carte d'identité——'

'Keep them. Burn them.' There was such an achingly bitter tone in Rip's voice that Moussac walked to him quickly and put his hand on his shoulder. He shook Rip a little, as if awakening him gently. 'Let's go, Rip. I'll drive you out to your plantation.'

Rip pulled his shoulder free. 'Listen, Jacques. I don't believe what's happened. Maybe you think I'm crazy. Maybe I am, but I don't believe it.' He ran his hand back through his hair. 'It's been one long long road these last four years. Africa, Europe, Germany, the hospital in the States. I never thought I'd come out of it alive. Well, I did. I had a picture of home ahead of me. Now the road runs off a cliff. There was a big blond kid in my company, Texas boy, used to sing a cowboy song about home is where you hang your heart. . . . Texas boy with a pretty good voice . . . he got clipped off in the Hurtgen Forest.' His voice had begun to thicken painfully and he stopped.

Moussac tried again. 'Come on, Rip. Let me drive you home.'

'Home.' Rip said it like pronouncing the word: death. Suddenly he turned to Moussac again. 'I don't believe it, Jacques! I won't until I know why she did it!'

'Rip——'

'I don't know why, Jacques, but all of a sudden everybody looks like a stranger to me. I feel all alone here.'

He hunched a little inside his raincoat and walked out.

Rip walked down Rue Voltaire slowly, holding his hat in his hand and letting the light drizzle fall on his face. Everything was misty, and the dim street lamps seemed to hang

mysteriously suspended in air. A minor French official who had had to work late at his office went pedalling by with a bulging briefcase slapping against his bicycle carrier. A high wooden cart drawn by bullocks came squeaking along on some strange night errand. Up high across the street someone's apartment was still lighted, and through the open balcony came the muffled crackling voice of the European short-wave radio.

At the corner of l'Impasse du Chat Noir, Rip stopped.

The Impasse. Black Cat Alley. Port Afrique's 52nd Street, Times Square, Place Pigalle, the Sunset Strip rolled into one lone row of grimy bistros and nightclubs. In comparison to the rest of the town this street was bright with lights, and, even at this late hour, fairly crowded. Clusters of French sailors wandered up and down the street; one of them stood with his legs apart, swaying slightly, out in the middle of the cobblestone road while he made a loud speech with enormous gestures to the world. The proprietors of the little hole-in-the-wall souvenir shops came out of their doorways to listen to him. Even a few bleached-blonde poules drifted out of their doorways to join the crowd that began to ring the speaker.

Only Rip was alone. He stood at the corner with his hat in his hand and the light beads of mist wetting his face. Beside him, in the dim glow from the street lamp over his head, was a small shop with a window full of cheap watches and jewellery. From the back of the window a tall dark-haired woman beckoned to him smiling. For a moment he stood frozen, then he walked toward her dumbly until his toes hit the wall. He could not take his eyes away from her. The reflection of his cigarette in the windowpane began to glow more brightly as he began to breathe faster, staring at her.

There she stood at the back of the showcase in the faint glow cast by the street lamp, surrounded by the open trays and velvet cloths of a half-empty jeweller's window, standing with the affected pose of a mannequin. She wore a dark patterned negligee which was casually and carefully open, revealing one long leg almost to the thigh; she held one slender hand up, delicately grasping a strand of her long wavy black

hair as if she had just gasped with joy; the other hand she held out before her, toward the street, so that she could admire the gold wedding ring which gleamed on her finger. She was a life-size advertising photograph mounted upright so that she looked three dimensional and alive.

Rip ran his sleeve over his wet face, then looked down at his own hand, at the wide gold band he wore, clenching his fist.

Someone tugged at his arm and he swung around tensely.

A small ragged Walof boy stood beside him. 'M'sieu wan' ver' nize ladee——?'

Rip glanced down at him as if he had hardly heard, then looked back once more at the beautiful cardboard girl with the long wavy black hair.

The boy grasped his arm persistently. 'Ver' nize ladee——' he began to say, but Rip, with a sudden quick accumulation of all his pent-up feeling threw his arm outward furiously and sent the boy sprawling. He turned to walk away, then turned back to where the skinny youngster lay whimpering on the ground and nursing a bruised elbow.

'Hey,' Rip said, 'you, what's your name, Kif-Kif. I'm sorry.' But the boy was still afraid of him, a little hostile. He tried again. 'Veux-tu des cigarettes?'

The boy realized instantly that Rip was buying a brief forgiveness; his elbow began to heal immediately and he became shrewd.

'Cigarettes? Américaines?'

'Oui.'

The kid stuck his hand out carefully, unbelievingly. Rip pulled his pack out of his pocket and put it into the bony claw and started off again. Then he stopped, patted his pockets, and swung back to the boy.

'Hey, Kif-Kif, come back here. Those are my last butts. Attends. Il me faut une cigarette,' then, ironically—'s'il vous plaît.'

The boy took the precious pack out of his dirty torn blouse and offered Rip an entire cigarette, as one gentleman to another. Rip saluted him gravely and started walking down l'Impasse du Chat Noir.

Black Cat Alley. Rip remembered it very well. Before the war there had been the same basement bars, the same night-clubs, the same one-doorway hotels, the same gimcrack souvenir shops full of stuffed lizard skins and crude ebony carvings. Before the war . . . a hundred years ago. . . .

The crowd around the drunken sailor who was making the speech had become noisy now. 'That's right!' they heckled him. 'You said it, admiral! You tell 'em!'

'Look,' one of the poules shouted, wobbling on her high thin heels, 'here comes an American, admiral! Why don't you ask him?'

The sailor waved his arm loosely at Rip. 'I most certainly beg your pardon, sir,' he said, 'but are you an American?'

'Sure he is,' a short husky petty officer standing nearby said. 'That's an American Army officer's coat.'

'Who but an American,' one of the rouged ladies laughed, 'would walk on a wet night with his hat in his hand?'

They all laughed. Rip put his hat on, turned to the lady, and raised it politely. That took care of that. Before the situation could dissolve into an endless discussion, he pushed his way past them.

A large patch of light spilled out of a basement bar across the sidewalk in front of him. The sign painted over the steps which led down below street level into the café read: Le Badinage, and the name was repeated in curly Arabic script. As Rip paused on the sidewalk a burst of laughter came from inside. He walked down the steps, and pushed through the swinging doors into the smoky basement room.

The joint was crowded to the walls. French sailors and their girls, small groups of Arabs drinking lebqi, and a cluster or two of bearded biblical-looking Mauretanian merchants in long blue tunics having little cups of thick Turkish coffee. The air was hot, close, heavy with noise and smoke.

Le Badinage was larger than it seemed from the doorway; it was built in a long figure eight, with a Moorish archway across the narrow waist of the room. In the arch hung a curtain of knotted leather thongs which made looking into the back room like a view through slatted blinds. From behind

the thonged curtain came the ancient dissonant wail of Arabic music: the two-string twang, the crying flute, the slow thump of drums. Rip saw a trio of bare-breasted Tuareg dancing girls, rare imports in this part of Africa, turning slowly in unison to the low beat of the music.

Rip dropped a coin into the cup of the blind beggar who squatted beside the doorway, then started to weave in and out of the close tables, gradually making his way across the room.

The dancing girls in the next room were turning faster now, their short embroidered vests flaring out as they began to whirl in circles before the crescent-shaped audience of Arabs seated on rugs and cushions. Watching the dancers through the spaces in the thonged curtain was a huge mountain of a man, the café's bouncer, a tall Syrian wrestler with a large mouth full of gold teeth who looked like Primo Carnera. He was cleaning his ear with a long toothpick, unconsciously speeding it in circles as he watched the dancers. Rip came up beside him and tapped his shoulder.

'Msa'l kheir, Grila,' he said quietly.

Grila turned, annoyed at the interruption, then stared. 'M'sieu Reardon!' he said with astonishment. 'La bes, la bes? Comment ça va?'

'La bes baraka laufik,' Rip answered with the same mixture of Arabic and French. 'Ça va, ça va.'

Grila grasped both his shoulders. 'Vraiment, c'est vous!' Then, in his heavy accent, 'I can't believe! You're back!'

'Yes,' Rip said, 'back. You used to have a hotel upstairs. I need a room for tonight.'

'Here, here,' Grila said, pulling the leather thongs of the curtain aside and pushing Rip ahead of him into the second room with the clumsy gentleness of a big man, 'here, this no way for a friend, to stand up.' He pushed two round Moroccan leather poufs away from the wall. 'Sit down, M'sieu Reardon, sit down. You look ver' tire', terrible. You need drink.' He motioned at a passing waiter, then gripped Rip's elbow. 'Sit down, please. To welcome a friend is good thing.'

Rip sat down.

Grila rattled swiftly in Hausa dialect to the waiter, raising two fingers to indicate glasses, and sat down heavily beside Rip. 'A little eau-de-vie will give you what you need, dreams full of dancing girls.' He followed Rip's glance to the Tuareg trio, and chuckled deep in his chest. 'Not so bad, ah? It is ver' hard get official permits in Marrakech for these girls to come work here, even with bribes, so we say they are dancers. They come, and mon Dieu, c'est vrai, they know how to dance!' The fact that a lie should turn out to be the truth pleased him greatly, and he grinned, showing a full row of gold teeth.

The dancers finished in a final twirling frenzy and sank to the floor, touching their foreheads against the stone. Then they rose and ran gracefully up the narrow stone staircase which ran along the back wall to the second floor.

'How long you gone from here?' Grila asked. 'Seems long time, by Jove.'

'In polite society, Grila, one has a drink first. Then the questions.'

'You sound all tire' out,' Grila said, 'tire' inside and outside.'

'Mostly inside,' Rip said.

Their waiter came back with a bottle of eau-de-vie and two glasses on a low carved taboret.

Rip poured a glass for himself quickly and tossed it down. He closed his eyes momentarily and shook his head. Then he filled both glasses. 'Pardon my haste on that first one, Grila,' he said, 'but I was starting to feel myself come back to consciousness again.' He saluted Grila with his glass. 'A votre santé.'

They drank, and Grila watched Rip begin to pour himself a third glass.

'Pardon,' Grila said in French, then changed to English. 'I nevair remember see you drink like this, M'sieu Reardon.'

'That,' Rip said, 'is because you lead such a narrow provincial life here.' He put away his third shot of eau-de-vie, and began filling his fourth.

'How was,' Grila asked, 'last couple years?'

'Not so good.'

'Bad, ah?'

'As the boys in the Air Corps say, very rugged. In plain English, stinking lousy bad. A simple outdoor life with very few luxuries. Anything else you want to know?'

'No,' Grila said, 'you said enough. You a little drunk and not drunk same time. I nevair see you work so hard on a bottle before.'

Rip raised his glass. 'Here's to the young. They die good. Or is it the good who die young?'

'M'sieu Reardon,' Grila said, 'that's ver' bad about your wife——'

With great care Rip lowered his glass to the taboret. His hand was trembling very badly and, when the glass touched the table, it spilled. 'I thought,' he said, 'we were going to have a pleasant little drink for old times, and I would drown myself to sleep with your rotgut and then you were going to ask the boss about putting me up for the night.'

Grila nodded in the direction beyond Rip's shoulder, toward the narrow stone stairway which curved up to the second floor. 'Here comes boss now.'

Rip followed Grila's glance toward the stairway, then turned back. 'That's not Marcel. That's not the boss.'

'This is new boss. Marcel——' Grila lifted both forefingers up to make a cross of them, and shrugged. 'Dead. Kaput. Vichy concentration camp near Dakar.'

Rip made a small wet cabalistic pattern with the bottom of his glass in the puddle of liquor on the taboret. Dead. Dead. Suddenly he tossed the drink down. 'And little Rudi,' he said, 'what about little Rudi, that bald-headed bartender?'

'At Bir Hacheim. Les boches. Killed.'

Rip looked into space and rubbed one hand down slowly over his forehead and eyes, a gesture of great weariness and troubled dreams.

The boss, the small man who had walked down the staircase and crossed the room, stopping to palaver briefly with an occasional Arab guest, now came over beside them and broke into Rip's brief memorial of silence with high-pressure Cockney affability.

'Well well well now! Mr. Rip Reardon! Welcome 'ome sir,

welcome 'ome! Ulysses the warrier 'as travelled the seven seas and 'omeward makes 'is way!'

Grila lumbered to his feet immediately to give his boss his leather cushion, while Rip turned to look at the source of so much cordiality.

Nino, the boss, was a short Cockney whom Rip remembered as having a face always covered by a day's growth of beard. He had an open-eyed stare of complete frankness and innocence from years of explaining how it happened that he was down on his luck. Since Rip had last seen him four years ago, Nino had evidently come up in the world along the Port Afrique coast. He now looked like a beachcomber's idea of a prosperous gentleman; he wore an expensive pongee suit, but the lapels were dirty where he had grasped them; he wore a pleated-front tan silk shirt, but the cuffs were frayed, one of them held together by a safety pin, and his ready-made polka-dot tie hung awry.

Nino was enjoying Rip's surprise. ''Ere now,' he snapped at Grila, 'take that bottle o' distilled varnish off of Mr. Reardon's table.' He fumbled in his pocket for a moment, pulling out a knife at the end of a watch chain, a small bottle of medicinal tablets, a gold pencil, a notebook and a crumpled handkerchief before he found his key. He held it out to Grila. 'Upstairs, in my room. Bring us a bottle of my armagnac. Lock up after, now.' He turned back to Rip as Grila left. ''Ere now, back 'ome from the wars an' don't even recognize Nino, your old friend and well-wisher?'

'The last time I saw you——' Rip's eyes took in Nino's prosperity.

Nino laughed, still enjoying his triumphant surprise. 'Burned *them* clothes you remember at the end of a stick, I did.' His eyes kept scanning Rip's face; suddenly his mouth dropped and his eyes rolled piously toward the smoky ceiling. 'Forgive my jollity at seein' an old friend back, Mr. Reardon. Forgettin' your bereavement, I was, cryin' rotten shime it is. Lovely lidy your wife was, a beautiful woman.'

Rip leaned away from him and poured himself another drink. The little man's gushing was sickening. Once again

Rip used his little unconscious trick of withdrawal, of hunching within himself. But Nino sat down on Grila's cushion across from him and went on talking.

''Ow would you like to sell your plantation house, Mr. Reardon? There can't be much left there for you now. Painful mem'ries, hauntin' your nights——' Rip's face had begun to freeze, but Nino took it for a look of disbelief. 'Oh,' he said, 'I can pay you a good price, cash on the button. American dollars or Swiss francs if you insist. I managed to rub together an honest penny or two during the late unpleasantness, you know 'ow it is in wartime, with a bit o' luck and if you don't mind my sayin' so, with a bit o' brains——'

But now he began to realize that Rip's face held a gathering storm. Hastily, placatingly, Nino shifted his tone. 'An' don't I know I owe all my good fortune to all you plucky lads out there fightin' for king and for country——'

'Listen Nino——' Rip began to say, but he was cut off by a sudden wave of applause from the patrons around him. The house lights went down. Without their having noticed it, a European woman had entered the dancing space. She was striking—tawny skinned, with long wavy black hair, high cheekbones, and a dancer's way of walking. She looked around the dim room at the semicircle of men seated on rugs, slowly lifting her hands, slowly, slowly, until the room became absolutely still; suddenly her hands flew behind her head with a rattle of castanets, tossing her black hair upward in a wild shower as the orchestra exploded into an Andalusian dance. It was more than clever theatricalness; she had said something to all the men with the slow controlled gesture, something they understood they could watch and pay for and applaud, but not possess.

Long waving black hair, Rip thought, watching her, how many more women would he see now with the same beautiful hair Georgette had had. . . .

He closed his eyes, feeling his throat begin to knot; slowly he fought his way back to self-control, and when he opened his eyes again his forehead was wet with sweat.

As the music beat and quickened the dancer began to move

her body as though she were alone in the room, with a sensuality and excitement that kept them all silent. Around the dancing space she swung, around and around, hips rocking so that her swirling Spanish skirts rippled in their faces and left them dry mouthed and breathing hard. Suddenly she seemed to catch sight of Rip and her eyes widened with surprise. She began to manage her dancing in his direction, coming forward and going back, coming and going, castanets clicking with wooden insistence, looking at him with a strange intensity which Nino noticed.

'Ynez looked like she's taken quite a shine to you, Mr. Reardon. Finest dancer from Spain, in my 'umble opinion.' He looked at the dancer who was whirling now in a cascade of white petticoats and lace and licked his lips a little. 'Pure electricity, that girl. You'll be interested to know she lives——'

Reardon took his eyes away from the dancer and stared directly at Nino. 'I don't give a damn where she lives,' he said flatly, sounding a little blurred by alcohol and dangerously quiet.

Nino cleared his throat, changing the subject, then leaned across the taboret to put a heavily sympathetic hand on Rip's arm. 'I'd like to repeat my offer for your plantation, Mr. Reardon. You won't find your house an 'appy plice, and I'll gladly pay——'

Rip stood up, rocking on his feet and tight with fury. 'Get out of my way, heel. Back down to your beach with the other jellyfish.'

Nino stood up too, but kept his voice down to a hissing quiet. 'I know your wife is dead, Mr. Reardon, and naturally you're upset——'

The orchestra leader had spotted what was happening across the room and signalled his men. The flute began to skirl in a mad bagpipe wail, and the drum beat faster, louder, faster, louder.

Rip leaned across the taboret toward Nino. 'Keep talking about Georgette and there'll be some more upset around here——'

Nino's hands fluttered frantically. 'Sit down, Mr. Reardon, no violence, please, please! I apologize! It's only your 'ouse, I want it bad I do, and you 'aven't said what you think of my offer!'

Rip took a deep breath and stood up straight. 'I think it's plucky. Just real plucky.' He sounded just the way he was—a man on a quiet controlled drunk.

There was a final crescendo of booming drumbeats and the brassy clash of cymbals as the Spanish dancer finished with her body flung upward in one taut quivering line, arms held high, head thrown back. She did not wait to acknowledge the shower of applause, but ran with a lacy flourish of petticoats toward the narrow stone staircase at the back of the room and up the curving steps.

The house lights brightened again and a hum of talk started.

Grila hurried toward Rip and Nino with a tall bottle of armagnac and two slender glasses with sugar cubes. He reached them just as Rip picked up his hat and turned to go. He stopped, amazed as Rip took the bottle off his tray, slipped it into his raincoat pocket, and dropped several bills on the tray in payment.

'Dites donc——!' Grila began.

'Mr. Reardon, please——!' Nino's voice had gone up shrilly now. 'You needn't act the bloody hero with me, y'know!'

From the top of the stairs, in the shadow of the doorway, the Spanish dancer stood looking down into the room holding one fist clenched tightly in her other hand, watching them tensely.

Rip swung back at Nino snarling, 'Hero! You little crud!' He reached deliberately across the taboret and slapped Nino full across the face with his open palm. He strode away quickly, ignoring the patrons' stares, twisting quickly past the rugs and tables. The leather thongs of the curtains opened and fell behind him.

Upstairs, watching it all from the dark doorway, the dancer lifted her skirts with one swift gesture and turned quickly back into the hallway behind her.

Grila stood still, watching Rip push through the leather

curtain. He took his toothpick from behind his ear and, after placing it between his shining gold teeth, bit it in half with a little snap.

'Aie,' he said, 'just wait when he gets home to his house and finds out . . .'

Nino's face had paled, making his eyes seem thinner, reptilian. 'Sure,' he said huskily, 'I can wait.' He leaned slightly toward Grila, dropping his voice. 'But right now I want you to go after 'im and muss 'is 'air a bit. Some dark corner.'

'No,' Grila said.

'Not you, not you personally. That would bring Moussac down on us. Hire some of El Makhzen's men. Quick, man, before he gets away.'

'No,' Grila said.

Nino was twisting his hands together now, cracking his knuckles furiously one by one. 'Goddam you thick head! Do as I say!'

'No,' Grila said. 'Reardon helped me before the war. I don't like hurt him too much now.'

Nino's eyes flickered from side to side to see if the nearby patrons could hear him. 'You dumb ox,' he said swiftly. 'I'll break you. Now get out of my sight!'

Grila shrugged and began wiping the tray he was holding against the seat of his trousers as he walked away. Nino's hollow jollity was gone completely now, and he rammed his fists into his pockets.

The street outside Le Badinage was empty now; the air was moving inland from the harbour and the mist was lifting, leaving the half-dry cobblestone road streaked irregularly with shining patches of wetness.

Rip stood on the sidewalk weaving a little. A spasm of pain twisted through his stomach, making him bend over and lean against the wall with his face breaking into sweat. Back in the United States, at Walter Reed General Hospital in Washington, the doctor had told him to watch himself about that pain inside. 'Don't push yourself too hard,' the Army doctor had

warned him. 'I don't mean treat yourself like a glass doll, but take it easy. There might be a hæmorrhage, you know, so why take chances? You aren't a hundred per cent. healed inside, and if you shove yourself too hard, well, it'll start ringing bells down where you live.'

The bells were ringing now.

Georgette. Georgette . . .

He had learned to live with himself through all the long war years, learning the discipline of being alive in his head with death sitting on his shoulders. He had learned and he had survived, and he never talked about it with the upside-down heroism of men who chuckled, 'Afraid? Lord, yes, scared as a cat!' The fear he had known clawed men's bowels to water, and left very little room for the jolly type of frankness. He had learned to live with the fear and stay on his feet. But Georgette's suicide, this single irrational death, this concentrated personal violence, was a hammer between the eyes. *Why? Why* did she shoot herself? His stomach knotted, the blade of memory stabbed him.

Early in the war, at Kasserine Pass under Rommel's powerful night attack, he had made the terrible discovery that he was not immortal, but vulnerable, brittle, human, as easily broken as a dry branch. That convinced him violence must be overcome by greater violence; but it also taught humility, the need for comradeship. Now, if Georgette was dead, the central root of his dream of homecoming was torn out and the tree of life itself could wither.

A part of him was sodden with alcohol and he felt an onrush of nameless fears; he had a sudden blinding vision of being chained naked on some rocky moon landscape under an awful rain of hot jagged shrapnel. A barrage of 88's thundered in his ears. Behind the fear he felt an overpowering rage that he should be so helpless, a shaking wrath because he could not fight back. His anger shifted somehow, subtly, and now he became furious about Georgette's suicide. Another defeat. He was helpless about it, too; nothing he could do would change the fact, there was nothing to lay his hands on and destroy in retaliation.

He closed his eyes and waited until it was over, then he rolled back on his heels heavily, shivering a little, sweating. This would not do. No. Not this way. The drinking had opened that last final door in his head and he had made the mistake of looking down the shaft into the bottomless cellar of his mind. The stabbing pain in his stomach came and went now, easing off a little. He tried walking slowly, pressing one hand against his side.

He went down the street carefully and stopped outside the next bar. He turned in under the sign, BISTRO, and stood swaying in the doorway, fighting down the slackening waves of pain.

The proprietor of the little bar, a small man with a fierce moustache who was turning off his lights, looked up at him.

Down the street, Ynez, the Spanish dancer, came hurrying out of a doorway beside the main entrance of Le Badinage, wrapping a fringed shawl around her head. She stood on the sidewalk for a moment, looking left and right undecidedly—but the entire Impasse was empty. A two-wheeled native carriage came rattling around the corner from Rue Voltaire, and, after a moment of indecision, she hailed it.

In the bistro the small moustachioed proprietor switched the light back on and stared at Rip wavering in the doorway. There was a single customer at the bar; he slapped a few coins down next to his glass and started out. He wore a leather jacket with gilt wings painted broadly over an upper pocket, and a visored cap, peaked in front with bent sides like an Air Corps pilot's. A small gold earring hung from one of his ear lobes. He stopped short and stared at Rip.

'Desculpe me,' he said in Portuguese, then in English, 'you look ver' familiar, senhor.'

'I'm under par,' Rip said, 'about six feet under. Not sure.'

'Gentlemen,' the proprietor said from behind the bar, 'please, if you kindly please, I am just preparing to make a close.'

The young man with the dangling gold earring was still looking at Rip. 'You look ver' familiar to my eyes, senhor,' he said slowly, 'Como se chama? What's your name?'

Rip looked at him, but the peaked pilot's cap threw a shadow over the young man's face, and all Rip was sure of was the little gold loop hanging from one ear. 'Why?' Rip said. 'Who the hell are you?'

'You are not six feet under, senhor. You are not even ver' drunk. Just perdido in your head and feeling violent, eh? You want a fight, eh?'

The proprietor came hurriedly toward them behind the bar, automatically wiping the wooden surface with the bottom of his apron as he came. 'Gentlemen,' he said nervously. 'No trouble, please. Monsieur has a bottle in his raincoat pocket. Why not drink that? Outside.'

'That armagnac,' Rip said, 'is for emergencies only. Forced landings and such.' But he closed his hand over the neck of the bottle, ready to pull it out and swing it.

The man with the earring stopped frowning and let his closed fists open. Suddenly he threw his head back and laughed out loud. 'Could you be the man Senhor Reardon?'

Rip looked at him. 'Maybe. Why?'

'You don' remember Pedro?'

'Pedro?'

'Pedro Aranda. You don' remember?'

'Pedro Aranda? You mean in Nairobi, 1939? That skinny Portugee kid?' Back then, before the war, Pedro Aranda had been a crazy daredevil of a kid who used to fly a battered old Gypsy Moth which was held together with spit and wire; he had spotted elephant herds from the air for wealthy big game hunters on safari. Dangerous work. A forced landing in some parts of that country was sure death, particularly from the red, numberless, flesh-eating Siafu ants. Rip had sprayed the youngster with gasoline once to kill all the ants on him.

'Yes, yes, yes!' Pedro pulled off the cap. 'See? Not so skinny now, eh!' He laughed loudly, pleased. 'Look different now, eh?'

'Well,' Rip said, swaying a little, 'I would never recognize you in that superduper cap with that jacket and those gilt wings.'

Pedro grinned, 'Ver' hot pilot, eh?'

'Yes, that's it,' Rip said. 'You look hot all right. Very

flashy.' He wavered again and grasped a chair and sat down heavily. 'So,' he said, looking up, 'time rolls backward. So you're Pedro, all grown up, with a leather jacket and wings and a sailor's gold earring for good luck. Still flying?'

'Sim. Yes.' Pedro ignored the proprietor's imploring gesture and sat down beside Rip. 'My own plane now. Ver' nice. American plane. What is call a five-place job. From Port Afrique to Dakar, Freetown, Accra, Abidjan, Porto Novo, Douala, Fada-n'Gourma, Niamey.' He grinned. 'Every place. Now I am Afro-Aero Company. Fly any place for money. Except Portugee Guinea.'

'Money,' Rip said. 'You still want the stuff?'

'No, no,' Pedro said, 'I hate it. But the girls, they love it. Sometimes more than a man.' He laughed, all white teeth in a mahogany face.

'Why not Portugee Guinea?' Rip said. 'Why do you fly every place but there?'

'Ah,' Pedro said.

Rip turned clumsily toward the proprietor. 'Let's have two drinks. Doesn't matter what, just so long's it's anæsthetic.'

'Monsieur. If you please. It is necessary to close.'

'Bring it, Louis,' Pedro said, 'bring it. Senhor Reardon is a friend from the old time.' The proprietor sighed deeply and started toward the back of the room, wiping the bar with the hem of his apron as he went. Pedro turned back to Rip. 'You still import-export like before the war?'

'Let's talk about something else, Pedro. What kind of cargo does the Afro-Aero Company fly?' He didn't care; but he did not want to sit alone and drink alone, vulnerable to the whirling saw-toothed darkness inside, and Pedro was the remembered past, the happier time, a laughing human being, a man you could have a drink with and talk about nothing. 'What cargo does Afro-Aero fly?'

Pedro shrugged and spread his hands. 'Anything. A trader to Ouagadougou for goatskins. Last week I flew a police official to Takara with some X-ray photographs.'

Rip wiped his face with his sleeve, forcing himself to think about that. 'A police official? X-ray pictures?'

'Colonel Moussac. You must know him. He——'

'I do,' Rip said. 'I do.'

'It's a good business, senhor, flying. Africa is big, roads are bad in the rainy season. Maybe you could use me in your business. Or maybe you want to invest a few dollars.'

'Maybe.' Moussac——? X-rays——?

'With a little money in back of me I can drop some of the not-so-good jobs. I could——'

'What do you mean, not-so-good jobs?'

Pedro lowered his voice. 'Senhor knows Africa. Always somebody wants something to cross over a border to get someplace.'

'Like flying girl talent down here to work for Nino?'

Pedro grabbed his arm. 'You know Senhor Nino? He told you? I'll knock his teeth out!'

The proprietor came back with two drinks. Rip looked up at him. 'Sit down, Louis. Join us. Have a drink.'

'You are Monsieur Reardon?' the proprietor asked.

'Yes.'

'I'm sorry I didn't know it was you. I heard about Madame Reardon shooting herself——' he coughed, embarrassed. 'I mean——' He stopped.

The room grew still. 'My God,' Pedro said quietly, 'I didn't think! No wonder you want to drink. Goddam! Louis, don't stand there. Bring the whole bottle!'

It hadn't worked. All the talk with Pedro, all the talk about anything except what he did want to discuss—it hadn't worked, and now he was back around, full circle, back to where he had started. Slowly Rip folded his arms on the table and lowered his face into his bent elbows with unutterable weariness.

The first bare edge of dawn was lighting the night as Rip got out of Pedro's little Fiat two-seater.

'I will be glad to drive directly up to your door,' Pedro said.

'No thanks,' Rip said, 'I'd rather walk the rest of the way.'

'You're all back to yourself now? You're all——' Pedro grinned '—okay now?'

'Yes, sure,' Rip said, 'okay now.'

'It is no trouble. I can drive you to your door.'

'Thank you, no. I just want to come home standing on my own feet.'

Pedro put the car into gear. 'Até logo, Senhor.' Rip put his hand into his pocket, but Pedro shook his head slightly, still smiling. 'Nothing, amigo. Felicidades. Good luck. Come to my airport sometime. I fly you around'—he kissed his fingertips—'like a virgin's sweet dream!' His earring swung lightly, a golden exclamation point.

Rip raised his hand in a half-salute. The guy had been very decent. 'A thousand thanks,' he said in Portuguese 'Obrigado, Pedro.'

The small car swung easily around on the narrow road and chugged back down toward Port Afrique. Rip was alone. In the grey trees somewhere behind him an awakening bird chattered loudly, like a mechanical toy, then stopped short.

He stood still for a moment, looking up the winding avenue of palms which led to his house, now out of sight around the curve, then he began to walk slowly, holding the long bottle of armagnac down in his pocket so that it would not slap against his leg. Fatigue was stamped deeply into his face in a fine network of grey threads, but he walked steadily and firmly.

The avenue of palms was just as he remembered it; how many times in Europe he had wrapped himself in a blanket on the ground and had opened a private door in his mind and had once again gone walking up this curving road between the trees. He had planted the palms after Georgette had come vacationing from Paris along the African coast to Port Afrique, after he had squired her and gone hunting inland with her for weeks, to the shocked delight of the Cercle Militaire veranda set; after he had made violent love to her and asked her to marry him. When Georgette moved in with him and began to change his plantation house she had mentioned how nice it would be to have an avenue of trees leading to the little

circular drive which wound around before their great screened veranda, something like the lanes of poplars in Normandy. So they were planted.

And now they stood like a double file of some honour guard. And Georgette was dead.

The road bent before him, and there was the house.

It was a good house for this climate, broad and low and open, with a second floor running across the back for the bedrooms and dressing room and the tiled American-style bathroom he had built for Georgette. Now the house sat quietly in the dawn hush, hugging the ground and sleeping within the pale shadows thrown from the sloping roof.

For a moment Rip dreamed he heard piano music coming from within the house, just as in the old days, then everything was still again.

He stopped where the avenue of trees swung itself into the circular drive which curved broadly around and led to the front steps of the house. An ancient gnarled baobab tree which was old when Cæsar ruled Africa stood at the junction of the avenue and the circle, and from one low branch swung the sign he had seen in his mind so many times the last four years.

The sign was of mahogany, carved as a native Ashanti warrior with ankle bracelets and face tattoo leaping upward mightily with an outflung spear and curved shield. On the shield was printed:

RICHARD REARDON
EMILE DELAIGRE
Importation-Exportation

The letters were faded, their edges blurred. Rip put his hand out and touched the weather-beaten sign, setting it swinging. Suddenly one of its rusted hinges broke, and the sign dangled at a crazy angle. Rip struck it furiously, this weather-beaten symbol of the last four years of absence from his former life, and the sign fell flat on the ground in front of him.

He stepped squarely on the Ashanti warrior's shield as he continued toward the house.

Music again. He was sure, as he started up the broad steps of his house, he could hear a piano inside. He stopped for a moment and rubbed his hand down over his eyes; he must be more drunk or exhausted than he realized.

But as he crossed the deep veranda the piano sounded louder. He stopped dead, listening, all his sharpened senses suddenly quivering tautly. The piano seemed to be playing something familiar, something he remembered hearing in Europe. . . .

Lili Marlene!

Lili Marlene, the soul-sick self-pitying German attempt at a *Stardust*, played very quietly, very blue.

He walked across the veranda swiftly, feeling his nerve-ends beginning to throb, and peered through the slanted blinds into his living room. Inside, a long ladder pattern of alternate bars of light and dark lay rectangled across the floor, running from the tall French windows where he stood over to the big piano on the far side of the room.

At the piano he saw the silhouette of a woman with long wavy dark hair sitting there with her back toward him, playing quietly. His heart began to pound and beat against his chest so hard it choked him; he stood rooted to the floor, frozen, shaking violently, certain that this delusion was his final torture, and all the numbing anæsthesia of alcohol had brought him only closer to his last brain-fogged agony.

The silhouette at the piano turned toward him, reaching down the keyboard, and the familiar delicate profile stabbed him. He ran to the front door and tore it open, shouting hoarsely, 'Georgette! Georgette!'

The piano banged discordantly as the woman swung around with fright and stood up quickly. The large white silk-threaded monogram on her robe shone dimly—an elaborately scrolled *G.R.*

For a single icy moment they stared at one another, then she sat down slowly, pale to the lips.

He stood there swaying on his feet, unable to think or feel any more. She was not Georgette, except that she was. Those high square-set shoulders, the long throat, the slender face

with fly-away eyebrows, the hair—especially the hair, the long shower of waving black hair which gave her that look of voluptuousness combined with girlish innocence. But she was not Georgette.

She shifted under his intense stare and lifted her hair away from her neck with a little nervous gesture. That touched a recent memory in his mind; suddenly he knew.

'You're the Spanish dancer from Le Badinage,' he said in French. His voice surprised him. It was cracked and dry, wooden tongued.

'I—I'm sorry,' she said softly, still pale. 'You frightened me the way you came in.'

He could not take his eyes off her; it was as though a long invisible line stretched back from him to that low, cold room in Moussac's police building, and he was staring under the bare light bulbs into the shrouded drawer again. But now the figure sat before him, talking quietly like a scared child.

'I couldn't fall asleep,' she said, 'so I came downstairs. I—I expected you sooner.'

He stepped to the pair of tall windows beside the piano and flung them open to let the pale pre-dawn light filter into the room. His heart was still slamming inside his chest, knees ball jointed and weak feeling, ready to tilt him in any direction, but his muscles were beginning to thaw.

Her eyes followed him. 'Sit down,' she said, 'sit down, please. You look très très fatigué.'

'Everybody's been telling me to please sit down ever since I got back.' He threw his hat and raincoat over a chair.

'It's only that you look——' she began.

'I know, I know. I've been told that too.'

'I'm sorry if I—I mean when you came in—I mean I tried to find you at Le Badinage, but I missed you on the street somehow.' Then she tried uneasily to start all over again. 'I'm sorry if I——'

He sat down abruptly, his legs jackknifing under him as if a rifle butt had been slammed behind his knees. It had been a long long march, this road back home, under a full pack. Now somebody had called a ten-minute break . . . no, no,

that was years ago, in the Army, back in Louisiana during manœuvres . . . his mind was going punch drunk.

She stood up quickly and came toward him, and the way she walked, the way the nightrobe swung as she walked, the way she held her head . . . Georgette. It stabbed him again. Maybe it was only in his head. Maybe it was only the long dark hair and the robe with Georgette's initials, but the resemblance was remarkable. Not remarkable. Painful.

'Let me get you some coffee,' she said.

'No.'

'It takes one minute.'

'No,' he said, 'I just want to sit a minute and look at you.'

She straightened a little and a faint flush began in her throat and rose across her face as his eyes moved over her.

'Why? What's the matter with me?'

'Where did you get that robe?'

'It was Georgette's.'

'I know. Where did you get it?'

She looked down at the elaborate monogram, *G.R.*, then realized suddenly what he meant and looked back up at him quickly.

'She gave it to me.'

'She *gave* it to you? I gave it to her for her birthday five years ago.' Five years ago was like another century now, something unreal he had heard about. He had ordered that robe from an expensive New York store in the States months in advance of Georgette's birthday and the package had not arrived until just the day before; he had given up hope for it and in the meantime that fantastic overdue cheque for a mahogany export shipment to Baltimore had come through and he had wired his agent in Johannesburg to rush him a diamond necklace. So Georgette had received two presents on her birthday—but one at a time. She had liked the robe because it was silken smooth and she loved smooth surfaces and she liked his having taken the trouble to write all the way to New York; she had kissed him for it and gone upstairs to undress and try it on, then she had come back to model it for him, turning up and down the long room like a mannequin.

He had stood here by the piano and had said very casually, 'That's only the beginning. There's another little item.'

Georgette had stopped in the middle of the room because of the way he had said it. 'A car,' she said. 'Rip, you didn't go out and buy an American car!'

'Better than that.' Then he had taken the long jewel case out of his pocket, and snapped it open. When she saw the diamond necklace glittering on the black velvet she was almost speechless.

'No,' she had whispered finally, 'they're not real.'

'They're real all right.'

'Darling . . .'

He had put the necklace on her, but his hands had shaken a little, resting on the smooth warm promise of her skin, so that he couldn't quite match the clasp, and she had to hook it herself. Then she had turned toward him, letting the robe open, and this time she had kissed him as she had not kissed him for the gift from the States, and she had said with her lips still against his, 'Let's go upstairs, darling.'

That had happened in another century.

The Spanish girl had gone back to sit on the piano bench; the dawn light outside had grown brighter and he could see now that her face was her own, not Georgette's. He had been right; the hair and the robe and the dimness and something inside his head had made her Georgette. Still, there was an almost sisterly resemblance—enough so that he found it troubling to look at her.

'What are you thinking?' she asked.

'Christ, I don't know what to think any more. I think I've gone out of my mind a little bit.' He stopped watching his hands clenching and unclenching by themselves and looked up at her. 'Why, what are you thinking?'

'So this is Rip. That's what I'm thinking.'

Even the way she pronounced his name was bad. She used the same little throaty Parisian roll on the R of his name Georgette had used. Their images overlapped too closely; it was becoming a kind of infidelity to the figure sleeping in the long drawer down at Moussac's; he had to fight this woman

off somehow, reduce her to what she was, a honky-tonk artiste.

'What are you doing here?' he snapped suddenly in English. 'What would a dancer from Nino's place be doing here?'

'You sound as if you do not think very much of Nino's dancers.'

The slight accented formality of her English, the angry little lift in her voice—either it was Georgette all over again, or the numbed memory inside him was making it seem that way.

'I don't, no.' For a moment he saw the swirling Spanish skirts again, the dramatic toss of hair, the taut line of her body turning. 'It's not important.'

'I do not go upstairs with the customers, if that's what you are thinking.' She was probably lying, the lady doth protest too much, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was that this stranger was here and he couldn't understand it. Or anything else. Or anything else.

'Apologies,' he said. Her explanation about her morals was not important, irrelevant, like a conversation heard through a wall. He wanted to ask her a hundred hot questions all in a rush, but some waiting, crouching caution held him back.

'Georgette didn't write to you?' the girl asked.

'Of course she wrote to me.'

'About me, I mean.'

'About you? No.'

'Not even once? She didn't mention me?'

Letters, years, months, the hospital . . . chitchat, local news, details, casualty rosters, maps, transport . . . *your son Warren was in my company and I deeply regret* . . . how could he remember now whether Georgette had mentioned a Spanish dancer. . . ? 'No,' he said, 'she didn't mention you.'

'I know. Two sentences was a long letter from Georgette. But she told me——'

He stood up, feeling very tired. 'I don't know. I don't know anything any more. Nothing adds up.'

'You only have that impression because you——'

'Impression, hell! There are some things I want to know!'

Somebody else sounded angry. He didn't. He was too tired to be angry.

Her eyes evaded his for the merest fraction of a second. 'This is no time to talk, Rip——'

'Don't call me Rip. You don't know me and I don't know you.'

'I know you,' she said quickly in French. 'She showed me your pictures, the medal you sent home. She showed me the letters you wrote from that hospital in Germany, then from America. To somebody who has been in the war those words were like a whole book. I know you, yes.'

It was too much. 'Take her robe off,' he said, 'take it off.'

She stood up, a little frightened by his sudden intensity.

'*Now*,' he said, 'take it off now. It means something to me. I don't want you wearing her clothes.'

'Of course, I was stupid not to think sooner—of course.' Her voice was hurried, a bit breathless, and she started to go past him.

He caught her arm tightly. 'Just what the hell are you doing here?'

'Waiting.' She did not sound afraid now that he had touched her; it was as if she feared only what he thought, not what he might do.

'Waiting for what?'

She shrugged. 'After ten years of running one learns to wait for anything. Waiting is easier than running after a while.' She looked at him. 'You look tired down to your bones. Why don't you go upstairs to bed?'

She stood still, letting him grip her arm, while she looked down at his hand with the broad gold wedding band on the middle finger then back up into his face. He opened his fingers and let his hand drop.

'I'll get some sheets and fix the room up for you,' she said, and started up the stairs. He followed her.

In the upstairs hallway she watched him stand at the doorway of the bedroom which had been his and Georgette's.

'Maybe you would rather stay in——' she began, but stopped when she saw he was not listening.

'It's exactly the way I remembered. Exactly.' He walked into the bedroom slowly and tilted the window blinds open. She watched him for a moment, then walked down the hallway toward the linen closet.

He walked around the room, touching the bedpost, the chair, feeling their solid reality. Until now everything had been night blurred, a little unreal, *this can't be* his mind had said and rejected it. But this he could accept, this room. It was real.

The twin beds had been Georgette's idea, delicate furniture, impractical for the African climate, and much too froufrou for his taste. The headboards were of quilted satin, and there were no footboards. But it had been what she wanted.

The same Parisian froufrou was in a dozen little things around the room; everything delicate, elaborate, silken and smooth surfaced and monogrammed. He had asked her about all her monograms one time, long ago, and she had laughed and said, 'Oh, I don't know, Rip. It's silly, I know it is. You can't go around looking into mirrors all the time, so I suppose somebody invented the idea of using your initials on things. Must we discuss highbrow psychology, chéri?'

He moved toward her dressing table. There was a regiment of jars and small bottles, very moderne, very elegant, all with a promise of some scented sensuous alchemy. Just lifting them, touching them, evoked her sitting there with a towel turban around her hair rubbing cream into her face with brisk round movements. Absently he picked up a modernistic gold lipstick case and twisted its base so that the lipstick poked out like a small red tongue; without thinking he began to lift it to recall its perfume, but stopped halfway and put it down again.

He opened the big double-door closet with the full length mirrors set inside each door and looked along the crowded row of dresses. Half of them were from Molyneux and Patou, haute couturière designs; the others she had made herself—and she had thought it was funny and not funny that he had never been able to tell the difference. They hung mutely in ranks, waiting for her body to fill out their narrow waists and

high shoulders and clever darts and tucks and pleats. Slowly, without realizing what he was doing, he let his hand run over them, letting their empty smoothness ripple under his fingers. He opened one of the mahogany drawers built into the wall and lifted out a beribboned sachet. This time he lifted it immediately and smelled it deliberately to let himself stir up a cloud of sensuous recollection. He reached into the open drawer and lifted the scalloped edge of a monogrammed silken peignoir, twisting it a little in his fist as the memories began to sharpen into the remembrance of warm skin.

Suddenly he caught sight of two people staring at him in the full-length mirror beside him. The hollow-eyed man who needed a shave—that was himself, and the woman in the doorway—yes, the Spanish dancer. He dropped the silk and turned and shut the double doors quickly before the mirror could reveal any further intimacies and turned to face her.

She came into the room as if she had noticed nothing, carrying some sheets and a flat pillow, and paused indecisively.

He pointed to the bed nearest the door. 'That one was mine.'

She made up the bed briskly, he noticed, smoothing the sheets flat and tucking the corners down in triangles like a nurse doing a hospital bed. Suddenly, as she worked, without looking up at him, she said, 'Are you sure you want to sleep here? In this room?'

'Why not?'

She stood up and faced him. 'Don't misunderstand me.'

'I don't understand anything any more. You're just one of them.'

'I mean'—she made a little gesture toward the double closet doors—'there might be too many memories.'

'What the hell do you know about memories?'

'Nothing,' she answered, 'nothing. You are the only one in the world who remembers pain. Nobody else has ever been hurt but you.'

They looked at one another across the bed. 'What's the matter with you?' he asked in English. 'Why are you such a tough guy?'

'What's the matter with *you*? Is this the way a man acts? Touching things around a room like a ghost?'

'Why were you watching me?'

'You should watch yourself. A man should remember who he is.'

'Oh, I remember who I am all right. That's one of the bad parts.'

'Can you turn the clock back?' She had an odd way of talking; the words were English, but they sounded European. 'Can you make the calendar go backward? How about tomorrow? You must live. How about resting and giving your body a chance to catch up with you?'

Like a nurse, yes, just like a nurse. Brisk, a little tough about what was good for you.

'I'm tired,' he said, sitting down on the edge of his bed. 'That I am. Very tired. Very. You don't know how right you are.' He let himself fall back, but the pillow was uncomfortable so he slung it over on the other twin bed near the window.

'You look like her, did you know that?'

Her pupils widened darkly as their eyes held together. 'Try to sleep,' she said huskily after a moment.

'I want to,' he said, 'God only knows how much I just want to close my eyes.'

She came back into the room. 'Try,' she said. 'It's so easy. Just close your eyes.'

He tried it, but when the lids came down his eyes seemed to pivot inward and once more he was staring down that endless dark shaft that plunged to the very bottom of his life. 'I can't,' he said. 'I'm wound up like a clock.' He opened his eyes and found her looking directly at him. Her eyes were—what? Pity? No, not quite. Understanding? Yes, yes, maybe some of that. Fear? Well, yes, maybe there was some of that too. But she certainly talked like a nurse. 'You know what it's like?' he said.

She sat down on the bed, Georgette's bed, across from him. 'I know,' she said. 'In the valley where you are I have crossed many times. If you want to talk, talk.'

'Christ no, I don't want to talk.'

She spread her hands a little. 'Then not. If whisky does not work with you, if such tiredness does not make you sleep, then you are standing on the edge. People should let you do whatever you want to do. Except jump off.'

'You remind me of a nurse. One of the good ones.'

'Yes?' She smiled slightly, with a quiet look of deep inward sadness. 'I spent much time in hospitals with wounded men.'

'The worst of it is,' he said, beginning to talk, really talk, for the first time, 'I'm probably feeling sorry for myself. I don't like it. I don't like people who can't get back on their feet when the referee counts nine.'

'What is that? This nine.'

'This isn't nine. It's ten. I'm out. I'm knocked out for the full count. I don't like it'

'This is American, no?'

'No,' he said, 'this is how I am. The major at Walter Reed, that's a big Army hospital in Washington, in the States, the doctor in charge of my case told me I had to be careful how I lived or I might break up.' He punched his chin lightly with the back of his fist. 'Brittle, like a piece of glass.'

'You? A man like you does not have a glass heart.'

'You sound as if you know me pretty well.'

'Whatever letters can tell,' she said. 'I feel I know you.'

He looked at her sitting there so close, on Georgette's bed, wearing the monogrammed robe. The long dark cloud of hair. The voice. Memory. Rip, you didn't go out and buy an American car! The diamond necklace on the warm skin. Let's go upstairs, darling. The bedroom. Once more he smelled the red tongue of lipstick and let his hand run down the row of smooth dresses and lifted the silk border of the negligee from the scented drawer . . .

He turned his head sideways to look directly at her. 'You want something from me,' he said, 'don't you?'

She frowned slightly. 'Yes and no,' she said. 'That is a hard thing to answer.' She leaned toward him—he could see her body moving inside the robe with the full pointed weight of her breasts resting roundly in the silk—and she put her hand on his forehead. 'Enough talking,' she said. She was treating

him like a sick child. 'Blow yourself out,' she said with a soft little smile, 'and put the candle to bed.'

Her arm. The silk sleeve. The same faint scent as Georgette's, L'Heure Bleu when it was warm, Mitsukuo when it was cool, or Coque d'Or. He took her hand from his head and held it so he could kiss the inside of her wrist, softly, softly, stroking the skin over the living pulse with his lips, letting the feeling rise subtly through him like the deliberate drugging sensuality of incense.

'Don't,' she said gently.

He bit her skin gently, moving his mouth á little and holding back all the long years and the fierceness running all through him now so that it was harder to breathe.

'Don't,' she repeated. 'This is bad for you.' She shivered a little.

'And for you?'

She began to cry quietly, without a sound, letting her fingers rest on his face. 'Me?' she said. 'For me——' then she stopped and raised her other hand and covered her eyes. 'I'm alone,' she said.

He parted the robe and put his hands over her breasts. 'So am I,' he said.

'Please,' she said, 'not here. Not now. You will only make everything worse inside for yourself.'

His head was whirling, he did not know himself, he only knew that now he held warmth and life again after the endless cold of the past four years. 'Georgette,' he murmured.

At that she obeyed his hands, and came to him trembling a little but with a new sureness, understanding and cool. The final always-awake part of his mind, the eternally watchful censorship of control, opened its last iron hold on him and for the first time in all the centuries of all the years behind him he let his armour fall away completely, becoming naked and defenceless, circling outward and falling through space, letting all the fight within him escape in a single blazing instant, closing his eyes drained and exhausted until her arms loosened around him and he could turn his face toward the wall and a welcome unconsciousness.

BOOK TWO

A time to keep silence

'I APOLOGIZE,' he said.

'No need,' she said, 'truly.'

It was the next day, he thought, the morning after the day he remembered collapsing into a dreamless healing unconsciousness, and he had shaved slowly, trying not to see the fine pink lines in his eyes, washing slowly, dressing slowly, not thinking. Then he had come downstairs, looking over his house, remembering, looking for her, just drifting, with the past years in these rooms opening like doors in his memory.

'I must have sounded a little crazy,' he said to her.

'Yes,' she said, 'you did. It was very frightening at first. But there is no need to explain it to me.' There was the faintest air of embarrassment about her and a good deal of dignity which stopped just short of formality. He liked her for both, the embarrassment as well as the dignity.

'The whole thing is like a dream now,' he said. 'Darkness. Some considerable drinking. And making quite a fool of myself.'

'Truly, I understand. You are all better now?'

"Well—much better.' The major who had been his doctor at Walter Reed General Hospital back in Washington would not have approved of the last week. Especially all that drinking last night. Nor did he himself; he had been sloppy and maudlin and sorry as hell for himself.

The girl had been kind. And good. Holding his head above

water before he went under the third time. It blunted all the angry questions he wanted to ask her about Georgette. He had had to question women several times during the fighting in Europe, and he would have questioned her the same way, but her gentleness had checked him. Even though they were strangers a vein of intimacy ran invisibly between them now.

'—and you look like a different man,' she was saying. She moved her hand to indicate the clothes, the Army clothes he had shipped home months ago from the hospital, the tan trousers with the creases still across the knees from too tight packing and the G.I. shirt with a First Army infantry division shoulder patch.

'Yes, I feel like a different man now.' He didn't, really. He still had a hundred questions buzzing in his head, but he did not want to frighten this girl again. She might know a great deal he still wanted to find out.

He had felt much tougher about her just an hour back.

When he had gotten out of bed that morning and gone down the hallway toward the bathroom he had looked into the guest room and had seen her clothes hanging in the open closet and a battered valise lying on the floor covered with baggage stickers from half the hotels of southern Europe and northern Africa. This girl has been around, he had thought, very much around and what she is doing here I don't know yet, but I sure as hell am going to find out. And that isn't all I want to find out. Last night was different. Wrap it up now, pack it away, forget it. Forget the warmth and all the rest and just remember all the fish-hook questions hanging overhead.

He had come downstairs slowly, looking over his house with fresh eyes on this morning. He remembered every detail of the living room; still, as he wandered through it, touching this or that, it was somehow like the room of strangers.

The living room was large, opening on three sides through high French doors to the veranda. The housekeeper must have heard through the silent wireless of the native community on the plantation that he was back, for the place was freshly dusted, and the French doors were thrown open to let the oblique morning sunlight throw reflected patterns across the floor.

The room suffered from an excess of comfort and decoration which made it look cluttered and lived-in at the same time. Lamps, two long low divans forming a right angle in the corner, a chaise longue, the piano—which had always needed tuning every few months because of the humidity—and groups of ebony African ceremonial devil masks on the wall grinned obscenely at one another across the room.

Dominating the corner by the piano stood a remarkable life-size mahogany statue of a nude woman holding a bunch of grapes above her mouth as she tilted her head back to bite one: the cascade of long wavy hair which ran over her shoulders and down her back cleverly followed the whirls and curving grain of the tawny wood.

The gossip in town had been that Beaulieu, the sculptor, had carved Georgette in wood as a labour of love, but Rip remembered Georgette laughing about the whole thing.

'Poor Beaulieu,' she had laughed, 'poor romantic man. Quel imbécile, c'est incroyable. He thinks because he poses me holding up a foolish bunch of grapes with all my hair down that I will recognize the great lover in him. He's going to call it Bacchante and he wants me to pose nude for him.'

Knowing Georgette, knowing the slightly artificial game of sophistication she played at to give variety to the sun-drenched dehydration of African life, he had had the sense to remain noncommittal; but later, when Beaulieu had suddenly left Port Afrique to make an inland trek toward Ougadougou, leaving the feet of the statue unfinished so that the mahogany nymph's slender footless ankles seemed to spring directly from a tree trunk, Rip had been amused by Georgette's callous aping of the sculptor's words: ' "This is classical trash. I want to go inland to find more pure, primitive forms." ' Then she had put one friendly hand on the nymph's shoulder and looked into its wooden eyes. 'Too bad for poor Beaulieu,' she had said in mock sorrow, 'you always said no to him.'

It was a performance, of course, like all Georgette's performances, a mixture of a charming childishness and sophistication, and Rip had enjoyed the way she had glanced sideways

over her shoulder to see whether he was applauding it. He knew she was faithful, but he felt proudly possessive of her, and, at the same time, a little sorry and contemptuous of the unhappy sculptor who had poured his passion into those slender wooden shoulders and ripe breasts and narrow waist and rounded hips. It was not trash; the wood breathed life. Their guests invariably mentioned Pygmalion when they saw the mahogany nymph, and Rip learned to accept the secret appraising glances with which the men looked back and forth, from the statue to Georgette herself and back again. There was the inevitable chichi about a triangle, but Georgette's open candour about the whole thing soon stopped that.

The split personality of the room became plainer when he moved from the silk lamp shades and smooth chintz-covered furniture and the glossy piano to the other side of the room where an enormous leopard skin hung on the wall and an equally large lion skin lay spread-eagled on the floor. Trophies from the Masai country in east Africa. A rack of hunting rifles and shotguns hung in a recessed cabinet in the wall, and Rip took out two or three of them, hefting them, shaking hands with old friends like the heavy big-game Mannlicher, the Savage 720, the Winchester 70 chambered for ·300 H & H magnum cartridges, and the beautiful custom-made double-barrelled ·475-calibre Jefferys Holland & Holland rifle for elephants and rhinos.

A drawer ran into the wall underneath the gun rack, and Rip, after hesitating a moment, pulled it open. It was very wide and shallow and lined with green baize; in it was set a remarkable collection of small arms—a clumsy Revolutionary pistol with intricate silverwork on the handgrips; a little ivory-handled husband-killer derringer; an early Webley; a Walther BPK semi-automatic ·765; a 9-mm. Luger, a P38, a Glisenti, a Tokarev, a Nambu, a Colt ·380, and a 9-mm. Corto Berretta he had taken from an Italian officer in Sicily.

Dust had sifted into the drawer while he was away, powdering it finely, and one gun-indented space on the green drawer lining was conspicuously empty where the dust had outlined a weapon which now was missing. He remembered

it; a ·32 calibre Mauser, with a wooden grip. Moussac probably now had it locked up in his office.

What had happened to make Georgette walk down those stairs and cross the room to pull open the drawer and take out the Mauser? What sense of violence drove her to the insanity of self-destruction? Or was it anguish? Or fear?

Fear?

But what could she have been afraid of?

It stabbed him to think of her standing here, alone in the house, with this open drawer full of such compact lethal toys. She had stood here, lifting the blunt gun barrel slowly, holding it away from her head rigidly. . . .

My God, *why?*

He had seen enough, remembered enough. He slammed the drawer shut and walked out on the veranda.

A folding table had been put up, and was set for breakfast for one. Suddenly his nerves reacted to the quiet sound of a man's voice in the next room; instantly his razor-edged tension returned. He strode swiftly into the kitchen, only to find the Spanish girl there listening to a small table radio.

She was startled by his sudden quiet entrance, and for a moment they stared at one another. Do you want to remember last night, her eyes asked. No, his said, that had its own logic but it's gone now, over, this is today now. Her eyelids dropped, accepting his verdict.

He noticed her hair was bound up today into a neat upsweep, like a cool big-city career girl who wanted to keep her prettiness within efficient lines. Efficiency, not excitement. Good. The hot blinding intimacy was over. From here on he wanted answers, facts. Her eyes came back up, controlled now, and took in his shave, his pressed Army clothes, his new appearance, and she tried a casually tentative smile as she shut off the radio.

'Why is the news always so bad?' she said in a carefully flat voice. 'Always the international troubles. Violence everywhere.' Her white shirt, open at the throat, added to the career girl look, but Georgette's fancy useless French apron which she wore—cut heart shape and trimmed with lace—

turned it into a musical comedy costume. Her eyes dominated her face; they were mobile, bright and dark, changing from one moment to the next with shifting depths and levels in them; pity, scorn, intimacy, cool dignity, innocence, sophistication—all came and went in her face because of her eyes.

'Nino mentioned your name to me last night——' he began to say, and stopped. Foot slipped. Mistake. Don't mention last night again in that tone of voice.

'—the night before,' she was saying quickly. 'Vous êtes resté longtemps. You have been sleeping twenty hours or so——'

'—the night before, but I've forgotten it.' Christ he didn't even know her name!

'Ynez. Ynez Camillo.'

'Enchanté.'

He put his hand out without thinking, An an fashion, surprising her, and she put her cool slender ers into his somewhat stiffly. Then, pulling her hand b quickly, she added unexpectedly, 'Ynez with a Y, the Sp ish way.' She sounded breathless saying that, and very you g.

He smiled, and she said, 'This is the first ime I see you smile.'

'I was pretty bad, wasn't I?'

'I too. I've been very ashamed. It was one of those times when you ask yourself the next morning: how could I act so crazy? how could I say such things?' She seemed to be relaxing a bit now, surer of him, less edged.

'I don't like people who use drinking for an excuse, but I'd really been putting away a lot.'

Then he had apologized stiffly, like an amateur actor in rehearsal, and she had assured him there was no need. He was being very sensible, he knew, but he felt a little foolish and was sure he sounded it.

'Colonel Moussac was here while you were sleeping,' she said.

'Oh?' Moussac . . . Moussac . . . hadn't Pedro mentioned something about him and X-ray pictures. . . ? It was hard to remember now.

'Moussac said he would come back. Also the Delaigres

were over. They said they couldn't get down to the boat the other night to meet you.'

'You know Emile and Diane Delaigre?'

'Oh yes.' Then, as she felt him watching her, she added, 'Yes, I do. For some time now.' It sounded like an explanation, except that it didn't explain a thing.

Emile and Diane Delaigre. His thin, dark partner and the blonde English wife. Strange they hadn't driven to meet him at the S.S. *José Harra* that miserable wet midnight when he had come ashore. Once again his mind saw the leaping headlights of Jacques Moussac's Renault sedan, and then the low cold room with the coffinlike drawers set into the walls. . . . No, don't think about that, wait until you feel more solid on your feet before you try to go back there again in your mind, before you try to sort together the pieces and meaning of everything that has happened.

The Spanish girl was watching him. 'What's the matter?' she asked. 'You look——'

'A passing thought. Shall I call you Ynez?'

'Please. Dancers are always called by their first names.' She glanced sideways at him. 'Nightclub dancers, I mean.'

Reassure the lady you think she's a lady. 'I remember you were very good. Very Andalusian.'

'No, not so good. It is difficult, in that milieu.' She looked at him again. 'I was surprised to see you come in.'

'How did you recognize me?'

'Georgette showed me all your pictures. The one from America, then when you became a captain, and later the others. You know how it is when you see somebody and think: He looks just like his picture!' She laughed. 'It's foolish, but that's how you think.'

When she mentioned Georgette there was a tone of old friendship in her voice, and in the things she said. Evidently Georgette had been very girlish about his letters, letting her read them all. And she knew Emile and Diane Delaigre. He didn't remember Georgette ever writing about her. How long had Georgette known her? Why was she living in his house? They had always had a houseful of guests. Georgette

liked people around her and people liked Georgette, but this girl seemed to have a more intimate arrangement. . . . Maybe she was one of those people who had a talent for intimacy. After last night—the night before, rather—that would be easy to believe. But there was this dignity and self-respect she carried about herself that troubled him; she was like so many girls he had seen in Europe, essentially decent girls who moved back and forth across the invisible wall between their day and night lives with a calm shoulder-shrugging ease.

'Here we are standing talking,' she said, 'and you must be starving.'

'Where's the housekeeper?'

'Bouala? I sent her into town, to the market, some fish for tonight.'

—Guest? She was running the house—she *lives* here!

'You want some eggs and ham?' she asked.

'Ham and eggs?'

'Yes,' she laughed, 'I mean that. I try very hard, always, to speak right, but I sound like a terrible foreigner, don't I?'

'No. Not at all.'

'Everybody says that. They flatter me.'

'No, really. You speak very well.'

'But the Spanish accent. Very bad, eh?'

'No, it's——' he almost said 'charming,' because that was the first, easy word to use '—it's not so bad.'

'My father, before the war, my father held the chair of Professor of English Literature in the University of Madrid. Before the Civil Spanish War, I mean.'

'Where is he now?' Somehow he knew before she spoke, but the way she answered surprised him.

'Walking with Shakespeare down some country lane in England,' she said, 'and discussing Hamlet.' She looked at him, then away. 'To you I sound very foolish, eh?'

'No. When you feel something inside there is nothing foolish about it.'

'You are very understanding.'

He pushed off the soft encroaching friendliness. 'Not always,' he said flatly.

'But this morning, yes.'

'This morning yes.'

'My father was a very great scholar. He lectured twice at Cambridge, speaking in English, of course. I was a little girl then, and very proud of him. At the University everybody respected him, but in 1937 the Falange came into our house and shot him. At his desk. The lieutenant said it was most unfortunate. He said he had always a high opinion of the professor, but not of the man who believed the godless enemy was in the right. Unfortunate. Sorry. Pues nada.'

She turned away from him and walked to the window. Without turning back she said, 'I don't know why I talk like this all of a sudden. I haven't talked to anybody like this in years.'

Death. This constant mention of death. Was it a sickness of the modern world, this longing for the peaceful shroud, or was it only a sickness in the back of his own head that made it seem as if this idea of death walked constantly beside him? No, we were going to forget that, remember? And lock the door on it. It was this strange girl, and the odd way they talked as if they had known one another a long time. Suddenly he realized why; her face was familiar because he had seen it time and again all over Europe—the frank open emotion, the cool realistic quiet despair, the sensuality that was both girlish yet agelessly sophisticated and knowing, the grave ancient wisdom behind the animation in her eyes like the Italian girl Agostina in Corot's painting. Or Georgette.

'How about that breakfast?' he said.

She turned back into the room. 'Oh yes, yes, of course. I don't know why I'm so—so——' she made a little inarticulate circle with her forefinger around one ear '—so émotionnée. Why do you look at me like that?'

'Was I?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I remembered thinking you looked like—Georgette.'

'People have said so, but I don't. It is the hair, of course.'

'Yes. And, well, the rest of you. You're about her height. The other night I thought——'

'I know,' she said quickly.

'The liquor didn't help.'

'Must we talk about it?'

'Well, no, not if it bothers you that much.'

'Shall I tell you what I think?' she said suddenly. 'Frankly?'

He nodded. This should be very interesting. People who said 'frankly' always put him on guard.

'I think you were away four years, and so many things happened to you it was like ten years, and you didn't remember exactly what Georgette was like and you painted a new picture in your memory.' She had the serious intensity of a child. 'Yes,' she said, 'I think that is it.'

'Well,' he said, 'that's quite a theory.'

'Forgive me,' she said quickly, 'I do not mean to offend you.'

'I know, I know.' He was quiet for a moment, then:

'I—well,' he said, 'maybe you're right. Sometimes it's better not to examine a thing too much.' She was quite right, of course. Four years was a long time, and Georgette had become mixed with the idea of home and clean living and peace and healthy sensuality. That was why he didn't want to talk about it just yet.

He walked away from her out on the broad screened veranda just in time to see a dog race around the corner of the house. He strode across the veranda and down the steps and, as he approached the corner, he saw a strange tall shadow move across the ground; for a split second he felt the familiar crouching *watch out* reaction race along his nerves, then he caught himself and stepped around the corner.

It was Suleiman.

Suleiman was standing there waving a stick in the air, and when Rip said quietly, 'Suleiman,' the old man turned as if struck and dropped the stick.

'Monsieur Reardon!'

Was the look in his eyes fear? Or was it relief?

Now it was gone, whatever it was, and the old man seemed happy to see him.

'How are you, Suleiman?' Rip said, putting out his hand. 'You look ten years younger.'

Suleiman put his umbrella handle into the crook of his elbow quickly and shook hands with him gravely, saying over and over again in French, 'Monsieur Reardon. I thought I would never see you. The war went on forever and I was growing older. I thought I would never see you. But God was willing, el hamdu li' Allah.'

Suleiman was an old bearded man with a wise weary face; he wore a red Moslem fez, loose white native breeches, and, as a badge of rank on the plantation, a shiny dark European coat.

'I was giving Saluki a chance to chase the stick,' he explained as Rip looked down at it. As a zealous Moslem, Suleiman disliked dogs, but somehow he had decided Saluki was a member of the Reardon menage and therefore an exception.

'I saw your shadow around the corner,' Rip said. 'I thought it was a man holding up a weapon.'

'After so many years of watching for enemies it is hard to think simple things like sticks.'

'No. It is me, myself, inside. I am on edge here.'

It was all right saying that to the old man with his patriarchal fringe of white beard and dark umbrella and European coat; the old man was like a rock, beaten by every kind of weather and still upright. He had been with Rip's father back in the hard days with Sir Robert Williams at Lobito Bay when they started pushing the Benguela Railway toward Chinguar along the old slave route through Angola. He had seen Reardon senior make and lose two fortunes while Rip was a boy being sent off to American or Swiss schools each year. Now he ran Rip's and Emile Delaigre's plantation, and Rip trusted him.

Suleiman knew what Rip meant by being on edge. He pulled on his short beard once or twice, then said, 'Since you went to the war the wheel of the world has turned many times.'

'Everybody talks crisscross to me. I expected straight talk from you.'

'Things are not always what they seem, Monsieur Reardon. The shadow of a stick may look like a gun to an uneasy man.'

'Why do you talk that way?'

'I may speak?'

'Speak.'

'I have heard of your behaviour at Le Badinage.'

His argument with Nino must have run through the bazaars in Port Afrique faster than phone calls. The old man was probably offended, being a strict Moslem, for had not the Prophet forbidden the drinking of liquor? And that slapping of Nino—Suleiman could understand a gun or knife, but he could not grasp the Western idea of contempt in a slap.

'I admit my judgment is warped,' Rip said patiently, 'but that is only natural under the circumstances. After four years of days and nights a man changes. He is impatient with fools and scoundrels. Sticks look like guns.'

Just then the dog, Saluki, came bounding into the clearing in front of the house and raced toward the avenue of palms. Rip whistled an odd dissonant scale, a kind of oriental bird call, and she stopped and turned, ears quivering like delicate antennae. Rip whistled again, louder, and the sleepy Persian gazelle hound loped toward him.

'Here, Saluki,' he called, crouching, 'here girl.'

But Saluki came up to him warily, and edged away, circling to look him over. Rip whistled the dissonant scale again, and she came closer to sniff him, whining a little. But as soon as he stretched his hand out to stroke her she ducked away and ran for the trees. Rip looked up at Suleiman, bewildered.

'She thought she heard Madame Reardon whistle,' the old man said slowly, letting his eyes slide away from Rip's.

'Oh.' He stood up. He could trust Suleiman; he would drop the conventional oblique African palaver they had been using and ask direct questions. 'Just what happened here, Suleiman? I want an answer, not words.'

The old man's face did not change. 'The gendarmerie came. Colonel Moussac. They looked around very carefully.'

'Who called the police?'

'I. Bouala had been away all night to see her people and she found madame early in the morning and called me, and I telephoned Colonel Moussac. You find this talk bad?'

'It is not pleasant, no, but I want you to tell me. What did Colonel Moussac say?'

'You know how cool he is always. He says very little.'

'I know, I know that. What did he say?'

'He decided from certain things of blood and such that madame shot herself during the night. With an automatic pistol from your gun collection in the drawer.'

'That's what he told me the night I arrived. It smells like a lie.'

'Colonel Moussac is your friend. I too. Why should we lie to you?'

'Don't ask *me* questions!' No, that wouldn't do. Raise your voice and lose your temper and you lose everything. Easy does it. This is a hot country where the rivers run deep and quietly and men take their time. Easy does it. Very easy.

Suleiman bowed his head a little. 'Men must ask questions, monsieur. None but Allah knows the answers.'

'Understand me, old man. That sounds like double talk to me.'

'To talk of a tragic thing is hard.'

'I have offended you.' He seemed to be apologizing a good deal these days.

'No, monsieur.'

'You believe I should sit grieving in a corner with my head bowed.'

'Each man grieves in his own way.'

'I had too long a journey here. I came with my heart cut out, and I've heard only brief answers which do not fit together in my mind. It angers me.'

'The stick still looks like a gun to you?'

'Maybe. Maybe. I am mixed up, and whatever crying I do will be alone. You understand? For the world I have a kind of anger. I want to fight back. I want to break open whatever happened while I was gone. I don't know whom to lay hands on or what to break, but I will find out in my own way. You understand what I mean?'

'Yes.'

'This is not an ordinary thing. A man does not grieve in a conventional way under these circumstances.'

'I understand. Believe me, monsieur, I understand. Only men who are like women weep with red eyes. A man shows the world a dry face.'

Back at the house the Spanish dancer had finished preparing the ham and eggs. She carried the plate out on the veranda with a little fixed smile on her face, ready to hear him say those things hungry people always say when they see breakfast arriving, brown and hot smelling. But he was gone. She looked around, puzzled, and then caught sight of him walking around the far side of the circular drive with Suleiman, the old plantation foreman. They walked close together, stopping every few steps as if to emphasize a point, Suleiman gesturing with his rolled umbrella, then they continued down the avenue of palms out of sight. Without thinking, she caught the tip of her tongue between her teeth, as if in a child's pledge of silence, and her face as she watched them go became a mask of panic. Suddenly the plate of ham and eggs fell from her rigid hand and smashed on the floor of the veranda.

Moussac's big black Renault sedan came chugging up the drive and stopped beside Rip and Suleiman. Moussac rolled the rear window down and poked his head out.

'Bon jour! Jump in.'

The black chevrons he seemed to wear as eyebrows were peaked as quizzically as ever, and his mesh tunic, cut British style with four patch pockets like a bush jacket, was freshly pressed. Rip noticed the flawlessly tailored shorts he wore, and the ribbed socks with a cuff below the knee. He wore his face with the same noncommittal well-bred smoothness, a man in harmony with himself and the world. His doxology was simple: As it was in the beginning it is now, and ever shall be.

Moussac noticed Rip's appraisal, and smiled. 'The well-dressed colonial, eh, mon vieuz? Tailored, à l'anglaise. Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. Only this,' he added, touching the exploding grenade insigne on his curve-edged French sun helmet, 'only this is government issue.'

Was the gesture one of Moussac's typically discreet reminders that he was not only Rip's friend, but a government official as well? With Moussac one could never be quite certain of anything.

'You're looking well, today, much rested.' He touched Rip's First Army shoulder patch. 'Your, how do you say, your outfit?'

'At the end of the war, for a while, yes.'

Pause.

'I came to see you yesterday. You were asleep still.'

'So Ynez told me.'

'Ynez? That's what is so wonderful about the Americans. I have known her for months, months, and I call her Mademoiselle Camillo. And you already use her prénom. Quel brave!'

'You sound a little annoyed.'

'Not at all, not at all. My attitude, as toward all things, is one of philosophic detachment. But I will admit it has occurred to me what a pleasant playmate she would make.'

'My friend, the highbrow philosopher. I didn't know you were such a boulevardier too.'

'I respond to beauty with gallantry like a morning glory to the sun.' The ironic edge in his little speech was the tone of a man who had measured himself against the world and its women and found their proportions pleasant, amusing, and not terribly important. The faint exaggeration of his language was partly an act, partly a camouflage, and partly a kind of rent he paid the world to allow him to live privately within his own soul. Yes, Rip thought, a complicated man.

The Renault had not yet started forward, and the chauffeur kept grinding the starter, turning the motor over. Moussac became very Gallic, very impatient. He leaned forward and tapped the Senegalese soldier on the shoulder. ''Allo? What's wrong? Do you want to wear out the battery?'

'It's the gasogene again, mon colonel.'

'Well, get out and fix it. We can't sit here all day.'

The chauffeur climbed out and went around behind the car where the tall metal cylinder stood to burn the charcoal which

drove the sedan instead of gasoline. Suleiman got out to join him. Moussac leaned back in his seat.

'Ah, what a relief it will be when these wartime gasogenes can be junked and one can buy real petrol again.'

Rip had the feeling he was deliberately avoiding finishing their talk about Ynez.

'I have brought your foot locker and other baggages with me, Rip.'

'A thousand thanks.'

'You were in poor shape the other night.'

'Shall we discuss it in detail?'

'I beg your pardon.'

'Oh my God, Jacques, don't get stuffy and let's stop beating about the bush. I blew my top the other night, sure. Maybe it was good, maybe it was bad. I don't know. I did it, and I want to forget it. Maybe you came out here to drop off my foot locker and stuff, or maybe you came because you had something on your mind. Or maybe you've got a yen for the Spanish kid, or maybe you just want to explain how come she's so much at home living in my house.'

'Haven't you asked her yet?'

'No.'

'But you know her first name already.'

'You really are annoyed, you old letch, aren't you?'

'When do you intend to ask her?'

'At the right time.'

'When is that?'

'When my horse sense as a gentleman and a scholar tells me to.'

'Meaning when you damn well please.'

'Right. Shall we argue about it?'

Moussac looked out the window for a moment, his black eyebrows peaking up as he pondered over something. Then he turned back and smiled at Rip. 'The world has gone mad, Rip. After four years, and this is how we sit in a stalled voiture and talk.'

'I argue only with my friends, Jacques. The back of my hand to my enemies.'

Moussac's smile broadened under his moustache. 'For an American, Rip, you have a remarkable flexibility. In many ways you are more like a European.'

'Remember, I was born in Africa. I'm one of the earlier internationalists.'

'Tell me, Rip. Your health, how is it? How do you feel now?'

'Well, I was due to be discharged from the hospital soon. They were only keeping me on to take a last series of X-rays. As soon as I gain a little more weight I'll be fine.' It was only half true, but it would have to do for now. He couldn't go around talking about stomach lining and hæmorrhages to his friends. He wanted to forget all that himself, now.

'Ah,' Moussac was saying, 'if only the spirit could heal as soundly as the flesh.'

Rip turned away, looking out the window without sight, letting Moussac's words send ripples across the quiet pool of his mind. Spirit. Flesh. The words had been worn smooth with too much careless handling these past few years. Now he was not sure what they meant to him. Only the sound of the chauffeur tinkering with the gasogene came from behind the car, and an occasional mutter of suggestion from Suleiman. A little breeze ran up the avenue of palms; they rattled their fronds in waves, like an oceanic sigh. The late morning sun beat down on the trees and the ancient ripening warmth of Africa rose into the empty cloudless sky to meet the challenge. The eternal double-face of existence, the hot warmth of life and the hot blaze of death, the sun shouted; and the ageless earth murmured deeply, life and death, the wheel turns, forever and ever . . . .

Rip turned from the trees back to Moussac. 'How soon can we have the funeral, Jacques?' . . . amen.

'Tomorrow morning. I have taken the liberty of making the arrangements.'

'Thanks.'

I must remember to speak to Ahmed, the stone carver in the Medina, another part of his mind said. What would she have wanted for a headstone? For a moment the image of the

voluptuous mahogany nymph inside the house touched him; the pagan affirmation of life and the pleasures of living. But he rejected it immediately as a new image rushed in on him —Georgette standing beside the open drawer of the gun collection and slowly lifting the ·32 calibre Mauser pistol to her head. . . . Bacchante discarding the wine grapes to pick up a weapon. Why? *Why?*

'Haie!' the chauffeur crowed successfully behind the car as the flame inside the gasogene boiler roared up into life again. He and Suleiman came back around the car and got into the front seat. This time the Renault started immediately and they drove slowly toward the house.

As the car reached the end of the avenue and turned past the ancient baobab tree into the circular drive which curved around to the house, Moussac exclaimed, 'Voilà!' He had caught sight of the Ashanti warrior sign lying flat on the ground. He turned his head to stare back at it, then turned questioningly to Rip.

'I knocked it down,' Rip explained, 'and it may as well stay down. Maybe I'll leave Port Afrique now.'

'Impossible!' Moussac repeated it in French. 'Absolument impossible!'

'I thought you believed all things were possible.'

'But this, no.'

'I haven't decided definitely, yet.'

'It is a bad American habit, this saying serious things in a light way.'

'I'm not joking, Jacques. Here now, well, I feel like jungle rot. Rusty.'

He was amazed by the look of intensity which swept into Moussac's face. Moussac, the professionally casual—intense!

'Impossible, Rip. I forbid it. You must stay. I will not allow you to go, even if I must wire the governor-general to refuse you an exit visa.'

'Why are you so upset by the idea?'

'For—for selfish reasons. With whom will I go hunting? With whom will I play chess? With whom, in the little

sun-baked anthill of a town, with whom can I disagree violently and drink beer and discuss the epicurean way of life?'

'Fine, fine, that takes care of number one. But how about me? Has that thought hit you yet? How about me?'

'No man is an island, Rip. You are attached here, part of this continent. Your father left you this plantation. There is your export business in town. Your friends are spread from Cairo and Khartoum to Capetown and Casablanca. You cannot just tear out the cord which binds you to a patch of earth.'

'What's left for me here?' He had not realized consciously he felt this way, but now that he heard himself say the words he knew how much quiet desperation he felt inside. Home? Georgette gone, his business folded away during the war like a mummy; his share in the plantation—he could sell that, pull up stakes, go away. Go where?

'What is left for you anywhere else?' Moussac was asking him. 'Rip, Rip, this is a negative way to look at things!' He leaned forward and said to Suleiman in French, 'You, Suleiman, he trusts you. Tell him what the men in the hills say.' He swung back immediately toward Rip. 'They say: "without bullets a gun is nothing but an iron stick." Without roots, Rip, without a function in life and the belief to live for all your capacity for life, you will be nothing but a Thing, even worse than dumb metal because you will have begun to destroy yourself by a deliberate act of will. The man who built up one of the most successful export-import businesses on the West Coast will begin to drift into the subtle self-destruction of alcoholism, and end up a beachcomber like Nino.'

'Nino's doing fine, Jacques. He offered to buy the plantation from me the other night at Le Badinage.'

'I know. So it was reported. You were very noisy.'

'Your agents work fast.'

'Don't change the subject.' Moussac's ivory-tinted fingers were drumming on his bare knee, now.

Why was Moussac so intense about insisting he stay in Port Afrique? They were very good friends only because they

agreed on a viewpoint which saw people and events in some rational proportion; aside from a few private feelings which they kept to themselves, they were calm and detached and kept the world's noises at arm's length. Then why this intensity?

Suleiman twisted in his seat to face them. 'Monsieur and Madame Delaigre,' he said quietly. 'They are coming over to visit.'

Rip thought he saw a single look cross between Suleiman and Moussac; but he could not be sure, for at that moment the sedan pulled up to the front steps of his house and stopped. For a second he had the fleeting feeling of an invisible strand of a situation unknown to him tugging at him gently, like an unseen thread of a spider's web blown across the face, unseen but definitely there; but then the chauffeur held the door open for him and he was getting out of the car automatically. He stood still, following Suleiman's glance through the aisle of eucalyptus trees, and he could barely make out the outline of the Delaigres' neighbouring plantation house about eight hundred yards away. By ducking his head a little he could see two horses standing there, with one rider up and the other just mounting.

Emile and Diane Delaigre. But how could Suleiman tell they were coming over to visit? Was it just a kind of oriental extra-sensory perception, or did he *know*? He turned to the old man just in time to see what looked like a second glance between him and Moussac.

'What's the matter, Rip?' Moussac asked suddenly.

'Matter?'

'You looked—I mean, for a moment you——'

'Let's wait for Emile and Diane inside,' Rip said. 'The sun is giving all of us delusions.'

'Compose yourself,' Diane said to her husband as they rode through the trees toward Rip's house. 'Relax. You're trembling.'

'For heaven's sake,' Emile said, 'stop biting at me. Ever since we went down to meet Rip at the pier the other night you've been biting at me.'

'I'm not, dear. Really I'm not. You ran away the other night. Today I merely want you to walk up those steps as if you were walking into your own house.'

They walked their horses slowly, in silence. Both of them wore white British sun helmets, and Diane's blonde hair, worn up in a coronet of braids, seemed lighter against her dark silk tailored shirt. She looked immaculate in her tan whipcord jodhpurs and polished boots.

Emile wiped his face with his sleeve. 'I'm sorry, Diane. I didn't mean to——'

'I know, dear, I know. I only want you to stand on your own feet like a man.'

'What did the Spanish girl say when you talked to her yesterday?'

'Well, I couldn't ask too much. Rip was sleeping upstairs—like a dead one, she said to me, isn't that an odd way of putting it?—and I was afraid he just might awaken while I was there and come tumbling downstairs or something equally embarrassing.'

'Diane, please, I'm not doubting your English sense of what was proper. I only want to know if Ynez said anything about Moussac.'

Diana looked hurt by his sudden swing back to irritability. 'She said he'd been to call, but left when she told him Rip was, ah, sleeping like a dead one.'

'Then Moussac hasn't had a chance to see him yet?'

'No, not unless he dashed up from town this morning.' She turned in her saddle to reach out and grasp his arm. 'Ah, Emile, I do wish you'd stop letting this thing worry the life out of you! You know Rip—he doesn't always use conventional standards of judgment. Just walk up to him like a man and tell him the whole thing.'

He rode silently beside her for a moment, then said quietly, 'It's easy for you to talk. Have you ever seen him angry? His face turns into stone. He turns into a—a blow-torch. Don't smile! You can beat yourself to pieces against the stone, while all the time the blow-torch burns through wood or metal or people or whatever is in his way. He knows it himself. I heard

him tell Moussac so one time. "It's a good thing I'm stubborn," he said, "it's a sentimental fool's best substitute for strength." '

'What did Moussac say to that?'

'Well, you know the good colonel. Always the sideways remark, like a crab, he gets ahead by travelling sideways.'

'But what did he say?'

' "Also your major weakness, Rip," he said. Then they sat down to play chess, or some such amusement. If it were not so serious, they could be very drôles, those two.'

Diane suddenly raised her head. 'Look, speak of the devil. There's Moussac's sedan in front of Rip's house!'

They stopped. Without thinking, Diane lowered her voice a little. 'You'll have to wait to talk to Rip alone, later.'

Emile stared at the car. 'Let's go back.'

'No, no. They've seen us by now. Have you lost your mind? He's been back almost two days and we still haven't said welcome home yet.' She moved closer to him so she could look directly into his face. 'I know how hard it is for you dear, but don't you *see*?' She could see his hands tighten; his taut reins began to tremble slightly. 'What's the matter, Emile?'

'I'm just wondering. I wonder how much Ynez has told him.' He turned to her quickly. 'You sit there with that nice smooth untroubled forehead of yours! Not a wrinkle, not a frown! I'm always the one to do the worrying, while you spend your time mothering me and hushing me and wrapping me in diapers and telling me not to be afraid of the dark!'

'Oh, Emile, please dear, don't turn on me just because you——'

'*Turn* on you! That's a laugh, that really is.'

Diane's eyes began to shine with tears. 'I try so hard to help, to stand behind you and give you some feeling of support, and you——'

'This jolly old chin up business is fine, fine, wonderful, but what damn good is it? You say I'm afraid of shadows in the dark. What if the shadows are real? How much has Ynez told him—that's what's worrying me. Is that a shadow, eh? Tell me, is it?'

'No, it's real.' Diane slapped the reins against her horse's neck. 'But don't worry about her.' She sat up straighter, taller in the saddle, as they began to move again. 'Let's go meet them. I know exactly how to handle her.'

They were silent, looking directly ahead, as they broke out of the sheltering shade of the eucalyptus trees and rode into the hot yellow sunlight of the clearing in front of Rip's house as if it was an arena for combat.

'Well, you were right Suleiman,' Rip said, 'here come Emile and Diane.'

They were sitting around the breakfast table on the veranda now, and Bouala, the housekeeper, back from market, kept bustling to and from the kitchen. She had greeted Rip with dignity: 'Praise be to God. It is good that you have come back to our home again'—and then returned to work as if he had been away for a weekend. She had worked for his father, as a young girl. Rip knew the casualness only covered her shyness, and he liked her for it.

Suleiman stood in a corner, withdrawn, with one hand resting idly on an ornamental Gold Coast talking drum which was decorated with two skulls as handles. Occasionally he raised his forefinger and tapped it on the skin drumhead, making a sound like microscopic thunder.

Ynez sat at the table with them. The silly French cocktail apron was gone now, and her white shirt, open at the throat, and the neat upswept hair made her look cool and business-like. 'Diane,' she said, almost to herself. 'That was the name of the Greek goddess of hunting, wasn't it? She rides beautifully, as if she were born for it.'

Moussac tilted his chair around to look out into the sunlit clearing at the Delaigres approaching. 'Greek? No, that classic profile comes from Wedgwood china, not a Greek urn. She rides like Britannica. If you look hard you can see the shield she carries in one hand——' he paused '—and the spear in the other.'

'That's all we need to make the day complete,' Rip said. 'A discussion of mythology.'

'We live by myths,' Moussac said, 'can't we at least talk about them?'

Did he and Ynez exchange looks? Rip wasn't sure. Maybe he was still seeing the shadow of a stick. . . .

'If I were an unborn child choosing a mother,' Moussac said in his carefully casual voice, 'happy thought, I believe I would choose Diane. She is good looking in a healthy outdoor English way, she is sturdy and calm and strong minded; and above all, protective.' He turned easily to Ynez. 'As a woman, wouldn't you agree?'

Ynez stared out into the sunlight at the approaching pair of riders; they were close to the house now. 'Of course you're right,' she said, 'except for one thing.'

'What's that?'

'You'd never be born. She was operated on, years ago, in England, before she came here and married Emile. She'll never have children.'

Both Moussac and Rip swung to look at her.

'Yes,' she said, nodding at them, unsmiling, 'it's a fact.'

'I've known her for years,' Rip said. 'So's Jacques.' He turned to Moussac. 'Did you ever know about that?'

Moussac was still looking at Ynez. 'No,' he said softly, 'I didn't.'

'There are a few things left which women do not shout from the roof,' Ynez said.

'Does she talk like that to you, too, Jacques?'

Moussac leaned back in his chair to answer Rip. 'This fine Spanish anger, you mean? The gypsy in the throat—the cry of don't push me?'

'Yes,' Rip said, impatient with Moussac's everlasting floweriness, 'yes, if that's what you want to call it.'

'Why, what would you call it?'

'Chip on the shoulder. Tough guy talk.'

'Hah!' Ynez said. 'If ever you see me truly angry I will strike you blind with one look.'

'Yes,' Moussac laughed, 'I think we have here, as you would say, a ball of fire. Ah!' he added, lifting his eyes to look over Rip's shoulder toward the doorway, 'here are your

guests. The lean dark Cassius and his wife-mother Britannica.'

The air had changed around them. Rip could sense it as he got up. Moussac's easy smile had faded and he was stroking his moustache thoughtfully; Ynez buttoned the throat of her shirt, then unbuttoned it; Suleiman tapped the talking drum with his finger more quickly, like a telegrapher; even Bouala stood still in the doorway with a fresh pot of coffee like some native African household deity. He sensed invisible flow lines of force running among these people, unseen relationships, unspoken feelings, threads of a broken cobweb . . . what the hell had gone on while he had been away to create this subtle, volcanic, underground heat?

Then they were all saying hello, and shaking hands, talking fast all at the same time; the glad to have you back, welcome, welcome home, you're looking fine, so are you, and Rip noticed that Emile's hand, as he shook it, was wringing sweat. Ah, you're letting your imagination run away again, he thought swiftly, the man's been out in the sun—but then he shook hands with Diane, and hers was slender, firm, and very cool.

'Sit down,' Rip said, 'sit down, everybody. My God, you'd think we were a bunch of strangers standing up, wouldn't you? Bouala, some coffee for Madame Delaigre—no, Diane? —an apéritif——?'

'Sherry, if you have it, please.'

'Sherry for madame.' Then he added purposely. 'Not the cooking sherry in the kitchen, Bouala,'—and they all laughed —'and Emile?'

'I'll take the coffee, thank you. I need a pickup.'

Finally they were all sitting down around the table and there was the inevitable moment of silence.

'Well!' Diane said. 'There's no need to shout.'

And once again they all laughed a little, uneasily and easily at the same time, and began to talk.

A half-hour later the gay uncomfortable chatter had tapered off into more casual conversation. Only Suleiman stood a little apart from the group, withdrawn from the heathen ham of

which Rip had partaken, and the equally forbidden wine with which Madame Delaigre filled and refilled her cherry glass. Emile Delaigre sat bent forward in his chair with the broken-hinge look of a tall thin man who finds standing more comfortable than the seats of ordinary men. His dark shaven face kept smiling as he threw little hopeful smiles at Rip; he kept spreading both hands outward, open, in a constant gesture of: If only you listen you will see my hands are clean and not guilty and you will understand.

'—so after you left, Rip,' Emile was saying, 'things went from bad to worse. I was stuck with over ten metric tons of flat cut and swirly Sapielli and Khaya mahogany, so I had to store the quarter-cut flitches out under a thatched shed and hope for the best. I stopped the sawmill and stored that new American band saw you bought in cosmoline, so you see I took precautions.'

Like an expert at a dinner party who has been asked a polite question about his specialty, Emile went on at great length about the mahogany, giving technical details nobody cared about.

Under the drone of explanation Rip's mind slipped back to the day, on this same veranda over this same breakfast table, the week before he left for the States and an Army uniform. Georgette had sat across from him then in a long white monogrammed robe which, he remembered, she always insisted on calling by its American name: brunch coat.

'Georgette,' he had said, 'about the plantation——'

She had stopped pouring the coffee and smiled across at him impatiently. 'Darling,' she said, 'all week it's been the insurance, or your will, or your father's papers——'

'But the plantation——' he had begun again.

'You know how dumb I am about these things. It'll go in one ear and out the other, Rip.'

'That's just it. I'm going to give a half-interest to Emile.'

Her smile disappeared. 'A half-interest!'

'Sure. He's done a good job managing it all these years and he knows more about mahogany than my father ever did.'

'I know, darling, but——'

'What's the matter? I thought you liked Emile.'

'Oh, I do, I do—he's sort of attractive at parties in his own tall, dark, thin way, but underneath he's—well, isn't he sensitive and weak and——'

'Not on the plantation he isn't.' Rip knew why; he knew Emile strode around bossing the labour gangs with a heavier, tougher hand than a stronger man would have cared to use. He knew Emile had a weak man's weakness for whip methods, but there was no real brutality—and Emile was honest. Whether it came from moral conviction or merely a weak man's fear of the risks of dishonesty, the fact remained that Emile was honest.

'But a half-interest, Rip! Isn't that quite a bit?'

'Not if I really want to protect you. If he takes good care of his fifty per cent., you'll never have to worry about yours.'

—If I don't come back you'll be safe, was what he really was saying, and she suddenly had understood. She stood up and came around the table to lean over and kiss him. . . .

Suddenly he realized they were all looking at him questioningly.

'It was, wasn't it?' Emile was asking.

'What was? I'm sorry, I——'

'I mean diversifying our wartime products a little. These East Indian palms have kernels with a high oil yield, so if I shipped enough up to Dakar—well, you don't want the details, but one way or another like that, I managed to keep ends together.'

Fifty per cent., Rip thought, to keep her safe. And now——

'Sounds sensible to me,' he heard himself saying.

Diane put her sherry glass down on the table. 'Rip,' she said impulsively, sympathetically, 'we know how tiresome all this talk must be for you. You're not really interested in the mahogany or palm oil. We did come over to tell you how terribly much we——'

'Why shouldn't he be interested?' Moussac was lolling back in his chair, casually rolling a cigarette of black Algerian tobacco with one hand. They all knew what Diane had been about to say about Georgette, and Moussac's interruption had

a subtle callousness. 'Why not?' he went on. 'After all, Madame Delaigre, Rip's whole life and fortune is in the land here. Of course he's interested.'

Rip smiled across the table at Diane's smooth stricken face. Why had Moussac blackjacked her statement of sympathy? 'Thanks,' he reassured her, 'I know.' Her eyes began to shine a little, and she dropped her eyelids. Rip turned to Moussac.

'Jacques, don't you think I can speak up for myself?'

'For a man who used to be one of the smartest export-import men on the coast you act singularly dumb.'

'Meaning?'

Moussac shrugged. 'Ask your partner. He knows what I mean.'

Diane's eyes opened quickly, warningly, but it was too late.

'Of course I know!' Emile said. He spread his hands toward Rip, the clean open innocent hands. 'He means with the war on, with the Nazis running both occupied and unoccupied France, why did I ship palm oil out.' He swung back to Moussac. 'Isn't that what you mean, colonel?'

Quietly Rip asked, 'Where did you ship the oil?'

'Dakar.'

'How?'

'In French ships.'

'To Leclerc?'

'No, I couldn't locate him. He disappeared suddenly.'

'Naturally,' Moussac said. 'Dead.'

'If not Leclerc——?'

'To a new company, Brury et Fils. They paid very well, with no delays.'

'Just who was this Brury? I don't remember the name. Did you——' but Diane interrupted him suddenly.

'Is this the thanks he gets?' she burst out. 'We do not say Emile went through what you did, Rip—or you, colonel—and he, too, would have fought if the examining doctors did not tell him to go back home and put some weight on. So he did his duty by you, Rip, as well as by himself, of course, and kept the plantation going. Day after day, with no help. He had malaria twice, practically blackwater fever——'

'I'm not over it yet,' Emile said. He held one long corded hand up above the table. 'Look at it, still shaky.'

'Oh, Emile,' Diane said, with a little embarrassed break in her voice, 'for pity's sake put your hand down.' She turned to Rip, 'Didn't Georgette tell you? Didn't she write you any of this? How Emile was managing, how sick he was——?'

'No. Everything sounded fine.'

'Not a word?'

'No.' How could he remember now? The years were a long black tunnel now, with no light at either end.

'I'm sorry, Rip. Really. Forgive me. I—I——' She kept twisting the stem of her glass between her fingers.

'Of course, Diane——'

'She's been upset lately,' Emile threw in, 'and when Georgette——'

'Everybody,' Moussac said, evenly, 'the whole world has been upset lately.'

Emile swung toward him, gripping the arms of his chair so that his knuckles whitened. Diane put her hand on his wrist. He eased back, letting the breath flatten out of his chest. 'For a policeman,' he said tightly, 'you seem to have much time to visit us people in the country.'

Moussac shrugged. 'Time on my hands.'

'That was the name of an American dance tune years ago.' Ynez' voice surprised them.

'Yes,' Moussac said, 'for a lazy man like me it is something to sing about, Mad'moiselle. Nothing to do. Not even a single prisoner in the jail.'

'The whole town knows about you and your jail,' Delaigre snapped. 'Strange. It is always empty.'

'Monsieur Delaigre, I take more pride in once having checkmated the great Capablanca in a game of chess—on paper of course, since I never had the pleasure to match such a master personally—than I take in being a policeman. But after all, what is chess but an expression in ancient symbols of the power elements in our communities? The king is our civil liberty to be protected to the death. The queen is the legal government. I flatter myself in being the knight, the right arm

of law and order, moving forward and striking sideways.'

Rip laughed at Moussac's obvious act of pretentiousness. What was Moussac searching for, probing for, behind the fog of words? 'Remember the knight in chess has a horse's head,' he said, smiling.

'Touché, mon vieux. But how much more often do I feel like the other end!'

'This Aesop's fable, Colonel Moussac, still does not explain the jail.'

'Of course it does, Monsieur Delaigre. Any half-intelligent criminal could escape from my jail. The guards are country boys, Senegalese rookies who don't care, who can be bribed with fifty francs. It would be easy. No, I prefer to keep my prisoners where there is absolutely no escape.'

'And where is this secret Devil's Island of yours?'

Moussac tapped his forehead. 'Here. Inside. Inside the conscience. Absolutely no escape.'

They all stared at him. This is more than idle veranda talk. Rip thought, there is a broken cobweb somewhere here. . . .

Emile was rigid, staring at Moussac. Slowly he took a small plastic case of yellow atabrine tablets from his pocket and, with a sorry look of self-pity, swallowed one. Diane poured herself another sherry. Ynez stirred her coffee, round and round, until they all sensed the grating of her spoon and she let it fall into her dish with a small clatter.

Rip looked at her levelly across the table. When she felt the silence and raised her eyes, and saw him watching, a wave of pink swept over her face and throat.

I don't understand it yet, Rip thought, but I feel a goddamn taut invisible web. What is it they're hiding from me? If there was something you could put your hand on——

Diane looked at Ynez, then at her husband, then at Rip. 'Rip——' she began, but when she saw the coiled look of tension in his face as he watched Ynez she stopped short.

'Are those your clothes,' Rip said to Ynez quietly, 'or Georgette's?'

Ynez raised her eyes to him again. 'Hers.' Then quickly, defensively, 'She gave them to me.'

'Did you live in Spain after the Civil War?'

'What's the difference now?' She sounded a little afraid of him, but she was not running.

'Why did you leave Europe?'

A puff of smoke came across the table as Moussac coughed. 'For an intelligent man,' he said hoarsely, patting his chest, 'that's stupid. Why did anybody leave Europe in the last ten years?'

Ynez thanked him with her eyelashes. It would have been theatrical if her eyes were not so plainly sincere.

'That was *Lili Marlene* you were playing the other night,' Rip went on.

'Yes.'

'You prefer the German approach to a broken heart?'

'You want national labels?' she flashed. 'All right! On my brain is a stamp: Nobody. I am one of the ten million nobodies.'

'Except the nobodies are starving. You've just finished breakfast in my house. How did that happen?'

'I only stayed because I wanted to see you.'

What did that mean? 'All right. You've seen me.' He didn't care what she meant.

If he couldn't weave the cobweb together the least he could do was pull hard on the most obvious loose end. This genteel pitter-patter—the aristocrats at the breakfast table! Nuts! He felt the old familiar anger growing in him, the need to break loose and *do* something, but here and now there was only the frustration of all this talk, talk, talk.

'Don't be too harsh, Rip,' Diane was saying. 'After all, Ynez is in Port Afrique on a very temporary basis.'

'Thank you for your charity, madame!' The brown Spanish face with the burning dark eyes looked across the table directly into the cool blue eyes in the smooth, motherly English face. 'Thank you for your timetable of my departure!'

Rip glanced at Diane. Had she really intended generosity toward Ynez, or was it a woman's old double double-cross?

Moussac stretched out his hand and stabbed his finger into the air at a point midway between Ynez and Diane. 'Right about here one could light a cigarette without matches,' he said.

Ynez turned on him furiously. 'Jokes! Always the reasonable man. So smug. So secure. Nero fiddling reasonably while Rome burns!'

'Allow me to remind you that you are the only one here on fire.'

That isn't true, Rip thought swiftly. In two more minutes I'm going to let go all this nice careful control I've been teaching myself to hold on to, and I'll burn this merry merry crew in hell if I have to. . . .

Ynez stood up. 'I'm leaving. I'll leave today.' Her voice was trembling now.

'Leave?' Moussac asked. 'To where, mad'moiselle? And with what official papers?'

'Shut up, Jacques,' Rip said. 'And you, Sarah Bernhardt, sit down. You're not leaving. I'm not finished yet.'

A glass crashed. Diane's sherry glass lay in pieces on the floor. Bouala appeared so quickly with a dustpan and brush that Rip was certain she had been standing just around the corner.

'I'm sorry,' Diane said quickly. Her mouth trembled. 'It's just that—I mean, we're all so tense—this is *such* a different home-coming that we'd planned for you, Rip——'

'Diane——' Emile began.

'I know,' she hurried on. 'I know why you're angry, Rip. Your looking so calm and all doesn't fool me. You're angry because we didn't come down to the boat the other night.'

'Forget it.'

'Diane——!'

'Suleiman, you know how he always shields you, he told us you should be left alone, you would rather be left alone at first. That's true, isn't it Suleiman?'

For the first time in an hour the old man in the corner spoke. 'There are a hundred truths, madame. That is one of them.'

Rip was growing tired of the old man's eternal double talk, tired of Emile's nervous guilty hands and explanations, tired of Ynez' defensive cat scratching, tired of Jacques Moussac's play-acting God.

For no reason an irrelevant thought struck him. 'Who were Brury and Son?' he asked Moussac.

'A front exporter for the Nazis. They shipped palm oil to Marseille in French bottoms, while the English destroyers trailed them to Gibraltar absolutely helpless to fire a shot, and the shipment naturally continued moving from unoccupied France into occupied.'

'I didn't know that then!' Emile shouted. 'Before you make accusations——!'

'Oh Rip,' Diane begged, 'don't be angry——'

Rip smashed his first on the table. 'Christ yes I'm angry! I don't gave a damn about Brury now, or the blasted mahogany or anything else like that! Have you all gone crazy to sit here yapping around me like this! Angry! I could break every one of you with my hands! Can't you remember Georgette was lying in that room in there just a short while back?'

Very softly Moussac said, 'Easy, Rip.'

The taut steel spring in his chest snapped. 'Easy! Georgette. Suicide. You're lying! I can feel it. Every one of you is lying!'

'Rip, sit down. Be logical. This is only in your mind. You saw her yourself. The powder burns on the skin. I have all the evidence in my office, the weapon, the bullet——'

Rip grasped the shoulder of his tunic. 'You? Of them all—that *you* should lie!'

'We do our best,' Moussac said evenly. 'Ask Suleiman. Only God knows the truth.'

Rip exploded. '*I* know the truth!' He swung on all of them. 'Look around you. Is this the house of a woman who would commit suicide? Look at it! Does it make sense? Music, flowers, bright colour in every room. Everything you touch is smooth.'

'Nobody denies that, Rip,' Diane said softly, placatingly. 'We all miss Georgette very much. We——'

'Georgette enjoyed being alive,' Rip snarled. '*Alive*. Not dead.' He stopped and swept his eyes around the table. 'What is this,' he asked quietly, 'a partnership of silence?' He stood up. 'What I want to know is: Who killed her?'

BOOK THREE

A time to seek

GEORGETTE'S funeral was held the next morning at the Cathedral.

Like so many things in Africa which were not what their names said they were, the Cathedral was less grand than its name. It was copied partly after the great church in Dakar, with a series of small vaulting arches that finally threw themselves upward toward the sky in an architectural frenzy of Gothic passion, and so the people of Port Afrique called it a cathedral more out of a respectfully exaggerated admiration than out of irony. And, inevitably, although the very design of the building was intended to express the echo of European medievalism, Africa had imperceptibly breathed itself into the stones of its walls.

Four tall stone angels, fifteen feet high, with wings folded to their ankles, stood guard on each side of the central doorway, and, in a niche at the centre of the arch sat the Madonna, carved in her softly draped biblical robes, holding her Child. The figures, Mary and the child Jesus and the four angels, wore tender stone smiles, patient not with the sweet forgiving thin lipped patience of Europe, but with the heavy down-curving lips of Africa whose patience never knew the name of forgiveness but only the inevitable healing passage of time and the ever-returning seasons. Africa lay in the broad tribal faces of the stone holy figures and breathed through their distended

nostrils and looked down out of their ancient almond eyes at Rip entering the church.

Although he did not profess their faith, Rip had always liked the stone figures because Africa had become a part of him, too. His outburst of suspicion against the circle of people on his veranda yesterday had been the nervous impatience of Europe and America where it is cool enough for fury and swiftness; but shutting his mouth immediately and refusing to say another word to them about it had been something like the deep savage patience of this hot slumbering African continent. The Delaigres had left shortly after his outburst, wrapped in a cocoon of muttered embarrassment; Ynez had drifted palely upstairs out of sight; Suleiman had picked up his umbrella and gone off saying something about putting Rip's prewar Alfa-Romeo coupe back into running order; and Rip had asked Jacques Moussac to drive him into town to see Father Xavier at the Cathedral.

There was much of Africa in Colonel Moussac too, for he did not say a single word to Rip as his car carried them away from the plantation and rolled into Port Afrique. He was quiet even when Rip got out at the church.

Each of them knew the values of silence, and Rip was sure Moussac understood that he, Rip, was using his silence as a bandage for his feelings and a weapon of his suspicions.

Father Xavier had been out yesterday when Rip had called on him, and Rip had been invited by the housekeeper to wait in the small walled garden of bright pink-red flamboyant trees in the shadow of the vestry. She had given him a tall glass of Kebir vin rose with a chunk of ice in it, and he had sat quietly sipping it, rattling the ice occasionally, and letting his mind ease off dreamily. The calm cloistered quality of the garden was another doorway which, like so many things and places in Port Afrique, opened to the past and Georgette.

She had visited Father Xavier here often. Although Rip's entire reverence was wrapped into the kind of personal humanism which bent no knee nor offered up litanies, Georgette had remained faithful to her own religion. Its formality and symbolic pageantry and profound mysteries had appealed

to her six senses. Rip remembered his first surprise when he had taken her to an early Mass after one of her popular all-night Saturday parties that were the envy of Port Afrique's commercial society; he remembered his surprise at seeing her kneel and pray with the calm innocent rapture of a nun. It was like champagne changing into water. He had known when he married her that she was complex and capable of being several different women; but he had never imagined that within the sensuous Parisian woman remained a French convent maiden.

Then, as he had sat in the garden remembering all this, Father Xavier had come coasting in on the girl's bicycle he used to accommodate his long black gown, interrupting Rip's reverie, and the priest had come over with his skirt swishing to join Rip. He managed not to look surprised. In a way Father Xavier was related to Moussac and to Suleiman, Rip had thought; his face had the same wise African tranquillity.

'It is very very good to see you home safe at last, Monsieur Reardon,' he had said, speaking English. He knew Rip spoke French, but this was intended as a subtle courtesy. Then he had led Rip into the vestry to escape the outside heat.

'Sit down, please. You want to talk to me about madame.'

It was direct, not a question; Rip respected him for it. 'Yes, Father.'

'I remember you were married in this room. The prie-Dieu stood just about here. I was sorry, of course, that she had chosen to marry someone outside the Church, but I was delighted it was you all the same. In your own way I have always felt you were a religious man. May I refill your wine glass?'

Wise, wise, Rip thought; easing me along gently.

'I don't understand what's happened, Father,' he said, using French in return courtesy. 'I've had a long time to think about it, and I always come up against a blank wall.'

Father Xavier sighed and stroked the top of his head. 'Comparisons are odious, and I will not compare my feelings with your own. But let me say I was deeply shocked. I thought about madame for a long time, too. She had always been, if

not devout, at least very faithful.' He sighed again. 'And there was the question of burial in consecrated ground.'

'Of course you will——'

'Oh yes, yes, of course, please do not be disturbed about that. I only want to say the wisdom of the Church includes an understanding of the temporary insanity which may drive a person to self-destruction. When that person has been as faithful as madame there could be no other explanation. She will receive the requiem Mass of the Church tomorrow.'

'This temporary insanity——?' Rip's voice sounded controlled, cold, even to himself.

'Precisely. Why? From what cause? A man lost in the desert loses his mind in the end, I remember thinking, sitting right here thinking about it, and that gave me the explanation.' He locked his fingers together, the gesture of a medieval schoolman pondering some complex point of theology. 'The Bedouins say a man cannot live in the open desert more than nineteen hours without water. So it must have been with madame. In the desert of loneliness in which she lived she could not exist any longer without love.' He raised one hand quickly as Rip began to speak. 'Love, you must understand, means something more profound to the Church than the ordinary term, for we have tried to combine the Grecian eros, which is love in its selfish passionate forms——'

. . . Bacchante, Rip thought; Beaulieu was right—maybe the romantic sculptor's classic intuition had been wiser than we knew at the time. . . .

'—with agape, the selfless Christian love for one's fellow man. Do you find this analysis of mine painful, monsieur? Too cold or Jesuitical?'

'No, no. I'm not familiar with the Greek words, but I think I know what you mean.'

'For a woman like your wife the total kind of love, both passion and the charitable kind, were necessary. But first you went to war, and she found half her life gone, half of love. She entered the desert. She lived alone, with only a housekeeper, out there on your plantation, and loneliness can be like the drops of water that wear away stone. Years went by.

The war shortages came, the rationing, all the petty necessary irritations of war. The terrible bulletins on the radio. The Vichy propaganda. The daily sandpaper on the nerves. When a day is a lifetime, can you realize what the years must have been like for her? Then, with each new military campaign she was afraid for you all over again. She worried about your fidelity. In this room she told me, "When a man is away so long and close to death so often, who could blame him for going to some woman to feel alive a little while?" It may sound strange now, but that's how people talk to me when they're upset.'

'Yes, I know.' He had tried to form a picture of Georgette in his mind as she had sat here, wearing a decorous black silk dress probably and a large black hat, looking cool and lovely, but his mind stopped there. He could not see her face.

'When I first mentioned the desert something crossed your face, Monsieur Reardon. Perhaps you thought I was being high flown and literary. But now do you see what I mean? Finally she heard you were terribly wounded and were not expected to live. The courage of four years broke wide open. At that point she lost what little drinking water she carried through her desert with her, and the final nineteen hours must have begun.'

'But I lived. They wrote to her from the hospital. I wrote later myself.'

'But the shock remained. If only she had come to me, but she trusted in her false strength. She never said a word.' The priest unlocked his fingers and spread his hands. 'From here on there is no logic, for who can blame the man wandering in the desert who sees a mirage, a green oasis, with his whole heart? It is a kind of Gethsemane. So, monsieur, I reached my answer. Suicide due to temporary insanity.'

That had been yesterday. Today he was entering the church a second time, passing the four stone angels who guarded the arched doorway.

Jacques Moussac had telephoned him from town that

morning to ask if Rip wanted him to send the Renault sedan, but Rip had refused the offer.

'Rip,' Moussac had said strongly over the phone, with his voice crackling in the receiver, 'you know I don't beat around the bush with you. If you still believe what you said about murder during your little explosion yesterday you will be letting yourself in for a lot of unnecessary unhappiness.'

'I spoke to Father Xavier yesterday afternoon,' Rip said. 'He explains it as temporary insanity.'

'Of course! That's like calling water wet. Suicide comes from a long chain of mental illness. Self-destruction is only the last broken link.'

'Sure.'

'I'm sorry, Rip. I didn't intend to sound so——'

'Sure, Jacques.'

'Now you're angry with me again.'

'No, no. I don't know what I feel. I'm mixed up——'

'I'll send my car out.'

'Thanks, no. Suleiman's having my coupe fixed.'

But the coupe had not been ready in time and he had had to call a fiacre out from town to drive him to the church.

As the native two-wheeled carriage with its torn folding cabriolet top clip-clopped slowly into town he had watched the trees slide by with his eyes unseeing, thinking about the phone conversation.

Suicide?

He did not like this enlargement of feeling, this conscious introspection he had begun to slip into. It was inevitable, he supposed, an inescapable brooding, especially with a hundred and one places continually unlocking his memory of Georgette. A sudden pain in the abdomen wrenched him. Then the spasm was over, leaving his forehead wet from the pain. 'Take it easy,' the Army doctor in Washington had said, 'just relax and take it easy.' Take it easy! He knew he was made so that he would keep driving himself to do something about the questions in his mind, taking some kind of direct action.

Doing what?

Well——

What, for example?

Well, go over the evidence again with Moussac. You know weapons—why not look over the ·32 Mauser in Moussac's office? Read the official report——

Why? After all, if Father Xavier's expl——

Because I can't swallow the idea of suicide! That's why. Maybe the others can. Maybe some of them want to swallow it for reasons you don't know about. Maybe the good Father Xavier can explain it to himself with allegories and Greek words, but it doesn't add up for me.

Moussac won't co-operate with this idea of checking the evidence. He calls it suicide—and maybe he *wants* it to stay that way. . . .

To hell with him then! Bribe your way into his office. Do something on your own!

Then the fiacre had rolled into the brick-paved square before the church and he had paid the driver and now he was walking past the stone guardian angels into the cool interior darkness of the church. Up ahead of him, as if at the end of a dim tunnel, the coffin lay on its bier in the light cast by six candles, at the foot of the main altar outside the sanctuary rail.

There were only a few people gathered together in the second and third pews; they seemed to be huddling against some invisible threat. It made the church look emptier somehow. The entire front row was unoccupied, and Rip knew as he walked down the aisle that he would sit there alone.

There were a number of well-dressed people he did not recognize, wartime friends of Georgette's probably, and off to one side Rip saw Moussac kneeling. He was in dress uniform, with little faded patches on the chest of his tunic where he had removed a dozen campaign ribbons; he wore only the rosette of the Légion d'honneur. His face was withdrawn, remote; a monk in contemplation.

Nino, the Cockney proprietor of Le Badinage, sat near the aisle. He was dressed fantastically in what must have been his idea of the clothes gentlemen wore on such occasions in Africa: striped trousers and a formal coat and an Ascot tie

which made him look like best man at a wedding instead of a mourner. His frank-looking, open blue eyes kept bouncing around, nodding quickly whenever he caught someone's eyes, nodding a bright friendly hello then swiftly rearranging the muscles of his face into shared sadness as if this were a social event, a democratic gathering of the local aristocracy, unhappily subdued by the accident of death.

Rip was surprised to see him. The snotty little chicken crud, he thought, trying to buy my place out from under me on my first night home. Opportunistic little bastard.

Emile and Diane Delaigre were nearby, Diane looking pale and drawn.

As he knelt before his prayer desk Rip felt a stiff sheet of paper buckle inside his pocket. It was a note from Ynez which the housekeeper had handed him as he had left the house.

Forgive me, I can't bear to go. Please understand. Nine words. Unsigned.

No, he didn't understand. Not a damn thing. If Ynez had added a tenth word what would it be? *Love*. . . ? Had she been Georgette's friend or enemy? *Suicide*. . . ? Just how much did Ynez know?

A server came out of a side door followed by Father Xavier, putting on his biretta, and the requiem Mass began.

. . . In Judicium cum servo tuo, Domine . . .

Rip heard one or two women behind him begin to cry softly.

Suddenly, as the grave Latin words rolled out and hung muffled a moment before losing themselves in space, suddenly Diane choked sobbingly, and put her head down on her crossed hands. Emile looked terribly distressed, with tears shining in his eyes, and he put one arm across her shoulders.

. . . et ne nos inducas in tentationem . . .

Moussac's eyes slid blankly over Emile and Diane and moved to Nino. The little man held his arms up stiffly in his formal coat, a prayer attitude, with two large incongruous safety pins glinting in his cuffs instead of links. Moussac looked at Rip's rigid profile for a long moment, then he focused his eyes on the pear-shaped flame of one of the tall candles.

. . . in paradisum . . .

A thin tremor crossed Moussac's tan face.

Then Father Xavier began to recite the De Profundis.

. . . de profundis clamavi ad te, Domine . . .

The bell tolling above them sounded very loud. Rip closed his eyes.

After the burial they all drifted away slowly, shaking hands silently with Rip, one after the other, then leaving him standing alone at the grave.

Nino walked beside Moussac with his hands clasped behind his back, one hand grasping the diamond ring on the middle finger of the other, turning the jewel around and around and back again as if the diamond was a touchstone of strength.

'You know,' Nino said, 'meanin' no disrepect, colonel, but I can't 'elp thinkin' Reardon's attitude ain't 'ardly proper.'

'That's a strange thing to say.' Moussac thought Nino sounded genuinely offended.

'If you weren't 'is friend I wouldn't mention it,' Nino said, 'but I'm a man who likes to speak up with what's on 'is mind.'

'Well,' Moussac said slowly, 'what's on your mind?'

'Did *you* think Mr. Reardon looked properly mournful when they lowered the casket into 'er last restin' plice on this earth?'

'He's in a peculiar mental state. He's likely to look a dozen different ways.'

'But—but 'e didn't look sad at all!'

'Well, he keeps his feelings pretty deep down.'

'I thought 'e looked, well, like 'e was—angry.' He rubbed his cheek, the one Rip had slapped. ''E's a violent man.'

Moussac took Nino's elbow and stopped him. Nino looked up with open questioning blue eyes.

'Have you ever been a deacon or anything like that?' Moussac asked him.

Nino smiled, pleased. 'Me? You're pullin' my leg, colonel.'

'The language you use——'

Nino's smile broadened. 'It's just I was brought up somethin' proper, that's all,' he said. 'My mother, may she rest in peace.' He crossed himself with downcast eyes.

'Oh.' Moussac looked over Nino's head along the row of carved headstones and weeping stone angels and marble crosses at Rip still standing by the flower-covered grave, then he looked back into Nino's eyes. 'Are you,' he asked him quietly, 'blackmailing Ynez by any chance?'

Nino's eyes changed and his mouth began to open, but Moussac caught sight of Father Xavier entering the church and hurried off after him, leaving the unexpected question hanging in the air behind him like a souvenir for Nino.

'Father,' Moussac called.

Nino stood still, his face turning flat and pebble eyed. He slid his talisman diamond ring off his finger, then on again.

The priest turned, holding his black vestments from brushing the doorway. He waited until Moussac came up to him.

'Yes, colonel?'

'Do you have a minute?'

Father Xavier looked at him. 'When the police come to the priests,' he said, 'it always means trouble.'

'We are born to it, Father, unfortunately, as the sparks fly upward.'

A tiny smile touched the corners of the priest's mouth.

'Surely you're not trying to hide your badge behind biblical quotations. That's supposed to be the devil's trick.'

'I'd like to talk to you about Madame Reardon.' Moussac's chevron eyebrows rose a little. 'Is there anything satanic about that?'

Father Xavier hesitated a moment then held the door open more widely. 'Come in,' he said.

Moussac's black Renault sedan was parked in the brick square outside the Cathedral, and the detective who had taken the Senegalese chauffeur's place for the day sat behind the wheel bored and sleepy. Suddenly he saw Reardon come out from beside the churchyard into the hot open square.

The handful of mourners had already hurried back to the cool offices and shaded houses, and the detective-chauffeur had watched them go with distaste. Colonial businessmen.

The men were all pale-skinned from sitting every day in their dim, high-ceilinged counting houses watching their centimes and francs pile into ninety per cent. profit so they could leave this godforsaken land and retire to France; the women were as pale as their husbands, sagging with idleness. They had no feeling for the country they lived in, but only pity for themselves in what they considered to be their exile. The detective disliked them, but now that he saw Monsieur Reardon come out his feeling changed. Reardon was a little strange perhaps, he thought, but not a grasper. A regular guy. That night he arrived on the freighter. Guts.

The flic had been married a year, and he thought for a moment how he would feel if he himself had just come from the funeral of his wife, and the more he thought about it the sadder he felt watching Reardon. When he saw Reardon finally raise his head and begin to look for a fiacre, the detective started the car and drove up to the curb beside him in low gear and cranked down the window on Rip's side.

'Monsieur Reardon——' he said, leaning across the seat. Rip looked blank. 'You don't remember me. I was one of the men who met you at the ship the other night.'

'Oh yes.' Rip's eyes had an unfocused look, as though he was seeing two things at once.

'My name is Apollonaire. Hector Apollonaire.'

'How do you do?' Rip was beginning to focus now.

'You look like you recognize the name, monsieur.'

'No, no. It's just that Greek words——' Rip stopped. Eros and agape, Father Xavier had said, two kinds of love. . . . 'It's very complicated.'

'My mother was Greek. My father was French, of course, but stationed in Syria a long time. Can I offer you a lift? The fiacres have all been taken by the others. Colonel Moussac should be out in a minute.'

'Thanks.' Rip got into the back seat of the sedan and took off his sun helmet and wiped his forehead.

'Hot,' the detective said, looking up in the rear-view mirror the way cab drivers talk to their passengers.

'Yes.'

'You think Apollonaire is a funny name?'

'No. Different, but not funny.'

'My friends call me Apollo.' The detective looked up into the mirror again at Rip's unsmiling face. 'That's supposed to be a joke on me,' he said. Then, suddenly, he twisted around in his seat to look directly at Rip. 'I'm sorry,' he said quickly, 'but I never know how to say anything at a time like this. I'm sorry for your trouble. You know what I mean.'

'Thanks.'

'I know how you feel,' the detective went on quietly. 'When I came home in France after the phony war in 1940 I found everything gone, wiped out. Kaput. Mother, father, family, everything. People expected me to stand around crying, bringing flowers. Not me. I felt something inside like this——' he made a tight clenched fist '—and that same night I went underground.' He stopped, and took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. 'Cigarette, monsieur?'

'Merci. Maybe you'd prefer to smoke an American cigarette?'

'Always.' Apollonaire put his own away and took one from the pack Rip held out toward him. 'Thanks.'

'Keep the pack,' Rip said.

'No, no——'

'Go ahead, I have more at home.'

Apollonaire took the pack and then lighted a match with a quick flick of his thumbnail and held the flame cupped in his hand for Rip.

They smoked quietly for a moment. The detective let smoke curl out of his nose, then blew a thin stream through it. 'Yes,' he said, 'it is better to fight back than weep.'

'Were you,' Rip said carefully, 'were you connected with—with my wife's case?'

'Yes.'

The blue string of smoke rising from the cigarette Rip was holding began to tremble in the still air.

'A terrible thing to come home to,' the detective said, 'I know.' He glanced at Rip. 'You take it very well.'

'When you get slugged you get slugged. There is no choice. No back talk.'

They smoked quietly, two men who had been soldiers, who had sat this way many times before watching the smoke drift into the sunlight like a small fog and waiting for nothing in particular. Rip took out his wallet. 'How much is it worth to you to get me Moussac's dossier on the case?'

Apollonaire looked down at the wallet then up at Rip. 'Why?'

'Maybe I'm a little crazy. Morbid curiosity.'

'You don't believe the suicide report?'

Rip shrugged and began pulling thousand-franc notes from his wallet, one after another. After he had a half-dozen notes in his hand he stopped and looked up at the detective, but Apollonaire was still watching the money, so Rip started pulling out more mille notes.

'That's a lot of money,' Apollonaire said, forgetting to flick the long ash off his cigarette. 'That's a couple months' pay.'

'Okay?' Rip said. 'Ça va?'

The detective took a deep thoughtful drag on his butt and then reached out of the window to flip it in a flat arc halfway across the square. Then he turned back to Rip. 'Put your money away, monsieur,' he said. 'I have a big weakness for money.'

'It's all yours. I want to see that dossier.'

Apollonaire held up his fist and clenched it tightly a second time. 'Why do this to yourself all over again?' He twisted his fist in the air, knotting it. 'A man can make himself sick inside like that.'

'I'm not asking myself any questions.' But he remembered the spasm of pain that morning.

'Put your money away, monsieur. Ordinarily I would be glad to take it, but not now. It is not necessary.'

Rip began to understand him, and put the money back. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

Apollonaire scowled. '"He's a Greek," you thought, "and they are always poor and you can bribe them." That's what you thought, eh?'

'No, no, nothing like that. I thought you were a flic who needed some money that's all.'

'I do,' Apollonaire said. 'It's no fun to be married a whole year,' he indicated the tip of his little finger with a curved thumb, 'and that's how much a man's money buys these days.'

'I know.'

Apollonaire took Rip's pack of American cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. 'Have one, monsieur?'

'Merci.'

Again the detective lighted Rip's cigarette with a match.

'Ecoute,' Rip said, 'listen, Colonel Moussac is taking his time inside. Will you go into the church and tell him I'm waiting, please?'

'And?' Apollonaire asked. He held the burning match in his cupped hand, forgetting to light his own cigarette.

'And leave the car keys.'

Their eyes met and held.

'The colonel's office keys are on the same chain,' the detective said. 'It is not a very good idea.'

'Neither are death and taxes.'

'Owl' Apollonaire said suddenly and dropped the hot match, then smiled thinly. 'See how easy it is to get burned?'

'You won't get burned on this one. Leave the keys.'

'Ma foi, you're a strange one.'

'I warned you before that I was a little crazy.'

'Like a fox,' Apollonaire said and got out of the car. Rip got out too and slid behind the driver's wheel and started the motor.

As the detective began to walk toward the church Rip leaned out the window and called him. 'Apollonaire!'

The flic came back to the car. Rip stuck his arm out the window and slid a single folded mille note into Apollonaire's shirt pocket.

'It is not necessary,' Apollonaire said, 'believe me.'

'I know,' Rip said, 'I believe you.'

The detective stepped back and threw him a half-salute, which Rip returned. Then he put the car in gear and drove away, leaving the detective standing there looking after him with both hands clenched in his pockets.

The sun hung midway in the sky, and the bells on top of

the church began to ring out the noon hour with great echoing strokes. From the distance, in town, the cry of a muezzin came across the red-tile rooftops from the balcony of a minaret, calling the faithful to worship.

The heat beat upward in wavering layers from the bricked square and Apollonaire turned to go into the dark coolness of the church.

Ynez wandered aimlessly through the big living room of Rip's plantation house. For a while she watched some little yellow butterflies dancing their way across the clearing in front of the house, weaving their way out of pools of shadow into bars of sunlight then back into the shade again with a look of nervous twitching.

She jumped slightly when the big brass clock in the room whirred softly and began striking noon dully with its hammers choked by the humidity.

She opened the piano and leaned over the keys and picked out the first few notes of *Lili Marlene* with one finger. She stopped and stood still for a minute. Then she walked slowly over to the gun collection set into the wall. She looked at the long powerful barrels of the rifles glinting dully in the gun rack. After a moment she pulled open the broad drawer which was set into the wall under the rack, and stared down at the blunt ugly automatic weapons lying in rows on the green cloth lining. With one finger she touched the empty space near the front of the drawer where the dust had left the sharp outline of the missing Mauser ·32.

There was a sound behind her and she whirled around. Bouala stood impassively in the far doorway.

Ynez put both her hands behind her as she leaned back against the open drawer.

'Yes?' she said to the housekeeper in a tight voice.

'Does mademoiselle want lunch here or on the veranda?'

'Nothing, Bouala. I am not hungry.'

Bouala turned to go, but Ynez took a step toward her. 'Bouala. Wait.'

The housekeeper turned back.

'Why do you dislike me so much?' Ynez said. 'What have I done to you?'

Bouala shrugged. 'Pas comprends. Don't understand, mademoiselle.'

'You do,' Ynez said, 'I know you do. I can tell just by the way you look at me.'

Bouala looked at her. 'Is that all for now, mademoiselle?'

Ynez raised one hand, then let it drop. 'Yes, yes,' she said wearily, 'that's all.' Bouala walked out of the room.

Ynez pushed the gun drawer shut, then rubbed the fingers of one hand against the other, rubbing off the non-existent dust. She crossed the room again and slumped down on the bench at the piano. With her forefinger she began once more to pick out the blue heartsick melody of *Lili Marlene*.

Diane Delaigre lay perfectly still on her bed at home without any clothes on. All the blinds in the room where tilted so that the room was in half-darkness. Emile came in with a basin of water and a small towel.

'How do you feel now?' he said.

'Better.'

'What the devil came over you in church?'

'I don't know. Better wring that out or I'll be sopping.'

He began wrapping the wet towel around her forehead and she closed her eyes. Suddenly Diane grasped both his wrists in her hands.

'Emile,' she said.

'Yes?'

'I—I—suddenly there in church I had a picture of her lying there in that box with her eyes open, you know the sort of odd things that flash through one's head.'

'So that's what started you off.'

'Yes. Open. And smiling.'

'Oh stop it, stop it.'

She opened her eyes and looked directly into his. She took his wrists and lifted them off her head and put his hands down on her body. 'It's terrible, isn't it darling, thinking like this I mean, but it *is* wonderful to be alive all the same, isn't

it?' She began moving his warm hands in little stroking circles on her cool skin. 'Isn't it?'

'You have no shame, have you?'

She dug her nails gently into his wrists, then slid them up his arm and ran them delicately back and forth inside his elbows. 'No,' she said, 'none at all.'

'Lovely funeral,' Nino said, standing in front of his mirror, 'lovely.' He held his arms out and Grila slid the black formal coat off his shoulders. They were in Nino's apartment upstairs over Le Badinage. A dozen clocks of different sizes stood around the room, filling the air with their ticking. Nino looked at Grila's reflection in the mirror. 'Ynez didn't come,' he said.

Grila stopped, still holding the coat. 'No?' he said to Nino in the mirror. 'Why not?'

'That's what I'd like to know.' Nino began untying his tie. 'Phew, this was a hot beggar to wear. 'Ardly pays to be a gent.' He turned away from the mirror to talk to Grila's back as Grila crossed the room to hang up the coat. 'Tell Ynez I want to talk to her before the show tonight. No, after.' He smiled a little to himself. What he had to say would upset her. He could wait until her dancing was finished.

'She still stays out on Reardon plantation?' Grila asked.

Nino doubled his fist and cracked his knuckles. 'We'll see 'ow long *that* lasts,' he said. Then he cracked his other hand. 'Every time I think of it I get 'eartburn. Look out 'ow you hang that coat!' he shouted suddenly at Grila. 'Don't you 'ave the sense to use a 'anger instead of a 'ook? Blimey, what's the use buyin' proper clothes!' He cracked his knuckles again, angrily.

Someone knocked timidly on the door. Grila opened it a crack, then more widely as he turned to Nino. 'It's that girl you told to come in, the new one.'

'Oh yes yes yes, let 'er in, let 'er in.' He stood there with his legs apart a little, rubbing one hand over the knuckles he had just cracked.

The girl came into the room softly with her embroidered

leather babouches shuffling on her hennaed feet. She was a Berber, small, wearing a loose white cotton shift fastened at the shoulder with silver clasps, with a tattooed forehead and a few thin lines of indigo face paint. She wore an elaborate headdress, with a rope of black wool plaited through her hair and fastened with jewelled bands, and her ears and neck were hung with heavy filigree silver earrings and necklaces. She had the painted cheeks and lips of a fille de joie, and her eyes, made to look elongated by a blue line of kohl painted outward at their corners, stared dumbly at Nino.

Nino stood still while she walked slowly up to him as if she knew what was to come and dropped her eyes. He stopped stroking his knuckles and slapped her face hard.

'Look at me,' he ordered in bad French, using the coastal argot.

She did not raise her head.

'Do you know what it costs to bring you here by the flying machine over the heads of the police? What do you think this is, woman, your father's tent? Who do you think you are to refuse Youssef-ben-Moumen? Do you consider yourself some sultan's favourite concubine? Answer me!' he shouted.

She kept her head lowered.

'Why did you refuse him last night?' Nino shouted. 'How many times do you think such a rich merchant will come asking for you? Since when have you become such a princess?' He was breathing faster now, with his lips parted a little and his chest beginning to rise and fall.

He slapped her again. Her cheek on that side became darker under the brown skin.

'Enough,' Grila said from across the room. 'I think she will understand better now. This hitting the face leaves an impression.'

'Do you understand now?' Nino asked her.

For the first time she raised her head and looked straight at him with her eyes shining like white enamel.

'Now do you understand, or are you too sick to talk?'

'I am sick.' She whispered her words. 'Please,' she said.

Nino stared at her with his eyes growing narrower. Suddenly he grabbed one shoulder of her tunic and ripped it down to the floor with one gesture. The Berber girl did not move.

'Look at this, Grila!' Nino shouted and began to curse.

Grila came over to the girl and put one big hand on her bare shoulder gently. 'When do you expect this child?' he said.

'In three months——' the enamel eyes slid back toward Nino '—if Allah is willing.'

'The expense,' Nino said. 'Grila, do you know what this—this young camel, cost me? And you told me Madame Raissa in Marrakech could be trusted! Now look what she sends us!'

Grila turned his big moon face from the girl toward Nino. 'You make something big out of something little,' he said. 'What happened? Did somebody make you mad at the funeral?'

Nino swung his open hand at him, but Grila caught his wrist in mid-air easily. 'I am not a young girl,' he said, throwing Nino's arm back to him like a stick. 'Remember.'

Nino groped toward a chair, chest heaving. 'Get me—get me my—my 'eart pills—quick.' He gritted his teeth in pain, patting his heart.

Grila went into one of the bedrooms which opened from the main room of the apartment, then into a bathroom. He pushed aside a small metal hypodermic syringe case inside the medicine cabinet and took a bottle of white capsules from the shelf; then he walked back into the bedroom and picked up a corked wine bottle full of boiled drinking water.

'Hurry up——' Nino called from the next room.

Grila took his time. He walked out of the bedroom slowly and went over to stand over Nino's chair. 'The glass tube with the needle is in the lavabo if you want it,' he said.

'No—no—the pills are enough——'

'One or two?'

'One one one, you devil! Don't—don't just stand there!'

Grila unscrewed the bottle cap and rolled a single pill into his hand. Nino held his mouth open and Grila flipped the

pill into it, then uncorked the water bottle and held it so that Nino could clasp it baby-fashion with both hands trembling and drink in long choking gasps. Nino let his head fall back against the top of the chair and closed his eyes wearily while Grila went back through the bedroom into the bathroom to put the bottle and the medicine away.

'If it isn't one damn thing it's another,' Nino said to the room in English with his eyes closed. The army of clocks ticked in the silence with a steady unemotional beat which soothed him and gradually made his fluttering heart keep pace. He had figured out the clock idea himself, sixty beats to the minute, and he was proud of his cleverness. He began to breathe more easily.

The Berber girl had stood still all the while, watching him with her eyelids half shut. After a little while Nino's chest slowed down and he wiped the sweat off his forehead; two large semicircular patches of wetness had darkened the armpits of his shirt. He opened his eyes and caught the Berber girl watching him. Slowly, compulsively, he got up and half-walked, half-staggered toward her. She did not take her eyes off his face, which seemed to anger him more; then, just as he reached her, she shut her eyes to get ready for what was coming.

'Rip told me he spoke to you yesterday, Father,' Moussac said to the priest.

'Yes,' Father Xavier said.

'You sound very noncommittal,' Moussac smiled. He rubbed one side of his moustache with the back of his thumbnail.

'If you have anything to ask, colonel, I'll try to answer.'

Moussac scratched at his moustache a little harder. 'Tell me, Father, did you notice any change in Madame Reardon these last few weeks?'

'Well, hardly, because—well, you see I didn't see much of her for perhaps five or six months.'

That interested Moussac. 'Odd. I mean——'

'Yes, yes, I know very well what you mean. She was faith-

ful to the Church, and yet she suddenly stopped coming. I don't mind saying it concerned me.'

'Did you ever find out why she stopped?'

'No.' Father Xavier looked at him coldly. 'Did you?'

'I?' He stared at the priest. 'How should I find out?'

Subtly the initiative of questioning had passed over to the priest. 'You and Madame Reardon knew one another for a long time,' he said. 'Mightn't she have told an old friend like you?'

'Yes, but——' Moussac began to say.

'You and she had known one another in Paris, years ago, before she came to Africa, isn't that so?'

'If you mean——'

'If you were such friends back home in Paris, perhaps you were good friends here too.'

'Please say what you are trying to say, Father.' Moussac's face was very serious.

'I haven't said anything yet.'

'You've just said Madame Reardon and I have lately been renewing an old affair.'

'If that is your interpretation.'

'And you believe the affair began again six months ago, and she was unwilling to confess it to you and stopped coming to church.'

Father Xavier shrugged. 'I have seen murderers who were kind to their mothers and I have seen good people furious enough to kill. People are full of contradictions.'

They were both silent. Then Moussac said quietly, 'Just what are you driving at, Father?'

Father Xavier shrugged again. 'Each man ponders the unknown in his own way. I have heard of your skill as a chess player. No doubt you see life in those terms, with people as pawns. On the other hand I only drop pebbles into the pool of life and watch the ripples spread outward.' The church bells began to strike the noon hour above them and the priest looked upward. 'Ah,' he said.

Moussac leaned forward. 'How much of this did Madame Reardon tell you in confession?'

'None of it. If she had I would never mention it now, colonel.'

'Then you're guessing.'

'Pebbles.'

'Is this what you told Monsieur Reardon yesterday? Did you drop any of these pebbles on him?'

'Save your sarcasm, colonel. He finds it as hard to understand his wife's suicide as I did at first.'

'Then you agree it was suicide?'

'Why,' said the priest slowly, 'is there any question about it?' His eyes ran over Moussac's face.

'In Monsieur Reardon's mind——'

'I see. Well, I can understand that.' He paused and locked his hands together. 'These things are never simple. If you ask me whether I believe she pulled the trigger against herself, I will say yes and tell you why I think so. But the emotional prison she must have found herself in—that is another question. The problem is not *if* she killed herself, but *why*.'

Moussac began to ask another question, but the housekeeper stood in the doorway. 'There is a Monsieur Apollonaire asking for you, Colonel Moussac,' she said. Then she added, tightening her lips, 'Outside.'

'Yes, yes,' Moussac said irritably, 'please tell him to sit down and be patient.'

She turned and went, leaving a slight air of starched disapproval. Through the open window, faintly, came the far-off cry of the muezzin calling the faithful to midday worship. Father Xavier got up and walked across to the window to stare out across the red Marseille tile rooftops of Port Afrique. 'Every day,' he said, 'he cries out at noon and tells them to kneel and face Mecca. We ring our bells and raise our eyes up to God.' He turned back into the room and looked at Moussac. 'Which way do you turn, colonel?'

'To look into my own heart, in all humility.'

'And what do you see there?'

'No guilt, Father. Nothing which would drive a woman to kill herself.'

Father Xavier watched him for a moment, then came back and sat down. 'That's the truth?'

Moussac spread his hands out. 'Who knows? I lie so often in my trade I don't even trust myself any more.'

'You're impossible.'

'No, improbable.'

Then they both smiled a little together and Moussac took a small notebook and pencil from his pocket. 'Just when was it Madame Reardon stopped coming to church?' he asked.

The Senegalese guards were just changing at the candy-striped sentry box before the walled entrance to the Prison Administration building when Rip drove Colonel Moussac's black Renault through the archway. By the time both rookies jumped around to salute the familiar sedan, the car was past them.

Rip parked directly in front of the steps, pulled the brim of his helmet lower, and slid out from behind the wheel and hurried into the building.

At the entrance he stopped short and swung back down the steps and pulled the ring of keys out of the car's dashboard. Apollonaire had said Moussac's office keys would be on the same chain. Rip noticed his hand was steady even though he knew he had very little time now.

Inside the building the air was cooler, and the corridor was as empty and echoing as always. He hurried to the door which said CHEF DE GENDARMERIE and tried the doorknob. It turned. He looked up and down the hall, then ducked into Moussac's office, shutting the door softly behind him. The metallic click of the door catch sounded very loud in the stillness, and it was then he heard the hobnail boots coming down the corridor outside.

He stood there by the door, leaning forward a little, breathing faster, trying one key after another in the door lock. The boots were coming closer.

Damn it! He wanted to lock the door but he couldn't find the right key. He had hoped the place would be empty during

the dinner hour. Hobnails. That meant one of the Senegalese rookies.

The noises in the hall had a pattern; footsteps, then a door would open, silence, footsteps dimmer now, then the boots would come back into the stone corridor, the door would close hard, and the boots would come one office closer.

Inspection, that must be it. A watchman.

He looked around Moussac's office. Hide. The big closet in the far corner. A rusty skeleton key dangled in the closet's lock. He could use that to lock the closet door from the inside.

He started across the room, but the boots outside sounded close by so suddenly that he ducked back to his original position behind the office door.

The Senegalese boy outside the door to Colonel Moussac's office stopped a moment to straighten his broad leather belt and red fez. One never knew whether the colonel would be sitting behind his desk when one came in or not. He opened the door and stepped into the room and felt someone jab a gun barrel into his back very hard.

'Close the door with your foot!' a voice commanded in French.

The boy put his hobnailed boot back, feeling outward.

'No tricks with the feet,' the voice said. The gun barrel in his back jabbed him harder. He found the edge of the door with his foot and kicked it shut. 'Across the room. March!' He walked slowly forward as he was told, beginning to tremble a little now, sweating and dumb with fright. 'Open the closet door!' He tried it but the door was locked. 'Unlock it. Quick!' The boy turned the skeleton key and opened the door, and, at the same time, the gun barrel gave him a hard shove and he stumbled forward into the dim closet. By the time he turned around the door had slammed shut and the key had turned in the lock outside.

Rip put his fountain pen back into his pocket and wiped his head with his sleeve. Suddenly the boy inside the closet began pounding on the door.

'Stop it!' Rip commanded, and the noise stopped. Then began again. 'On the shelf above you,' Rip said, 'there is a

bottle of liquor. It's yours.' Again the noise paused thoughtfully, then began again.

'Let me out!' The boy's voice sounded muffled, but loud.

'Shut up, you fool!' Rip said. He crouched and took out his wallet and slid a hundred franc note under the door. 'Look down here,' he said, rattling the money.

Silence. Suddenly the note was yanked out of his fingers and disappeared. Rip smiled a little. 'Here's another one,' he said, slipping a second under the crack. 'Now keep quiet, understand? Quiet?'

The second hundred franc note was a mistake. Now the banging started inside the closet more loudly than before. Rip slid a thousand franc bill under the door. The banging stopped, then began again, but now it was much less anxious. He tried another mille note. 'That's the end,' he said through the door. 'No more money.' From inside the closet he heard a faint deep chuckle, and Rip stood up. Now he rapped on the door himself. 'Listen,' he said, 'there's a bottle on the shelf over your head. It's yours. Be quiet .No one will blame you. You were locked inside.'

Rip heard the low laugh again. He turned into the office and went directly to Moussac's desk. It was locked. Swiftly he tried the keys on the chain ring he had taken from the car until he found one that worked. The top drawer of the desk slid open.

A pile of papers lay in front. He shuffled through them quickly. Each was covered with cryptic symbols; each represented a chess game on paper with every move written in chess shorthand. A printed form with handwriting caught his eye. It was from the Takara Photographic Artists Company to Colonel Jacques Moussac acknowledging the receipt of three X-ray plates for development, with a little handwritten note saying the plates would be developed as soon as the proper chemicals could be obtained by air from their main store in Dakar.

Takara. That was a small town a hundred miles up the coast. Why would Moussac send X-ray plates that far away for

development when he could have had the work done right here in Port Afrique?

There was a bill from a British tailor in Freetown, and half a carton of black-market cigarettes with phony American brand labels. In the long shallow scooped-out tray in front of the drawer lay several steel pens and, in the corner, a small key. A round tag attached by a wire loop to the key said: File.

Rip tried it in the locked file in the corner of the room and it turned easily. He slid open the top drawer. There it was, the wooden-grip Mauser ·32 calibre automatic, the weapon Georgette had used. Without thinking, still letting the swift uncritical part of himself act, he slipped the Mauser into his pocket.

In the second drawer from the top he found what he was looking for: the files. He ran his fingers back to the R's, Radillet, Raissa, Reabout, Reardon, and pulled out the dossier labelled REARDON, G.

The top sheet inside the folder was a long official airmail letter to the second secretary for interior affairs in the governor-general's office. The first paragraph referred to an attached voucher for the payment of food for thirty-seven prisoners for the past month. Rip smiled faintly. The faked food bill came to exactly the same amount as the tailor's bill from Freetown.

The second paragraph began:

> As for the case of Madame Georgette Reardon I have taken the initiative of cabling her husband, Major Richard Reardon, who is now presumably under treatment in an Army hospital in the United States. . . .

Presumably?

> . . . There is every evidence of suicide after exhausting all routine tests. However, the possibility of a crime of violence was considered since both the means of violence were available to all in an open collection of weapons, and all had the opportunity to attack the deceased on the evening of death. Mademoiselle Ynez Camillo was considered first. She is a

Spanish refugee with a long record of illegal entries in French African territories, and is now in Port Afrique illegally. She is a dancer at a local cabaret, but is not the ordinary type of such habituées. She and Madame Reardon struck up a friendship months ago, possibly due to their close resemblance, and she was invited to stay on as a kind of a companion and guest at the Reardon plantation outside of town. It is my personal knowledge that Madame Reardon was very lonely, and I believe this part of Mademoiselle Camillo's story to be true. She is a high strung, intense, very serious young woman with the accumulated subconscious anxieties and fears common to such European girls.

Emile Delaigre was hired in 1938 by Major Reardon's father, the late Richard Reardon senior, as a manager of the mahogany plantation which makes up much of the Reardon property. Late in 1941, Major Reardon voluntarily gave M. Delaigre a half-interest in the property before leaving for service with the United States Army. Delaigre has a record of honest dealing, but is now under an acute strain due to his war dealings with Brury et Fils, a Vichy-Nazi front in Dakar. He suffers in anticipation of Major Reardon's reaction to this fact after Reardon returns home. Delaigre has travelled several times through the cycle of fear, tension, irritability, insomnia, neurasthenic weakness, and has actually succumbed to physical ailments once or twice due to this progressive weakening. His last employment, as a young man, from 1930 to 1938, was at Derek Bishop Ltd., a British import-export firm in Casablanca. He did well there, rising to a managership, but had to leave because of some scandal with the French girl who was his secretary. He married an Englishwoman in 1939, and has lived quietly here in Port Afrique, due to her sympathetic understanding, since that time.

His wife, Diane Delaigre, came to Port Afrique in 1938, on a visit. She is très sportive, after the English fashion, and is a straightforward and rather motherly person who often treats her husband almost as a young son. Although there was some coolness between her and Madame Reardon

because of their husbands' commercial relationship, there was also a bond between them because of their shared European background and culture.

I wrote to you of the interest which a William Blake, known locally for many years as Monsieur Nino, had in trying to procure the Reardon property. The word 'procure' is used advisedly in his case because of the nature of his hotel business for which his cabaret is a front. He is a small bantam cock of a man, of the petty criminal type, and his sudden riches during the war (see dossier 1291, Blake, W., 1945) have intoxicated him to the point where he now plays the big gentleman criminal comme Chicago, and goes about town heavily armed. I have examined his automatic. It is completely new and has never been fired. I conclude it is a fetish of virility for him.

A sculptor named Beaulieu, who was interested in Madame Reardon several years ago, visited Port Afrique recently. He has proved to my satisfaction that he did not see her and I allowed him to return to Takara.

All these individuals had both the time and access to the weapon but none stood to gain from Madame Reardon's death. This fact, plus the obviously undeniable circumstances of the death, make clear in my mind the verdict of suicide.

Please accept assurances of my most sincere regards . . .

Rip put the letter back into the folder. The sheet under it was a bill from Afro-Aero Cie., PRICE TO BE SETTLED LATER, for a round-trip flight to Takara, signed in a big scrawl: Pedro Aranda. The ver' hot pilot: 'I fly any place for money, senhor.'

Takara. Beaulieu was staying there now, evidently. Yes, and those X-ray plates to be developed at the Photographic Artists Company. But why was Pedro's bill for the plane's delivery trip in this dossier?

The next letter was dated two weeks back and was a request from Moussac through official channels to the Sureté in Paris to contact Scotland Yard concerning one William Blake,

British subject, and one Diane Delaigre née Barkleigh, and to return such information to this office without delay.

The last sheet in the folder stabbed Rip. The rounded handwriting, the violet ink were so familiar. *Mon cher cher Jacques, Please come see me. I'm terribly lonely and not well. I'm afraid. Of myself, I suppose. The arms we bear are brittle. Why are you so distant? Nino has been asking about the property again. Please come.* It was signed with a single letter, *G.*, and there was a two-line postscript. *I have some new mail from Rip. He writes from the other side of the moon. It's hard to believe he is real any more.*

His face was wet now, sweating, his shirt sticking to his back, and the violet ink smeared a little under his fingers. *It's hard to believe he is real any more. . . .* He shoved the letter into his pocket without folding it, next to the Mauser automatic, and put the dossier back into the filing cabinet and left the office quickly.

'Blimey,' Nino said. 'Look who's 'ere, Grila.'

'B' jour, M'sieu Reardon,' Grila said.

'I want to talk to you,' Rip said from the door of Nino's bedroom. 'About my plantation.'

Nino's eyes brightened. Very casually he said, ''Ow'd you get in 'ere? Le Badinage is locked.'

'I came through the other door, your hotel door.'

It was true. He had parked Moussac's sedan at the corner of l'Impasse and had walked down the street to the entrance of Nino's hotel. Inside the hallway there was a rickety bird cage of an elevator lined with spotted mirror panels with a bare electric bulb in its ceiling. When he had pressed the button marked *Up* it had gone down into the basement. There was probably an electric warning buzzer attached to the *Down* button which would send the elevator up, he decided, so he got out and walked up the stairs into Nino's apartment and went in without knocking. The outer room was empty.

The room was a mixture of the worst in both African and European taste. Heavy imported furniture with dragon's claws, covered with Saharan robes woven of coarse goats' wool, squatted along the walls. A small bar was built into the

far corner with much fancy imitation inlay work, and the walls were hung with pictures of dancing girls wearing a minimum amount of their lacy working clothes and posed in a number of fancy positions. There were at least a dozen clocks in the room, clocks in brass-handled glass cases, fat round alarm clocks, cheap clocks, expensive clocks. All of them ticked away in the silent room like a dozen heartbeats gone crazy. The little man must be living on borrowed time, Rip thought.

Two or three bedrooms led off the sitting room and, from one of them, Rip could hear Nino's voice. When he walked to that bedroom door he saw Nino lying face downward in bed, wearing only a pair of silk shorts, while Grila kneaded his back like a masseur.

'What's the matter with you, Nino?' Rip asked, still standing in the door.

'Sacred iliac,' Nino said, rubbing the small of his back, 'somethin' terrible.' His eyes sized up Rip in the doorway for a moment, then he rolled over on his stomach again, turning his back deliberately to Rip. 'Full steam ahead, Grila,' he said. He cocked the back of his head slightly toward Rip, 'Funny you should want to talk business this very day, Reardon.'

'I'm not sure how much longer I'm going to be in Port Afrique. I don't have much time and I mean business.'

'Oh?' Nino turned slightly and punched Grila's arm. 'Easy on that side, you ape! Think I'm made o' wood?' He swung his head toward Rip again. 'I've just 'ad a considerable upset. Business investment. Turned blooey.'

'What kind of business,' Rip said, 'traffic in women?'

Nino swung around and sat up straight.

'Or drugs,' Rip said, 'or black-market gold and diamonds. Or all of them? It's easy by plane.'

'Listen, Reardon, you came 'ere to say something. Say it and get out.'

'Don't get excited,' Grila said, 'you took one pill already.'

'Pill?' Rip asked. 'Heart trouble? Fainting spells?'

Nino ignored him. 'Bring me my clothes, Grila. The pongee suit.' He swung his thin legs over the edge of the bed. 'I'm not a well man,' he said. 'I used to travel up and down

the coast askin' for a little 'elp from you and your kind, Reardon, the 'igh an' mighty businessmen, oh such gentlemen, but what did I ever get but stinkin' little 'andouts and a quick boot in the arse. Don't think I've forgotten it. No wonder I'm a sick man. Back 'alf broke, and ticker gone blooey like a rusty clock. Never 'ad a decent chance till the war.'

'Yes,' Rip said, 'I remember. The war. Plucky chance for a plucky fellow.'

'No snot from you, Reardon! You may of been a big local lad before the war, but I'll bet today I can buy you out *psst*, like that, and 'ave enough francs left over to burn.'

Grila brought him his white pongee trousers and held out one leg at a time for him. Nino went on talking as he dressed.

'I can put 'alf this stinkin' little town in my pocket tomorrow if I like, Reardon, so just remember that kindly. I've got friends now. 'Alf the gentlemen in town come 'ere to my place for one little service or another, an' you'd be surprised 'ow these gentlemen sing a different tune to me these days.'

Grila, who was holding a shirt open behind Nino, grinned with his full row of gold teeth over Nino's shoulder. He laughed a little, deep down in his chest, making a sound like some kind of spring breaking inside a large grandfather's clock.

Nino rammed his arms into the shirt sleeves and turned around. 'What's so funny?'

Grila's gold teeth shone. 'Little man. Big talk.'

Nino slapped him across the face with an open palm, and Grila smiled more broadly at Rip. 'He likes to slap people,' Grila said. Nino punched him hard in the chest, and Grila put up two big hams of hands and pushed him away. 'You hurt your hand like that,' he said good-naturedly.

Nino walked barefooted across the room to a large mahogany wardrobe in the corner and took a shoulder holster off a hook inside and put it on.

Rip smiled. 'That's a lot of artillery you're packing there, Napoleon. Doesn't it hurt your shoulder?'

'Nobody hurts me any more. I'm on the hurtin' end myself these days. Get me my coat, Grila.'

'Why do you work for this little crud, Grila?' Rip asked. 'You're liable to stub your toe on him someday.'

'Would you 'ire this big ape?' Nino asked. 'Would anybody else? With 'is prison record? With desertion from the Foreign Legion? Fat chance. Sidi-bel-Abbes 'as a price on 'is 'ead. They'll bury him up to 'is neck in the desert, en silo, if they catch 'im. 'E's where 'e belongs, with 'is friends. Ain't that so, Grila?' he asked as the big man held up his coat for him.

'Sure,' Grila said, grinning, 'sure.' He looked at Rip. 'He knows everyt'ing on everybody. Blackmail.'

'I thought you came 'ere to talk business, Reardon.' Nino buttoned his white coat and smoothed it over his hips with both hands. Then he brushed past Rip, who did not move from the doorway, and went into the large sitting room. 'Sit down, Reardon. I won't offer you a drink. You've got too much liking for violence in your cups.'

'In my plucky cups?' Rip said. He followed Nino into the large room and sat down opposite him.

''Ow much do you want for your share of the plantation, Reardon?'

'I didn't come here to ask you how much you'd pay. I want to know why you want it.'

'You don't think the likes o' me belongs in a fine big 'ouse like that, is that it?'

'I haven't said yet where I think you belong.'

'Are you afraid I'll turn your place into a real casino with girls upstairs?'

'To hell with that. I want to know why were you after my wife about it?'

Nino's eyes flattened. 'When did she write you that nonsense?' he said quickly.

'She didn't. I found out.' Rip stood up. 'Just tell me why.'

'Grila,' Nino said, 'look at that bulge. 'E's got a gun in 'is pocket.'

Rip took the Mauser out. 'Maybe you recognize it, Nino. It's from my collection.'

'Blimey, don't point it like that!'

'I wouldn't like to fire this,' Rip said. 'I've been allergic to noise since the war.'

'Mr. Reardon, please, I'm a sick man——'

'So's Emile. So am I, in my own way. So's everybody, these days. Psychological cancer.'

Nino's mouth was open and he was breathing hard. 'Grila,' he said, 'take it away from 'im. I can't—I—I——' he put a hand up to his heart.

'Keep your hand down,' Rip said.

Nino lowered his hand quickly and took the water bottle from the table beside him and began gulping from it thirstily.

'M'sieu Reardon,' Grila said, 'you know I don't like to hurt you.' He started walking toward Rip, all his gold teeth smiling.

'I don't want to hurt you either,' Rip said. 'I know you have to work here, but you'd better stay out of this, Grila.'

'Put the gun away,' Grila said. 'Your finger pulled the trigger twice already. It's empty. You must be tired.'

Rip felt a salt trickle of sweat run down his forehead and sting his eyes. As he blinked the water bottle flew out of nowhere straight at him, and he ducked swiftly—directly into Grila's fist. He blacked out.

Nino got up out of his chair and came over to stand above him. His chest was heaving. 'Get me another pill, Grila,' he said, 'quick.'

Grila lumbered into the bathroom, and when he came back Nino was kicking at Rip's stomach sideways with one of his bare feet.

'This kicking is not necessary,' Grila said.

He and Nino stared at one another. 'Don't you get tough with me,' Nino said.

'Leave him alone,' Grila said. 'The kicking is not necessary.'

'I can break you too,' Nino said. 'Just don't forget that.' He walked back to his chair.

'Sure.' Grila smiled. 'I know. Here's your pill.'

When Rip opened his eyes his jaw felt broken and his stomach ached. He opened his mouth experimentally, and the

jaw hinge worked, but it felt as if a nail had been driven into his left temple.

The room was empty now. He picked up the Mauser lying on the floor beside him and got up slowly and went out through Nino's bedroom into the bathroom and washed his face with cold water. The skin on his cheek was bruised, so he opened the medicine cabinet to look for some adhesive tape. A metal hypodermic syringe case sat on one shelf; the other shelves were taken up by bottles and boxes of pills and tablets. In one corner was a small Swiss clock built above a music box which played a tune when set to ring.

As Rip left Nino's apartment he could hear a low buzz of voices coming upstairs from Le Badinage's early customers.

There were three ways to reach Nino's rooms, he could see. The first was to come up by the elevator; the second was the hotel staircase as he had come; and the last was to follow a long corridor down to a far stairway which probably ran downstairs to Le Badinage. The corridor was lined with doors, like a hotel, except that each door had a small sliding panel set in its centre. As he stood there one of the doors down the hall opened and two girls came out. One was staggering. The first was French and she was supporting the second girl who looked like a Berber from her tribal face markings. The Berber looked pregnant. The French girl caught sight of Rip and then deliberately spat on the floor in his direction. They went down the hall together and turned into another room.

Rip went back and pressed the elevator button, and when the bird cage reached him he got in and pushed the button marked *Up*. The elevator took him down to the ground floor and he walked out to the street quickly. Moussac's sedan was still parked up the street where he had left it.

He found a small note on official stationery lying on the seat of the car. *When you think you can spare the car please bring it back. Jacques.*

As he started the motor the door on the passenger side of the car opened and Hector Apollonaire stuck his head in.

'Well,' Rip said, 'hello.' His jaw hurt, just talking.

Apollonaire sat down on the seat beside him, but kept the door open. 'Who hit you on the face?'

'Accident,' Rip said. 'More people are hurt in accidents around home than on the battlefield in war. It's a statistical fact.'

'I almost went in the hotel after you.'

'Why? It was just a friendly visit.'

'So I see. I phoned the colonel, but he said leave you alone.'

'He's being very co-operative. He's letting me take the car.'

'I know,' Apollonaire said, 'he told me to put the note there. He thought you would need a ride when you came out.' He smiled a little at Rip and got out of the car. Just before he closed the door he put his head back in and said, 'Your partner, Emile Delaigre, went into Le Badinage twenty minutes ago.'

'That's how it is when you're a friendly hotelkeeper like Nino,' Rip said, 'you get lots of friendly visitors. It's very plucky.'

'It's very what?'

'Nothing. An English word.'

'You want me to drive you home?'

'No, no. I feel fine. I don't know where I'm heading, but I can see straight.'

'I know what you mean, monsieur.' Apollonaire took Rip's pack of American cigarettes out of his pocket; there were two left. 'Have one?'

'Thanks.'

Apollonaire lighted Rip's then his own. He took a deep drag. 'There's nothing you want to tell me, monsieur?' Apollonaire said.

'No.' He put the car into first gear, then he said, 'Yes, there is. There are three ways of getting to Nino's apartment. Up from the cabaret, or through this other door on the street, or up an elevator. The elevator's up and down buttons are reversed.'

Apollonaire looked at him. 'I know that,' he said.

Rip revved the motor up slightly. 'I wish you'd told me. Now it looks as if I'm going to have to find out everything

for myself, the hard way.' Then he let out the clutch and drove off. Something was stabbing his stomach so badly now that he had to clench his teeth.

When he reached his house he noticed the lights were on upstairs. He parked the car directly in front of the veranda steps and hurried into the house, feeling the dead weight of the Mauser swinging against his leg as he took the steps two at a time.

No one was in the big living room, but he could hear someone moving around upstairs. He walked directly to the gun rack which was set into the wall and pulled open the deep drawer beneath it. All the small arms of his collection were there, except for the conspicuously empty space outlined on the green baize by dust. He took the Mauser out of his pocket and very carefully set it down on the empty space. He stared at it a moment, then picked the weapon up and put it down on the space very carefully again.

It did not fit. It was not the right gun.

There was a noise on the stair behind him and he swung around, slipping the Mauser back into his pocket. It was Ynez, wearing a hat and a dark suit, dressed for travelling. She was carrying a battered valise covered with worn hotel labels. She stopped halfway down the steps and looked across the room at him, then continued down.

He waited until she was coming toward him before he asked, 'Where are you going?'

She put the valise down. 'I don't know. Away from here.' She tilted her head slightly. 'What's that on your face? What happened to you?'

'Accident,' he said.

Her eyes slid to the open gun drawer. 'Why is that open?'

'Oh,' he said vaguely, 'just one of those fussy old collectors fussing around with his collection. Checking up on little details here and there.'

She looked back at him. 'You look sick,' she said. 'You just came out of a hospital. Why don't you stop all this running around?'

'Don't you have to go to work at Le Badinage?'

'I'm leaving. As you see.'

'Does Nino know about this?'

'You still don't believe me, do you? You still don't believe I own my own soul.'

'You're lucky,' he said. 'So few people do.'

Her face changed. She turned away from him, then she walked blindly to the divan and sat down and put one hand over her eyes.

He poured himself a drink and one for her and went over to sit beside her. 'Here,' he said, 'this is what for.'

'I don't drink,' she said into her hand.

'Neither do I,' he said, 'but I've been trying it lately. Against doctor's orders. Here, try it.'

She took the drink from him, tried it and began to cough.

'It burns,' she said. 'It burns like fire.'

'This? This is the smoothest you can buy. Ordinarily,' he said, 'I'm against it. But once in a while it's useful.'

'It makes me sick. I have tried it before.'

'You get sick only when there is something inside which would make you sick anyway.' Somehow they had begun talking in French. It made her sound more relaxed, less formal, than English.

'Truly?' she said.

'Yes,' he said. 'I've spent a lot of time in the hospital and you can't help learning some of these things.' He put his own drink down the hatch. 'Wipe your face,' he said, 'you look terrible.' He got up and crossed the room to get himself another drink. Maybe he could anæsthetize the pain in his stomach.

'What happened to your face?' she asked from across the room.

'I told you,' he said, 'a little accident.'

'You don't trust me, do you?'

'It's nothing personal.'

'Everything you say is personal.'

He came over to sit beside her again. 'And you resent it?'

'I resent the whole world. It's nothing personal.'

'Now we're getting into a rut,' he said, and swallowed his drink. 'Brr.'

'How is it you don't cough?'

'Inside I'm made out of leather. How did you get into Port Afrique?'

'They didn't tell you?'

'Who didn't tell me?'

'Didn't the Delaigres tell you?'

'We haven't exactly been seeing much of one another.'

'Well, didn't your friend tell you? Colonel Moussac?'

'My friend the colonel seems to be telling me just so much and no more these days.'

'I'm here illegally,' she said. 'I have no papers. It's a long story. You wouldn't be interested.'

'From here on I'm very interested. I'm interested in everything and everybody from here on.' Under his elbow he could feel the hard edge of the Mauser in his pocket.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean I want you to answer me when I ask you something, that's what I mean.'

'You sound a little mixed up.'

She started to get up, but he caught her wrist. 'Don't run,' he said, 'this is a friendly conversation.'

'I don't like the way you're talking to me.' She pulled her wrist free.

'I haven't told you the half-dozen things I don't like about you. Tell me, did Nino bring you into town?'

'If you know so much, why ask?'

'How'd he get you in?'

'By plane. A little airplane for about five people. It's called the Afro-Aero Company. A Portuguese pilot owns it. Nino saw me in Casablanca and found out I was in trouble and offered me the job down here.'

'Did he want you to work with him, or just work for him?'

'Both.'

'And?'

'I told you,' she said, 'it's a long story.'

'Well,' he said, 'just tell me the part that includes Georgette.'

A quick guarded look crossed her face, then she looked away. 'You got my note?' she asked. Then she turned back to face him. 'I just can't attend funerals. I have seen too many dead in my life. I avoid it now. Please don't misunderstand it.'

'I'd better understand something first. Do you know why Georgette shot herself?'

'How can you say it like that? So cold.'

'That's how I am by nature, cold.'

'No,' she said. 'I don't know.'

'Where were you when it happened?'

'Working. At Le Badinage.'

'Where were the Delaigres?'

'They had a big party out here for some visitor. Some sculptor named Beaulieu.'

'Oh.' He thought for a moment. 'Where was Moussac?'

She shrugged. 'When I got home it was almost morning and he was here already and one of his detectives they call Apollo was——' she stopped.

'And Nino, where was he?'

'At Le Badinage.'

'He could have left any time, couldn't he?'

'Yes, but if he did I didn't see him.'

'He could have gone up the steps from the cabaret into the corridor to his apartment, then down the elevator and out of the hotel entrance, and you wouldn't have seen him go.'

Her eyes widened. 'How do you know all that?'

'I found out by accident,' he said.

She glanced at his bruised face. 'Oh,' she said.

'Why are you covering up for him?'

'I'm not!' she flashed. 'The only one I want to protect is me.'

'Well,' he said, 'at least that's an honest answer.'

He got up and went over to pick up her valise and crossed to the staircase and heaved it up the steps to the next landing. She was standing up, looking very pale, when he came back.

'You too,' she said. 'Everybody thinks they can step on me. What makes you think I won't leave town anyway?'

'Because I don't want you to, and I don't think Moussac wants you to. Between us you wouldn't get far.'

'You think it's lots of fun for me, this running, always running?'

'Right now I'm not worrying about you.' He went over to the gun drawer and once more tried to fit the Mauser into the space it did not fit. Then he put it back into his pocket and went over to pour himself another drink.

'Since when do you carry a gun?' she said. 'I thought that was Nino's trick.'

'Maybe I want to make myself feel brave, like Nino.'

Ynez watched him coldly. 'As long as I'm going to be a member of the household,' she said, 'may I point out that for a man just out of a hospital you drink too much?'

'If I were you,' he said, 'I'd just be a very good girl and not point out very much of anything to anybody.' Then he left the house and got into Moussac's car and drove away.

'Good evening,' Moussac said, 'come right in.' He put the book he was reading down on the desk in front of him.

Rip closed the door in Moussac's office behind him and crossed the room. He took a chair across the desk from Moussac and sat down heavily.

'Tired, eh?' Moussac said.

'A busy day. What are you reading?' he added conversationally.

'*Beyond Good and Evil.* Our old friend Nietzsche is quite an interesting author.'

'Inside you've always considered yourself one of his supermen, haven't you, Jacques?'

Moussac looked across the desk at him. 'On the contrary, Rip. Perhaps one of the free spirits he writes about, the men he called good Europeans, the ones who recognize the lack of morality as a condition of life—but beyond that I drop him.'

'The Government pays you to be a cop. And you sit here with a book, taking life easy.'

'You're still wrong. I'm working.'

'On what—improving your mind?'

'No, on analysing yours.' Moussac's eyes were very level now, watching Rip. He tapped the book against his open hand. 'The first sentence Nietzsche writes, Rip. ". . . Supposing that Truth is a woman—what then?" '

Rip met Moussac's eyes silently. With Jacques this kind of talk could mean anything. Supposing that Truth is a woman. Which woman? He decided to say nothing.

Moussac sighed and got out of his chair to cross the room and look out the window into the darkness. 'I feel a certain cosmic mood tonight, Rip,' he said without turning. 'Olympian. I watch people creating little hells for themselves to live in and I feel an enormous pity.'

'Pity?' Rip said to Moussac's back. 'You?'

Moussac looked over his shoulder. 'Why not? Pity is the cornerstone of ethics, and I'm an ethical man. Not so many years ago we thought we were living here pleasantly, comfortably. Good friends. Lightning has hit us, and we have the unhappy wisdom of painful experiences.' He turned to stare back into the night again. ' "And we gazed at each other, and looked at the green meadow over which the cool evening was just passing, and we wept together. Then was life dearer unto me than all my wisdom had ever been." '

What was Moussac trying to do with these quotations? Or was he thinking of Georgette, and this mood was genuine?

Moussac left the window and came back into the room. 'Yes,' he said. 'Yes. I warned you that I was overcome with sorrow tonight.'

'Sorry enough,' Rip said, 'to offer a man a hospitable drink?'

Moussac smiled a little. 'Certainly,' he said. He went to his closet and took out a bottle of liquor and two glasses. As he came back to the desk he held the bottle up. 'Brand new,' he said. 'The boy you locked in there this afternoon finished the other one.' He shook his head to himself as he poured. 'Remarkable,' he said to himself, 'remarkable. Slightly crazy, but remarkable.'

'I parked your car in front of the steps.'

'Thanks.'

'Thank *you*.'

Moussac handed him the glass of liquor. 'Maybe I shouldn't give this to you. Your eyes look bad.'

'I had a few before I came.'

'I thought so when you walked in. Apollo told me about your face.'

'For an outfit that always gives the impression of being asleep yours manages to get around pretty fast.'

'We're very clever,' Moussac said, 'very slick. Here's your health, Rip.'

'Santé.'

They put the drinks away, then Moussac said, 'You came here to start a fight, didn't you?'

'All depends.'

'Are you open to suggestion?'

'I'm always wide open, Jacques. You know me.'

'Stop this craziness. You're a sick man, it's all over you. How long do you think you can stand this pressure you put on yourself? You'll put yourself back in the hospital.'

'Okay, Jacques, we both know all the labels about fixations and compulsions and all the other names.' He pushed his glass aside and leaned across the desk. 'Now listen. When I was a kid and my father sent me to the States to go to school I saw a funny gadget in one of the travelling carnivals that come around small towns. It was a big box like a chest of drawers with two metal arms sticking out at you, with two metal hands. The trick was to shake hands with the metal hands, see? You dropped a penny into the big box and that started an electric current and then you shook hands with the metal hands.' Rip held both hands out in front of himself, and they were shaking. 'The current hit you like a kick in the belly and you tried to let go of those hands. But you couldn't. The current held you there, shaking and shivering and dancing on pins and needles, but you couldn't let go for the life of you.' He leaned back in his chair and dropped his trembling hands. 'Well, I've got hold of those now.'

'How long did the penny current last?'

'Half a minute, maybe.'

'And how long will this penny you've dropped into yourself last?'

'Until I settle in my mind just why Georgette would kill herself.'

'A more important question——' Moussac began to say, but the door opened and a Senegalese guard came in. 'Ah,' Moussac said, 'the radio from Etienne?'

'Oui, mon colonel.' The guard handed him a typewritten slip of paper, saluted, and went out. Moussac read the message half aloud. 'Queen's bishop pawn to queen's bishop four.' He crossed the room to his elaborate Moroccan chessboard and moved the pawn and stood there for a moment studying it. Then he came back. 'The Sicilian defence,' he said.

'Still playing that long-distance game with what's-his-name?' Rip asked.

'Giradoux? Yes. He's lonely as an owl up there in Etienne. He's gone through the Arab girls so many times he's bored, so now he pours all his passion into chess. Continence doth make intellectuals of us all.'

Rip poured himself another drink. 'It's all a chess game to you, isn't it, Jacques?'

'What is?'

Rip waved his glass in a little circle. 'Everything. People. Beyond Good and Evil. Georgette. Me. Everything.'

'Stop drinking my expensive cognac. You're becoming maudlin.'

'That's me,' Rip said in English, 'just a sentimental slob from Kokomo.'

'I don't understand that,' Moussac said in French. He sat down behind his desk again.

'Tell me,' Rip said in French, 'just before the guard came in, you were saying a more important question was something.'

'Yes, I remember. But I've decided to forget it.'

'Don't. I want you to remember everything, Jacques.'

'You really want to start a fight, don't you, Rip.'

'I told you, Jacques, it all depended.'

Moussac sighed. 'What a crazy day. Malice in blunderland.' His chevron eyebrows shot up in a smile, giving him a satanic expression. 'Look at you,' he laughed. 'It's too bad we've lost the taste the Elizabethans used to have for puns.'

'Stop it,' Rip said. He got up, holding the edge of the desk because another spasm of pain had just shot through him. 'For Chrissake, stop your cat and mouse tricks.' He took the Mauser out of his pocket and put it down in front of himself.

Moussac leaned back and spread his hands. 'What I was going to say was simply that the more important question is not why Georgette committed suicide, because she's at peace now no matter what we say here. The real question is why you are smashing yourself to pieces trying to analyse the past. This continuous, almost infantile rage of yours.'

'Okay, professor, tell me. Why am I?'

'So the world's sickness has touched you too, Rip. The universal hatred of the intellectual.'

'I've seen some places where they weren't much damn good, Jacques.'

Moussac leaned across the desk suddenly and picked up the Mauser. He opened it to make sure it was empty, then got up and went over to his filing cabinet. He did not open the bottom file drawer from which Rip had taken it, but dropped it into the top drawer instead. Then he came back to the desk and sat down.

Rip spoke slowly. 'That gun doesn't come from my collection, Jacques.'

'You're seeing things. You've been drinking too much.'

'It doesn't. It's exactly the same, but the barrel is about five millimetres short. Georgette never used that gun. What's the idea, Jacques?'

'Sit down, Rip, sit down. You're wobbling on your feet.'

'What's the idea behind switching the guns, Jacques?'

'Listen to me, Rip. Yesterday you made a lot of fireworks about murder. Today you are just as suspicious and aggressive about something else.'

'I'm telling you it doesn't fit into my collection!' His voice had gone up.

'You can't see straight then.'

'Listen, Jacques. The week before Georgette and I were married she told me you two had been good friends in Paris years ago. She said it in French. You were her ami. I let it go at that.'

Moussac's barometric eyebrows went up and he stared at Rip. 'I think,' he said slowly, 'you should take one last drink and go home and try to get some sleep.'

'I like you, Jacques,' Rip said, 'but if you keep up this crap I'm going to beat your face in.'

'Fine. Fists will solve everything. You're the twentieth-century man—you live in the narrow cocoon of your own soul and violence is your final answer to everything.' He stood up too, facing Rip directly. 'You can't stand it, can you? You *must* believe she was murdered, eh? You can't stand the implications of a wife who commits suicide very shortly before her husband comes back home.'

Rip hunched slightly and Moussac stood up straighter saying angrily, 'Yes, go ahead, sock me. A good punch on the jaw will answer everything!' He pulled a short flexible truncheon from his back pocket and swung it bluntly in a little murderous arc. 'I'll break your wrist with this if you swing, Rip.'

Rip swung. His reach was too short and he got a blow across the arm which sent a vein of fire shooting up to his elbow.

'Some intellectuals know the value of force,' Moussac said. 'I'm sorry, but I'll get your face next time. Please sit down.'

Rip dropped his hands. 'You killed her, Jacques. You and she got together while I was gone and you knew she had a streak of confession in her so she'd be sure to tell me when I came home, or Father Xavier, so you killed her.'

Moussac tossed the truncheon on the desk between them. 'No, Rip,' he said, 'you did.'

There was no sound in the room except their heavy breathing as they stared at one another. Moussac nodded his head slowly. 'Yes, Rip, that's what I think.'

Rip went back around the desk and poured himself a drink. Then he sat down, hunching his shoulders.

Moussac began pacing behind his desk. 'How do I know,' he said angily, gesturing with one hand, 'that you were really in that Army hospital as long as you say? How do I know you didn't brood on this infidelity idea for years, the way soldiers away from home for a long time do? A wounded man lying eighteen months in a hospital lives only in his head. So you convinced yourself Georgette and I were lovers. You were discharged from the hospital, or got a long leave, you took a boat to Africa, or else you flew, using a false name—the details don't matter—then you hired a private plane and flew down here and landed on your own plantation and went into your house and had an argument and shot her. Then you flew back up the coast, took the plane from Casablanca to the States under a different name, and came back to the hospital a day or two after my cablegram arrived. Then you flew back to Casablanca, perhaps via Paris this time, by a different airline, then by Air France to Casa, after which you bribed your way aboard the S.S. *José Harra* and came home.'

He stopped pacing and looked at Rip. 'Who knows? You may not even remember the whole thing. Amnesia is one of the least incredible of all the incredible things which could happen in the mind of a violent man.'

He came around the desk and stood over Rip. 'Yes,' he said, 'everything fits like the moves in chess. The game looks erratic only to outsiders. When you understand the rules you know there is a formal pattern to behaviour, an inner logic, no matter how it looks outside. I test people the way chemists test metal—with heat and pressure. Sooner or later the breaking point occurs. The more complex the person, the more indirect the method—the more psychological pressure. You are listening to all these things I'm telling you, mon vieux?'

'Yes.'

'That's why I believe you killed her yourself.'

BOOK FOUR

A time to love and a time to hate

THE noise of footsteps stirring in the darkness outside the veranda of Rip's house brought Ynez to her feet.

'Who's there?' she called out through the screen, controlling her voice.

A slender blur of whiteness materialized out of the dark and came toward the veranda. 'C'est moi, mademoiselle.' Suleiman stepped into the outer edge of the light cast by one of the table lamps. 'I am looking for Saluki.'

'Saluki?'

'Oui, mademoiselle. Since the death of Madame Reardon the dog has been with me.'

'A man of your faith, Suleiman? With a dog for a friend?'

Suleiman folded his arms into the wide sleeves of his *jelab* and bowed his head slightly. Then he looked up at her. 'Saluki is a living thing, mademoiselle, with much feeling. A Persian gazelle hound is almost human. She cries for Madame Reardon. She does not understand why someone she loved should go away and not come back.'

For a moment they looked at one another in the darkness. A swarm of small insects suddenly swirled out of the night air into the veranda screen, making a hundred brittle little noises like the snapping of dry twigs.

'I am not of this country, Suleiman,' Ynez said. 'I do not

have much patience for one word with two meanings.'

'The meanings are in you, mademoiselle, not in the word.'

'You sound like Colonel Moussac.'

'An honour. He is a wise man.'

Ynez leaned forward a little. 'You too, Suleiman?' she said through the screen. 'You are against me too?'

Off in the darkness where the nearby grove of trees stood massed, a dog began barking sharply. Suleiman raised his head, listening, then turned to Ynez.

'It is Saluki. Au revoir, Mademoiselle.'

He bowed slightly and moved off toward the trees slowly, with dignity. For a moment Ynez watched him go, listening to the sharp barking of Saluki, then she turned back into the veranda and dropped into her wicker chair to light a cigarette nervously.

From inside the house came the occasional sound of Bouala working in the kitchen; she was singing a wordless native song with a nasal monotone which echoed the desert shepherd's ram's horn in the forgotten savage days of Carthage. Saluki had stopped barking now, and in the silence the hundred night time sounds of Africa became clear; the far off *wheet-wheet* of nocturnal birds, sounding as wound up and mechanical as toys; the thin dry clatter of palm fronds as the invisible upper ocean of air stirred sluggishly in the trees; the rheumatic creak of some wooden part of the house settling its heat-swollen frame more firmly. Light-mad insects whirred against the screen furiously, and large moths drifted and fluttered around the veranda towards the unobtainable nirvana of the bright table lamps. The ancient air was filled with a swarming sense of a million miniature lives, and for some reason Ynez shivered slightly; when Bouala, the native housekeeper, spoke from the door behind her suddenly Ynez felt the hair rise on her arms. Bouala was holding a long knife.

'Mademoiselle——'

'Yes?—Bouala!'

Bouala lifted one hand wrapped in a cloth, stained with blood. 'My hand,' she said. 'The kitchen knife.'

The dreamy languor of the night was broken; the faintly

troubling sense of some subtle unseen threat was gone. Ynez lost her uneasy look immediately. She became brisk, knowledgeable. 'Hold your hand up above your head,' she said. 'That will help slow the bleeding.' She led Bouala back into the kitchen and took the first-aid kit out of one of the cabinets, then she washed her own hands thoroughly, like a surgeon scrubbing for an operation.

'You will put the strong medicine on?' Bouala asked. 'The kind that hurts?'

'No iodine for such a thing,' Ynez said. She examined the deep flesh wound carefully. 'It is a clean cut,' she said, 'and your hand is clean. All you need is a light vaseline bandage with a little pressure.' She took some sterile gauze out of the kit and unwound it skilfully.

'Hello. May I come in?'

Ynez and Bouala looked toward the kitchen door as Diane Delaigre came in. Despite the humidity, her smooth motherly face was cool, and her blonde hair was bound neatly in a shining Psyche knot. She looked just a little theatrical, not so much because of the mannish shirt which she wore open at the neck nor the gabardine riding skirt nor the calfskin mosquito boots, but because she carried a small riding crop as a fly whisk. She gestured with it in a slightly artificial way and flicked it against her heel now and then.

She looked out the back door screen as Saluki barked in the distance. 'That poor animal. He nuzzled against me like a baby half the way over here.' She turned back into the kithen. 'Is Rip at home?'

'No,' Ynez said.

'What is this, Bouala, another cut?' Diane said in French. 'You're clumsy.' Then in English: 'Aren't you going to put antiseptic on it, Ynez?'

'No. All we have are too strong. They would hurt the tissue cells. It might begin an infection.'

'Oh, really? That's a remarkable job of bandage wrapping, I must say.'

'It's a spica. It stays in place.'

'You're quite professional.'

'For a long time I worked in hospitals, in Madrid. When there is trouble you learn these things very fast.'

'Yes,' Diane said looking at her. 'I rather suppose one does.'

Ynez did not notice Diane's stare. 'There, Bouala,' she said. 'Voilà. It will heal like new.'

'Merci, merci, Mademoiselle.'

'Pas quoi. I will change the bandage when you need it.'

Bouala looked at Diane, then at Ynez, then back at Diane again. Her black eyelashes quivered faintly like butterfly antennæ sensing storm vibrations and she got up from her chair quickly. 'Bon soir,' she said softly, and went quietly to the back door and out, closing the screen behind her without a sound.

Ynez replaced the first-aid kit slowly, carefully, and there was only the slow tap-tap of Diane's riding crop against her boot.

'Where did Rip go?' Diane asked finally.

'How should I know?'

'You should be dancing down at Le Badinage now, shouldn't you?'

Ynez shrugged. 'I do not follow rules.'

'Oh? That's convenient.'

Ynez closed the metal kit with a snap. 'What do you want? Why are you sitting there tapping your little whip?'

'Why are you so jumpy?'

'It's like a fog, this place! You see nothing, but all around you things are happening. I like to do things straight, in the daytime.'

Diane's riding crop stopped tapping. 'Georgette died at night,' she said quietly.

'So that's it?' Ynez leaned across the table toward her. 'Don't think I can't understand you. I know you, the respectable kind. I read you like a book. Life never punched you in the face, so you kick people with your polished little boots, your fancy little whip.' She straightened, and raised a clenched fist. 'See that? I can fight like a man when I want.'

'I'm not in the least afraid of you.'

'Hah! That's good. Me, I am afraid of everything. The

night time, the police, the whole world. But to fight back, I am not afraid.'

'Oh, I don't doubt your courage when you're cornered.' Her open blue eyes tightened, and she stared directly at Ynez. 'That's why you shot Georgette.'

Ynez sat down slowly.

'Georgette and I were more friendly than you thought,' Diane said. 'She told me when she began to dislike the very things in you which she'd liked at first—the fire, the intense feelings about everything, the casual way you took whatever she gave you. She told me she was going to kick you out finally. Back into the cold cruel world, or whatever it is you're running away from. So far as she was concerned you could go back to where you started, the trouble with the Spanish police. Or back to being a rather tony Piccadilly tart.' Her voice was flat, even, with a cool ladylike ferocity. 'But you're the girl who doesn't follow any rules. And there was such a convenient collection of guns from which to choose.'

Ynez folded her hands on the edge of the kitchen table, clasping and unclasping the fingers, then she lowered her forehead slowly to rest on them. 'Oh God,' she said in a muffled voice. 'Oh God in Heaven how tired I am.'

Diane's riding crop began tapping again, making sharp slapping sounds, more quickly, but she did not speak. The inevitable insects outside hurled themselves passionately, again and again, against the back door screen.

Ynez raised her head. 'I know,' she said, 'I know what you want by all this. That's why you came looking for Rip here tonight.' She mimicked Diane's way of speaking. 'But, Rip, *really*,' she said, copying Diane's voice, 'isn't it rather odd when you look at the facts. I mean, after all. And how do you think it *looks* with the Spanish girl staying on in your house now?' Suddenly Ynez slammed her open palm down on the table. 'I understand you like a book! You want to chase me away. You know your husband Emile comes every few nights to Le Badinage. Business with Nino—hah! Business about Ynez.' She leaned forward tautly. 'The business of watching me out on the floor, undressing me with his eyes.

He wants Nino to make me move back to the hotel, to one of those rooms with the little window cut in the door. He wants to make a business arrangement about it with Nino.'

'You bitch!' Diane stood up swiftly and brought the shaft of her crop whistling down across Ynez' outstretched arm.

Ynez jumped to her feet and tore the crop from Diane's hand. She raised it furiously, then suddenly her face changed and she lowered it. 'I could beat your smooth face to ribbons,' she said huskily, 'and you could go to hell for bandages. But then Moussac would surely have to deport me, and you would win in the end.' She threw the crop across the table. 'Here, take your little whip! Beat your little boy when he comes home, beat some sense into his behind with it. You can't scare me to run away from Port Afrique, Diane! And the next time I see Emile look at me I will give him what he wants until his teeth rattle.'

Diane stood very still, trembling a little, and her eyes began to fill with tears. 'Emile's a fool, I know that better than anyone.'

Ynez rubbed the red welt on her arm angrily. 'Your poor helpless child! Pobrecito. Your poor baby!'

'He is,' Diane said, with the tears running down her face, 'he really is. If you only knew. You've never held a sick man shaking in your arms all night.'

'Yes,' Ynez said. 'Men sick of killing. The wounded. But not a man shaking because he collaborated with Nazis and was afraid of his partner.'

'He didn't realize what he was doing!'

'Get out of here,' Ynez said. 'I've had enough trouble. For the rest of my life. I only want a little peace.'

'Please believe me,' Diane said, 'that's all I want too. I haven't slept for nights.'

'You make me sick. Get out with your crying and your little horsewhip. Get out.'

'I haven't told anyone about Georgette, honestly.'

'Thank you, thank you, a thousand thanks. You wanted to keep the knife hanging over my head.' Her voice went up. 'Go home, Diane. Go to bed with your dark handsome boy

and see if you can make his teeth rattle. Go home and try it.'

'How can you be so hard!'

'Hard? Hard? I have seen a man get his leg sawed off without anæsthetic. No ether, nothing. I can hear him scream, right now, in my head. Nice polite people like you helped make that war so bad. You think your little heartache touches me?'

'Haven't you ever loved someone that you'd do anything to——'

'My kind of love would make gooseflesh on a woman like you! I never tried to own a man. Now get out of here before I spit on you.'

Diane wiped her eyes with the back of one hand like a child and walked to the screen door. She turned for a moment and looked directly at Ynez. Their eyes locked, spear point against sword, a declaration of war. Then Diane swung the door open widely and went down the steps into the outer darkness.

Ynez stood still, staring at the door, rubbing the red whip mark on her arm; suddenly she turned and hurried out of the kitchen and ran upstairs to her room and dragged her valise out of the closet. A long scratch ran along one side of it where Rip had tossed it up the steps. She grasped the handle and carried it along the hallway and then began bumping it down the steps into the living room.

'Goin' away, are you now?'

She stopped on the stairs. Nino was in the living room sprawling comfortably in one of the deep chairs and smoking a long Indian cheroot with elaborate ease.

She left the valise on the steps and went down into the room. 'You,' she said, 'that's all I need now, to see you.'

He stood up and came over to her and put a sympathetic hand on her arm. 'What's up, dearie? Aren't you 'appy to see your ol' friend and well-wisher again?'

She shrugged his hand off. 'My old friend and well-wisher had better leave here before Rip comes back home.'

Still smiling, Nino put the cheroot back into his mouth; his face puckered and he began to cough and wheeze. 'Lord, oh Lord,' he said, half-laughing, half-choking, 'it was wonderful.

Really. Wonderful. "My kind of love would make gooseflesh on a woman like you." ' He beat his chest, coughing. 'Wonderful, wonderful. The way women talk.'

'I'm glad you heard! From now on, nobody pushes me!'

'Cool off now, Ynez. You're still a bit 'eated up an' talkin' big. I don't carry no little ridin' crop, y'know.'

'Oh no, no. You don't. Just a gun under your arm. Everybody is so brave, such tough hombres! Everybody has something to lay his hand on here!'

Nino looked at her. 'You know where I'd like to lay my hands?'

She turned her back on him and went to the table and lighted a cigarette. He came up behind her. 'Blimey, I'm no angel, Ynez. I know what I am, I admit it. You didn't come in to Le Badinage tonignt so I 'opped it out 'ere. An' there was all this talk goin' on with Diane, so what was I to do?'

She swung on him. 'You smell. A hundred different smells, all bad.'

His eyes smiled automatically, rigidly, but he walked away from her and dropped back into the big chair. He looked around the room, at the piano, the African masks, the lion skin, the gun rack, the mahogany statue. 'Now there,' he said, 'there was a woman,' gesturing toward the wooden nymph with his cheroot, dropping ashes on his shirt. 'Georgette. Face like a French dream, body made for joy, like the Song o' Solomon in the 'oly Book. There was a woman.' He frowned at her. 'You, you're still a girl. Inside your head you're still a virgin, dearie. Nino understands those little things. Graduate, I am. School o' life, with my bloody diploma in a dozen police files.'

Ynez ground out her cigarette and lit another. She crossed her legs and, without realizing it, began tapping one foot in the air, thinking, thinking hard.

'It's a nice layout around here,' Nino said. 'It's a place a man'd like to own. Build your own airfield, easy. I could show Rip 'ow to run the export-import racket proper from 'ere.'

'What do you want with all this talk, Nino?' Ynez said. 'What do you want here anyway?'

Nino waved a circle in the air with the cheroot. 'Well, dearie, everything. Your ol' friend Nino 'as been on the bottom 'alf so long that now 'e's on top 'e wants every bloody thing.' He looked at her legs. 'Every lovely little thing.' He got up from the chair and began to walk around the room, cracking his knuckles as he talked. ''E's a rich man now, Ynez, your friend Nino.' He thrust one hand toward her. 'See that diamond ring? From Van Vliet in Jo-burg. Four and a 'alf carat, pure blue-white.'

'Yes. Smuggled. On that little aeroplane with the Portuguese pilot.'

'No matter how. There she is, on my hand. 'E who labours in the garden of the Lord——'

Ynez smiled. 'Oh Nino, Nino, you don't know how funny you can be.'

'Go ahead, laugh. Blimey, Nino ain't no sensitive chap. Too expensive! Ha ha.'

Ynez laughed aloud. 'Oh Nino, Nino . . .'

He smiled thinly and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. 'I like to see you laugh, Ynez.' He came to stand over her chair, and his voice dropped. 'Don't leave Port Afrique. Stay. I can give you everything. A big American car. A diamond necklace that shines on your skin like little lamps.' His eyes kept running over her, touching her.

'And all you want back is love? From a girl?'

He missed the mockery in her voice. 'I can wait, Ynez. My 'ole life is waitin'. In the end every bloody thing comes to Nino.'

'Not this bloody thing. Not me.'

'I remember when we sneaked you into Port Afrique on Pedro's plane. No passport, those Franco men from Tangiers after you.' Nino raised his eyes piously to the ceiling. 'The good Lord provides for them what wait. Be patient, I said to myself. She'll show 'er gratitude proper, she will.'

Ynez laughed again. 'You really believe that, don't you? Like all the rich. God is your partner, your silent partner.'

'I'm a rich man, Ynez. I'm proud to admit it. But everything I 'ave will go to you. You know my ticker is bad. This

cheroot—doctor allows me one a day. I could drop dead with 'eart failure right 'ere on this spot.'

'But the expense, Nino. Think how expensive the funeral would be.'

'Now you're 'aving a bit o' fun with me.' Suddenly he dropped to his knees beside her. 'Ynez, Ynez——'

'Oh get up, Nino. You look like a fool there.'

'Ynez, you were friendly to me in the beginning——'

'Only to say thanks.'

'You had a kind word, like a mother to a child——'

Ynez raised her hands. 'Oh my God, what kind of a place is this? All the men want mothers, and the women want little boys.' She frowned at him. 'You're no child. Get up off your knees.'

'I know, Ynez, I know what you want in your 'eart. I 'eard you say it tonight. A little peace. A place to lay your 'ead in peace. Don't think Nino don't know what a bit o' 'ell it is, on the bottom of the pile with the 'ole world on top o' you.' His whole face was twisted with the genuine effort of sincerity.

She looked into his face. 'You're a strange one. Sometimes I forget myself and I pity you a little.' She put a hand over her eyes. 'We're all caught in the same craziness. Like a war. A very little private war.'

Outside there was a faint sound of a car sputtering up the long avenue of palms which led from the road up to the house. Ynez jumped to her feet.

'This must be Rip coming back! Look, you can see the headlamps through the trees.'

A flat explosive sound cracked out clearly.

Nino lumbered up beside her. 'Blimey, what was that! A gun-shot!' He was beginning to breathe faster, with a pale look of fear around the nostrils.

'Didn't you ever hear a gasogene engine backfire? What a hero!'

Nino caught her arm. 'We're all in this together, Ynez. You said it yourself. What if he finds us 'ere? What then?'

The car was closer now, shifting gears as it came around

the corner where the ancient gnarled baobab tree stood above the fallen Ashanti warrior and his painted shield. The yellow beam of its headlights swept across the veranda as it followed the curve.

Ynez looked into Nino's pale face. 'What if he does find us here?'

'Ynez—I have a fiacre waiting for me out on the road. Come with me.' He grasped both her elbows, breathing hard. 'You'll need money to get out of Port Afrique.'

She looked into his eyes calmly. The car outside was around the far bend now, coming toward the house. 'I don't trust you,' she said.

His eyes flicked to the darkness outside, then back to her. 'Where you are, you can't trust nobody!' He pulled her arm. 'Let's go! We can talk about it.' He started back toward the kitchen as the car pulled up before the front steps.

Ynez stared out at the veranda. Outside, a car door opened and slammed shut. At the sound she turned and followed Nino quickly out the back way.

'You're crazy,' Rip said to Colonel Moussac as they got out of the Renault sedan. 'One hundred per cent. nuts. You said that only to throw me off balance. You have some reasons of your own.'

'Why talk like that, Rip? If one has private delusions one is crazy, but if one shares public delusions one is sane. Nonsense.' Colonel Moussac turned back to Hector Apollonaire at the wheel of the sedan. 'Take a walk back out to the road,' he said. 'Take a look at the fiacre we passed.'

'Oui, mon colonel.' The detective slid out from behind the wheel.

'You're pulling some kind of trick, Jacques,' Rip said as Moussac joined him and they went up the steps to the veranda together. 'I don't understand it yet, but give me time.'

'No trick. You accused me of murder. I accused you. Same logic. You wanted me to come out here to match the Mauser in the empty space in your gun drawer. Here I am. In my office you saw me put the gun in my file, you saw me take it

out.' He lifted the automatic out of his pocket. 'Here it is. We shall see who is seeing straight—you or me.'

As they walked into the living room, Moussac stopped. He sniffed deeply. 'Algerian tobacco. I'm disappointed, Rip. You smoke such bad cigars? And leave your lights on?' His eyes were moving around the room, resting on everything, missing nothing, like a blind man's fingers.

'Stop stalling,' Rip said. 'Let's have that gun.'

'Why do you keep rubbing your stomach with one hand? Stomach ache?'

'It's an old Indian good luck charm.' Rip slid open the wide shallow gun drawer with the green baize lining. Moussac pointed to the space outlined by dust on the felt.

'This is where you said the Mauser did not fit?'

'Yes. The gun was too short. About five millimetres.'

Without a word Moussac handed Rip the automatic. Rip put it into the faintly impressed space; he squinted along it, shifted it slightly, stooped to sight down the barrel, then he stood up and stared at it.

'It fits.' He looked at Moussac. 'It didn't fit before, but it does now.'

Moussac shrugged and spread both hands outward.

Rip picked up the Mauser and began to examine it minutely, suspiciously, then he began to fit it into the space again. Moussac watched him for a moment, then walked past him into the lighted kitchen.

He glanced around the room, the disordered chairs, then went to the table to pick up the bloodstained kitchen knife. He opened the first-aid kit, touched one or two of the compact items with his careful ivory hands, closed the box, and went back into the living room.

Rip looked up as he came in. He was still holding the automatic.

'Here,' Moussac said, 'don't point that thing at me.'

Rip tossed the gun across the short space between them. 'Catch,' he said. 'You win this round, or this move, or whatever you want to call the goddam mysterious game you're playing.' He pounded his right fist into his left palm softly.

'I don't understand you at all. It's too tricky, a double double-cross.'

Moussac slipped the Mauser back into the pocket of his tunic. 'I'm just trying to prove to you, mon vieux, I know what I am doing. You do not. I want you to stop running around. You are a bull in a china shop. This with the gun in the drawer should prove it to you.'

Rip shook his head slowly. 'It's some kind of trick. Now you see it, now you don't. You must have switched guns in the file cabinet in your office.'

Moussac rubbed the ends of his moustache with the back of his thumbnail. 'Stubborn,' he said, 'how stubborn. Still holding the electric hands for a penny, pins and needles. Look,' he added, 'you remember Beaulieu's work on the mahogany nymph modelled on Georgette?' He waved one hand at the voluptuous statue which stood in the corner of the room, beyond the piano. 'You remember how much carving he accomplished?'

'Sure I do,' Rip said.

'How much?'

'There are no feet. Georgette got rid of him before he carved the feet. The ankles end in the tree trunk.'

Moussac looked at him steadily without speaking. The brass clock on the shelf nearby spun its metal insides during the silence and began to strike nine o'clock with muffled hammers. Rip took his eyes from Moussac's and he went across the room, around the piano, and examined the wood nymph from head to foot. He straightened and glanced at Moussac, who stood silently watching him, then he crossed the room and dropped wearily into a chair. Moussac did not move. 'The feet, ah? Both feet are finished, carved right down to the toes.'

'You've said enough, Jacques. Go away.'

'Beauty is not always in the eye of the beholder, eh? The feet are really finished. The gun really fits. We see, but we do not see. Nothing is where you think it is. Have you ever heard of Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy?'

'Enough, Jacques. I'm not buying any more of your fancy

psychological pressure. Enough parlour tricks for tonight. Go play God some place else.'

'You look sick. Go to bed.'

'Go to hell.'

Outside, somewhere nearby, Saluki began to bark suddenly. Moussac raised his head. 'Is that Georgette's dog barking out there?'

'It's your lost soul, Faust. Va-t'en. Leave me alone.'

Moussac laughed. 'Now I know how mixed up you are. You are Faust, not me. I am Mephistopheles.'

Rip's shirt was wet under the armpits, and he rubbed his stomach with both hands, face twisting a little with the pain inside. 'All right. All right. Go. For Chrissake, go.'

'You're a sick man, Rip. It's all over you. A child could tell. You need rest, careful diet, no liquor.'

'Yes, doctor. I know all that.'

'The problem for you is simple, Rip. If you learn to live with the questions in your head, you will give your body a chance to heal. But if you keep fighting for answers this way you will end by killing yourself.'

'Jacques, will you please just get the hell out of here before I throw you out? I'm just damned tired of you and your logic.'

Moussac started out, but stopped beside Rip's chair. 'Rip,' he said quietly, with the edge gone now, 'this chase in the dark of yours, this bitter hunt, stop it. You are not canonizing your dead wife—you are only looking for yourself or destroying yourself. I don't know which. Subconscious suicide to atone for some guilt. Your violence has no target, so you are turning it against yourself. You will kill yourself this way.'

Saluki barked again somewhere outside, sharply, lost in the grove of eucalyptus trees, then tapered off in a long diminuendo of yips.

Moussac turned to listen. 'My lost soul,' he murmured. He looked down once again at Rip's bent head, then he went out and down the veranda steps into his car.

Rip waited until he heard the motor chug over heavily, then catch and grind with the gears as the sedan pulled away around the curving drive. He got up with difficulty and

walked toward the kitchen, moving slowly now because the spasms of pain were hitting him faster, again and again, stabbing, barbed with ice and fire.

It was as though he was back in Germany, in that evacuation hospital which had been set up inside the abandoned Nazi technical school on the outskirts of Halle, the modernistic one, all glass and concrete, with the long sentences still chalked on the classroom blackboard in hasty German script: 'Our comrades have died in German blood on German earth, but we will forever live!' Wagnerian bully-boy bombast, twilight of the tin gods, the words on the blackboard over his head as he lay wounded badly in the shock ward the docs had set up in the schoolroom and he felt the intravenous needle transfusing a bottle of whole blood into the body which was betraying him by dying in the airless Nazi kindergarten. Christ how he had hated the endless decay of war, the deadening inside himself, the acceptance of enormous brutalities, the unspoken, unknown, but tangible sense of the degradation of killing and violence. He had never had a spine of political faith or religious belief to help keep him upright, but only the far-off faint memory of the grail called home.

Home was not enough.

Home was the dimly remembered big plantation house in Africa where his mother had died when he was five. His father had called him into the high shuttered room with the medicinal smells, and the pale woman lying in bed had managed to raise one hand weakly and put it on his head. 'What will happen to my little boy?' she had whispered. 'I want you to grow up strong and healthy.'

'Don't worry about Rip, now, Mother,' his father had said.

'I wish you'd call him Dick,' she had said very quietly. 'I never did like that name.'

'Now Mother, just rest. Don't talk. You've got to save your strength.'

His father had been one of the post-Victorian empire builders, personal empires, self-consciously shaking hands with destiny daily, and, like most men whose hardness only masked cruelty, faintly contemptuous and quite sentimental

about weak women, animals still too small to be shot, and deathbeds. He always thought of himself as stern, tough, and probably immortal. And he wanted to teach his boy to be almost as strong as he was.

As the pendulum of his life swung delicately between life and death in the shock ward Rip had begun to grasp dimly how hollow a strength he had copied for so many years, the inside-out weakness it really was, and how false the sense of immortality. Where did the betrayals end? First his father, now his own body had turned traitor, and as he lay dying in the littered Nazi schoolroom thinking vaguely of his parents whom he had never really known, all the friends whom he had known so unknowingly, he was overwhelmed by the terror of this final naked loneliness of dying.

He leaned against the gun rack weakly, remembering Germany vividly, feeling the sweat start out all over him. This was bad. And was going to be worse. He knew that because he had been here before.

'. . . *if you keep fighting for answers this way you will end by killing yourself.* . . .'

Maybe Jacques Moussac was right; Jacques usually was, damn his eyes and damn his shrewd brainy supercilious manner and his equally damned mysterious chess playing with people and his European love of subtleties-within-subtleties. Maybe Jacques was right and he, Rip, would end with a little taste of American blood on African earth, but without the Teutonic drama, no Götterdämmerung, nothing but the little hæmorrhage in the stomach mucosa, the blood-coughing wrenching, the bright red gushing from the nostrils, the dagger in the bowels.

Leaning there against the gun rack he suddenly felt the wave of pain rising in his throat; he leaned over, hunching, his old familiar protective hunching, the child curling in the womb with its fists bent up to its mouth, and then it began. When it was over, and the coughing stopped, the side of his hand was covered by a very faint red-dotted spray of blood.

There was no maybe; Jacques was right. He was killing himself slowly.

A bitter sorrowful gladness swept over him; death, the old soldier who had campaigned beside him and all his friends who now were gone, was marching alongside again. That was a sick and bitter and self-conscious idea, he thought, but there it is because that's how I feel. All the promises of all the long years had unravelled to this last dirty end of rope.

'Ynez!' he shouted suddenly. '*Ynez!*' His voice, the house, the rooms around him, all rang with emptiness.

'Bouala! Suleiman!' No, no, they'd be gone now, they would be in their little two-room house at the far end of the compound.

For the first time the saw-tooth edge of understanding touched him; this was what it must have been like for Georgette, this soft insidious sifting of silence piled upon silence. Loneliness. What had Father Xavier said? '. . . *nineteen hours in the desert without water . . .*'

He closed his eyes. Christ oh Christ, this was no way to be, this was no way to think. This stinking self-pity. He tried walking toward the kitchen again, toward water, toward the water he knew he should not drink but which all his insides craved. Through the past few years he had been nineteen times nineteen days crossing his own personal desert, and now that he was at the end of the long journey home there was only a desert before him.

While he stood there in the doorway to the kitchen, outlined by the light, the whiplash crack of a rifle rolled out, echoing and re-echoing among the dark surrounding trees, and with it a bullet smashed through one of the windows and smacked into the wall of the door beside him.

His combat-trained muscles reacted instantly. Kasserine, Sicily, the Hurtgen Forest. . . . He dropped, rolled, reached up and snapped off the kitchen light. Outside, somewhere nearby, Saluki had begun to bark furiously. Rip crawled into the living room, ignoring the pain inside, driving himself with the feeling that here, now, suddenly there was something concrete to do, to fight back. The invisible cobweb of tension around him was gone, and now he could reach up carefully into his gun drawer and feel for the small semi-automatic

Walther ·765 and take out a clip of cartridges, and slide the clip into the handle of the gun with that comforting murderous little *snick* of the first bullet slipping into the chamber. The familiar weight of a weapon in the hand and the curved trigger guard with its hard metal promise of power helped him focus, plan, move swiftly. By reaching upward he was able to snap off each of the table lamps, one at a time; he ignored the lamps outside on the veranda; too bad but couldn't be helped. Too dangerous out there. He'd make himself a target again. Now outside, out the back way, fast, staggering a little as a spasm inside cut at him, make a wide circle out around the side of the house, crouching, shoulders hunched, careful at the corner, careful, there's moonlight out here, now down, belly and elbows to cross the empty space edging the drive in front of the house.

Saluki's barking had become continuous, the sharp insistent yap of a furious gazelle hound with bared teeth.

He crawled toward the sound as quietly as possible, his back chilly with sweat and the night air, the ground faintly warm and ripe smelling under him. Saluki stopped for a moment, then began again on a new crazed note, then stopped again.

About thirty yards more to go, maybe twenty. He slipped back the catch on the automatic and held it ready. The muscles in his body tensed suddenly as a small animal scurried out from under his arms. He stopped and listened, but there were too many sounds, insects buzzing, birds stirring and fluttering, snapping sounds, rustlings. The pale moonlight, hanging thinly like gauze between the trees, only made the darkness seem twice as opaque.

Ahead of him a low mound humped out of the ground, rising and falling with the sound of laboured breathing. Someone was lying there. He waited, searching the space around him with his eyes, listening. It might be a trick, the old booby trap kind. Shoot first, investigate later. He raised the Walther and said quietly, 'Get up. Get up.'

The man did not move.

At that range he could not miss; he pulled the trigger

twice, watching the bundle jumping under the bullet's impact each time, then he got up and walked into the clearing.

It was Saluki, very dead.

About three hours later, just before midnight, Pedro Aranda, the very hot Portuguese pilot of the Afro-Aero Company, came into Colonel Moussac's office. Moussac and Hector Apollonaire were sitting on each side of the desk under a green shaded hanging light playing chess with a wooden Mohammedan set on a chessboard whose squares were woven into a goat hair cloth rug.

'Bon soir, mon colonel.' Pedro threw Moussac a small salute.

'Bon soir, Pedro. What is this package you carry?' Moussac asked it casually, with no suggestion of how badly he wanted the package.

'I have just come back from Takara.' Pedro paused, waiting for some sign of impatience from Moussac. Impatience would cost Moussac a little more.

'At night? So late?' Moussac seemed only to be pondering his next move in the chess game. The package from Takara was completely ignored.

Pedro shrugged. 'Throw a fifty centime piece on the ground, I can land my plane on it. I had the moon all the way down the coast, no clouds.' He kissed his fingertips. 'What a moon, soft, like a woman. A night for making love. Or smuggling diamonds.'

Hector Apollonaire laughed. 'You won't die in bed, Pedro.'

'Au contraire, Apollo, it is my ambition. In bed, shot by a jealous husband. That is the way a man should go.' He went on talking about this, making Moussac wait for the package from Takara. Then, in order to make Moussac speak up first about the package, he talked about gold. 'The Chinese merchants are paying almost double the price for black-market gold in Macao,' he said. 'They hire sampans down the Canton River out to Macao. In a Portuguese possession they do not fear the Chinese laws.'

Moussac was watching the large package Pedro held. 'It is

only necessary to get the gold to Macao,' he said. 'A minor difficulty.'

'A little distance from Port Afrique to the Canton River,' Hector said, 'of perhaps ten thousand kilometres.'

Pedro gestured with his hands, casually ignoring the package which buckled stiffly as he lifted it with careful indifference. 'What is distance in an aeroplane,' he said, 'when the pilot has considerable skill?'

'Pardon me,' Hector said. 'The skill. Yes. I forgot that.'

Pedro grinned and looked at Moussac. 'But I am interrupting your game, mon colonel.'

'Nothing. We play constantly. One interruption more or less.' Moussac studied the game before him intently, ignoring the package from Takara.

But Pedro was in no hurry. 'What kind of chess set is this? I have never seen such a set.'

Moussac rubbed his moustache with his thumb, ready to pull the package out of Pedro's hand, but waiting, playing the casual game to keep the price down.

Hector picked up one of the carved geometric pieces. 'It is a Mohammedan set,' he said. 'The colonel got it during his years in the desert with the Tuaregs.'

'The man whose set it was,' Moussac said, 'used this cloth chessboard so that he could fold it and carry it on a camel. None of the pieces have faces for the Koran forbids graven images.'

'Oh?' Pedro slapped the package from Takara idly against his leg. 'And how did he come to part with such a fine set, mon colonel?'

'He lost the game in the desert.' Moussac's chevron eyebrows went up as he looked Pedro straight in the eyes. 'He died.'

'Oh? You play for high stakes.'

'It lends some excitement to the game. In Algiers they once played chess outdoors, on a field, using living men, slaves, as the chessmen. When a piece was taken, the slave lost his head.'

'This is true?'

'In Africa it could be true.' Moussac made a move in the game, then looked up under his eyebrows at Pedro. His eyes were hard now. 'How would you like to play as a piece in such a game?'

'This package from Takara, mon colonel——' Pedro said quickly.

'What? Oh, that. Yes.' He held his hand out idly.

'It was much effort,' Pedro said, still holding the package. 'To develop such big X-ray plates in Takara required some chemicals from Dakar, for which it was necessary for me to fly to——'

Moussac laughed. 'You could fly your plane with your mouth, Pedro. So many revolutions per minute, like a propeller.' He held out his hand again for the package. 'Don't worry. I don't forget favours. I'll take care of you.'

Pedro smiled broadly now, tugging gently on his gold earring with one hand. He gave Moussac the package without another word. Hector Apollonaire leaned back in his chair, smiling too; the whole thing had been played properly, obliquely, coolly, with the formal progression of a good chess gambit.

Moussac tore open the seals on the package and lifted out three full-size X-ray plates, each eleven by fourteen inches. He held them up to the light, narrowing his eyes, examining them very very carefully. Then he lowered the plates to the desk. 'Thank you, Pedro,' he said, 'good-bye.'

Pedro's white teeth smiled again. He started for the door, then turned back, grinning more widely. 'Curiosity is a very natural thing, mon colonel. Especially after so much flying with a small package on the seat beside you.'

Moussac raised the X-ray plates toward the light again, fanning out all three of them in his hand like oversize celluloid playing cards. 'Come here, Pedro. Here, look at them all you want.'

Pedro came back to the desk and stared at the dark and light patches in the X-rays. After a moment Hector raised himself out of his chair and looked over Pedro's shoulder.

'Well?' Moussac asked, keeping his face straight.

'It is very interesting,' Pedro said. 'To take a picture through a human being is a remarkable thing.'

'You understand what you see?'

'Nothing.'

Hector laughed over his shoulder and Pedro swung on him. 'You, Apollo, do you know? Can a dumb detective interpret these shadows?'

Hector laughed again. 'You're a good pilot, Pedro. Stick to your machine.'

'I suppose you know what this map of somebody's private guts means?'

'It is a very intellectual thing to understand,' Hector said. 'Something like chess.'

Pedro looked across the desk at Moussac who was standing with the light falling halfway across his face, from the shaded lamp, in a partial mask of shadow. 'That's why you trusted me,' Pedro said slowly. 'That's why you let me carry these back from Takara alone. You knew even if I steamed it open these X-rays would mean nothing to me.'

'Yes. Nor could you sell them to anyone else. Nor hire them out for blackmail.'

'You have no trust for anybody, do you?'

Moussac's eyebrows moved up, then came down. 'I do not trust even myself,' he said. 'I have too high a regard for the complexity of human nature.'

Pedro turned to Hector. 'You know what I think? When a man talks like that all the time he needs a good physic.'

Moussac clapped Pedro on the shoulder. 'Don't be so touchy, Pedro. I think you're a good pilot. Let me try to be a good cop, eh?'

'I am not so ignorant,' Pedro said. 'This of the X-rays is a very curious thing. Of what did you take X-ray pictures, mon colonel?'

Moussac smiled. 'I am a photographic enthusiast. I like to take intimate pictures of everything, Pedro.'

A Senegalese sentry knocked on the door and came in. He saluted and said, 'Mademoiselle Ynez Camillo to see le colonel.'

Hector Apollonaire sat down abruptly and began lighting a cigarette. Pedro looked at Moussac and grinned.

'Send her in,' Moussac said.

Pedro started for the door. 'It's a busy office at midnight, this one,' he said. 'Men and women, coming and going.'

'Yes,' Moussac said. 'Visitors all the time.' He looked at the doorway. 'Ah, Ynez, come in, come in.'

Ynez came into the room slowly, looking at the three men as if trying to sense what lay among them. 'If I am interrupting——' she began.

'No, no, not at all. You know my assistant, M'sieu Apollonaire. This is Senhor Pedro Aranda.'

'The pleasure had already been mine,' Pedro said. He was smiling again, giving her a fast once-over like a sailor in a hurry. 'I flew the lady into Port Afrique.'

'Oh, yes,' Ynez said, 'yes.'

'There was some small difficulty about a passport, if I remember with correctness.'

'Yes,' Ynez said. 'I did not have one.'

'Oh. Yes. You have lost some weight since that time. It is becoming, permit me to say.'

'Thank you.'

Pedro turned to Moussac. 'If you should ever take some of those intimate X-rays of this one, please save a copy for me. I have a curiosity to know what occurs inside.'

Hector Apollonaire got up and took Pedro's elbow. 'Good night, Pedro,' he said, and moved him toward the door.

Pedro smiled back over his shoulder directly at Ynez. 'Good night,' he said. Moussac shut the door behind both men and came back toward Ynez.

'So,' he said, 'the queen of Port Afrique has come to see the policeman, the chess knight.'

'Please, please, this has been a very bad night for me, please don't make your jokes with me tonight.'

He pushed Hector's empty chair toward her. 'Won't you sit down?'

'Sit!' she said, 'I'm on my knees already.'

'What kind of talk is that? Sit down, calm yourself, I'll give you a brandy.'

'No, no please. Listen to me. I need papers from you. I must leave Port Afrique. The sooner the better.'

'Why? What's the matter? What's happened?'

'I want to leave. For a long time now, you know that.'

'Yes, yes, but why this suddenness? It's after midnight.'

'I decided suddenly. I can't stand any more. Everything is so—so——' she moved her hands in the air—'so electric. As if everybody carries a knife.'

'But this is the state of the world today. Everywhere. If you run away from here you will find the same thing wherever you go.'

'No,' she said intensely. 'Some place people must live with each other with peace, on some kind of even terms.'

'The same old dream you've always had.'

'No dream! All right, the world is a jungle, I know how to live with the snakes and the lions. All I want now is a little patch of grass. A little sunshine.'

'Running. Always running.'

'But I don't want to run! I want to stay. I thought I found here a place where I could stay peacefully. I had a job and Nino let me keep it because he is a little man who lives in hope. Georgette had so much loneliness she let me stay there on the plantation, with all the restfulness and quiet there. And you yourself looked at me like a man, not a policeman, and you let me stay.'

'Why? Why do you think I let you stay?'

She looked at him. 'The answer is simple.'

'Simple!'

She shrugged. 'I've heard it before.'

Moussac stood up and walked across the room and looked out into the dark courtyard. When he turned back his face had a thin drawn look, and the slightly satanic expression was gone. 'You're a fool. Like all the rest of them. I'm surrounded by fools, Gulliver tied down by the Lilliputians. You think I want you only to have that dancer's body in my arms for a night or two? You child! I want you like that, of course I

do, any man with eyes in his head would, but I want you because you are a girl who became a woman early. Suffering has given you a deep and simple kind of tenderness. There is an honesty something like chastity in the way you deal with people. You are able to become incandescent with pity. You are more than a girl, a dancing girl, you are truly a person! The world is filled with the walking dead, but you have life and passion.'

Very quietly she said, 'I never heard anybody say things like that before. Why do you talk like that to me?'

He came toward her a step or two and looked across the narrow space under the shaded lamp at her. 'Because everything I said I believed,' he said stiffly, 'and now you have the vulgarity to shrug your shoulders like a tart and say the answer is simple because you have heard it before.' Suddenly he slapped his hand flat on the desk and went back to stare out the window again.

She spoke to his back. 'Maybe what you say is true. I don't know because I don't know what to believe any more. But maybe you are acting.' He swung around to face her from the window, but she raised her hand. 'Please,' she said quickly, 'please don't be angry. Maybe not acting all the way, but acting a little bit. Maybe you want me to stay here and you let your feelings run that way.'

He walked across the room to stand beside her. Suddenly he leaned forward and took her into his arms and kissed her. He bent her back, back, kissing her fiercely, until she pushed herself away with both hands. 'You—I—let me breathe . . .'

'Was that acting? Did it feel like acting?'

She was pale now, trembling a little. 'No,' she said breathlessly, 'no.'

'Do you think you could love me?'

She put her hands up to her face. 'I come to ask him for papers and he asks me that . . .'

He grasped her wrist and pulled one hand down. 'I don't blackmail people. This is you and me. There is nothing to do with papers.'

She pulled his hand toward her and held it in both her own.

'I'm not like you,' she said. 'I don't know how to express myself, it's always hard for me to say how I feel.'

'I asked you a simple question. You must have heard it before. As you say, the answer should be simple.'

'Oh please, please, don't be so angry with me . . .'

'My God, stop pleading like that! I'm a man of reason, not an animal!'

She stood up straight, raising her head tensely. 'And what of me? Am I human too? You think you understand what it is to keep running for years like a hunted thing. Ah, nobody knows who has never lived in hell. It is so easy to want me. I am young and I look pretty, but don't you think I must need somebody too?' She was crying now, furious and sobbing dryly with the tears shining in enormous dark eyes. 'Sometimes I think I'll go crazy. My whole life is the waiting room in a railroad station. In Madrid I used to sleep with an old alarm clock in my hand, I used to hold it to make sure I heard it, and every time it went off and I awakened it was like coming back into hell. Sometimes I think I still hear the alarm clock ringing and ringing and I can't shut it off.' The tears rolled down her face.

'Ynez, Santa Ynez. . . .'

'Don't put your hand out to me! I don't want your pity or anybody's.'

'I would never give that to you——'

'Maybe I could love you, I don't know, but I think I'll always be a little afraid of you.'

He turned away from her and went back to his desk and sat down. He opened his ivory fingers scissors-fashion on the desk in front of him, then closed them. After a moment he spoke flatly. 'You prefer Rip.'

'If you ask me, I will tell you yes.'

'Why?'

'Oh, I know what you think. You like Rip, but you also have some contempt for him. You think he is a little mad, he throws himself into things too hard, too fast. You think he should let every little feeling go upstairs first into his brain, his mind, everything to be checked first. He lives with a full heart.'

'You're talking like a little fool. He was a man with a fighting chance to get his health back, but no, he refuses to live sensibly and relax and give himself a chance to heal. He is a man who feels a deep guilt about something and without knowing it he is determined to kill himself.'

'Not if he gets help. He needs help.'

'And you want to help, Santa Ynez?'

'Until tonight, yes. I wanted to help Rip.'

'My God, you sound like a cabaret song: Love Thy Magic Spell is Everywhere.'

'I knew this would end with you angry and my not getting the papers.'

'Is he another wounded soldier for you to nurse, Señorita Nightingale? A wounded soldier in the fight for liberty?'

'You fought yourself. Don't be sarcastic. Or did you surrender inside?'

'If you feel so deeply and if Rip needs you, why do you want to run away so fast?'

She clasped her fingers together tightly. 'Because I felt I knew him from the first time I saw him.'

'Another cabaret myth,' he said tightly. 'The instantaneous love potion, Tristan and Isolde. You're a child.'

'You're wrong. The words don't say what the feeling is. With some people it is like being hit in the face. You feel it quick, all over. A face in the crowd, you remember it. But now——' She raised her interlocked fingers, then, with a mute gesture, dropped them back into her lap.

'But now he is suspicious of you? But now he knows a tough girl with war experience would know how to handle weapons? A girl who wants a quiet corner so much she might kill somebody to get it and keep it?'

'No, no——'

'A girl who deliberately planned to make herself over in the image of another woman, so that a sick lonely man away from home for years could change the picture in his mind with the least trouble.'

'Now you're trying to make me afraid——'

'You came here yourself. In the chess game the queen is

always the most important player on the board. I wait for people to make their own moves.'

'I don't understand you——'

'But I understand you, Santa Ynez. You used Georgette's friendship to see his pictures, to read all his letters until you knew him from those alone. You could become mistress in his house with one stroke. From a dancing girl chased by the police to mistress of the Reardon money and property. Cinderella in the fairy tales. From ashes to the palace. You could step on Nino then, on the Delaigres and on Diane's English jealousies about her husband. You could spit in the face of the whole world and every night you could comb down your long black hair and get into bed and be Georgette in the darkness.'

She stood up tensely, shaking. 'Why are you tying the rope around my neck?'

He spread his hands. 'There has been the simple fact of murder.'

'You said it was suicide.'

'That too.' He spread his hands across the X-ray photographs. 'Both can be very close, heads and tails on the same coin sometimes.'

'Why don't you arrest me, right away? Here.'

He smiled. 'Spoil my jail with a prisoner?'

'What kind of a man are you anyway? From fineness, from sensitive understanding, then all of a sudden this dirty cat-scratching business? I don't understand you.'

'Who understands anybody else? We can only send little messages, little flashes with a mirror, from one world to another.'

'That's what I mean. The way you talk. What am I, a classroom of children? Why did you wait so long to tell me you think I killed Georgette?'

'A Spanish girl,' Moussac said, 'who does not know her Bible? For everything there is a time, a time to keep silence and a time to speak.'

She was shivering, and caught her elbows in her cupped hands. 'A time to love and a time to hate.'

'That too.'

She shook her head at him. 'You're mad.'

He laughed out loud. 'I've been hearing that often lately. In the words of one of the best American poets: I am large, I contain multitudes.'

'And me?' she said. 'I am small, I contain much fear and a little hope. I only want some papers to get out of town.'

'It would be easier for you to go find Pedro Aranda, that pilot. A girl like you could persuade him, because he is very adaptable to warmth and persuasion, and you could be flown out of Port Afrique tomorrow night while my back is turned.'

She stared at him. 'You learn all the time,' she said slowly. 'The man who kissed me was one man. This kind of dirty talk is a different man.'

'Not so You are a practical girl who knows how to do practical things.'

'I could kill you. Right now. That's what I could do.'

'What a girl you are,' Moussac said softly, admiringly. He came around the desk quickly and caught her, surprised, and kissed her as long and as hard as he could until she was able to fight her way backward and slap him stingingly with all her strength. She came at him, blazing, swinging both arms, but he caught her wrists and twisted her arms until she cried out and he let her fall back into the chair.

'You're strong,' he said. 'I never thought you'd be so strong.'

'I could kill you——'

'Go ahead, cry.'

'I am not crying! I could only——'

'I know, I know. This Spanish passion. It is tiresome to hear you repeat it.'

She put her hands down to her sides and rubbed her palms along her dress. 'All right,' she said finally. 'You win. I want the papers because sooner or later I will be caught like this again if I don't have them.' She sounded tired suddenly. 'Whatever you want,' she said.

'Go home Ynez. Tomorrow it will look different.'

She looked up at him. 'I mean it. Whatever you want.'

'You don't know what you mean any more. What happened tonight to you? What started you off?'

'Oh, it's been coming a long time.' She began talking, almost to herself. 'When Rip first came I thought everything bad might be put away and forgotten. The first night he came home we——' she put one hand up to her cheek suddenly—'I feel warm all of a sudden. My face is hot.'

'The first night?' Moussac said. 'Really? So quickly, Isolde? So fast?'

'I know what you think,' she said. 'But it was not like that. It was, it was—I don't know how to explain it. A thing seems natural, then the next day everything changes, and things are even worse. It was like two strangers in the dark, in an air raid; you put out your hand and hold tight with the brotherhood of man and the next day on the street you don't even recognize each other.'

'I think of her for months,' Moussac said, 'I plan, and he comes home on his knees and the very first——' he stopped and shook his head. 'And I thought I understood a little about people.'

'Maybe you were right before. Maybe I felt that way because he was on his knees.'

'I'm very tired of that explanation!'

'People get tired of eating too! Does that stop it?'

'All right, all right. Then what happened tonight?'

'I had a fight with Diane.'

'Where?'

'At the plantation house.'

'Then what?'

'Then Nino came. He talked me into coming into town with him. He offered me some money to help get me out of town.'

'And you trusted him?'

'At that particular minute, yes. People do unexpected things.'

He laughed shortly. 'Let's not go into that again. Then what happened?'

'He has a whole suite of rooms of his own, upstairs, over Le Badinage. He offered me one of the rooms overnight. He

gave me the key. He said we would talk first thing in the day, tomorrow.'

'So you stayed?'

'Yes. By that time I didn't like it any more, but there was nothing else to do.'

'And the room turned out to have two keys.'

'Yes,' she said. Then she added quietly, 'I think I could kill him, too, sometimes.'

'And then you decided that was enough to swallow and you ran over here and went through the stamping machine again.'

'Yes.'

He put his hand on her arm. 'Forgive me,' he said.

'No,' she said, 'I wouldn't buy your pity for two francs.'

'But you would like me to pay for feeling sorry by handing you passport papers.'

'If that's the way you want to look at it, yes.'

'It's too high a price. I don't feel *that* guilty. No, I'm afraid you'll have to stay in Port Afrique a short time longer.'

She stood up swiftly. 'No jail. But still a prisoner?'

'Yes,' he said, and tapped his forehead with his thumbnail, 'but only up here.' He walked to the door quickly and pulled it open. Hector Apollonaire was lounging against the opposite wall of the corridor, smoking philosophically. He straightened as Moussac motioned toward him.

'Mon colonel,' he said, 'my wife is more unhappy all the time about these night hours of mine. Could I——'

'Take mademoiselle back to the Reardon house in my car. Then your time is your own—until tomorrow morning.'

Hector shrugged. Moussac walked back into his office, going past Ynez as if he were alone in the room, and picked up one of the X-ray photographs on his desk. He held it up to the light, examining it very closely while he gave himself a cigarette and lit it with his free hand. 'Go with Apollonaire back home,' he said through the smoke around his head without looking at her.

She went to the door silently, then turned. 'That's all?' she asked. 'Just wait and wait and wait?'

He put the X-ray down. 'Yes,' he said, 'but not much longer.'

It was not until Hector Apollonaire had disappeared with Moussac's car around the curve in the drive before Rip's house and she had started up the front steps that Ynez noticed the blood. The living room of the house was dark, but the table lamps on the veranda threw a soft glow across the outer flooring, and Ynez could see a distinct thin red line wavering up the steps and across the floor and into the house. She ran across the veranda and through the dark living room and up the staircase. A rectangle of light stood at the head of the stairs, in Rip's room, and she ran up the steps to it.

She found him lying full length on his bed with his eyes closed and the thin drawn look of pain.

'Rip!' she cried.

He opened his eyes as she came toward him. She sank to her knees beside the bed so that her face was on a level with his. 'What's the matter, Rip? What happened to you?'

'Nothing,' he said, 'not a bloody thing.'

'I saw blood on the veranda as I——'

'Saluki's.'

'The dog?'

'Yes. I shot her. Twice. She's on the kitchen floor now.'

'You shot her!'

'Yes.'

'Why? Why?'

He stared at her for a long moment, then swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up slowly. 'Well,' he said, rubbing his stomach, 'that's a little better. I thought it was going to be a lot worse.' He looked down into her upturned face. 'Don't look at me like that. I'm all right.'

She stood up. 'Can I help you? Is there something I——'

'Why yes,' he said in English, 'sure you can. Convince me you don't go around firing at people with your little bow and arrow.'

'I can understand better what you say,' she answered in careful school English, 'if you will speak with more slowness for me.'

'Sure,' he said very slowly and distinctly, 'drink to me only

with thine eyes. Thy fine Castilian eyes. I'm just wondering at how easy it would be for a man to fall into those dark pools without a splash, and never come up again.'

'This I do not understand,' she said swiftly in French. 'I have little taste left over for jokes tonight. If I can do something to help you, tell me. I will do it.'

'The first thing you can do,' he said, 'is go downstairs and find that bottle of armagnac I brought home the other night. Bring it up here.'

'Is it all right? I mean, for you to drink now.'

'Yes,' he said, 'it's all right.' The hell it was, brother. Why don't you take a good long clear look at yourself and get off the sharp edge of this seesaw?

She stood still, watching him, then went out and down the stairs. 'In the locker,' he called out after her, 'under the gun cabinet.'

He tried standing up, but his legs sat down heavily under him. It was too soon to try standing. He would have to sit very quietly for a while, or lie down and just say to hell with everything until the pinpoint of bleeding inside healed. It was too bad. For a few minutes back there under the dark trees he had had a chance to catch whoever had fired that shot. Someone was desperate and afraid of him, and that gave him a chance, because desperation and fear would inevitably force someone to make a mistake. Maybe that's what Jacques Moussac was waiting for too—someone to make a mistake. Moussac was capable of calling murder suicide, or calling suicide suicide in such a way it would seem to be murder and he could pin someone down as being guilty. Or he was guilty himself and wanted every delay he could manage. Or he was on the job and knew exactly what he would do when someone became afraid enough and desperate enough to make a mistake. Or—oh hell, Moussac was capable of any number of things. For that matter, so was Ynez. So was Nino, or Emile, or Diane. Or Suleiman or Bouala!

He could hear Ynez moving around downstairs. What are you prepared to do, he thought suddenly, if she comes back upstairs carrying one of those compact little husband-killers

you have collected so conveniently in that wide drawer downstairs?

The lights went off downstairs and he heard her coming up. He tried standing up again, and made it this time; shakily, but up.

When Ynez came in she stopped at the bedroom door. 'What's the matter?' she said.

'I tried standing up.' Maybe she hadn't fired the shot after all. Or maybe they were all against him together. Or all against him—but working separately. He eased himself back down. . . .

She crossed the room and set the bottle of armagnac beside the bed with a short highball glass.

'What's the matter?' he asked. 'Only one glass?'

'I don't want any.'

'I don't drink alone,' he said. 'I never liked people who do.'

'Do it or don't,' she said. 'It becomes embarrassing to hear you lie about it.'

He poured himself three fingers of the armagnac and began to raise the glass, but stopped in mid-air. 'Lie to myself?'

'Yes. In between all your talking against drinking in such a solitary unsocial way, you manage to empty a bottle or two.'

'Here,' he said, holding the glass out toward her, 'I'm not being unsocial.'

She took the glass with a faint air of defiance. 'Neither am I.' She held it unfamiliarly like a glass ball too big for the fingers. 'I'll make a toast for you,' she said. 'I'll make a toast for the kind of man I thought you were from reading your letters to Georgette.' He started to speak, but she raised her voice. 'I'll make a toast to my father who was a good man who liked to teach Spaniards something about an Englishman named Shakespeare. I'll make a toast to all the other good men the Fascists killed.'

'That's quite a toast,' he said. 'Just because you're Spanish doesn't mean you have to make this sound like a renegade Mass.'

She drank bravely, but when she handed the glass back to him less than a third of the cognac was gone. He tossed off the

rest of it and set the glass down hard, letting his tongue touch along his lips. 'Your lipstick——' he began to say, then coughed, leaning over and coughing hard because the cognac had hit the pinpoint spot of rawness inside him.

She sat down beside him quickly and threw one arm across his shoulders to help steady him. 'You,' she said, 'you should make more toasts and drink less.'

'My God,' he said, coughing, fighting down the barbed fire-tipped fishhook caught in his guts, 'shut up.'

'No,' she said. 'I have seen this before, this bottle sickness. You did not have it always. There is a chance it will pass away with you.'

'Oh God. Yes. Sure.'

'Don't be so brave, don't be a hero. I don't give sympathy. This is something a doctor would tell you.'

'I know it. Every damn word of it.'

'Listen to me,' she said. 'Back home, in Spain, after I learned what to do in the hospital, they sent me up to the line, past the Fuencarral cemetery. I speak languages. French best, so they put me in an aid station in a sheep stall, behind the Commune de Paris Battalion. With the milicianos, the infantry. Are you listening to me?'

'Yes.'

'I know what trouble means. I know what war is. I learned when I was fifteen and I remember everything. In the Plaza Tetuan I saw the Junkers and Capronis come down to three hundred feet to machine-gun women standing in line for food by the subway. I know what it is in a hospital when the stretchers pile up with men groaning and dying and the lights burn over the operating tables all day and all night. I knew about fighting years before people like you woke up to find the whole house on fire.' She pulled up her dress suddenly to show him a pink-red scar that twisted across her thigh. 'Shrapnel. Compound fracture. No anæsthetic, no Purple Heart, nothing. Only the new Ortega plaster cast method they were using then, with the terrible terrible stench of dead tissue. Later I used to lie in bed and wonder if the infection would spread into blood poisoning. I used to wonder if I

would ever dance on two legs again. There are many things you learn to think about in a hospital bed.'

'I know,' Rip said. He did. Very well. Eighteen months, staring at the hospital ceiling overhead, learning to withdraw into the only final privacy; the privacy inside your head.

'You're the hero,' Rip said, 'not me.' He meant it. No doubt she had been one of those typical middle-class Spanish girls, over-protected, hothouse grown, strictly controlled. Then her whole world had blown up in her young face. She had fought in a mob with rifles, a revolutionary army learning the tough, dirty discipline of being an army, poor in almost everything but the willingness to fight back, and he respected her for it. She misunderstood his using the word: hero.

'No,' she said angrily, 'I know when I am weak. I don't try to be a hero. Iron bends. A man breaks. Why do you pretend to be iron?' She jumped to her feet angrily. 'All night I have been fighting with people in dream worlds. Now you. I'm sick of seeing you lying there like a man wounded in battle! You are not the first man, the only man to come home and find something which cuts your heart out! You drink. You want it as a drug. Be a man, not a sick boy. Take your pity for yourself and make it like a bandage so you can stand up straight again and walk like a man!'

'Just tell me one thing,' he said slowly, 'do you know how to aim a rifle and fire it?'

She frowned, puzzled. 'Yes. I'm a good shot. Why do you ask me?'

It would have been simpler if she had said no. Now he was tempted to trust her. 'What do you care,' he asked, 'whether I walk straight again or not?'

'I care,' she said. 'I have a selfish reason. I want to stay here with you. There is no place left where I can run. I have no money. This is the last place I can go, and I know you will be kind if you want to be.' Her confession sounded dry mouthed and hurried, but she got it all out.

'In English they have a word for such a man,' he said. 'Sucker.'

She sat down on the bed facing him and clasped her hands in her lap. 'I know what that sounds like,' she said simply. 'If I thought you would believe me I could say more.'

'What would you say, for example?'

She closed her eyes momentarily, then opened them with heavy lids, tired looking, as if she had thought about this for a long time. 'I would say: Stop driving yourself. Let the dead rest in peace. Learn to live again with some joy, with a purpose, with a direction to follow.'

He looked into her eyes. 'Learn to live with you, is that what you mean?'

'I did not say that.'

'But that's what you meant.'

'Yes, partly, maybe. Only partly.'

'And forget Georgette?'

'The goddess part, yes. The little shrine you carry, the little candle you are burning. But remember her as a person with good and bad mixed up together, like you or me.'

'This bad,' he said. 'What do you mean?'

'She could be very good,' Ynez said. 'She saw me when I was in trouble and she asked me to come live here.'

'She was lonely,' Rip said.

'What's the difference? Who has simple reasons for doing anything? She asked me to come. She treated me like a sister for months.'

'But the bad,' Rip said. 'What about that?'

'A few weeks ago she suddenly changed. It was about the time you wrote to say the doctor would let you out of the Army hospital in about four more months.'

'Are you sure?' he asked. 'I don't understand that. She just changed suddenly?'

'Yes. She picked up some small stupid thing I did, I forget what now, and she made something big out of it until we were both very angry. Then she told me I would have to pack up and leave before you came home. But he will not be home until four months from now, I said. I don't care, she said, I want you to leave here before the end of this month. And that night she did not come down to Le Badinage.'

'She used to go to Le Badinage?' That was surprising.

'Once or twice a week. To watch my last number, and then drive me home. She could be very kind, Georgette. She said I reminded her of Paris.'

He took her clasped hands out of her lap, held them covered tightly in his. 'Ynez,' he said, 'tell me the truth——'

'—yes——'

'Was it really suicide?' He could feel her hands begin to tremble in his.

'Yes,' she said, 'I believe it was.'

He took a very deep breath and then let the air escape from his lungs. It was easier to breathe now. 'And if you stayed here,' he said, 'you would be staying partly because of me?'

She let her hands rest in his more quietly. 'More than partly,' she said. 'It would be for many things, but also because of you.'

'It's easy to want you, Ynez,' he said. 'But it will be different to learn to trust you completely. Or to love you all day long, while walking or talking or being elsewhere, the way a woman should truly be loved.'

'I know,' she said, with tears coming into her eyes, 'I know, I know.'

'It will take time,' he said.

'Time to remember. Time to forget,' she said softly, with her voice catching.

He took her into his arms, understanding now she needed healing as much as he, kissing her now without the sharp animal fierceness of the first time, but with a stronger tenderness. She stirred under his hands, feeling silken and round, turning against him firmly in the soft struggle, like a dancer responding. She moved her mouth against his, then kissed his throat, unbuttoning his shirt, and ran her hands up and down his sides with longing, with warm discovery. 'Rip,' she whispered against his lips, 'how cool you feel.' In Spanish she began to say, 'Eat your love like bread, drink it like wine,' but she did not finish because he raised her face and locked his mouth over hers.

BOOK FIVE

A time to kill and a time to heal

GEORGETTE'S jewels—the diamond necklace Rip had given her for her birthday years ago—were missing. It caught him completely by surprise, because he had been letting himself relax like a fool during the past week, trying hard just to let the days walk by, always skirting the edged question of who had fired at him from the darkness outside his house, letting himself slip into a remote-from-the-world feeling with Ynez. Like a fatheaded bigshot on an expensive vacation with his girl friend, he thought bitterly, standing there in front of the open safety deposit box in Banque d'Afrique with the empty jewel case in his hand.

The past week had begun to throw him off guard—everything had been so open and healthy and spontaneous. The week had opened a new world to him, sunshine after the dark years. Only an hour ago he had been letting himself slip into a fool's paradise. . . .

'Enough!' Ynez had cried, just an hour ago at the beach. 'Enough! Enough swimming! Do you want me to drown? This water is freezing!'

That was only an hour back; they had been swimming for the shore, standing up in the rolling white-foaming Atlantic surf and letting it knock them down, then running through the shallow water and racing up the beach for their clothes, panting for breath and laughing. The seaside air had the clear hard actinic polish of African sunlight; the sand was fine grained, dazzling white, and there was an endless blue sky

with white whales of clouds swimming idly through it. The long beach curved past them emptily, mile after mile stretching away like the perspective of a surrealistic landscape; they were alone, the first man and woman on the planet, uncorrupted.

'Feeling better?' she had said over her shoulder as they dried themselves with large towels carrying the monogram, *G.*

'Like the weather,' he had said. 'Like a new dollar bill.'

She had stopped wiping her arms. 'A dollar. How many francs is that?'

'It changes,' he said, 'from day to day. It's complicated.'

'Here,' she said, handing him the towel. 'Wipe my back. That I can understand.' She looked back over her shoulder, tilting her head so that her long dark hair hung all to one side. 'What are you waiting for?' Then she turned slowly. 'You,' she said softly, using the soft French *tu*, 'why do you look at me like that?'

It was a question which needed time to answer, because she stood wet and shining as a water nymph with her slender tawny back tapering delicately to the polished slope of her hips, the firm bones of her face moulding its planes and angles strongly, her eyes fluttering and softening, softening, as passion came and ebbed and came more strongly with her loose unbound hair falling in a dark veil between him and the sky as she bent over him whispering, 'You. You. You.'

They were sure of each other now, unhurried, and she worked against him in mock revolt, playing out the charade of capture and subjection until they were both breathing quickly, running faster, faster, until suddenly she lifted hard and clasped him with taut pagan fervour, half-torment, half-joy.

Later she had said quickly, 'This can't last long, Rip. It's too good.'

'Why not?' He laughed. 'The jealous gods?'

'Yes. They look down and say: that's too good down there. That's too simple. That's too happy.'

'Gipsy talk. In English we say a word, nuts.'

'It can't. This is excitement. You stop breathing. Love is something different.' She moved her hands, gesturing outward. 'It grows like a tree.' She rolled over on her side,

propping her head up on one elbow and looking at him very seriously. 'I know what you think, with your English words. You think: she's European, she has to talk about it and analyse it.'

He ran a fingernail cunningly down her side until her face changed and she shivered a little and laughed. 'That's better,' he said. He felt a large ridiculous ache touch him because she carried this little fragment of happiness cupped in her hands like a child.

Only the night before he had wakened suddenly out of a deep sleep and found her awake too, leaning over him.

'Rip,' she was saying, sounding frightened, 'what's the matter, Rip?' She had her arms around him.

'What?' He sounded stupid with sleep. 'What?'

'You're all right. You're home. You're safe. No machine guns.'

He sat up straight as it swept back over him. Machine-gun tracers arced past him. They were in trucks and their advance had been tearing along so well down the autobahns they had become cocky and less careful, and they had fallen for the oldest Nazi trick of all and driven right through and gotten themselves cut off and in pretty bad trouble with some heavy machine guns. Some Hitler Jugend in the cobblestone streets up ahead had lowered their 88-anti-aircraft guns, firing them horizontally like rifles.

'You were dreaming and shouting,' Ynez said. 'Are you all right now?'

He got up and sat with his bare feet flat on the floor, rubbing his hands through his hair. 'Yes,' he said. He still had a foot in each world, but Germany was going away now and he was coming back here. He lit a cigarette. She put the light on, and he realized there was a storm outside, with the thunder cracking over the house like artillery and the rain splattering metallically against the windows in hard uneven gusts, coming and going. She got up and sat beside him, touching him.

'Are you all right now, Rip?'

'Yes,' he said. Then suddenly he began to talk. The long

years, the endless boredom, his getting a break the day they had gotten involved in a battle for a hill outside Mateur, in Africa, and Rip had been running a platoon and the company commander had given him instructions about the hill and then had said, 'Oh, by the way, sergeant.' The officer pulled some gold bars out of his pocket and said, 'Good luck,' and shook hands, and Rip had carried the bars in his pocket all that day. That night the other guys had told him what they thought of lieutenants, and he had told them, and the canteen full of mud-tasting wine had gone around.

At Kasserine the 21st Panzer Division had broken through the Americans, aiming their thrust at the supplies at Tébessa, and there were some very bad times which had left him different than he had ever been before because he had seen how temporary a man's life really was. It had been bad at Sicily, too, at Niscemi, just beyond the original beachhead at Gela, because the Hermann Goering tank division had broken through, overrunning them, tanks rolling directly over their foxholes while the Americans had only small arms to fight them off at first, and bazookas, and then later, after the landing was finally secure and Troina had fallen after six days of fighting, his outfit had been pulled out of the line.

Sitting beside him, in Africa, listening, Ynez said, 'They should have given all the men medals after something like that.'

'They did, practically.'

'You too?'

'Yes. A Bronze Star.'

'What's that?'

'Well. Well, it's a star. It's bronze. There's a silver one.' Yes, he thought, and there's a gold one, too.

England had been good after Sicily. Retreat was usually at five, except when they were on manœuvres, and everybody got passes, and there were lots of marriages and near-marriages and almost-near-marriages. He got up to London once in a while, and stayed at the Cumberland, when he could get in, and watched the tailored-uniform crowd at Grosvenor House handle the echelons of black-stockinged girls at the tea dances.

'And you, Rip?' Ynez said.

'Well,' he said, 'I had a tailor made uniform too.'

'And the girls?'

'Well.' He grinned a little. 'I try to think I was pretty special. But I was just another joe away from home a long time.'

'What's a joe?'

'Well, sometimes a joe is a dough or a dogface. Sometimes a sad sack.'

'English is such a wonderful language.'

'That's not English. That's American.'

Then Normandy. Easy Red Beach they had called it when he had come ashore. A five-foot shale ledge had pinned them down with casualties dropping steadily all around. Half their landing craft had not been able to reach shore and the men forced themselves to go up that ridge hand over hand, into the German gun barrels, blowing gaps in the wire, and then fighting inland, those who were left upright and moving, to Caumont. Then later, a million years later, there was Aachen, and using two-pound chunks of dynamite to blast from one building into the next through the walls, without ever going outside. Entering a house with grenades, then automatic fire, then rushing the door. There the Germans had captured Rip and one of his platoon sergeants one night when the sergeant had blundered in the jeep down the wrong road, and when Rip had refused to talk about the number of tanks his division had, and the sergeant also, the S.S. major ordered two of his men to march Rip and the boy down the open street under the barrage the Americans were laying down. The two Nazi soldiers had taken shelter in a doorway, making Rip and the sergeant stand at attention out in the middle of the street. The artillery was bursting all around. They stood under a hail of shell fragments, and the sergeant said, 'Goddam them gunners. Too —— accurate.' He had a brand new wristwatch which he tried to take off and give to Rip in case he was hurt or the Nazis stripped him, but one of their guards fired a burst from a machine pistol at him from the shelter of the building and he snapped to attention again. Five minutes later a direct hit had killed both Nazi guards outright

and Rip and the sergeant had hightailed it, and two days later they made it back into American lines. The sergeant had given him the watch at Christmas, just because of the magical luck of the whole thing, and Rip had taken it and given the guy his own in return. They had both been very serious about it.

Sitting beside him, Ynez said, 'I know. I know. You have to believe in something. Even a watch.'

He had smashed that watch in the Hurtgen Forest. Hurtgen had been bad. Not bad. Terrible. Terrible. Worse than the shale ledge at Easy Red Beach. No, there was no point lying about it now by minimizing it. It was agony. The Germans had four lines of defence in the dark dripping-wet cold forest of firs that guarded the approach to the Cologne plain. It took the Americans over twenty-one days before they came back out of the primeval cave-death of Hurtgen into the open spaces before Gosshau, and each day of the twenty-one had been agony. There were mines, S mines, wooden shoe mines, teller mines, box mines. They were particularly afraid of the mines on springs that jumped up and exploded at knee height because those hit a man where he was a man, and although the wound was no worse than any other really bad wound, the effect on your thinking made it especially bad. They advanced with battle packs, dug in, buttoned up, then their artillery support raked the line so that usually their blanket rolls could not be brought up to them because it was suicide for a man to be out of his hole when the German tree bursts were raining fragmentation from the top of every tree, and they went through the nights wet in freezing misery. They advanced through the forest on the average of six hundred yards a day, with the engineers probing the ground with number-eight wire on their hands and knees to find the non-metallic mines. The Nazis had very small mines in the ground; each was about the size of a little cardboard pillbox which exploded under very light foot pressure and took the foot with it.

The advance had been very costly. The men shared their lives like bread, yet each man went through the forest alone, and later no one man could tell another what it had been like in

the fourth dimension beyond time, space, home, love, and life.

Sitting beside him, listening, Ynez' eyes were enormous, depthless. 'I know,' she kept saying, 'I know. I remember. I know how it was.'

Once a German medical major and some stretcher bearers came across toward them waving a white flag and a red cross and Rip had gone out to meet them with two of his own men. The German wanted permission to clear his wounded, and Rip had told him to make it fast, very fast, because he suddenly remembered standing at attention under the artillery barrage and he could see the major and the stretcher bearers swivelling their eyes to spot the American positions.

Rip lost some of his best friends in the forest, and he was hit twice himself, but minor wounds, so he had been able to keep on. Then the platoon sergeant who had exchanged watches with him was hit in the face, and when Rip heard about it a nervous tic started in one eye and twitched for hours. One night the colonel had come up to Rip's company C.P., worn out himself, and wet, unshaven, and freezing. Rip had been exhausted. The frigid air made the breath vapours of his communications men freeze inside their radio mouthpieces, cutting transmission. The automatic rifles' chambers became iced so that they couldn't be loaded properly. The blood plasma froze, and had to be thawed under jeep hoods with the motor running. The medics carried their morphine syrettes under their armpits, close to body heat, so that the drug would flow.

The waxed packaging on K-ration boxes made good small smokeless fires, and Rip was sitting huddled with his hands held over one, trying to dry some socks, when the colonel came up to the command post.

'Jesus, captain,' he said to Rip, 'don't you know you can't talk like that to a superior officer?'

'Yes,' Rip said.

'That *was* you on the phone, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' Rip said. He didn't care.

The colonel crouched over the little fire beside him. 'You think I don't know how it's been?'

'Well,' Rip said, 'that was how I felt and I said it. Seen our casualty roster? I can't order my men into this any more.'

'You're crazy,' the colonel said.

Rip grunted. The word had no meaning.

'Jesus, captain, I don't want to send you back. You know that. I'm willing to forget the phone business. But Jesus, don't get thinking this is a picnic for me. You know what it's like at Corps. We've got to get through here.'

'We've been getting through,' Rip said, 'and we can't do it any more. We're finished.'

The colonel hadn't said a word, just sat rocking on his haunches, crouching over the little fire in his wet worn clothes and thinking. He was white haired, about fifty, in good shape, but his face was gray with lack of sleep. 'Where you from, captain?'

All questions made sense here. 'Africa,' Rip said. 'Born there. Raised there. School in the States mostly. And Switzerland. My mother died when I was a kid.' He had no idea why he added that about his mother. 'Where you from, colonel?'

'Connecticut. A little town called Westport. It's on the New York, New Haven, and Hartford railroad, about fifty minutes outside New York. My boy's going to be old enough for the Army next year.'

'Only boy?'

'Yep. You married, captain?'

'Yes,' Rip said. 'French girl. Back home.'

'Children?'

'Not yet.'

The colonel looked around the dark hollows of the trees; their interlocked branches were matted so closely a man had to crawl through tunnels beneath them. Some explosion sounded on their left flank, rather far away. 'This is a hell of a long way from Africa,' he said. 'Every place we go it rains.' He shook his head and said one word. 'Sunshine.'

Rip put the socks, still wet, inside his shirt and got up, rubbing the backs of his knees and legs. 'Colonel,' he said, 'I'm damn sorry.'

The colonel got up too. 'Hell, captain. Forget it.'

'I am. I mean it. I must have been nuts.'

'That's all right. Everybody is, the whole goddam world or we wouldn't be here now.'

'I haven't shot my mouth off to anybody else.'

'Just to me on the phone?'

'Yes.'

'Well, thanks for trusting me.'

'I trust you,' Rip said. 'I'm okay now.'

As the colonel started to leave, Rip said, 'I hope it's all over before your boy's old enough.'

'So do I,' the colonel said. He looked around the dark close gloom of the forest. 'Sure as hell doesn't look it now.'

Soon after, Rip was transferred, not because of the colonel, but by accident or because they needed experienced men elsewhere. Crossing the Roer came next, and faster, because they all felt they were winning the war quickly and the most Rip remembered before he was hit soon after that was an incident in Düren where one of his own mortars had caught an old woman who had come unconcernedly up out of her cellar, and she went down on her knees in an attitude of death like picking flowers, and the picture of it had stayed with him for no reason.

All the names he had thought he had forgotten came back as he talked to Ynez without stopping. Gummersbach, Bad Wildungen, Naumburg. And then the inevitable odds had finally gone against him, after all the miraculous years of escape from really serious injury. It had been his own fault. Stupidity. Fatigue. Over-confidence. All of them. The machine-gun burst had caught him in the middle. Multiple abdominal wounds, the casualty tag said.

The windows of the bedroom were grey-white with the cool morning light as the night began to end.

'Do you want a drink?' Ynez had asked him.

'No,' he had said. 'I'm all right. I'm finished. Talking, I mean.' He felt light headed and tired.

'Come over here,' she said. 'Stop walking up and down.'

He came over and sat down. She put her hands around him and said in English, 'Darling.'

He kissed her and said, 'Darling. Not darrrling.'

'Darling.'

'What an accent!' He laughed and kissed her again. He rested his head against her, feeling the even rise and fall of her breathing and hearing the soft regular beat of her heart. 'I need you,' he said into her throat.

'I need *you*,' she said. 'Sometime you will stop worrying about me, and we will be fine.'

'I don't worry about you.'

'You do.' She put her hands over his ears and rocked his head back so she could look into his eyes. 'You do. But that will go away when you settle in your mind what you believe in.'

'I believe in you,' he said.

'But not completely. Only down here, not up here.'

'Not completely. But almost.' He didn't know why he shouldn't trust her completely, without reserve, but he didn't. 'I've been pretty hard to get along with, haven't I?'

'Sometimes. The silent times are the worst.'

'I suppose it's like a wound. It should heal with time.'

'It should.'

'When it does,' he said, 'maybe we can talk about getting married.'

'Rip. You're serious? Truly?'

'Truly.'

'Oh Rip.'

'It's nothing to cry about.'

'I'm not. Sometimes I'm a terrible baby, that's all.'

'You're a beautiful baby sometimes.'

'Oh Rip. Do that again. Oh Rip . . .' Then, 'You're serious?'

'I'm not a boy, Ynez. I'd like a home, some place steady.'

'If I ever have my own home I'll die. I'll die from happiness.'

'You're feverish now. You're running a nice warm temperature.'

'Oh Rip. I would have to learn so much. I'm so stupid about so many little things.'

'You can learn. Like everybody else. But lovelier.'

'Rip. Rip.'

He felt exhausted after talking so much about the war,

packing the years down tightly like shirts put away for the last time into a foot locker. He got up and said, 'I'm hungry. Let's go downstairs.'

She got up quickly and they went downstairs barefooted into the kitchen. She opened the back door and took a deep breath and said, 'The rain is all over. It looks like a beautiful day.' She turned quickly, her long hair swinging with her. 'Let's go to the beach again today. You can teach me about swimming.'

Now, standing in front of the open safety deposit box in Banque d'Afrique with the empty jewel case in his hand, he remembered it all. The past week had been like that. During the first day or two, while he was still looking waxen with the stomach pain inside she had to insist that he lie quietly in the sun, reading last month's American newspapers, just letting the sand trickle through his fingers all day in a kind of bottomless hourglass. Ynez found a case of imported Swiss canned milk and she made him drink gallons of it. When he felt better he started teaching her to swim, gradually overcoming her belief, which she shared with all inland people, that the human body sinks like stone in water.

Swimming, she had said, 'You hold me on top of the water like a baby.'

'The water does most of it. The ocean water. The salt in it.'

'The salt?'

'Yes. In fresh water you would sink faster.'

She had laughed. 'The salt! Qué va. How could salt alone——' And then she had laughed again. 'Pues es muy raro. It is very strange.' The more she felt at ease with him, the more she used her own language.

'Truly,' he had said. 'In America there is a lake so salty you can almost sit upright in it, like a chair. Without sinking.'

'The salt——' she began to say, then her eyes curled up with laughter and she choked a little. 'What a story!'

'Truly,' he had said. 'They call it the Great Salt Lake.'

'What a liar!' she had cried. 'Ay, mi madre! What wonderful liars the Americans make!' And he had begun to laugh with her.

So the past week had gone, a pleasant relaxing blur of sunlight and open air and healing.

Today Rip had driven his car to the beach because Suleiman had finally managed to get it running with some decent gasoline again, and they had dried quickly in as much of its shade as they could manage. He had slipped into a striped Basque shirt—Georgette bought this for me, he had thought swiftly, then pushed it out of his mind—and unpressed linen trousers and rope-soled espadrilles. When Ynez had pulled on the open-shouldered blouse and wide skirt, she glanced up under her eyebrows to see if he had noticed the faint outline of thread holes on the skirt pocket where she had taken off Georgette's monogram with nail scissors. He had. He was looking straight at it.

He had said nothing until he slid behind the wheel of the Alfa-Romeo coupe. 'Jump in,' he had said. 'Three stops today. Office, Banque d'Afrique, and dressmaker.' Then he added quietly: 'New clothes for you.'

'Don't talk like that,' she had said as the car wheels spun in the sand and then caught and started them toward the grass road. 'You make me feel like a kept woman. Clothes, riding in a big auto——'

'Don't bother a man on vacation,' he had said. 'Today's my last day. Tomorrow I go back to work again.' He meant it; forget what's past, close the door, pick up where you left off.

She swung toward him in the leather bucket seat and put her hand on his elbow. 'Fine! Wonderful! What's first?'

'Plans. Plans, plans, plans, plans marching up and down again.' He turned his eyes from the road to look at her briefly. 'How would you like a safari? I've been thinking about it for the past four-five years. Not so far inland from here there are diamonds—not the precious kind, but commercial size, for industry. There's some platinum in this country, chrome ore, hematite iron ore.' He waved his hand broadly. 'Thousands of board feet of hardwood inland just waiting for the Reardon Development Company to start the wheels rolling. I'm going to talk to Emile about it.'

'Emile?'

'Yes. After all, he's still my partner.'

'Sometimes he reminds me of one of those delicate Siamese princes. The kind who were brought up as girls.'

'No, no. Not Emile. He's always been very busy with women. Very successful.'

'Perhaps for the same reason. The Don Juans are most afraid of being Juanita.'

He laughed and said in English, 'The Importance of Being Juanita.'

'What's that?' Then she repeated in English, 'What is that meaning?'

He laughed again. 'It's like the title of a play by Oscar Wilde. Your father would know it. I'll explain sometime. Anyway, my vacation is over this week and I'm going back to work. I want to go inland pretty soon and look things over.'

'I can hardly believe it's the same man,' she had said. 'In a week. From night to day.'

'I'm really talking through my hat,' he had said. 'It's too big for my export-import business. It would take millions to start a development company that size, but I've got a good-size shoe-string to start with.'

'I thought you were rich, Rip.'

He laughed, 'Broke,' he said, 'practically penniless, outside the trickle of business Emile Delaigre has kept up. But I can borrow, and I have a diamond necklace in Banque d'Afrique that ought to be worth close to fifty-sixty thousand dollars in today's market.'

He swung the car into Port Afrique, and was promptly blocked for ten minutes by a native funeral in an ancient Chevrolet truck with a double row of mourners walking slowly behind it. Then he had to wind the car between high swaying ox carts and the barefooted pedestrians strolling in the gutter. Rip threaded in low gear past the bazaar where the noise of the crowd bargaining at the stalls hung in a hot muffled blanket of sound and squadrons of flies attacked the quarters of beef impaled on steel hooks in the sun. Here and there an orthodox Mohammedan stood silently praying, fingertips, flicking from forehead to lips to heart, bowing to

touch his head to the sidewalk, completely ignoring the murmurous groups of people around him and genuflecting with passionate simplicity toward Mecca. Overhead an occasional vulture sailed with rigid wings down an invisible shaft of air, wheeling gently over the steaming fecund red-tile rooftops and gliding down to rest on a high ridgepole, wings folding like a black umbrella collapsing. Animals and insects and birds and men melted under the impartial crucible of sun blaze and flowed together in a blind sluggish African life swarm without beginning or end.

Rip had turned his coupe into L'Avenue Wagram and parked in the shade of a baobab tree in front of his office. 'I'll be just a minute,' he had said, 'then another minute at Banque d'Afrique. Then the dressmaker, you kept woman, you.'

She was binding up her hair before the car's rear-view mirror and holding a comb between her teeth, but she managed to nod and pronounce, 'Yes.' She saw the look in his eyes and her own crinkled upward at the corners.

Enormous faded letters, hard to read now, were painted across the front of Rip's office building in a wartime slogan: One France, One People, One Victory. The De Gaulle-Giraud appeal for unity. As he walked down the cool shadowed corridor to his office the words stayed in Rip's mind and he thought of Georgette. The war must have been so close to her, yet so far away.

Before the war, a voice in his mind said, you wouldn't have been capable of this.

What kind of a stuffed-shirt word is that? Capable. Capable of what?

You know damn well what. Is that girl waiting for you outside or isn't she?

But you learn in a war that the living must live. You learned the dirty, guilty, grateful taste of that idea over and over again, until now you can swallow it without thinking. You remember the dead, you will live with the living a slightly better man because of them, and you will remember Georgette. You will remember her. You remember her every day. Must you fall on that memory like a defeated Roman on his sword?

You want that girl out there, don't you?

Why not? She's warm, she's alive, she has no coyness and much understanding. She's a fine girl.

But you don't trust her. Not completely.

I could. I could. Without half trying.

But you don't. Not completely.

No. Not completely. That takes time.

The conversation inside him stopped when he saw the frosted glass office door: REARDON ET CIE. IMPORTATION-EXPORTATION. He read it twice, then turned the unlocked doorknob to his office and went in to find Emile there.

Emile looked up from a pile of papers on his desk, startled. 'Well, Rip,' he said, getting up, 'this is quite a surprise.' His eyes were moving over Rip's face while he smiled uncertainly. He picked a bound volume off the desk in his long slender hand. 'Bentley's cable codes, remember? Just got a cable from Harry Otis at Service-Exporters in New York. Firm offers for our mahogany. But this mixup of foreign exchange and dollar balances——' he stopped, then added, 'or don't you care any more?' He looked as if he realized he was talking too much.

'Sure I care, Emile,' Rip said. 'Think there's room for me to come back into the firm?'

Emile looked at him. 'I don't believe it. I don't believe it. And I had the impression you wanted to leave Port Afrique as soon as possible.'

Rip smiled. 'Had a taste of being boss during the war, Emile? Ran the place alone, and it hurts now to see me come back in the saddle.' That was putting it a bit too hard, but straight enough.

'Don't talk nonsense, Rip.' The disappointment was still in Emile's voice.

'As a matter of fact,' Rip said, 'I've got a couple of big ideas for us, Emile.'

'*Us?*'

'Sure, us.' He leaned across the desk. 'Look,' he said, 'I gave you a fifty per cent. interest in this company, and I'm going to stick by that. Understand? Take that look off your

face. Stop worrying. That about collaborating with Brury et Fils—well, I know how complicated that kind of business can get when you lived so far from the real war. Just don't act like a fool again.'

Emile ran one of his hands back through his hair. They were shaking slightly. 'Rip,' he said, 'I can't believe it. A week ago I thought——' and he stopped.

'Forget it.' A week ago. How could he explain to Emile that time ran at different speeds for different people, and that he had lived through speedup times like standing at attention in an open street under shellfire when an hour dragged by like years? One week, and his life had changed like the silent ponderous no-going-back change of the seasons. 'I'm thinking of taking a light safari inland,' he said. 'We might take an option on some of that country if I can locate diamonds in commercial quantity.'

Emile's hands were still trembling a little. He put them on the desk, but that didn't help, so he picked up a pencil. 'A safari! This is like the old days, with you popping in and out.'

'It brought in the money, didn't it? You run the books, I'll find the stuff.'

Emile was smiling thinly, rubbing his hands flatly and rolling a pencil between his fingers. 'This sounds like the old days, Rip.'

'Now you're talking.'

'But a safari——'

'I can make it quick. Fly inland. Maybe I'll hire Pedro Aranda and his plane. Maybe get a little hunting in on the side.'

'Diane's been talking about a hunt this week, too. Perhaps you'd like to join——'

'Well,' Rip said, 'we'll see.' He didn't want to go hunting with the Delaigres, Diane and Emile would inevitably quarrel quietly, nerve-rackingly, and Diane would become desperately pleasant and begin to stay close to her bottle of sherry. No. No fun there. But he was glad Emile was just about beginning to relax with him. Maybe we can all begin to relax a little now. Forget the past. We all live in glass houses.

He went to the door, then turned back. 'Diane is worried about Ynez, isn't she?' he asked.

Emile stood up quickly. 'Oh no, no. No, she's not. It's only that the Spanish girl reminds her——' he spread his hands slightly. 'You know how a woman can be, Rip. They've never become civilized, like men. An eye for an eye. They still believe it.'

Rip shrugged and went out, and as he went down the hallway he heard Emile's muffled voice begin to speak into the telephone. Running quick to mommy with the story, Rip thought as he left the building. The eye for an eye talk was phony he-man stuff. Diane was twice the man Emile was, if you wanted to put it that way, and at this particular moment that was how he wanted to put it.

Ynez was sitting back in the car seat, smoking quietly, with her hair bound up now, looking cool and lovely and quite different from the passionate woman on the beach of an hour ago. She smiled at him as he got into the driver's seat. 'Do you still have a business to come back to?'

'Yes,' he said, and reached over to grasp the smooth white column of her neck, softly stroking the clean curly little tendrils of hair at the nape, reminding himself of her warm taut skin again. 'You're a pretty girl,' he said. 'A mighty pretty girl to be running around with an old man like me with the grey showing in his hair.'

'I like you that way,' she said, putting her hand up behind his head, curving her fingers over his. 'It makes you look wise. And strong.'

'Well,' he said, starting the car, 'now to Banque d'Afrique, then the dressmaker.' He smiled at her, and said in English, 'Baby needs a new pair of shoes.'

Not so wise and not so strong, he thought, standing next to the open safety deposit box in Banque d'Afrique with the empty velvet jewel case in his hand. Not so very wise, you damned fool. Recapturing your lost boyhood there on the beach an hour ago, weren't you? Just a happy-go-lucky boy having fun—in a hurry to forget the past and plan himself a

big successful future. Christmas tree stuff. Christ, what a naïve incredible fool.

He gripped the jewel case so tightly that it snapped shut. He opened it again. It was empty all right, all right. Empty as hell. He remembered the morning of Georgette's birthday when she had to help him clasp the glittering square-cut stones around her neck. A century ago . . .

He slammed the safety deposit box back into its shelf with sudden fury and walked out of the vault cage, ramming the empty velvet jewel case into his pocket. Between his normal prewar credit and that diamond necklace he might have raised over two hundred thousand dollars. Now the necklace was gone. The dark whirling fury he had felt when he had first come home began to knot in him again. He wanted to break something, smash something. The questions he had deliberately kept out of his mind all week came roaring back at him.

Ynez was watching him as he came striding out of the Banque d'Afrique building; she was still smiling, but as he came closer she began to frown a little. He didn't get into the coupe, but leaned on his elbows over the edge of the car hunching his shoulders.

'What's the matter, Rip?' she said quickly. 'What happened in the bank?'

'Nothing,' he said between his teeth.

She turned in the seat and put her hands on his arm. 'Rip, what happened?' She sounded a little frightened.

'Can't you guess? Aren't you good at guessing?'

She gripped his arm. 'Rip, will you please tell me what has hit you all of a sudden?'

He pulled his arm free of her hands. 'Did you ever see Georgette's famous birthday present?'

'What present?'

'The famous one. The diamonds.'

'That necklace?'

'Yes yes yes, that necklace.' He was surprised. She wasn't beating around the bush.

'Yes, I saw it at her last birthday party. She took it out of the bank to——' Then she stopped and began to put her hand up

to her mouth. 'No,' she whispered, 'no, Rip. It isn't *gone*?'

He took the velvet jewel case out of his pocket and snapped it open in front of her. She let her breath out in a long sigh and then looked up at him. 'Georgette brought the necklace back to the bank after the party. How can it be?'

'That's what I'm asking you.'

She stared at him, searching his face, beginning to get a look of fear in her eyes. 'Rip,' she began, 'no. No, Rip, no.'

'Look at it,' he said, his throat tightening with anger, holding up the case. 'Empty, isn't it? And you were living in the house with her all the time, weren't you?'

'Rip,' she said breathlessly, 'please Rip, don't turn on me again——'

'Turn on you! How the hell can I believe a single word you say! Maybe it was you who fired at me last week!'

'*Fired* at you!'

'Yes. The night I killed Saluki.'

'And I was afraid to ask you why you shot her. . . . I thought you felt violent because she was Georgette's dog and whining all the time. . . .'

He grasped her wrist tightly. 'My God, how do I know you didn't shoot Georgette?' The fact the jewels were gone was nothing compared to what it might mean in explaining Georgette's death.

She was crying soundlessly now, with the tears running down her face, her shoulders shaking. 'I can't stand this any more,' she said, 'I don't know what to do. This suspicion of yours, it's endless. Up and down. I was beginning to hope we could learn to live the way we did this week. . . .' She fumbled blindly in her purse for her handkerchief and began wiping her eyes. 'I'm such a fool,' she said. 'I'm always in a hurry to believe something good will happen.' She got out of the car.

'Where are you going?' he said roughly.

'What's the difference?'

'Tell me who was at the party when she wore the necklace.'

She looked stonily into his eyes. 'If you have so many questions, why don't you go see your friend Colonel Moussac?' Then she turned and walked away from him

quickly, leaving him feeling numb and furious and strangely empty as he watched her go.

Across the street Hector Apollonaire straightened up in the store entrance where he had been leaning, smoking slowly. He pulled the stub end of his cigarette off the toothpick on which he had been holding it to avoid burning his fingers, and carefully shredded the remaining bits of tobacco into a little tin box. Then, as Ynez disappeared around the corner, he went inside to use the store proprietor's telephone.

'What do you want me to do,' Colonel Moussac said, 'bring her in here for some American-style third degree?'

'No, Christ no,' Rip said. 'Nothing like that.'

'It's the logical extension of your suspicions.'

'My God, Jacques, can't you ever stop talking about logic and do something?'

Moussac smiled and drummed his fingers on his desk top. 'You're a bigger fool than I thought. I suggest certain actions, and you say no. I have always been ready for strong measures, but only if I understood the moral implications, the psychological effect. Otherwise strength becomes mere muscles, like an army which occupies a country without understanding the language, and its own power corrupts it. Don't make a face, Rip. What substitute do you have for my contemptible logic?'

'I came here to ask *you*. Don't needle me, Jacques.'

Moussac rubbed his moustache thoughtfully. Hector Apollonaire stood over near the window with his back to them. 'Would you like me to report the possible murder of Georgette to the governor-general at the capitol?' Moussac said. 'Or announce the theft of a very expensive diamond necklace? Do you want a half-dozen police officers with constipated minds poking around here? Frightening everybody into silence? Or would you rather have me give everything a normal appearance until something revealing happens?'

Rip slapped the desk. 'But nothing is happening!'

'No. Nothing. The jewels are gone, but that is nothing. Somebody fires at you from the darkness. Nothing.' Moussac shook his head. 'It is you who blunders, not me.'

Rip punched his fist softly into his open palm. 'Why would Ynez withhold information,' he said, almost to himself, 'unless she were guilty?'

Moussac shrugged. 'Why didn't you tell me last week someone had fired at you?'

'I didn't trust you.'

'Have you ever made her feel she could trust you? Really trust you?'

'No, damn it, I suppose not.'

Moussac spread his hands. 'And do you trust *me* now?' He and Rip stared at each other for a long moment. Hector Apollonaire stopped looking idly out the office window and turned around to watch them.

'No, Jacques, I don't,' Rip said slowly. 'Now that you ask me.' He didn't trust anyone now.

Moussac put one hand flat on his desk and levered himself up out of his chair. 'You used to be a good man, Rip, but now you weary me. You used to have a sense of proportion, some balance, but now you push, you shout, you blunder. You think strength is better than wisdom.'

Rip got up. 'Wait a minute, Jacques——'

'No,' Moussac said. 'I have had enough. I am the authority here, not you. I want you to go home and stay away from here and do absolutely nothing without asking me first.'

'Fat chance,' Rip said. The familiar angry knot in the throat flattened his voice.

'Then get out. I'm finished.'

Rip looked at him. 'So am I.' He walked out of the office.

Hector Apollonaire made himself a cigarette with one hand, lighted it, then spoke through the smoke. 'Our move now, or his?'

Moussac looked out of the window at Rip's back walking away through the stone archway, out toward the Place de la Prefecture. 'His,' he said. He crossed the room slowly and stood over his Moroccan chessmen. He lifted the queen, then put it down again in the same square thoughtfully.

'Checkmate?'

'Not yet.' Moussac turned back into the room. 'But soon.'

Le Badinage seemed to be more crowded than usual when Rip came in that night, but nothing had changed. The blind beggar was gone from the door, though. Perhaps his blindness had suddenly been cured and he now spotted the police for Nino on the street outside. Everyone was the same; the slightly tight wavy-haired French sailors in their striped jerseys with the pompom hats pushed back on their heads, six of them taking turns dancing over and over again with a shopworn blonde; the Mauretanian merchants in their loose blue tunics with grave biblical mahogany faces, sipping thick Turkish coffee from small cups slowly and tasting the formal pleasure of playing the ancient game of bargaining by ancient rules; Arabs in town to sell everything from goatskins to eggs, drinking lebqi; the French small businessmen leaning toward one another excitedly over the little marbletop tables and gesturing about politics as they drank their Kebir vin blanc. Some uniformed Frenchmen sat in one corner, with their dusky silk-skinned concubines sitting beside them passive and alert and heavy eyed with desire, drinking their quinquina Dubonnets with considerable respectability. The air was hot as a steam bath. The outer half of the long figure-eight room was solid with smoke and talk, but Rip could see through the spaces between the leather thonged curtain which hung across the middle of the room that the nightly show had begun in the other half of the cabaret.

As he wove between the tables toward the back half of the figure-eight, he looked around for Grila and Nino. Neither of them was within sight.

A blonde girl stood up as he tried to edge by her table, and for a moment they stood wedged in the narrow space, face to face.

'Busy, m'sieu?' she said. Her hips rocked gently.

'Yes.'

'You have a nice face.'

'Thank you.'

'What's the hurry? Life is short.'

'I'm looking for a friend.'

'And who is not?' She dropped her voice. 'I need passage to Casablanca.'

'And who does not?'

She smiled and moved back from him so that he could squeeze by. 'Tell your friend I said you have a nice face,' she said, 'but you have no heart.' She sat down again.

He bumped into one of Moussac's flics cadging a free drink at the bar.

'Bon soir, M'sieu Reardon,' the detective said. 'A drink?'

'No, no thanks. Have you seen Nino downstairs here tonight?'

'No.' The flic winked. 'He is sometimes most busy upstairs.'

Rip got to the curtain of leather thongs at last and parted them with both hands, then stood still. Most of the lights had gone out in this half of the cabaret, and the semicircle of patrons seated on the low Moroccan leather cushions were quietly watching the lighted space in front of the room. Ynez was standing there, very slim and straight and dark looking in her Andalusian costume under the spotlight, and she was singing a blue song he could not catch at first, singing it with a little three piece orchestra. Then he recognized it: *Lili Marlene* . . .

'Monsieur . . .?'

Rip let the waiter lead him to a cushion near the corner. 'Bring me a fine à l'eau,' he ordered quickly, to get rid of the hovering man.

'*We will create a world for two*,' Ynez sang, standing and turning slowly, the music muted,

> *'I'll wait for you the whole night through,*
> *Then we'll say goodbye and part,*
> *I'll always keep you in my heart . . .'*

Rip had always considered the pathos of the song as beer-hall sentiment, Teutonic gemütlichkeit dissolving in beery tears while Lili waved goodbye slowly under a dim street lamp, but now as Ynez sang it untheatrically in her clear husky contralto he sensed something he never had before. She was singing the tune sincerely because it said something

to her; in her voice Rip remembered the pinched unsmiling faces of hundreds of young Europeans who knew only the rootless coming and going in constant fear and cold and hunger, the quickly grasped street-corner love that said this is truly love because you do not have to pay where others have paid before you and will again afterward.

'My love for you renews my might
I'm warm again, my pack is light . . .'

There was a catch in her voice as she ended, and after a split second of silence the audience began to applaud her wildly. It was café singing in the broken-heart tradition they understood, and the undertone of tears in her voice captured them. The violinist tapped his foot and the little orchestra began again, and Ynez repeated the last chorus. Rip watched her so intently that he did not notice the waiter put his drink down before him. When Ynez finished a second time she bowed her head simply to the applause while the short French violinist behind her rapped his bow enthusiastically on his violin; after a moment she raised her head and walked slowly across the cleared space and up the winding stone steps to the second floor. The audience clapped until she was out of sight.

In just a moment, Rip thought swiftly, the house lights will come on. He got up and moved quickly. He had just remembered that those steps led upstairs to a long corridor which ended at the rickety elevator with the reversed *Up* and *Down* buttons; next to it was Nino's apartment with the clock collection ticking eerily all over the room.

At the base of the stone steps a waiter moved forward to intercept him, but Rip grasped his wrist tightly and twisted him to one side. He dug some money out of his pocket and stuck it into the man's hand, and, before the waiter could decide what to do, Rip had run halfway up the steps. The lights went on in the room, so he took the last few steps to the archway at the top two at a time.

The upstairs corridor was lighted feebly by small spaced bulbs, and as Rip walked down it toward Nino's apartment one of the doors opened and a party spilled out into the hall-

way. Two enormous bearded French Foreign Legionnaires were surrounded by a half-dozen girls on whom one of the men was pouring champagne and laughing uproariously. The second Legionnaire was carrying a bottle too, and as Rip came closer to them he twisted the cork and yanked it off the bottle with a mighty report like a gun going off. The warm shaken champagne fountained to the ceiling and rained down on them all. The girls screamed.

'Have a drink, monsieur!' the Legionnaire shouted at Rip. He had a fine enthusiastic edge on, and loved everybody.

'Thank you, no, I'm in a hurry.' One of the girls was tugging at his sleeve, squealing with laughter and trying to pull him into the room.

'Celebrate!' the second Legionnaire shouted. 'Back in civilization! Celebrate!'

Rip unwound the girl's arm and took the bottle the Legionnaire held out and took a long swig and handed it back. He patted the big guy on the back, edging past him. 'Happy landings,' he said. 'Welcome back to civilization. Happy landings.'

Finally he was past them and going down the hall again. He turned the corner by the elevator, toward Nino's door, and there was Grila.

The big Syrian bouncer was leaning against the door jamb and picking his mouthful of shining gold teeth with considerable precision. He grinned like a jeweller's display when he saw Rip. 'M'sieu Reardon,' he said. 'By Jove, long time no see.'

'Did the Spanish dancer just go in there?' Rip asked, pointing at the door behind Grila.

Grila found something juicy with his toothpick and spat it out. Then he shrugged slowly.

'No tongue, is that it?' Rip said. 'Nino told you to stand here, and outside of that you don't know a thing.'

Grila grinned widely again.

'I'm looking for the señorita, Grila,' Rip said slowly. 'I'm going in there to find her, understand?'

'M'sieu Reardon. You friend. Don' be mad.'

'I'm not mad, Grila. I just want you to step aside. I'll pay you.' He put his hand into his pocket.

'No pay. An officer from the Legion has been here today to ask questions about me.' He opened the big ham of his palm and closed it into a tight fist. 'Nino got me like that, if he talks.'

'You're on the spot, Grila. But I'm going in there.' He took his hand out of his pocket.

Grila hooked his thumbs over his belt. His eyes swivelled left, then right. 'We frien', no?'

'Yes,' Rip said, then added, 'but I sure as all hell am going to——'

'You got stay out.'

Rip's fist began swinging a little. 'I haven't forgotten that punch you threw in my face last week, Grila.'

'What could I do, M'sieu Reardon? I run away from Legion. He blackmails me.' Grila grinned placatingly. 'You don' wan' fight, m'sieu.' He pointed to his shining gold teeth. 'New. Solid gold. You can break a toot'. Cost lot money.'

'Take them out,' Rip said fast. 'Take them out of your mouth. Quick. If Nino asks questions, you were clipped from behind. Quick!'

Grila shrugged again and put the toothpick behind his ear and carefully took the precious gold denture out of his mouth. 'Eas',' he said, 'ver' eas'.'

Rip hit him very neatly, rolling into the blow with his shoulders well behind it because he had been able to get set for it just right. Grila's head snapped back against the wall and he slid to the floor with glazed eyes, a felled ox. Rip pulled the gold teeth from Grila's big limp hand and slid them gently back into his gaping mouth.

He put his shoulder against the door to Nino's apartment suite and eased the door handle around slowly. Behind him he could hear the wild party down the hallway, with the Legionnaires' laughter booming out over the girls' thin shrieks. The door swung open easily, and he could see that the room inside was dark. He slipped in and shut the door behind him, feeling his muscles go taut as a strange rasping sound began all around him. Suddenly he remembered: the clocks.

Nino's tickers, with their healthy spring-wound mechanical hearts. The far bedroom which opened off the living room was dark; that was the one where he had seen Grila massaging Nino's back last week. The second bedroom next door to it was closed, but a thin crack of light showed around its door. After a moment, when he could separate the sounds made by the clocks, he could hear voices behind the door. He walked toward it slowly, putting his feet down very carefully. Now he could hear the voices through the door more clearly.

'Blimey, you're more changeable than weather! You think I'll take you back this way every bloody time you come runnin' 'ere for 'elp?'

'Stop shouting, Nino. You give me a headache. You keep offering me things. How do I know you're not lying?'

'Who's lyin'! When I say——'

'Last week you talked about diamonds.'

'Sure I did. Got 'em, too, I 'ave.'

Standing outside the door Rip heard a drawer within the room being opened, then Nino's voice with an edge of boastfulness. ' 'Ere, look at these before you talk about lyin'. Pretty, ain't they?'

'Nino!'

Rip kicked the door open with a bang. Nino whirled around with one hand jerking up under the shoulder of his coat. In his other hand he was holding a diamond necklace. Ynez stood staring at Rip, frozen. Her valise was spread open on the floor beside her. Rip walked into the room slowly, feeling the soft hammers of excitement drumming inside him.

He held out his hand. 'I'll take that necklace back now, Nino.' He ignored Ynez.

Nino's crouching frown deepened as his eyes searched over Rip. Then he straightened, losing his frown, and pulled the automatic out of his shoulder holster. 'Grila!' he shouted suddenly. 'Grila!' The breath was whistling in his nostrils. Only the faraway idiotic laughter of the Legionnaires' party came back through the wall. Rip began walking toward Nino with a thick heavy feeling spreading through his chest, keeping his eyes on Nino.

'Rip,' Ynez said tightly. 'Don't. He's crazy enough to fire.'

Nino's chest was heaving. He waved the heavy automatic with a clumsy threatening gesture. 'Stay where you are, Reardon. I warn you, I warn you.'

Rip stopped. The short-barrelled gun was no doubt very inaccurate, but on the other hand, at this short range. . . . Without thinking, he was wiping his palms over and over again against his trouser legs.

Nino forced a short sound like a laugh, choking a little for air. 'The warrior. The fighter. Irresistible to the fair sex. Goin' about strikin' people, eh?' He tried his theatrical little ironic laugh again, but it came out half-cough. 'So bloody stubborn. Won't sell out or get out. Stubborn about your wife. Stubborn about Ynez.'

'Nino,' Ynez snapped, 'put that gun away.'

'Shut up.'

Rip tried taking another step forward, but Nino swung back toward him. 'They'll hear you downstairs if you fire,' Rip said, hardly recognizing his own voice. 'You'll hang.'

Nino smiled crookedly. 'With these walls? Another bottle o' champagne poppin' off, that's all.' His smile widened to a grin. 'Lord, Lord, I'm enjoyin' myself for the first time in years. The bloody worm turneth, eh? The meek inherit the earth.' He raised the diamond necklace with his free hand. 'Got a signed receipt for the purchase o' these, I 'ave, signed by Madame Georgette Reardon. Anyone who tried to lift 'em is robbin' me, and I've a right to shoot 'em.'

Ynez took a step toward him. 'Nino——' she began pleadingly.

Nino turned slightly toward her with the necklace. 'Didn't believe me. Didn't believe your ol' friend Nino had something Reardon didn't 'ave, did you?' He held the necklace up, letting it sway so that its facets gleamed and sparkled. 'And all yours, just for the askin'.'

'You mean that, Nino?' She sounded breathless and taut.

'Cross my bleedin' 'eart, I do.'

She raised her hand for the necklace admiringly, then everything happened at once. She grabbed at the automatic. Rip

lunged forward. Nino backed off from them swiftly, furiously, and leaned against the wall strangely bent, with the necklace dangling against his shirt front as he pressed his hand over his heart and levelled the gun at them both. He was gasping, opened mouthed, drinking air in gulps. The weapon drooped in his hand, and as he fought for strength to raise it, a gun went off in the darkness of the living room behind them.

Nino clawed at his heart. Rip stepped forward and snatched the gun from his hand. Nino staggered forward, pulling at the knife which hung from his watch chain. Rip fired at him point-blank.

Nino's momentum carried him forward to the middle of the room; his stagger became a crumpled fall across the edge of the bed, then he slid to the floor in a dead drop.

Moussac walked into the room, slipping his revolver back into his pocket. He looked very grave, and touched Nino's body gently with his toe. He bent to pick up the necklace and cocked his head sideways at Rip, looking up under his peaked eyebrows. 'Operation Stupid, eh Rip? At least we can both agree that this is not suicide.'

Rip looked down at the gun in his hand, then back to Moussac. 'You fired first, Jacques.'

Moussac turned back toward the door and pointed up at the ceiling. In it there was a large chipped plaster hole with fine little radiating cracks. 'That's where mine went. I never fire at human beings. I can't stand killing any more.'

'I can,' Rip said. 'I could kill this little bastard all over again.'

Grila lumbered into the room, blinking his eyes. When he saw Nino on the floor he stopped short. He looked around at the other three. 'Who killed him?'

Rip raised the automatic in his hand silently. Grila stared at it. 'His own gun?'

Rip nodded.

Grila began to chuckle. It began down deep in his chest and rumbled and heaved, until his whole body was shaking mirthlessly. He slapped his leg and laughed without stopping, saying over and over again, half-choking, 'His own gun, his own gun . . .'

Moussac slapped him lightly across the face, but Grila only put a hand over his big mouth like an idiot boy giant and went on laughing.

Rip watched him narrowly. He eyed the weapon in his hand, then stepped to the mirror and fired into the glass at his own image.

The gun went off, but nothing happened. The mirror remained untouched. Blank cartridge. Grila was laughing out loud now, uncontrollably. 'Nino little man,' he choked. 'Afraid real bullet.' The enormous joke of it was doubling him up.

Rip picked up the bottle of drinking water on the dressing table and began pouring it in a stream over Nino's face. As Nino began to splutter Rip reached down angrily and grasped his shirt front and lifted him up off the floor and threw him backward half across the bed. 'Talk,' he said between his teeth. 'Stop faking. Where did you get the necklace?'

'My medicine——' Nino managed to gasp. 'Can't . . . breathe . . . hurts . . .'

'I know where he keeps his hypodermic needle——' Ynez began.

But Rip had grabbed Nino's collar and was shaking him until his eyes bulged. 'Talk, damn you, talk.'

Moussac pulled Rip's arm free. 'Do you want to kill him? We'll never know what he has to say.'

Rip swung toward him fiercely. 'All stop and no go in your book! How much have you gotten done till now?'

One of Moussac's detectives came hurrying into the room. He was the same man Rip had seen cadging a drink at the bar a half-hour before. 'Mon colonel,' he said fast, 'Apollonaire just telephoned. There is much activity at the Delaigres.'

'That's all he said?'

'He couldn't see enough.'

There was a small crash in the adjoining bathroom and then the tinkling box tune of 'La Marseillaise.' 'Name of a name!' Moussac said. 'What's that?'

Ynez came into the room carrying a hypodermic syringe in her hand, with a small rubber-capped vial of colourless fluid and a bottle of alcohol. When she saw the look on their faces

she nodded over her shoulder toward the bathroom. 'That? He had a musical Swiss clock in the medicine cabinet. It fell out.'

'You know how to inject that medicine?' Moussac asked her crisply.

'Yes.'

Moussac pointed at Grila. 'You. Stand outside the door and keep everybody out. I'll send a gendarme up here to guard Nino.' He turned to the detective. 'Get the car started.' The detective left quickly. Moussac looked at Rip. 'Do you want to drive out to the Delaigres with me?'

'No,' Rip said savagely. 'Do you want to go out with *me*?' He started out the door with Moussac directly behind him.

When they all were gone Ynez looked down at Nino curled in agony on the bed, breathing shallowly, rapidly. He stared back up into her eyes mutely. Inside the bed table beside them, a hidden telephone began to ring shrilly. Without taking her eyes off Nino, Ynez opened the cabinet and lifted out the instrument; it was an old-fashioned French handset, with an additional earphone hanging on it. Ynez raised the extra earphone to her head and gave Nino the handset. 'Answer it,' she said. She lifted the phone off the cradle and put it into his stiff hand so that he could speak directly into the mouthpiece.

'Nino?' a man's voice said from the other end of the wire.

Nino gasped slightly, and managed to whisper, 'Emile . . .'

Ynez had heard enough. She hung up her earphone, wiped the rubber cap of the vial with alcohol, poked the needle through it, and began to fill the hypodermic syringe very expertly.

'Nino,' Emile's voice sounded tinnily in the room from the receiver. 'What's been happening? One of Moussac's flics is hanging around here, and Rip isn't at home. Listening? Nino. Nino! Can you hear me? What's the matter with you?'

'Emile . . .,' Nino whispered again. His eyes were frozen, watching Ynez draw back the plunger of the hypodermic syringe, watching the level of the fluid drop in the vial.

'Nino!' Emile's voice rattled loudly in the phone. 'What's the matter with you? Speak up!'

Ynez finished filling the hypodermic and depressed the glass plunger just enough to squeeze the air bubbles out of

the chamber. Nino began to gasp with fear as she leaned over him and pushed up his sleeve. 'No . . . no . . . no . . . please . . . let me . . . let me live . . . please . . .'

Emile's voice was crackling in the receiver now. 'Nino!' He was shouting. 'Who's there? What's going on! Tell me what's happened!'

'Please . . . please. . . .' Nino's eyes were rolling with fright. With her free hand Ynez lifted the vibrating receiver out of his nerveless fingers. Emile's frantic voice was cut off abruptly as she dropped it back on its cradle.

She swabbed Nino's arm with alcohol. 'Was Emile blackmailing Georgette too?' she asked him.

'No,' he said, his adam's apple moving convulsively in his throat, 'no . . .'

She held the point of the syringe needle skilfully against the skin of his arm. 'Better tell the truth,' she said.

'I . . . I . . .'

'Emile was going to get half of the diamonds?'

'No . . . No . . . Ynez . . . please . . .'

'Don't beg, you filthy little pimp. You killed Georgette, didn't you?'

His head jerked tremulously on the bedsheet. 'No . . . no . . .'

'Because you were afraid she would tell Rip you were blackmailing her.'

'No . . . no . . .' A foam of spittle lay along his lips, and his chest rose and fell in spasms.

'You knew Rip would shoot you, so you killed her.' She pricked his skin delicately with the hypodermic needle. 'Speak up.'

'. . . pity . . . 'ave pity . . .'

'Pity? On mad dogs? You wanted to sell me, didn't you? Money, money. Hush money, bribes, blackmail, money all the time. Everything for sale with you, including me.' She pinched up the skin of his arm and slid the needle into the hump of muscle. The sheet under him was drenching wet now as he rocked back and forth.

'. . . no . . .' he managed to whisper. '. . . I . . . didn't . . . kill . . . her . . .'

Ynez held her thumb rigid over the glass plunger of the syringe, ready to depress it. 'Who did?'

His teeth clicked bonily as his jaw quivered. '. . . you . . . did . . .'

She bent her thumb against the plunger, pressing it carefully, watching the fluid in the syringe drop slowly out of sight into his arm.

Moussac leaned forward beside Rip in the back seat of his sedan and tapped the detective on the shoulder. 'Raise your headlights. Ah. Is that a fiacre coming down the road? Block it.'

The detective spun the wheel so that the big Renault sedan stopped at an angle, blocking the road. The two-wheeled carriage approached them, the horse's hooves clopping dully on the hard dirt road. The folding top was up, throwing a shadow over the passenger inside. A man jumped out of the back seat and walked into their headlights waving his arm. 'Get out of the way. Vite, vite!'

'It's Apollonaire,' Rip said, and the detective in the front seat laughed shortly.

Moussac got out and walked toward Apollonaire. 'Take it easy,' he said loudly. 'Stop waving your hands around.'

'Mon colonel!'

Moussac led him by the elbow out of the beam of headlights and they talked there in the shadows quietly. Moussac's voice crackled at intervals with a questioning sound, then Apollonaire's came back each time with a slow answer. Then they walked back to the sedan; Apollonaire got in beside the driver, and Moussac rejoined Rip in the back.

Apollo shifted around to face Rip in the darkness as the car started off again. 'Bon soir,' he said, sounding apologetic.

'What's happening at the Delaigres'?' Rip asked.

Apollo's head turned momentarily toward Moussac in the shadow of the car interior, then back toward Rip. 'Hard to tell,' he said. 'Lights on. Much going up and down stairs. A telephone call. Then the servants came out and started beating in circles around the house. I left.' He paused. 'I used the telephone in your house. The operator in

Port Afrique said Emile's number called Nino's number.'

'Any conversation? Did she hear?'

'I asked her. She was very insulted.'

They were quiet as the car drilled through the dark. Their lights swung and caught the double file of trees leading up to Rip's house; the car raced up the avenue, turned into the circle and curved around to halt in front of the veranda. Rip got out quickly and started up the steps to his house to get a weapon.

Moussac called after him sharply, 'Where are you going?'

Rip turned. 'It's a cool evening,' he lied clumsily. 'I need a scarf.'

'Nonsense. Come back. I am serious.'

Rip came back down the steps.

They could see the lights on in the Delaigre house as they started toward it through the grove of eucalyptus trees. Rip thought at first that he and the others were moving four abreast, about five yards apart, but he noticed they had dropped back behind him. He paused and turned, but the dark shadow of Moussac motioned him forward with a hand which held a revolver. He began walking again, feeling the hair along his arms raise stiffly.

It had been simpler during the war; you knew who the enemy was.

He remembered the group meeting on his veranda a year ago—or had it only been a week ago—for onze heures petit déjeuner. The feeling of cobwebs he had sensed. Could they all be in this together, yet double-crossing each other? These mother-loving tricky mucking double-crossing—if he ever laid his hands on some solid evidence he would break whomever was guilty with his hands, smash every bone in them. . . .

His shirt began to stick coldly to the patch of sweat on his back, and his face felt wet. A low branch, invisible in the dark, struck him across the forehead and he slammed it out of the way savagely. Some birds in the upper branches began to squawk loudly, and Moussac hissed behind him. Music drifted faintly through the trees from the lighted house; it sounded louder as they came closer, a French air with the same lilt as

Madelon. A sudden sense of incongruity struck Rip and he smiled wryly to himself in the darkness. The open lighted house and the little popular tune and the four of them walking carefully through the trees and the possibility, the very good possibility, that someone might get himself hurt quite soon. He wouldn't have handled it quite this way, if this were his own patrol; he'd do a better job of coverage and see that each of the boys had grenades. The area of open space around the Delaigres' house would be a little tough to cover . . . and then he stopped thinking that way because he noticed from the corner of his eye that Moussac had motioned Apollonaire and the other detective to spread out and encircle the house. Nuts, he thought with a sudden bitter surge running all through him; nuts to this.

He began walking fast, faster, walking directly out into the open, crossing the lawn, thinking over and over again: Nuts. To hell with sneaking. I'm walking right into this in a crazy dumb fast way. But fast, walking upright, not because of the bravery of it but only because it was not something to crawl toward. The music was much louder now as he came up the front steps without trying to walk quietly.

He opened the front door quickly and walked across the veranda directly into the bright living room. Then he stopped short.

There was the portable phonograph, with the record going round and round. He ran up the stairs to the bedrooms, pushing the doors open hard, opening the closets. Then he came back downstairs and walked out on the veranda and spoke into the outer darkness.

'Come on in, Jacques,' he said. 'There's nobody here. They've left.'

Rip, Ynez and Pedro sat around the kerosene lamp in the little shack at the end of the airfield without saying very much. Pedro was still foggy from having been awakened by Rip so unexpectedly at four in the morning, and he sat bent over and worshipping the cup of coffee in his hand and eyeing the limp wind sock which hung like a tired flag on the pole at the far

end of the grass runway. Ynez sat between Rip and Pedro, pushed back a little from the table, silent, face tight with lack of sleep. The hush before dawn lay all around the airfield, the beginning twitter of awakening birds, shadows scurrying across rocks, and the hundred rustlings of small animals. The pile of hunting gear which Suleiman had helped Rip pack so hurriedly as soon as Moussac and his men had left the Delaigres' house, the sleeping bags and folding cots and mosquito netting and the hunting rifles, lay in a humped pile of duffle bags and canvas cases.

Pedro cocked one eye at the sky and said, 'It will not be a very good morning, Senhor Reardon.'

'That doesn't matter.' Rip was anxious to start. Moussac would be sure to drive back out to the Delaigres' house right after breakfast, and he would find Rip out and guess immediately Rip had gone after Emile.

Rip looked at Ynez. The gendarmes had just been carrying Nino out of his apartment at Le Badinage when Rip had gone back to pick her up. The little Cockney looked even smaller under the blanket on the stretcher. His eyes had been closed and it was hard to tell whether he was dead or alive. Ynez had been sitting in a chair when Rip came in, staring blankly at the wall. He recognized the look. He had seen men like that after a particularly bad pasting from the 88's, when the shrapnel had burst jaggedly in the upper branches of the trees and then rained down vertically, inescapably, into the foxholes. When he had told her that she was to come with him she hadn't said a word; she had just gotten up and come, and later had watched him and Suleiman scurry around his house packing the gear into duffle bags hurriedly. She didn't ask him anything as he had raced in his car around the Route de la Corniche, across the back end of Port Afrique to Pedro's little shack on the edge of the airfield. She had sat in the car while he had kept the headlights of the coupe levelled at Pedro's windows; he had banged on the door until Pedro opened it, staggering with sleep and rubbing the hair out of his eyes.

Now, sitting over his coffee, Pedro said, 'I would be a happier man if that carburettor was cleaned out with

thoroughness.' He nodded toward the five-place high-wing monoplane sitting on the airfield. 'She's a nice ship, but sometimes she drinks petrol like a fish. My mecánico, he ignores these troubles unless I shout.'

'We'll take the chance if you will,' Rip said.

'You're in a big hurry.'

'Yes.'

'You like to take chances?'

'No. But there are big chances and little chances. This is one of the little ones.'

Pedro raised one eyebrow at Ynez. 'Why are you so talkative this morning?' She stared straight ahead without answering. 'Another cup of coffee, senhorita?'

'No thanks.'

Pedro turned to Rip. 'I don't think she likes me,' he said. 'I like her, but I don't think she likes me.' He took a swallow of coffee and then added, 'If every woman I meet does not respond to me in five minutes, it hurts my feelings inside. Why is that?'

'Don't ask,' Rip said. 'Not this early in the morning.'

'You think I am belligerent because it is so early.'

'A little. Yes. Don't make something of it, though.'

'What's the hurry, senhor? How far away can your partner go in a light truck? A qué distancia? A hundred kilometres? Two hundred?' He made a pinching gesture with his fingers, showing how little distance that was to a pilot.

Rip got up. 'It's too damn far to walk, Pedro. There's the light beginning to break now. Let's load this gear aboard.' Emile might have driven inland along any one of a number of roads which radiated from Port Afrique toward the interior. They would have a lot of territory to search.

He scanned the horizon as they lifted the duffle bags and the guns in the canvas cases into the back of the plane. He could see a layer of stratus clouds in the distance. Well, the sun might dissolve those as the day went on.

Fifteen minutes later, as Pedro brought the ship up past a thousand feet, the clouds looked like the roof of a continent, cotton-ball mountains piling upon mountains in the distance,

and the dawn had the look of coming down barefooted from the nearer hilltops. Below them the coastal mangrove swamps stretched in a green rug of treetops for miles, the upper leaves of the trees just catching the first light of the sun. Port Afrique became a tiny cluster of dirt-colour mounds as Pedro turned the plane farther inland, a town clinging to the edge of the Atlantic, its back to the sea and fighting off the endless encirclement of the jungle.

Rip was sitting in the seat next to Pedro and he had to twist to look around at Ynez in the seat behind. She had her hands in the pockets of her loose coat and her shoulders hunched up.

'Cold?'

'It doesn't matter.'

Pedro raised his voice above the thrumming of the engine without turning his head. 'The sun will be higher soon. The warmness will come in here.'

'Don't suffer silently,' Rip said to Ynez in English. 'I don't believe in silent sufferers.'

'That's not it,' she said, answering in English, looking at him with level expressionless eyes. 'What is there to say?'

'There are a hell of a lot of things you could explain.'

'Some things I know, some I can guess. The two are mixed up. Some things I do not know. Whatever I say will only make you worse because you are a little mad.'

'Maybe.'

'Yes, not maybe. I understand why you are like this, with all the suspicion and not knowing what to believe. Or who. And after such a long time. But still it makes you very difficult.'

'If I could trust you,' he said.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the leather seat. 'Yes,' she said so quietly he could not hear the word but read it from her lips. 'I know.'

Pedro called back over his shoulder in Spanish to Ynez. 'Look down, senhorita. Recognize the country? Remember when I flew you down here? Remember?'

Still watching her Rip saw that she shook her head a little, keeping her eyes closed, and two tears came out from under her eyelids and ran down her face.

He turned to look out the angled window of the plane's cabin. Sometimes she was simple and it was simple to know what to think about her; sometimes she was not, and she seemed distant, with a kind of foreign complexity which he couldn't reach, guarded by her own silences. This was one of the second times. If he succeeded in locating the Delaigres there would be a cracking of heads together until he got some straight answers and then there would be an end to these wheels within wheels and this blind alley feeling.

They were nearing the edge of the vast tropical rain forest now, and there was an occasional cleared patch of flat land and a cluster of thatched huts, with a knotted string of blue smoke curling upward into the still air. Here and there he could see a long thin winding pin scratch of road. On the map folded on his knee the roads were labelled *Pistes locales plus ou moins automobilisables*. Local tracks more or less suitable for motoring. Impracticable during rainy season. He looked up from the map and scanned the ground. In the distance he could see a small whirl of dust rising between the trees, a faint tan blur against the dark greenness of the trees.

'Let me have your glasses,' he said to Pedro, almost shouting because Pedro had put cotton plugs into his ears. He focused the excellent 12-power German binoculars carefully on the pillar of dust, but the plane had reached wide shelves of wispy vaporous mist, and sheets of fog slid between him and the road. He tapped Pedro's shoulder and pointed at the area he thought would be best, making a wiggling motion with his hand to indicate the bending road. Pedro nodded and banked the ship, eyes flicking constantly back to the needle and ball.

Rip held the binoculars, steadying himself against the vibrating wall of the plane, seeing patches of ground slip darkly past the glasses between torn pieces of cloud. Then he spotted it.

The dust was coming from a dark vehicle almost directly off to his side. He motioned to Pedro to circle the area, because he could only catch quick glimpses of the vehicle whenever they passed an open space between the clouds. It was hard to see during such short intervals.

Pedro tapped him. 'Shall I descend lower, senhor?'

Rip shook his head. No, then he would risk being seen and recognized. Damn these clouds anyway. Damn the whole craziness of this running after people, and the craziness of what people did to other people. And people. Just people. Damn them.

They were droning through a sky landscape now, crossing great white valleys between the clouds where the sun caught them and projected their shadow to the next cloud so that they seemed to be flying directly into themselves. They were in a spaceless world made completely of clouds.

After a half-hour of it Pedro looked sideways at Rip without speaking. 'Okay,' Rip said, 'we're boxed in. Let's turn around and go back and try it again this afternoon.'

'The delay will give an opportunity to examine the carburettor,' Pedro said.

Rip did not answer.

The clouds did not clear until late that afternoon. They sat in the airfield shack and ate out of cans hungrily, and Rip used the delay to telephone Suleiman at his house.

'Has Colonel Moussac been there, Suleiman?'

'Oui. Very early this morning.'

'How early?'

'Before the time of early breakfast.'

'What did he say?'

'Nothing. He only looked at the gun rack in the living room. He saw which guns were taken. He also opened the drawer to see if any bullets had also been taken.'

'He asked no questions?'

'No. Only looking. You need help, M'sieu Reardon?'

'No. It goes.'

'If you need——'

'No. Truly.'

Then late in the afternoon, after Pedro and his mechanic had fussed with the carburettor lovingly, they took off again, this time heading straight for the Medina road on which Rip had spotted the dark vehicle that morning. Ynez was sitting

in the same seat, but now she was wearing one of Pedro's old leather flying jackets with the big gilt wings over one pocket, and it made her look small inside, almost childlike. No, Rip thought, let's not have too much thinking about this child business. She is a smart cagey operator and there is no need to droll. If she looked like a back end of a horse we wouldn't have quite as much damfool nonsense and . . . well, enough of that, because the next step will be remembering those nights upstairs and that wonderful clear uncomplicated day at the beach, and when you remember all that you also remember how much you need it and want it and you soften around the edges like a candle burning near bottom. All that was over now, as it had to be, because he might have to hurt her in what was coming.

The late afternoon sun slanted hot and blazing yellow toward them, making it hard to see with the glasses, so Rip told Pedro to fly a course on the other side of the road while he climbed into the back seat, making Ynez move over. He scanned the ground from the shady side of the plane. He could see better now because the sky was clear and he could feel Ynez beside him with the light pressure of her body resting momentarily against his as the plane rocked slightly in the invisible waves of heat that rose up against it.

Pedro twisted around toward him. 'If they have parked under a tree,' he shouted, 'we'll never find them.'

'How much petrol do you have?'

'Plenty. All fixed. No chances now.' He grinned. 'Not even a little one.'

The land slid by below them, endless, immense, a sleeping king with a deep timeless rhythm here, away from the nervous nibbling of the little men and their little trade along the coast. As always, the brooding sense of Africa acted like a soothing drug on Rip, and he felt very quiet, philosophic, clear sighted and able to see his life in perspective. The mad-dog viciousness he had let himself build up inside against Emile slackened now, but in its place he felt an equally clear resolve to handle him cleanly, not as confused and angry as he had been with Nino, but with the cold finality of a judge who is also pre-

pared to be executioner. He would try to keep it from being dirty, because there would be a chance for Emile to talk, and to fight back if he had to, but if it came out that way in the end Rip was prepared to shoot him. He had his big Holland & Holland rifle lying in the back of the plane. It was chambered for the ·475 magnum cartridge, for most big game, and it would be like using a small cannon to shoot a man.

The earth was flattening beneath them now, merging into the higher savanna grasslands of the plateau, with baobab and shea butter trees, brown and dusty and sparse looking after the clean green hardwood of the tropical rain forest. *Water must be filtered*, the map on his knee noted in fine italics, *Lion*, *Hyena*, *Gazelle*, *Buffalo*, *Wart-hog*. Lots of game, he thought. Also *Delaigre*. He traced the winding Medina road along the map with his finger, and looked down out the window to check it, and it was then he spotted the vehicles and the camp. He wasn't completely sure, because from this height they were just unexpected square little boxes in a vast collection of irregular shapes, but when he got the glasses on them, blurring the lenses back and forth until he got critical focus, he could see two vehicles and a small camp of two or three tents with another tent or two off to one side for the men.

He prodded Pedro's shoulder and motioned downward: Here.

As they dropped and began circling for a place lengthy enough and level enough to land, he could see the small toy-size figures of several people come out of the tents and look upward. He climbed into the front seat beside Pedro and leaned back, rubbing the palms of his hands along the edge of his trouser legs without thinking.

The space was not really quite long enough for the plane, and there was the additional hazard of a wall of trees at one end. Pedro came down into it cautiously, almost brushing the tree tops, then, at the last moment, he pulled up the plane and banked upward and away. He turned sideways until his eyes met Rip's.

'Ver' small field,' he said loudly. 'Worse than landing in a bucket. I don't like it.'

'Try it again,' Rip said.

'Let's look around first for a bigger clearing.'

'You're up high enough now. Look around. Do you see any place else even half as long?'

Pedro swung the ship in a small circle, examining the terrain beneath them. Finally he turned back to Rip and smiled faintly. 'I know you don't mind being killed when we land,' he said, 'but think of this beautiful little aeroplane.'

'Better think of the beautiful little bill you can charge me when we get back to Port Afrique.'

Pedro's smile widened. 'Plenty,' he said, 'don't worry, plenty.'

'Okay,' Rip said. 'Now go on back and try that field again.'

Pedro was skilful. As he approached the landing space again he brought the nose of the ship up high against the horizon, working the rudders, practically walking the ship down in a perfect elevator stall. Then the ground was racing under them, then they were no longer airborne and their wheels were bouncing the light ship slightly as they ran over the ground, whirling a cloud of dust behind them. The ship stopped just short of the trees, and Pedro turned it around and taxied back down the runway. When he cut the engine the silence rushed in. As Rip climbed out of the cabin to the ground he saw a dark car winding through the trees toward them.

It was Moussac's Renault sedan, covered thickly with dust, somehow tired looking, as if it had been driven fast for a considerable distance. His Senegalese chauffeur with the red fez was at the wheel. It swung up beside them, and Moussac got out stiffly.

'Well,' Rip said, 'Dr. Livingstone.'

'Damn your hide, Rip. The springs in my auto are broken and my back is broken and if I had a drink I could spit.'

'Rough, isn't it? Moving fast instead of spouting big talk in your swivel chair.'

''Allo, Pedro,' Moussac said over Rip's shoulder. 'Was that you overhead in the clouds this morning?'

'Yes.' Pedro showed all his white teeth. 'With a bad carburettor. We——' Pedro stopped, because Moussac was

staring beyond him, at the door of the plane, as Ynez came out.

Moussac turned to Rip. 'Now I'm sure,' he said. 'Now I know it. You're crazy. Completely crazy. This whole idea is wild, and bringing her is worst of all.'

Rip spread his hands out, using the French gesture. 'Why? We've been talking about going hunting for a week now.' He dropped his hands. 'So, we're going hunting.'

Moussac laughed shortly and slapped his hand against the broad leather belt he was wearing to carry his revolver holster. 'Hunting!' He laughed again. 'In an aeroplane!'

'In the modern manner,' Rip said.

'Bon jour, colonel,' Ynez said as she came up to them.

'Bon jour, Santa Ynez. Welcome to darkest Africa. Where you meet the darkest mentalities.'

Rip could see that Moussac was really very annoyed and hot and tired from the long ride, and perhaps worried and angry beneath it all. He was an unexpected factor, and it meant taking things more carefully, feeling his way forward.

'Look, Jacques,' he said, 'ask your boy to give us a hand with our duffle bags. There are two guns in there, too.'

Moussac tightened his mouth at the mention of weapons. Then he spoke quickly in dialect to his chauffeur. Rip noticed the Senegalese was wearing a cartridge belt and holster, too. Lots of firepower around, he thought. Emile must have taken some guns with him too. Like the Boy Scout slogan: Be prepared.

'Do you have a drink back at that little camp?' Pedro asked. 'One swallow. I have to hurry back.' He looked down the short open space ending at the wall of trees on which they had landed. 'I don't want to get caught here and take off in the dark. Risky.'

'Certainly,' Moussac said. 'We all need a drink. The Delaigres have everything but ice with them.' He took Pedro's arm casually. 'But what's your hurry? It's too late to fly back now. A day or two of hunting and you can fly your passengers back to Port Afrique.'

'Well——' Pedro said. He looked from Moussac's face to Rip's and back again.

Rip shaded his eyes at the sun; half the enormous red ball was cut off by the horizon, and the light stretched in fine streamers of afterglow across the sky. 'Better stay overnight, Pedro,' he said. 'It's too late to start back now.' He said it very easily, without mentioning going back to Port Afrique with Pedro, sounding as casual as Moussac had. 'Stay on. Have a drink and some supper.'

He turned to Moussac. 'Let's get to camp, Jacques. I could use something tall and wet myself.' His mouth felt dry, now that he was so close to the end; when he went to the plane to unload the big Holland rifle he felt the trigger guard through the canvas case, and in his mind he felt his finger curve around the trigger, squeezing it. A ·475 magnum hitting a man at close range would do a terrible amount of damage, but it would be as mercifully certain as death and there would be no doubts nor lingering. My God, he thought, climbing out of the plane and walking toward the car with the rifle, you've had to do a lot of very dirty jobs in the last couple of years but you've never hunted dirty and now you're planning it in your head without any hesitation. Callous bastard. Moral apathy, that's what Moussac would call it. Something's wrong inside, but this is not the time to find out. No, not now. Later, after this is all over, and if you haven't been hurt or shot again in the stomach or anything stupid or painful like that, later you'll need a good bath, inside and out. The idea of perhaps being hit in the abdomen again reminded him of many things and many months, and left him feeling empty. As he came up to Moussac he said, 'Let's go get that drink. I've got a mouthful of ashes.'

Moussac looked at him carefully, weighing him, weighing the new sound in his voice, weighing the idea of the two rifles, then he slapped his open palm against his leather belt with its cartridges and holster and he said, 'Allons.'

As the car bumped along slowly back toward the camp, steering around wart-hog holes, Moussac said quietly, 'You know, Rip, in the twentieth century revenge has gone a little out of fashion.'

'Don't talk like a fool, Jacques. I'm looking over the land

here for commercial development. Just hunting a little at the same time.'

'You've held on to those electric hands long enough for your penny, Rip. Let go now.'

'I want to say something,' Ynez said.

'Nobody is talking to you,' Moussac said fast.

'Let her talk,' Rip said.

'Why? Talking dries the throat.'

'Please,' Ynez said, 'about Nino. I——'

'Did he talk, Jacques?' Rip asked. 'What did he say?'

Moussac looked at Ynez. 'Not much.'

'Something terrible,' Ynez said. 'I tried to kill him.' She was shaking now. 'I can't stop thinking about it.'

'I'll get your statement later,' Moussac said.

'He helped me,' she said, shakily. 'In some ways he helped me.'

'Like the farmer who feeds the goose,' Moussac said.

'He had much filth,' she said, 'but that he should not die for. It was only my wanting to fight back. At him, at the whole world, and he was there at the wrong time.' Her words sounded shaky because her mouth was trembling.

Moussac put his fingers on her arm. 'Guillaume, the doctor at the hospital, said Nino had been given three times normal dosage.'

'Yes.'

'It saved his life.'

She stared at him. 'No . . .'

He shrugged. 'I'm sorry. It's true. He needed a great deal to keep the heart alive.'

She looked bewildered, going pale, unbelieving. 'Yes,' he said, nodding his head. 'Why would I lie to you?'

'The chess game,' Rip said. 'Your lousy chess game.'

Ynez turned her face to the car window and slowly leaned her forehead against the glass.

No one said a word.

The Delaigres' camp sat in the lee of a rock hill, and looked modest and small and rather hasty. Two light trucks from the

plantation stood off to one side, one of them larger than the other, and heavily loaded, covered with tarpaulin.

Emile and Diane were sitting in canvas chairs in front of a folding table, and Emile got up and came over to the car to say hello warily. His eyes kept blinking as he talked.

'Well, well, Rip,' he said, 'which part of your safari is this? The diamond property part or the hunting part?'

'The hunting,' Rip said.

'So you decided to join us after all, Rip,' Diane called from her chair. 'Emile said he'd asked you but you'd said no.'

'Only maybe, only maybe.' He noticed Diane had a canvas water cooler beside her and a half-empty bottle of sherry. That explained the high warm flush she had, and the way she slurred her words beyond the ordinary needs of British speech.

'And Ynez,' Diane said. 'Away from night life and the tinkling cymbals and the sounding brass. The healthy great outdoors.' She waved one hand at the emptiness all around them. 'Kilometres of it.' She poured herself a drink in a little collapsible cup and closed her eyes tightly as she tossed it down.

'Diane,' Emile said.

Rip could see she had a fairly rosy glow on, but doing a typically well-mannered job with it, so he introduced Pedro. 'Senhor Aranda. A very hot pilot.'

Pedro stood there, uncertain about shaking hands with the blonde Englishwoman, but she got out of the canvas chair and came over to him with her hand out. 'So you're the handsome boy who flies that pretty little aeroplane over our heads back home.'

'There's a good deal of black-market money in that ship,' Moussac said. 'Be careful what you call it.'

Pedro laughed and said, 'If only an honest life paid more.'

Emile said to Ynez, 'We heard you went back to work at Le Badinage.'

'Yes,' she said.

'But it's much healthier out here,' Diane said. 'Really, dear, if the bloody anopheles mosquito or tsetse flies or whatever don't get you.'

'Diane,' Emile said.

'This is healthy country, around here,' Moussac said. He looked at Rip. 'Very healthy.'

'You can shoot things, my dear,' Diane said to Ynez. 'You can get all the venom out of your system just by pulling a little trigger. That's why you've always hunted, isn't it, Rip?'

'Sure,' he said. 'I'm venomous as hell.'

'Oh Rip.' She laughed a little. 'There's even a name for it. Catharsis.' Diane turned to Moussac. 'You're the local Socrates. Isn't that true?'

'You exaggerate, Diane. May I suggest you give all these tired people a drink?' He smiled. 'Perhaps in a little while we can all exaggerate.'

But there was very little talk through supper, except for comments about the antelope Emile had shot just that afternoon, and then they all sat around the low camp fire, smoking. Diane said once, 'I've heard some French will drink champagne before dinner, during dinner, and after dinner. I use sherry the same way. Awfully ladylike, but disgusting, isn't it?'

'Diane,' Emile said. The worried frown line between his eyebrows was very deep now, and the corners of his mouth were tight.

Later, while they were all around the fire, Rip began cleaning his Holland rifle superflously, very carefully. He had a box of cartridges in the pocket of his tunic.

'What an unbearable snob you are about guns,' Diane said pleasantly. She turned in her chair to Pedro. 'He has a Purdey shotgun at home he keeps out of sight. And custom gunstocks by Griffin & Howe in New York. Circassian walnut no less.'

'That's me,' Rip said. 'An unbearable snob.'

'Don't point that,' Moussac said. 'Watch it, man.'

'It isn't loaded.'

'That's what they all say at the examining magistrate's inquest later.'

Diane went into her tent and came out with a handsome shotgun. It was engraved with a delicate, elaborate silver leaf-and-scroll design. 'Here, Rip,' she said. 'How do you like this?'

'A Francotte,' he said. 'Who's calling who a snob?'

'Don't point it,' Diane said lightly, as she took it back. 'It *is* loaded.' She looked at him coolly.

Pedro got to his feet and cleared his throat. 'I must go see my little girl before she falls asleep,' he said. 'Do you have a big canvas in your camion I can borrow for putting over the engine, Senhor Delaigre?'

'Certainly,' Emile said quickly, getting up too. His eyes kept flicking between Diane and Rip and their guns. 'Certainly. I'll get one from the camion.' He paused uneasily as if he wanted to say something more, then he and Pedro went off in the darkness, walking on the long flickering path of their own shadows which the fire behind them cast.

Ynez got up. 'I think——' she began.

'No, stay, dear,' Diane said.

'Why should I?'

'No reason.' Diane rubbed her fingertips back and forth across her forehead. 'Women never help one another with men, do they? An eye for an eye.' She shut her eyes briefly. 'Via Dolorosa.' She looked up at Ynez sideways. 'You don't say much do you? You've learned the road to Calvary is a two-way street.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Yes you do. I'm sure you do.' Diane waved a hand at Moussac and Rip. 'These bright lads don't.' She chuckled with a faint edge of drunkenness in her voice. 'Set a woman to catch a woman.' She rocked her head back at Ynez lopsidedly. 'You look like the wrath of Jehovah. Sit down, dear. Don't leave me alone with these two charming armed men. I might let my guard down,' she chuckled again, 'and you know what happens to girls who do that. Sit down. Please.'

Ynez sat down. Diane kept the shotgun cradled on her knees while she poured another sherry into the little collapsible steel cup. Half the wine spilled outside the cup.

Rip had spread the oil rag across his lap so that he could ease a cartridge from his tunic pocket into his hand very slowly, turning slightly from the fire to take advantage of the shadow. He ran the action of his gun back and forth, opening and closing it, holding the weapon pointed at the sky, then

he slid the cartridge into the chamber from that clumsy position and pushed it home. Now the gun was ready to fire.

There was no moon, and a wall of darkness stood around them. The night was very still now, an enormous black flower folded around them, bottomless, ageless, with a soft other-worldliness.

Ynez coughed. Moussac put out his cigarette carefully against the bottom of his shoe, then flipped it into the fire.

'Rip,' Diane said, 'did you just load?' She had moved her body slightly sideways in her chair so that the Francotte was pointing directly at him.

'Yes,' he said.

'Do you think you're going to shoot him?'

'Yes,' he said.

'No, no,' Moussac said, 'there will be nothing like that.'

Rip began to lower his rifle, but Diane said, 'Don't.' She lifted the Francotte a little. He sat up straighter, holding his rifle vertically, feeling a heavy thumping beginning inside his chest. The night was very still.

'Rip,' Moussac said, 'killing must stop some place.'

'I wouldn't kill a man for a necklace,' Rip said, 'or for some property.'

'Rip,' Moussac said softly, 'you are guilty yourself.'

'Me!'

'Yes. Georgette knew what you were. Your angers. Think of the life she had with you. A woman of her religious faith, not really a woman but still partly a convent girl, emotionally immature, treated as such wives are, her husband's possession, guilty about using contraception in her marriage——'

'How the hell do you know!'

'I'm guessing, I'm a very good guesser. Guilty about some of her actions, tormented by loneliness and introspection, swinging back and forth between ideas of suicide and fear of destroying her beautiful self-beloved self——'

'And yet *I'm* the one who's guilty?'

'Yes. Because in a way the world is guilty and you accepted the world's standards of conduct as rational—the muscle before brain, the myths about the superiority of being

aggressive, the closed fist instead of the open hand——'

'Sometimes you need a closed fist to survive!'

'Yes, yes, but at the right time only, with critical judgment. Georgette lost hers. She let her fears grow into mountains. She was afraid of what you would do when you came home and found out about her and Emile.'

Rip looked at him. 'God,' he said. 'Emile?'

'First Beaulieu, when he came back to finish the statue. Later, Emile.'

Rip remembered Ynez standing in the bedroom doorway the first night he was home. *Remember*, she had said, *you were gone a long time*. He turned to Ynez.

'You knew about that.'

'About Beaulieu. Not Emile. I—I wasn't sure.' Her voice was trembling. 'What could I say? Anything would start trouble. For you. Me. Everybody.'

'Diane,' Rip said, 'I'm sorry.' He felt strangely calm about it, as if in some part of him he had known all the time.

'Sorry,' Diane said in a choked voice. Then she picked up the nearly empty bottle of sherry and smashed it into the rocks around the fire.

'They met at Nino's place,' Moussac said. 'Ynez was a guest at the house only for appearances, Georgette didn't want to be living alone, with people talking.'

Rip wiped his forehead with his sleeve. 'How do I know this is true, Jacques?'

'You think I would play some stupid game with this? I have X-ray pictures which show Georgette was almost five months gone with child.'

'Oh sweet holy merciful God,' Diane said.

Moussac looked at her. 'You're not able to have children, are you Diane? That operation.'

She stared at him. The tears were running down her face now.

'When Georgette stopped going to church,' Moussac said, 'Nino began his blackmail. He never dreamed how frightened she was, or how successful he would be. The more he asked the more he got. Georgette became frantic. She even wrote desperate notes to me, but whenever I saw her the storms

were over. She was afraid of me too, and that is why I share your guilt, Rip.'

Rip stood up. 'Emile killed her.'

'You did, Rip. In a way. It was really you she was afraid of. She must have been terribly afraid of you, down deep. Ask yourself, truly; how could she trust you if she told you such a thing? You don't answer. You know why.'

Rip looked off into the darkness. 'I'll kill him. I'll kill him, the bastard.' Suddenly he swung his rifle across the camp fire, holding the barrel like a scythe handle, and knocked the shotgun out of Diane's hands. She jumped out of the chair shaking from head to foot, her face contorted, screaming.

'She was a bitch, your wife! Having Emile here, for herself, that wasn't enough! No! She had to take him away. They were going off to Cairo. He was leaving me. And she was going to leave you your empty house to come home to!'

'Emile!' Rip said incredulously. 'He was going to leave you?' The pattern of what had happened was beginning to fall into place.

'He was! He *was*. While she was alive. But he hasn't! Oh my God!' she shouted, pointing at Rip, 'Look at him standing there! You're such a bloody godawful fool!' She was standing very straight, hysterical, biting the back of her hand, her whole body shaking.

'Rip,' Moussac said sharply. 'Put that gun down!'

'You,' Rip said. '*You?*' He couldn't believe it. She had shot Georgette. It must have been she who fired at him from the dark. He could see it now.

'She laughed at me!' Diane shouted. 'She knew I'd been operated on back home. Yes, she said, Emile had told me the truth about them. They were really going off. What was I going to do about it? We talked very quietly at first. We both pretended to be quite calm about it all. And when she went out of the living room for a moment I took out the gun, and then I waited. Oh God, God, she'd broken my life and she was smiling about it and I hated her.'

'Rip,' Moussac said fast. 'Rip!'

'Rip!' Ynez shouted. 'Put the gun down!'

'No. Rip, Rip, please.' Moussac stretched one hand out. His voice was full of ancient sorrow. 'More killing will solve nothing, Rip. I beg you. You have had enough. Must the war be an eternal lance in your side?'

'Why?' Rip's hands were shaking. 'Can *she* just kill and forget it?'

'No, no, Rip. She lives in her own hell already. She and Emile live in their own circle of the damned. He hates her, and she loves him. They'll hide in the interior and they'll die that way.'

'Of old age? That's not soon enough.'

'Rip, Rip, we are all guilty more or less. The killing must stop some place.'

'Why?'

'For self-interest. Your violence only creates more violence. You hurt yourself at the end.'

'I'm thinking of Georgette,' Rip said between his teeth. 'Sitting there, just talking, with a loaded gun coming closer.'

'Yes,' Moussac said quickly. 'Think of that. Don't you think Georgette considered killing herself? Why would she keep a loaded automatic in the house? What do you believe she was thinking when she laughed at Diane with all these things? Maybe she was playing with death deliberately, like a life of alcoholism all in one gulp. I beg you, Rip. I beg you. Think of yourself. This is a cancer, this killing. You will destroy yourself with it.'

'Rip,' Ynez said, coming around the fire to put her hand very slowly on his arm. 'It has been bad for everybody, Rip. Put the gun down.'

Diane fell back into her chair with her hands over her face, her head bent into her lap, sobbing bitterly.

It was then that Ynez' face suddenly froze with fear and she raised both hands into the air. '*No!*' she cried. '*No——!*'

Rip and Moussac spun around, following her eyes into the dark. Emile was coming through the shadow a short way off, with a rifle. He stopped when Ynez cried out, and threw it to his shoulder aiming at Rip. Ynez screamed piercingly and ran forward, blocking Rip as he tried to swing his gun up.

Moussac tugged at his holster. Diane shouted hoarsely, 'Emile! *Stop!*' Emile's weapon fired a moment before Moussac's slamming *crack!* in the stillness. Ynez staggered, then fell to her knees, writhing, and slid sideways to the ground.

Emile's shadow went crashing through the underbrush, running away from camp. Diane ran behind Moussac as he took aim carefully and knocked his arm upward. He turned and gripped her wrist so hard she bent forward gasping and almost fell. 'There has been enough agony,' he said between his teeth. 'Go after him. Stay with him. Leave the territory. Disappear. You'll hang if I find you again.'

'You're afraid,' she said, trying to twist her arm free. 'You're protecting the Spanish girl. She's illegal. You're afraid to take her into a courtroom. You're helping Rip.'

Moussac dropped her arm. He looked old and worn suddenly, full of sorrow for the world. 'Diane,' he said. 'Take this moment of my weakness. Run. In two minutes I will be glad to shoot you both. Get out of the country.'

The native boys were shouting in the darkness now, and over it came the noise of a truck motor starting.

'Run, Diane,' Moussac said, 'run.'

She ran off between the trees, shouting 'Emile! Emile!'

'Ynez,' Rip said. He was on his knees, bending over her, 'Ynez, can you hear me?'

She nodded, biting her bottom lip between her teeth. Her nostrils were pinched inward with pain. A dark bloodstain was spreading across her shirt.

He leaned over her and kissed her forehead. He was trembling. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'Don't worry. We'll get you out of this.'

She tried opening her mouth. Her face was quivering. Her mouth was a child's mouth, a child unbelieving after a hard slap in the face.

Moussac was on one knee beside them. 'Shock,' he said. 'The bad pain will hit later.' He tore open the neck of her shirt. 'Just below the shoulder.'

Stop the bleeding, Rip thought. Quick. Blood loss. Shock. Then irreversible shock. Death. He remembered that much.

Hæmorrhage. Blood loss. Stop the bleeding. Compression bandage.

He pulled his shirt off and ripped it into strips. He folded them into pads and began binding them tightly around her, using pressure. Oh God, he prayed as his hands worked fast. God, no no no no. Don't let her. Please. Please. Forgive me. This is my fault. This is mine. If she dies, I have killed her. This is what the years have come to. Please let her live. A single life. I cannot bear another death. Let her live. One small life. One. *Let her live.*

Pedro came running up to them. Moussac got up. 'Don't ask any questions,' he said. 'Listen to me. Can you fly to Port Afrique at night? Can you take off?'

Pedro looked down at Ynez. 'Yes, maybe. Yes. The field is very short. Try.' His hands began fluttering.

'God, man! Yes or no?'

'The field is short. It is a danger. Especially at night. There is no headwind to help us take off——'

'If you can't, say so. We'll do something for her here. But quick. Quick. Decide. Fly or not?'

'I try. It is a possibility.' He was very nervous now and could not keep his hands still.

'You'll fly?'

'Yes. If we can take off. If we do not hit the trees.'

'Wait here,' Moussac snapped. 'I'll get my car. There's some morphine in my kit. Then we'll drive to the plane.'

Moussac parked the car beside Pedro's plane so that they could lift Ynez out of it and up into the cabin. The door of the sedan was narrow and in the dark they bumped her against it despite all their care, and she gasped. The morphine had begun to work, but her mouth was still open with the grimace of pain.

Rip bent over her. 'We're at the plane now. You'll be all right soon. Can you hear me, Ynez?'

She raised one hand to touch his face. 'Sin novedad,' she said, using Spanish. 'No te apure,' meaning, 'There's nothing wrong, don't worry.'

He didn't understand her. 'Don't talk,' he said. 'Don't talk now.'

Her face contorted suddenly and she screamed softly, going rigid, then she slumped heavily again. Rip felt a tremor run through him. For me, he thought, this agony is for me, and I have caused it.

'Diane, Diane and Emile?' Ynez whispered.

'Gone. Gone. Don't try to talk.'

'Good. Let them go.' She touched his face again, and one corner of her mouth tried to smile. 'The beach that day. Good.'

'Yes. Good. Good.'

'Don't . . . don't look like that . . .'

'We'll swim again, Ynez.'

'Don't cry, Rip.' She stiffened again, her head arching backward with the cords of her throat going taut. Her breathing had a shivering sound in it now.

'Oh Rip . . . Rip . . .' She was crying weakly. 'I'm afraid . . . to die . . .'

'You won't, you won't.' He could barely speak.

'It's so dark . . .'

'The sun will be up when we get to Port Afrique.'

'Port . . .'

'Yes. Don't worry.'

'I . . . feel . . .'

'Jacques gave you morphine. I have more for later. If you need.'

'Rip . . . ' She touched her lips with the tip of her tongue. 'Rip,' she repeated. Her face was wet.

'We're going to lift you into the plane. Easy now.'

There was barely enough room in the ship to stretch her out along the seats on a folded blanket. Rip crouched beside her, holding the flashlight in one hand and stroking her forehead with the other. Her skin was cold. He felt terribly helpless.

The engine ground over into life, spitting coldly, mechanically, coughing, then catching and swelling into a roar as Pedro gave it the throttle. He snapped on his landing lights, and up ahead of them the beams seemed to blunt themselves and dissolve against the darkness.

The cabin door banged shut in the air stream, but Moussac pulled it open, holding his cap on his head with one hand and shouting in to Pedro. 'Think now you can make it with the short run?'

'Try.'

'I'll drive down the end where the trees are. My lights will be your boundary. Watch for my headlights. Hear me?'

Pedro nodded. The propeller tips became a shimmering silver disc in the lights, kicking up a storm of dust now.

Moussac looked at Rip. 'Georgette's papers are still in my office,' he shouted. 'Get them if you need them. The likeness to Ynez is sufficient.'

'Thanks, Jacques.'

'No more than another quarter grain of morphine. Hear?'

'Yes.'

'She has a chance. Guillaume at the hospital is a good man.'

'I hope so.'

'Remember to tell him about the morphine.'

'I will.'

'Good luck!' Moussac slammed the cabin door hard. A moment later they saw his headlights back off from the plane, swing in an arc, then go bouncing down the field. Pedro waited until he saw the dim far-off headlights turn to face the plane, blinking on and off. That was where the trees were.

Rip put his fingers over the flashlight so that only a dim glow came pink-edged between his fingers. He unscrewed the canteen with one hand and moistened the end of his handkerchief and began wiping Ynez' face. She opened her eyes halfway.

'Are . . . we flying?'

'Almost. Don't talk. You're safe now.' If we don't hit the trees in the dark. For a moment he had a self-punishing picture of the plane ripping into the upper branches of the trees at the far end of the flat runway and the fuselage splintering all around them.

Pedro locked his brakes and ran the throttle up to full r.p.m. The plane shivered and rattled with the engine's caged roar, until Pedro suddenly released the brakes and they shot

ahead, rolling swiftly, the engine sounding powerfully, a tiny bombardment of little pebbles rattling upward against the cabin and the plane rolling, bouncing a little and swaying badly, feeling hollow boned, with Pedro tensed forward in his seat and Moussac's lights ahead of them going on and off methodically, like heartbeats. The headlights came closer and closer, rushing toward them, and the solid wall of trees seemed to rise from the ground, and Pedro had the tail up now but waiting to pick up enough speed to make sure, waiting until the very last minute because there was no breeze to help them, then small things began to slide backward on the floor of the cabin for they were in a steep climb with the engine roaring and the shuddering wingtips on the verge of a dead stall. Then they were gaining altitude, then banking, turning in a long curve and levelling off, and Pedro was throttling down for the home run.

Ynez looked up at Rip, bloodlessly white faced and trying to smile. She moved her lips, and he bent his ear directly over her mouth.

'Everything . . . black . . .'

He uncovered the flashlight. Her eyes looked dark, depthless. 'Pedro says we'll land with the light in Port Afrique. You'll see the sun soon.'

'Good . . .'

He wiped her face with the wet handkerchief. 'Rest. Rest.'

She opened her eyes more widely and he put his ear to her lips again.

'The war . . . is . . . truly over . . . now . . . chico?'

It was the first time she had ever called him chico, and he knew she was using the word as if to say: friend, comrade, not only lover, but comrade in arms, veteran of the long hard years.

'Finished?' she asked faintly.

'Yes. Finished.' It was not entirely true in many ways, but she needed it to be completely true now. He held her hand tightly in his, feeling torn apart inside, empty of hatred now and filled only with a vast pity and hope. 'Rest now,' he said. 'The war is over.'