

THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E.



MAGAZINE

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Introducing
Two New U.N.C.L.E. Agents
starring

APRIL DANCER

"An Armful of Dark-Haired Danger"

and co-starring

MARK SLATE

"The Agent Whose Business is Death"

in

**THE SHEIK OF
ARABY AFFAIR**

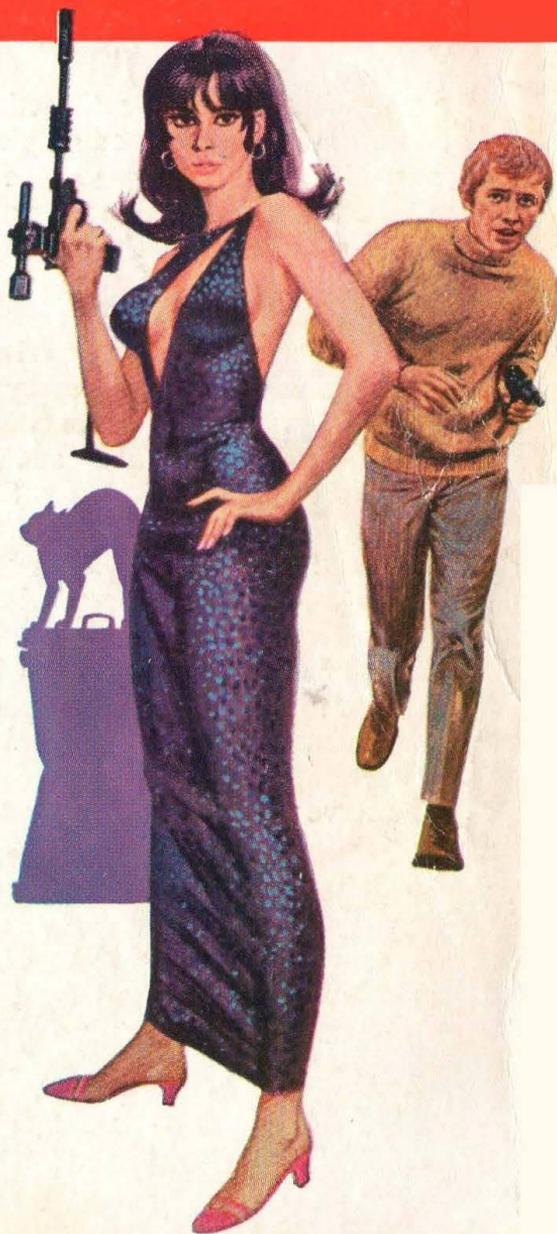
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THE *Girl* FROM **U.N.C.L.E.**

United Network Command for Law and Enforcement

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Reserve your copies in advance. You'll be glad you did!

Leo Margulies
Publisher

THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

DECEMBER, 1966

Vol. 1, No. 1

NEW COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL SHEIK FROM ARABY AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

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Somewhere, hidden deep in a desert fortress, a monstrous THRUSH secret weapon lay waiting to ravage the world, as April Dancer took on her first, most perilous assignment—to snatch Mark Slate from an Arab death trap and bring him back alive! 2 to 94



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THE SHEIK OF ARABY AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Deep in the trackless desert THRUSH had forged a weapon of unthinkable deadliness, as April Dancer faced a ring of foes to rescue Mark Slate and bring back to U.N.C.L.E. her deadly secret



ONE

A PENNY SAVED

BBRITISH MEN, being more reserved than Americans, don't stare as openly at attractive women under ordinary circumstances. Yet every male head at the race track turned in the wake of the girl as she passed by.

She was a slim girl in her early

twenties, perhaps five feet five inches tall and a pound or two less than a hundred and ten. Although this left her a bit on the willowy side, her small weight couldn't have been distributed more delightfully. Dark hair falling to her shoulders framed a lovely, delicately featured face with vivacious flashing wide eyes.

But there was more.

It wasn't only her beauty that

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Whose Business is Death"



turned heads, however. It was also her dress.

Not that it was in any way striking. As a matter of fact her neat blue sport suit was smartly conservative both in color and design. But Englishmen, particularly those affluent enough to occupy the private box section of a race track, tend not only to notice women's clothes, but to be excellent judges of their quality.

It was apparent to the more discerning men that the simple sport suit was an Italian original which couldn't have cost less than fifteen hundred dollars. They also noted that she wore no jewelry whatever except an attractive but inexpensive charm bracelet.

The woman was obviously American, and English experience had been that moderately wealthy American women cover themselves with gems in order to flaunt their wealth.

English connoisseurs of such matters had also noted that the enormously wealthy, feeling less compulsion to impress others, often wore little jewelry or none at all.

The woman therefore was an American heiress. And, since she wore neither wedding band nor engagement ring, apparently available.

Approximately every second male head which turned as she passed was considering ways which might be arranged to meet her.

Two of the men eyeing her sat

in a private box directly in the line of her approach. One was a tall, dark man in his mid-thirties with an athletic build, wearing a conservative dark suit and an old-school tie which would have told the initiated that he was a graduate of Oxford University's Balliol College.

He had a lean, intelligent face with liquid brown eyes and a slightly aquiline nose. A thin black mustache and a small, close-trimmed black goatee gave him the appearance of a handsome Mephistopheles.

The other man was short and squat, with powerful shoulders and bandy legs. His slightly oversized head had thick, Slavic features and moist, pendulous lips. He was somewhere in his mid-forties.

"Do you know who she is, Maxim?" the younger man asked.

"Never saw her before."

"She is checking box numbers," the Mephistophelean man said. "Do you suppose we could be lucky enough to have her looking for us?"

"I hope not," his companion said definitely. "Playing companion to you on this ridiculous jaunt is degrading enough without having to disentangle you from some female."

"Ridiculous jaunt?" the younger man said with raised brows. "I've been training Salome for this race for over a year. And I really don't require a companion."

"A matter of opinion," the squat man said dourly. "To insist on tak-

ing time out for this nonsense in the middle of the most important project the organization has ever undertaken hardly impresses me as responsible action. With your knowledge of the project, I wouldn't turn you loose among strangers for a triple promotion."

"I'm glad you came along," the tall man said with a grin. "You're so suspicious of everybody we meet and so refreshingly incapable of enjoying anything but work."

Then his face lighted. "I do believe the lady is looking for us. She is heading this way."

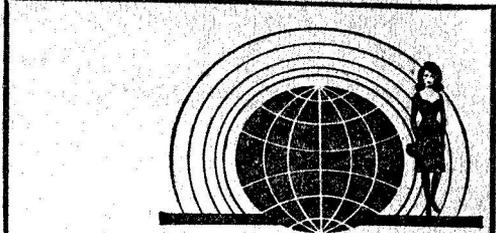
The girl stopped before the box, examined its number, then looked up with a dazzling smile.

"Sheik Ranjit Sighn?" she inquired in a musical voice, glancing from one man to the other as though she didn't know which to address.

The younger man rose and bowed. "At your service, sultana. My poor sword is yours to command."

The squat man rose also, reluctantly. The girl ignored him, too intrigued by the romantic statement uttered in an Oxford accent. Oddly the words hadn't sounded corny, although from the twinkle in the sheik's eyes she wasn't sure whether he was sincere or merely teasing.

She decided he was teasing and replied in kind. "I'm sorry I don't have any dragons to slay today. Salome's handler told me your box



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The complete novels depicting the adventures of April Dancer and Mark Slate, with the rest of the famous U.N.C.L.E. cast are especially written, entirely new and, in magazine form, depict the "Girl from U.N.C.L.E." which appears also on television under the MGM-Arena banner. Buy the magazine regularly at your news-dealers—and read the best of all!

number. I know this is impertinent, but is Salome going to win?"

"The sheik's horses usually win," the other man said in a guttural Slavic accent. "He devotes most of his time to training them."

His tone was slightly peevish, as though he considered his companion's devotion to horse training a waste of time.

After a flick of a glance in the squat man's direction, the girl returned her attention to the sheik, her eyes questioning.

He exposed white teeth in a smile. "No one can guarantee a win, sultana. But I always race my horses to win. No jockey of mine ever holds a horse back to build up the odds for future races."

"But do you think she will win?"

she persisted. "I want to make a bet, you see."

The sheik laughed with delighted amusement. "I wouldn't give a bad tip to such a charming lady. Salome can outdistance anything she's against today. Barring unforeseen accidents, such as her breaking a leg, you may bet her with confidence."

"Oh, thanks," the girl said, and started to turn away.

"A moment, please," the sheik said.

Pausing, she glanced up inquiringly.

"You can't move into a man's life, then out again without even telling who you are," he said. "I would never again sleep."

"Oh, I'm April Dancer," she said airily, and started to walk away again.

"Wait!"

She paused a second time, this time frowning.

"Won't you join us and watch the race from our box?"

"Thank you," she said politely. "But I have to find my bookie to get a bet down. And he's clear over near the box of the people I'm with."

"You may use my bookie," he said. "It will be simple to arrange."

When she pursed her lips undecidedly, the sheik said, "We would be delighted to have you. And I may be able to give you tips on other races."

April's eyes lighted.

"All right," she said. "I love to win."

The sheik gallantly descended the short steps leading from the box to take her hand and personally escort her up them. He introduced his friend as Maxim Karsh.

The squat man dourly said he was charmed, but he didn't sound it.

When they were settled in seats, April between the two men, Sheik Ranjit Sighn motioned over a portly man in a bowler who was standing nearby.

"This is Miss April Dancer, Basher," he said. "Put the name on your books and cover any amount she wants to bet."

"Sure, guv'nor, your 'ighness," the bookie said. "What's your liking, Miss?"

"Oh, Salome, of course."

Basher made a notation. "'Ow much, and what position do you favor?"

"Just a moment," April Dancer said.

Opening the alligator bag she carried, which both men could see was loaded with currency, she took out a piece of paper bearing a column of figures and studied it.

"Let's see," she said, speaking aloud to herself. "I'm ten shillings sixpence ahead. If I dropped the ten shillings, I would still be sixpence up."

To the bookie she said, "A half pound on second place."

"Second!" the sheik said with a

mixture of amusement and indignation.

April hiked her eyebrows at him.

"I don't want to risk losing," she said.

The sheik laughed aloud, as one laughs at the cute exploit of a small child. "Put it down, Basher. And a thousand for me on the nose. You want to place a bet, Maxim?"

"You know I don't gamble," Maxim Karsh answered.

The horses were led from the paddock and began parading up and down. The sheik said, "Salome is number two."

"I know," April said. "Isn't she beautiful?"

Ranjit Sighn swelled like a new father whose baby daughter has just been complimented.

"I'm rather proud of her," he admitted.

"I love horse racing," the girl confided. "I almost always win."

"I can imagine," the sheik said with dry amusement.

"We do it differently in America, you know. We have betting windows. There are no bookies at the track."

"I know," the sheik said. "I've been to America."

"Oh? Sorry I can't return the compliment. I've never been to Arabia."

"I'm not from Arabia," Ranjit said. "I happen to be the Sheik of Mossagbah."

"Oh?" April said blankly.

The sheik's expression turned rueful. "Few Americans seem to be aware that my country is on the map. It's on the edge of the Arabian desert. It's not large, but it's rich in oil and equally rich in beauty. Nothing is more beautiful than the desert."

"I would like to visit it some day," the girl said politely.

"I would be glad to arrange it now," the sheik said.

She smiled at him. "I'm afraid I have to return to the States next week. How do I address you, incidentally? Sheik? Your highness? Or gov'nor, like Basher?"

"Ranjit," the sheik said.

"Then you may call me April. Oh, look, it's post time."

Conversation ceased until the race was over. It is not the custom in England to shout for your horse at race tracks, but April got carried away as the horses entered the stretch and yelled Salome home. It wasn't until Salome crossed the finish line first, that April glanced around and saw people staring her way and she realized her breach of etiquette.

Putting her hand to her mouth, she abruptly sat down and gave the sheik an abashed look.

"I embarrassed you," she said.

"You delighted me," he assured her. "The English could enjoy life more with a little American-type enthusiasm."

Salome had been the favorite. When the results were posted,

April discovered that the odds had been so low, she had increased her winnings only by three shillings sixpence. But she exhibited no disappointment. As a matter of fact she seemed eminently satisfied.

It wasn't the amount you won that was important, she explained to the sheik. The important thing was to win.

The comment further amused Ranjit Sighn. If there had been any doubt in his mind that April Dancer was actually an American heiress, her performance dispelled any uncertainty. It had been his experience that only very rich Americans showed concern over small amounts of money.

Probably the value of money had been drilled into her since childhood, he thought. This was a peculiarity of American millionaires.

A penny saved was a penny earned. He had once read that the children of old John D. Rockefeller were allowed a spending allowance of fifty cents a week until they reached their teens.

TWO

THE SILENT LISTENER

UNDER THE indulgent tutelage of the sheik, April made equally frugal and successful bets on the remaining races. By the end of the last race she was two pounds eight pence ahead and was obviously delighted by her winnings.

The sheik was equally delighted, but in a different way. Between races he had worked considerable personal information from the girl, and was now convinced beyond all doubt that she was a multimillionaire. She had told him she was an orphan and had been the only child of a freezer manufacturer in Akron, Ohio.

A casual mention that her father had died in the very three-hundred-bed hospital he had donated to the city amounted to an admission that she had inherited millions, for only a multi-millionaire could make such a charitable donation.

Ranjit Sighn was not impressed by money; he was a multi-millionaire himself. But the girl's enthusiasm over her small winnings when she could probably have bought the whole track outright from her pocket money tickled his sense of humor.

It even seemed to amuse dour Maxim Karsh. By the end of the afternoon he had thawed so much that he was actually being pleasant.

In the process of giving out information about herself, April managed to acquire some about the two men too.

The sheik had a palace in Mos-sagbah's capital city of Fada, a chateau on the Riviera, and a chalet in the Swiss Alps, she learned. But his favorite residence was his oasis fifty miles from Fada, out in the middle of the desert.

"It's the blood of my nomadic

ancestors, I suppose," he said. "Even after years of exposure to western culture, I'm most at home in a tent."

"You live in just a tent?" she asked.

The sheik smiled. "There are tents and tents. This one happens to be a hundred feet square with numerous rooms, a modern kitchen, electricity and some rather priceless art treasures. I hardly rough it. It's quite as luxurious as any modern hotel."

"It sounds enchanting," she said. "Just like an old Rudolph Valentino movie!"

Ranjit laughed at the comparison.

The only actual prying the girl did was as to Ranjit's marital status. He was a bachelor, he assured her, although under Moslem law he was entitled to a total of three wives.

April also learned that Maxim Karsh was a geological engineer, and his acquaintance with the sheik stemmed from the fact that his company was in the process of drilling for oil near the oasis.

This information was volunteered by Ranjit, and for some reason it seemed to upset the engineer. April got the impression he would have preferred the sheik to give no explanation of him whatever.

When the last race was over and the bookie Basher had settled accounts, the sheik asked April where she was staying.

"In London at the King George," she said.

"I'm at my club, which is only a stone's throw from there. May I call to take you to dinner this evening?"

When April graciously accepted the invitation, he pressed his advantage by asking if she would ride back to London with him in his limousine.

"Oh, I couldn't," she said, "it came with Lord Thaxton and the American Ambassador and his wife. We were in Lord Thaxton's box. I'm going to have to apologize for deserting them so shamefully all afternoon."

"Try to make excuses," he urged. "We'll wait for you at the main exit."

"I'll try," she said dubiously. "But don't count on it."

Her party was ready to leave and was waiting for her when she returned to Lord Thaxton's box. After apologizing for her long absence, she drew the ambassador aside.

"I managed to make my contact," April said. "You've been very helpful. Now I have a chance to follow it up. Do you think his lordship would be offended if I didn't drive back to London with you?"

"I'm sure he'll understand. The old fellow followed you with his glasses and saw you seated with that handsome bearded young fellow. He's quite a romantic beneath

his reserved exterior. He probably expects you to desert us."

"Thanks," she said. "That's all I wanted to know."

She went over to the elderly Lord Thaxton and made her excuses to him and the ambassador's wife. Both assured her it was perfectly all right for her to return to London with Sheik Ranjit Sighn and Mr. Karsh.

She found the sheik waiting for her alone at the main exit.

"All set," she said. "Where's Mr. Karsh?"

"He went to tell the chauffeur to bring the car around from the parking lot. We'll be picked up right outside the gate."

The limousine was a long black Rolls Royce, chauffeured by an Arab in uniform. Maxim Karsh was seated in front next to the driver.

Ranjit helped April into the back, told the chauffeur to drive to the King George Hotel when he reached London, then closed the glass partition between the front and rear seats.

"Now we can talk in privacy," he said.

April rather doubted that. Knowing how THRUSH, the arch-enemy of U.N.C.L.E., operated, she was sure everything they said would be recorded for later study. It was possible, though, that Ranjit Sighn didn't know his limousine was bugged. According to her information file on him, his connection with the organization was fair-

ly recent, and he may not yet have learned that THRUSH didn't even trust its own agents.

As they turned onto the road for London, the sheik said, "Do you have to return to the States next week, April?"

"I'm afraid so. There's some business about my estate. A transfer of stocks, I think Larry said. He's my lawyer. I really don't know exactly what it's all about but nothing can be done without my signature. What difference would it make anyway? You said you have to go back to Mossagbah about the same time."

"I do. I thought I might talk you into coming along and seeing the wonders of the desert."

April smiled. "Sorry. Larry will have a fit if I don't show up in New York when I'm supposed to."

"I can't stand the thought of being parted so soon," the sheik said, taking her hand. "When will I ever see you again?"

"You're going to see me this evening."

"Oh, sure. And every evening for the next week, if you'll allow me. But after that are you just going to walk out of my life forever?"

His touch sent a small tingle along April's arm in the direction of her heart. My, he was a handsome man, she thought. It was too bad he was involved with THRUSH. Under other circumstances she might generate kinder feelings about him.

Steeling herself against such weakness, she said, "Do you ever get to Cairo?"

"Sometimes. If you're going to be there, I'll make a point of it."

"I'll be there for a day or two soon. I've signed for a Mediterranean cruise at the end of this month. I know there's a short lay-over at Cairo for fuel and supplies, because that's the end of the route. From there we start back."

"I'll pick you up in my plane and fly you to Mossagbah," he said enthusiastically.

"We won't be there that long," she protested. "I would miss my ship."

"You can always catch it at some other port of call," he said reasonably. "Tripoli or Tunis or whatever. I'll fly you wherever necessary."

She pursed her lips as though thinking it over.

"I suppose something like that could be arranged," she said finally. "But suppose we table it temporarily. After a week of my company you may want to, withdraw the invitation."

"Never," he said fervently, giving her hand a squeeze. "I consider the matter settled."

When the sheik helped her from the car in front of the King George Hotel, she insisted it was not necessary to escort her into the lobby.

"I hardly think I'll be attacked by any dragons between here and the front door," she said with a



smile. "They aren't allowed to loiter in front of the hotel."

"All right," Ranjit conceded, smiling. "Can you be ready for cocktails and dinner by eight?"

"Easily. I'll expect you then."

She stuck her head in the front window to say good-bye to Maxim Karsh. The car was equipped with a telephone, she noted when she saw the bracketed instrument on the dash board.

As April Dancer walked from the lift to her hotel room, she dipped her hand into her bag and brought out a small, flesh-colored ear plug. Pushing back her dark hair, she slipped the plug into her ear. When she let her hair fall forward again, the plug was invisible.

The precaution had been instinctive, because April really hadn't expected to find her room bugged. To her surprise a faint humming sounded in her ear the moment she opened the door.

THRUSH had moved even faster than usual, she thought. April had known she'd be put under observation after she managed to meet Ranjit Sighn, but she had

hardly expected this rapid action.

Maxim Karsh, she thought. When she left the sheik waiting at the main gate and went after the car, he must have used the car phone to contact THRUSH's London office.

April would have to be careful of that one. She was sure her masquerade as an idle American heiress had fooled him, yet he was taking no chances. Probably everyone who came in contact with Ranjit Sighn was thoroughly investigated.

Closing the door behind her, April Dancer moved over to the bed and dropped her bag on it. The hum grew louder until she reached the center of the room, then began to fade as she passed it.

Casually she turned, walked to the dressing table and examined herself in the mirror. Again, from this new direction, the hum was loudest in the exact center of the room.

The bug was in the overhead chandelier, the U.N.C.L.E. agent decided. She didn't glance up, because it might be a visual device as well as a sound receiver.

Returning to the bed, she picked up her bag and walked into the bathroom. When she closed the door behind her, the humming promptly stopped.

At least she could have privacy here, April Dancer thought sardonically.

She removed the ear plug and dropped it back into her purse.

THREE

NO MAN'S LAND

WHEN APRIL came from the W bathroom she had arrived at a decision. She always got a mild kick from turning the enemy's own weapons against them, and the bug in her room gave her a perfect opportunity to give the listening agents an earful.

Going over to the writing desk, April sat and picked up the phone.

"I wish to place a call to Mrs. Cornelia Amster," she told the switchboard operator. "She's staying with Lady Mowbry in Kent. You'll have to look up the number, because I've forgotten it."

While she awaited the connection, she smiled to herself. There were advantages in having attended a good New England school. One was her schoolgirl friendship with Cornelia Amster, nee Crowley, heiress to the Crowley chain-store fortune.

THRUSH might have difficulty finding any record of a deceased American freezer king from Akron, Ohio named Dancer, but they could hardly question that Cornelia Amster was anything but an American heiress. She was as well known as Barbara Hutton.

April was also thankful for the American tabloids which reported Cornelia's every move. It was through them that she had learned her old school friend was honey-

moon in England with her recently acquired second husband, and that the couple would be staying with Lady Mowbry for a week. April had made careful note of the honeymoon itinerary just for use in such an emergency as this.

She heard a very British voice say, "Lady Mowbry's residence."

"London calling," the operator said. "Mrs. Cornelia Amster, please."

When Cornelia came to the phone and recognized April's voice, she squealed, "April! Where are you?"

"At the King George in London. Having a happy honeymoon?"

"Simply divine. Henry is so sweet. I'm dying for you to meet him. When can you come up?"

"Corny, you don't want callers during your honeymoon."

"One more won't matter. We've been surrounded by people ever since it started. Henry is showing me off to all his relatives. He's the younger son of the duke, you know. I'd be a duchess some day if Henry had managed to get born before his brother Albert. Lady Mowbry is his aunt. I'm sure she would love to have you."

"I'm afraid I won't have time, Corny. I just called to say hello and wish you happiness. I'll only be here a week and I'm all tied up—I hope."

"What do you mean, you hope? Can't you spare me one day out of a whole week?"

April giggled. "Would you expect me to spare a day from a brand new romance?"

"Romance! Have you finally fallen, April? Who's the lucky bridegroom?"

"Whoa," April said. "I'm not planning to get married. Can you picture me in a harem in the middle of a desert? It's just a pleasant interlude."

"A harem? Are you tangled up with some oriental prince? You be careful! I nearly accepted the proposal of a sultan last year, and when I discovered he had *four other wives*."

"He's not a prince, Corny. He's the sheik of Mossagbah, and he doesn't really have a harem. He's a quite eligible bachelor. Tall and dark and handsome and absolutely divine. Would you believe it, he actually lives in a tent on a desert oasis. As he describes it, it's about the size of a palace and is furnished just as ornately, but it's still a tent. Just like Rudolph Valentino in the *Sheik*. I can hardly wait to see it."

Cornelia wailed, "April, you're not *going* there with him!"

"Not now," April reassured her. "Maybe not at all. Depends on whether he still looks as handsome to me a week from now. It won't be for some time in any event. I have to fly back to New York next week because of some tiresome legal business about a transfer of stocks or something."

Although Cornelia was fully aware that April had only modest financial means, April was reasonably sure she would exhibit no surprise at this. Her old school friend had been raised amid such tremendous wealth, she probably took it for granted that all women owned stocks and securities.

Cornelia said, "When are you going to visit this dreadful place?"

"It's not a dreadful place, Corny. The sheik says it's as comfortable as any modern hotel. At the end of the month I have a Mediterranean cruise planned. I happened to mention I would be stopping at Cairo. Ranjit said he'd meet me there and fly me to his canvas palace."

"It sounds dangerous to me," Cornelia said dubiously. "Way off alone in the desert with a handsome sheik. You be mighty careful."

"Oh, Ranjit is a perfect gentleman, Corny. Don't worry so."

"Ranjit, eh? Sinister sounding name. How long have you known this character?"

"I just met him today."

This brought another wail of protest from April's old school chum. April soothed her by assuring her she could take care of herself. Before she hung up, she also had to assure her she would phone again before leaving for the United States.

That would stifle suspicion, she thought as she cradled the phone.

Naturally the phone was bugged, so THRUSH agents had heard both sides of the conversation. It should have convinced them that April was exactly what she seemed: a bored American heiress looking for new thrills.

MAXIM KARSH was staying at the Woodford. The limousine dropped him there, then drove on to Ranjit Sighn's club. The sheik instructed the chauffeur to be ready to leave again at a quarter to eight.

Fifteen minutes later the squat, broad-shouldered Karsh paused alongside the parked Rolls Royce. Turning his oversized head to glance both ways, he opened the back door and lifted a hidden panel in the back seat. He removed a small cylinder from the recess beneath the panel and replaced it with another.

Back in his hotel room, he fitted the cylinder into a tape recorder, switched it to play-back and listened to the conversation which had taken place in the back seat en route to London.

When the tape reached the point where the sheik invited April to visit his oasis, his Slavic featured face darkened with anger.

After the taped conversation ended, he switched off the machine and strode from the room. Outside Karsh caught a hansom cab and gave a Soho address.

The address was a dingy billiard parlor. Karsh told the driver to wait and entered the place. He passed through a room where seedy looking men were playing billiards at several tables, and he went into a men's room.

Checking to make sure the room was unoccupied, the short, squat man took a key from his pocket and unlocked the mop closet.

Karsh then switched on a light in the closet, pulled the door closed and locked it behind him. Reaching up, he gave the burning light bulb a half turn to the left. As the light went out, the rear wall of the closet slid aside to disclose a short passageway, ending in a curtained doorway.

The panel automatically slid back in place when Karsh stepped into the passageway. He pushed through the curtained doorway into a large room where several men monitored communication equipment of various types. One or two glanced up, then went back to their duties.

Going over to a slim, youngish man who sat idly before a panel, earphones clipped to his head, he said, "Anything?"

"She's taking a shower at the moment," the young man said. "You can hear the water running even with the door closed. She made a telephone call right after she came in. Want to hear it? Now, I mean!"

"Of course," the squat man said impatiently.

The young man threw a switch on the panel. April's lovely voice came from a speaker saying, "I wish to place a call to Mrs. Cornelia Amster."

Karsh listened intently to the whole phone conversation. When it was over his expression indicated that his anger had somewhat abated.

"At least she doesn't seem to be a plant," he muttered, more to himself than to the young man. "Cornelia Crowley-Amster *couldn't* be an U.N.C.L.E. agent."

"Akrim double-checked the thing," the young man offered. "It actually is Mrs. Amster and her new husband staying with Lady Mowbry. So they didn't ring in an actress just to play the part for our benefit."

"I guess Miss Dancer is only what she seems," Karsh said, more relaxed. "Stay on the monitor until further notice."

He turned and retraced his way back through the men's room and on outdoors. He gave the hansom cab driver the address of Ranjit Sighn's club.

By the time he arrived at the club it was nearly a quarter of eight. Karsh saw the sheik, elegantly attired in evening clothes, just coming down the steps.

Telling the driver to wait again, Karsh climbed from the cab and went over.

The Arab chauffeur already had the rear door of the Rolls open for the sheik to enter. Ranjit paused to look at Karsh.

"Oh, hello, Maxim. What's up?"

"I'd like a word with you," the squat man said grimly, taking his elbow to lead him out of earshot of the chauffeur.

The sheik frowned at a wristwatch. "I haven't much time."

"You'll have to take time for this," Karsh said frigidly. "How dare you invite a woman to the oasis at this point? Have you lost your mind?"

The sheik's eyes narrowed.

"And how did you learn of the invitation?" he inquired ominously.

Maxim Karsh blinked. "That doesn't matter. What matters—"

"It matters to me," the sheik interrupted coldly. "I'm not one of your paid underlings. I happen to be the chief of state of an independent sheikdom. I haven't offered my services for money, but for a share in the eventual power. I highly resent being spied upon by an inferior."

The short, squat man reddened slightly. "I may be your social inferior, Ranjit, but I am your superior in this project. You will learn that THRUSH requires absolute discipline, no matter what your status is in the world. It is my order that you withdraw this invitation."

The sheik's expression suggested he was more amused by the man's impudence than irked. He said sarcastically, "You certainly can't suspect April Dancer of being an U.N.C.L.E. agent."

"That isn't the point. As a matter of fact I instigated a check on her before we ever left the race-track, and it seems she's an American heiress, all right. But you can't take any outsider to the oasis. She's bound to see things she shouldn't."

"She won't understand them," Ranjit said dryly. "As lovely as she is, she doesn't impress me as loaded with brains. I've already mentioned to her that you're supervising the drilling of an oil well near the oasis. That will account both for your presence there and all the activity going on. You worry too much."

"You don't worry enough," Karsh exploded. "I gave in to your unreasonable insistence on taking time out to race your horse, but I absolutely put my foot down on this. I forbid you to bring this woman, or anyone else to the oasis until our project is completed."

The sheik stared down his nose at him.

"I don't take orders from peasants," he said coldly. "If the lady accepts my invitation, which is my devout hope, you may expect to see her there as my guest. Meantime, whatever listening devices you have in my car or elsewhere to

eavesdrop on my personal conversations, I expect to be removed at once. Understand?"

"I do as my superiors say," Maxim Karsh growled.

In the same cold tone Ranjit said, "Then, since I am obviously your superior in every way, eliminate the bugs. Now you will have to excuse me. I am already late for our reservation at *Annabel's* in Berkeley Square."

He strode over and climbed into the back seat of the limousine. Maxim Karsh glared after him, controlling his anger by chewing at his pendulous lower lip.

FOUR

DESERT DEATH DEALER

ONE WEEK later April Dancer walked along a New York street in the shadow of the U.N. building. She turned into a modest shop whose window sign identified it as *Del Fiona's Tailor Shop*.

At the rear of the shop a pleasant looking woman seated before a pressing machine glanced up and smiled. April smiled back, entered a dressing cubicle at the rear of the shop and pulled the door closed behind her. She waited, facing the rear wall.

In the outer room the pleasant-looking woman touched a button on the machine which had nothing to do with its pants pressing function.

A panel at the rear of the dressing cubicle slid aside and April Dancer stepped through into the lobby of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

The U.N.C.L.E. agent exchanged a pleasantry with the clerk on duty, picked up her I.D. triangle—without which she would have set alarms to jangling all over the place if she had attempted to go farther—and walked down the hall to Alexander Waverly's office.

The director of U.N.C.L.E.'s New York headquarters was a tweedy, soft-spoken man past middle-age who gave the impression that nothing less than atomic attack could jar his inevitable poise. Two other people were in the office with him.

Mark Slate, in his early thirties, was a lean, muscular man with the eyes of a poet and the build of an athlete. A Cambridge graduate, an RAF veteran and a former member of the British Olympic ski team, he was a recent transfer from U.N.C.L.E.'s London headquarters.

His dress was a trifle flamboyant for an undercover agent, since an effort to look unobtrusive is usual in that field. It wasn't garish, but he wore a rather loud tie and a checked vest. He gave the impression that to complete his outfit he should have been strumming a guitar.

The other person was Randy

Kovac, a tall, coltish teen-ager. Randy, still in high school, was an experiment. U.N.C.L.E.'s first and only part-time on-the-job trainee, he was supposed to work in Communications only four hours a week. The training so fascinated him, though, he could be found at headquarters, as often as not in areas which had nothing to do with communication, practically every minute he could spare from school and study.

Mr. Waverly said in his usual formal manner, "Ah, Miss Dancer. We've been expecting you."

Mark Slate smiled at her affectionately and said, "Hi, April."

Randy, who had a teen-age crush on the girl agent, silently gazed at her as a peasant regards a queen, waiting for April to speak first.

April made Randy's day complete by greeting him first with a friendly, "Hi, Randy."

"Welcome back, Miss Dancer," he said enthusiastically. "Have a nice trip?"

"Just fine. How are you, Mark?"

"Curious. What did you find out?"

"Enough to know something definite is going on in Mossagbah." She turned to Waverly. "Mission accomplished, sir. The sheik has invited me to visit his oasis. He's to meet me in Cairo on the fifteenth and fly me there in his private jet."

Randy said, "Is this trip going to be chaperoned?"

All three looked at him. Randy blushed.

Waverly turned back to April. "Excellent, Miss Dancer. You didn't attempt to learn anything about the project, did you?"

April shook her head. "You told me to do nothing which might arouse suspicion that I was prying. I even pretended some misgivings about visiting the oasis, but of course I finally let the sheik talk me into it. It is a THRUSH project, though. Maxim Karsh was with him."

Alexander Waverly's left eyebrow raised slightly, a gesture which for him denoted extreme startlement. "One of THRUSH'S top electronic engineers. Well, well. Did the sheik volunteer any explanation of his presence?"

"He introduced Karsh as a geological engineer. He said Karsh's company was drilling a new oil well near the oasis."

Mark Slate said, "Maxim Karsh wouldn't know an oil well from a hole in the ground. He's strictly a physicist."

"You know him, Mr. Slate?" Waverly asked.

"Not personally. I read his dossier when I was stationed in London. He was one of those on the required study list for all agents."

"He's on the list at this headquarters too," Waverly said. "Which is how I assume Miss



Dancer was familiar with his name. You had never encountered him before, had you, Miss Dancer?"

"No, sir."

"If Maxim Karsh is involved in this project, it must be a major one," Waverly said. "And it most certainly has nothing to do with oil." He turned back to Mark Slate. "I think we'll have you do a little advance scouting, Mr. Slate. Fly over to Mossagbah and do a bit of nosing around. Perhaps you can pick up some rumors of what's going on from the natives."

When Slate nodded, Waverly said to April, "You go ahead with

your cruise as planned, Miss Dancer. By the time you arrive in Cairo, Mr. Slate should have some preliminary information for you. You can check with Cairo headquarters before you fly to Mossagbah with Ranjit Sighn."

"All right, sir," April agreed.

Randy asked, "What kind of guy is this Ranjit Sighn?"

"A couple of years older than Mark, I think," April said. "Tall and dark and extremely handsome, with a cute little mustache and a goatee which makes him look kind of devilish."

She was unaware of the touch of dreaminess in her voice as she

described the sheik, but Randy caught it. He said belligerently, "And just what's on this oasis?"

"Just a tent."

"A tent!" Randy said in a high voice. "You're going to spend maybe a whole week or more all alone in the middle of the desert in a tent with this man?"

"It's not just an ordinary tent, Randy," April said with a smile. "It's more like a canvas palace, with innumerable rooms. Ranjit has assured me that I'll have my own private room in the women's quarters. And we'll hardly be alone. There are numerous servants with quarters in the tent."

"Oh," Randy said, somewhat mollified. "You be careful anyway."

Waverly told the boy in a kindly tone, "I'm sure she can take care of herself."

Mark Slate said, "I'll call the airport to see if I can get a reservation to Mossagbah tomorrow. Meantime, April, do you have a date for dinner tonight?"

"No, I came straight here from the airport."

"Then I'll pick you up at six-thirty. During dinner we can work out contact plans in case I'm still in Mossagbah when you get there."

"How romantic," April said with a mock sigh. "I'll be waiting with bated breath."

Slate cocked an eyebrow at her. "I know I can't compete with a

handsome multi-millionaire sheik, but at least I can dance a mean frug. If you behave yourself, I may take you dancing after dinner."

BY THE TIME Mark Slate had been in Mossagbah two weeks, he gave up all thought of learning anything of significance from the natives. Not that he found them close-mouthed. He spoke Arabic fluently, and he had spent the first week in Fada simply picking up the Mossagbah dialect.

With his hands and face darkened and robed as an Arab, he was accepted without suspicion when he began to visit the nomadic tribes.

It was simply that no one had any information as to what was going on at the oasis. While it was widely known that foreigners had built a number of strange buildings there, no one had any idea of their purpose. Since it was also understood that the foreigners were under the protection of Sheik Ranjit Sighn, the tribesmen exhibited no great curiosity. Ranjit was an absolute monarch. Too much curiosity about his affairs might not be healthy.

Eventually Slate decided that the only way he was going to learn anything was by a visit to the oasis.

It was just past dusk when he halted his camel atop a sand dune and studied the lights below. In

the center of the oasis the walls of the huge, palace-like tent glowed dimly from lights within it. Even dimmer glows came from the numerous small tents surrounding it.

Just beyond the oasis several rectangles of light denoted the windows of some kind of building.

Slate kneed the camel forward. Fifty yards from the oasis he halted again, signaled the animal to kneel, and dismounted. Leading the camel behind a sand dune, he drove an iron stake into the sand and tethered it securely.

Silently he circled the oasis on foot toward the rectangular lights. The moon was just rising. By its light he could see, when he got close enough, that the glow came from the center of a line of five flat-topped buildings. The other four, taller, longer and wider than the center one, were all dark.

This was a major project, he thought. The larger buildings were at least a hundred feet long by fifty wide and quite evidently factory buildings. The smaller one in the center of the row was probably the administration building, and fifty yards out in the desert, was a towering skeletal structure he could make out but dimly. Slate made a wide circle of the row of buildings in order to get a better look at it.

Twenty-five yards from the structure he dropped flat when he spotted a robed Arab guard armed

with a rifle slowly patrolling around it. He was now close enough to make out what it was, however.

It was the half-completed missile tower of a rocket-launching pad.

On hands and knees Mark Slate headed for the administration building. Halfway there he sank flat again when he spotted another Arab guard patrolling the rear of the line of buildings.

When the guard had passed beyond him and had his back to him, Slate rose and sprinted to the shadows alongside the administration building.

The lighted windows were at the far end of the building, the end facing the oasis. Cautiously he moved to the nearest one and peered in.

It was a small mess hall. Seven men were at dinner around a single long table. They seemed to be of mixed nationality, but none looked Arabian.

The only familiar face he saw was at the head of the table. Slate had never personally met the man, but he felt sure he recognized Maxim Karsh from the complete description in his London dossier and from April's personal observation.

Retreating to the dark end of the building. Slate peered around the corner. The Arab guard had not yet reached the far end of his post and still had his back turned. Slate stepped around the corner

and tried the door centered in that end of the building.

Finding it locked, Slate produced a small pick-lock and easily opened it.

A dimly lighted hall ran the length of the building, ending at the door to the mess hall he had peered into.

Mark Slate hesitated for a moment, then drew out his U.N.C.-L.E. gun and buried it in the sand just outside the door. He felt a trifle naked without it, but he knew it would be foolish to take it into the building with him. If he were surprised, the gun would identify him as an U.N.C.L.E. agent, even if he managed to shoot his way clear, thereby alerting THRUSH that U.N.C.L.E. was aware of the project.

Since nothing else in his possession which couldn't be easily disposed of in an emergency identified him, there was an excellent chance that Slate could pass himself off as simply an Arab sneak-thief if apprehended.

With a final glance toward the Arab guard, who was now ending his route and in a moment would turn to come back this way, Slate stepped inside and eased the door closed behind him. He left it unlocked.

There were two doors on either side of the hall, all but one standing open.

Glancing into the ones either side of the hall nearest the door

by which he had entered, Mark Slate saw they were living quarters. Probably for Maxim Karsh and his first assistant, he decided, since they were both single rooms.

Halfway down the hall the open door on the right gave on to a larger room containing two sets of triple-decker bunks and six metal wall lockers. The barracks for the lesser technicians, Slate deduced.

Across the hall from the barracks was a closed door. Trying it, he discovered it was locked.

One twist of the pick-lock opened it. The room was dark, but by the light from the hall Slate spotted a wall switch.

Easing the door shut behind him, he flicked on an overhead light.

FIVE

DESERT DEATH DEALER

SLATE FOUND himself in a completely equipped, windowless physics laboratory. Glancing around, he spotted a small safe in one corner. He was making for it when something on a work table distracted his attention.

It seemed to be a scale model of a curious Y-shaped contrivance, consisting of numerous separable parts fitted together by small pegs and holes.

When Mark Slate looked inside the various pieces, he saw that the contrivance was a miniature mod-

el of some kind of space vehicle. Farts housed many kinds of elaborate machinery; there was a tiny control room with a panel full of knobs, levers and dials, and a living cabin with six tiny bunks.

Putting the model back together, Slate knelt quickly before the safe. From a pocket in his robe he took a small earplug similar to the one April had used to detect the listening device in her London hotel room.

Inserting it into his ear, he placed his ear next to the combination dial and slowly turned the dial.

After a moment Slate heard the distinct sound of a tumbler falling into place. Reversing the direction of his turn, he again moved the dial slowly until he heard a second click. Twice more he reversed movement, then, after the fourth click, tried the safe door. When it failed to open, he turned the dial again until there was another click. This time the door opened. He smiled, realizing it had been a five-number ' combination instead of a four.

Removing the earplug, Slate dropped it back into his pocket. Then with curiosity, he examined the contents of the safe. There was nothing inside except a set of drawings and some technical notes.

After rapidly scanning the drawings and notes, Slate drew out a gold medallion suspended

around his neck by a golden chain. A small diamond centered the medallion and circling the diamond was a carved inscription in Arabic.

Holding each sheet of the notes and drawings flat on the floor, Mark Slate held the medallion over them and pressed a nearly invisible plunger on the medallion's back.

When he had completed this process, he carefully replaced all the documents in the same order he had found them, closed the safe and spun the combination dial.

Taking out a fountain pen, he twisted the barrel and a small chromium antenna thrust upward from its end.

"Section two," he said in a low voice.

After a moment Alexander Waverly's voice said, "Yes, Mr. Slate?"

"I'm in the lab of the project at the oasis," Slate said, quickly. "Do you recall the secret super-rocket fuel formula Professor Bettner reported stolen from his lab safe last February?"

"Yes, of course."

"THRUSH has it. They plan to use it to put the components of a space platform into orbit, then weld them into place in outer space.

"I don't know how far they've progressed with the individual components. There are four factory buildings here, but I haven't

been inside any of them yet. They have the missile tower for a launching pad about half completed, though."

"Were you able to get to their plans?"

"I just finished microfilming all of them."

"Good work," Waverly said. "Don't attempt to break into any of the factory buildings. Miss Dancer will be in a much safer position to look them over when she gets there. That microfilm is too important to jeopardize by risking apprehension over minor information. Get out of there and take the first flight back here you can get."

"Yes, sir," Slate said. "I'm on my way. I'll route through Cairo, so that I can leave word for April at headquarters there."

He twisted the pen barrel and the antenna disappeared. Putting the pen away, he flicked off the overhead light, cracked open the door and peered out into the hall. When Slate saw no one, he slipped out, pulled the door closed and re-locked it with his pick-lock.

He had barely taken a step toward the exit from the building when the door to the mess hall began to open. Instantly Slate darted through the closest door, the one into the six-bunk barracks.

Pulling the door nearly shut, he watched through the crack as men trooped from the mess hall into the corridor. Since the room he

was in, plus the two single ones, were the only rooms in the building aside from the laboratory and the mess hall, Slate knew he was going to have lots of company within moments if he waited around.

Clicking the door shut, he made for the moonlit window. It was barred by inch-thick steel rods spaced only about six inches apart.

Slate took out his fountain pen communicator and twisted the barrel and said, "Section two. Emergency."

Almost immediately Alexander Waverly's voice said, "Yes, Mr. Slate?"

"I'm about to be taken," Slate answered rapidly. "I probably can't talk my way out of it, but I may be able to pass myself off as a sneak-thief."

"Get rid of that communicator," Waverly said sharply. "Don't let them suspect you're an U.N.-C.L.E. agent at all costs."

"Yes, sir, I know," Mark Slate said, as he silently broke the connection.

The earplug in his pocket would be as dead a giveaway to his identity as the U.N.C.L.E. gun would have been. With his thumb and center finger he flicked it between the bars, far out into the night. The pick-lock wouldn't be as much of a giveaway, but it might create suspicion that he had been in the lab. Slate dropped it



into the sand just below the window.

Then he whipped out a small gunny sack, began jerking open locker doors and dumping everything of value he could find into the sack. A watch, two rings, three wallets, a set of jeweled cuff-links and two tie clips went into the sack before the door started to open. Before it opened completely, Slate had dropped his fountain pen communicator on top of the loot in the sack.

The man in the doorway switched on an overhead light, then gaped at Slate. Recovering, his hand darted beneath his arm and reappeared with a thirty-eight automatic.

Several angry-faced men were behind the first one. They all reached for guns too.

The man in the doorway, a thickset blond with heavy Teutonic features said, "Who are you?"

With a subservient bow, Slate

answered, speaking in the Mos-sagbahan dialect, "I Abdul the merchant, master. I look for cook to ask for dinner."

"Yeah?" the blond man said. His gaze fell on the gunny sack and his eyes narrowed suspiciously. Moving into the room, he said over his shoulder, "Perez, see what he's got in that sack."

The thin, wiry man named Perez and who looked Spanish, moved past him and took the sack from Slate's unresisting hand. Perez dumped the contents on one of the bunks.

The blond man, Perez and the men crowding the doorway all stared from the items on the bunk to Slate. Slate gave them a cringing, apologetic smile.

"Why, you lousy thief!" the thickset blond man said finally. "Turn around and get your hands against the wall. Perez, shake him down."

As Slate turned and leaned his hands against the wall, the blond man said to one of the men in the doorway, "Sven, hurry. Go get Karsh."

By the time Sven returned with Maxim Karsh, Perez had thoroughly searched the intruder and had reported there were no weapons or additional loot on his person. He had pulled out the medallion suspended by the chain around Slate's neck, and it now hung in plain view on the outside of his robe. Slate decided he might

call less attention to it by leaving it where it was, than by attempting to shove it down inside his robe again.

The squat, wide-shouldered Maxim Karsh looked Slate up and down suspiciously. Suddenly he said in Arabic, "What is your name?"

He had an atrocious accent. Apparently THRUSH wasn't as finicky about its agents' linguistic ability as U.N.C.L.E. was.

Sure of his pure Mossagbahan dialect, Slate said, "Abdul the merchant, master."

Karsh turned to the blond man and said in English, "Find anything on him, Fritz?"

Fritz shook his head. "Perez searched him. He's clean." Then, pointing to the loot on the bed, he added, "Except for that. He was cleaning out the lockers when we walked in."

Karsh returned his attention to Slate and said, still in Arabic, "Are you one of the sheik's men?"

"Yes, master. All Mossagbahans the sheik's men."

"I mean do you live at the oasis?"

"No, master."

"Where are you from?"

Slate shrugged. "From the desert. My tribe move with the winds."

Noticing the medallion hanging around Slate's neck, Karsh moved closer to examine it. "What's that?"

"Kadar prayer medal, master. Protection against Jinn and Eblis."

Karsh started to reach for it, Slate stepped back and raised both hands protectively, "No, no, master. Beat me if you like, but no take medal. Is no protection for infidel."

Karsh reached impatiently for it again. Slate put his hand across it.

"Is sacrilege," he said with dignity. "His highness not like."

The squat man paused. Sheik Ranjit Sighn had made it quite clear that the western intruders should not violate any of the native religious customs. Even though this man was a thief, he was still a Mossagbahan apparently. Karsh decided it might be better for the sheik himself to handle the matter of the medallion.

He dropped his hand and Slate poked the medallion back down inside his robe.

"How'd you get in here?" Karsh growled.

"Door unlocked."

"I mean into the building?" Karsh asked.

"Door unlocked too." Slate jerked his thumb in the direction of the door by which he had entered.

Karsh turned and left the room. They could hear his footsteps receding up the corridor. When he returned, he glared at the blond Fritz.

"It was unlocked. You know se-

curity rules. You were on check duty this evening."

Then a sudden thought struck Karsh. Without awaiting the blond man's reply, he turned and strode across the hall. After trying the lab door, he took a key from his pocket and opened it. He left the door open, and through it Slate could see him glance around, then kneel before the safe and begin working the combination.

When he had it open, he carefully checked the documents inside, replaced them and closed the safe again. Relocking the lab door, he came back across the hall.

"We won't take any chances," he said to the blond Fritz. "The sheik will be able to tell if this man is really a native. Put that stuff back in the sack and bring it alone."

The whole group seemed prepared to trail along, but Karsh delegated only Fritz and the wiry Perez to escort the prisoner.

"The rest of you take a look around the area," he ordered. "Abdul herd had to have transportation. Find out what he used to get here and report to me at the sheik's tent."

Karsh then led the way up the corridor to the mess hall, through it and out the door leading from it to outdoors. Fritz and Pirez followed with Slate between them, covering him with pistols.

Karsh led them across the stretch of sand to the oasis and to

the front entrance of the sheik's tent.

They were challenged by a robed Arab sentry just outside the tent, but when he recognized Maxim Karsh, he stepped aside to let the group enter.

This was it, Slate thought. It was going to take superb acting to convince Mossagbah's supreme ruler that he was a native. And if he didn't convince him, he was very shortly going to be dead.

six

ENEMY TERRITORY

ANOTHER Arab sentry armed with a rifle stood just inside the door. He frowned at the drawn pistols of Fritz and Perez, but apparently he knew them both; besides, it was quite obvious that they were drawn to cover the prisoner.

He let the group pass without making any objection to the guns.

The inside of the tent was like something from the *Arabian Nights*, with modern overtones. The main room was huge—probably fifty by thirty feet—and the walls were hung with jeweled tapestries. A rich oriental rug covered the floor. Cushions to sit on were spread here and there, and low tables next to them contained beautifully carved gold and silver urns and chalices.

But there was also some mod-

ern western furniture among the oriental splendor. A long handsome teakwood dining room table with six ornately carved chairs had been placed in the center of the area. In one corner, there were a couple of long sofas and several easy chairs. Lamps spaced around the room were electric, Slate noted. Then there must be a generator, because cables could hardly have been run this far out in the desert.

A tall, handsome man in a white riding habit, glistening black boots and a jeweled turban was seated in one of the chairs reading a book. Even if he had met him somewhere else, Slate decided he would have recognized Sheik Ranjit Sighn from April's description. The thin black mustache and close cropped goatee did rather make him look like a debonair devil.

The sheik glanced up in mild surprise at the intrusion, then laid aside his book and regarded Slate and the two guns trained on him curiously.

Slate bowed deeply and said in Arabic, "May Allah smile on you always, most high and exalted one. I am your humble subject, Abdul the merchant."

Ranjit Sighn said, "Greetings, Abdul. May Allah smile on you also."

He looked at Maxim Karsh inquiringly.

Karsh said, "We caught this man' looting the lockers in the

men's barracks. At best he's a thief. At worst he could be an U.N.C.L.E. agent."

Ranjit glanced at Slate, with amusement, then back at Karsh. "Oh, come, Maxim. You see U.N.-C.L.E. behind every palm tree."

"Maybe he is Abdul the merchant," Karsh said doggedly. "He speaks Arabic. But that could be a pose. I want you to check him out thoroughly. You ought to be able to tell."

Before the sheik could reply, curtains covering a doorway at the rear of the room parted and a dark, lovely young girl in Arab costume entered, bearing a tray containing coffee, sugar and cream. After glancing curiously at the visitors, she set it on a table next to Ranjit.

"Thanks, Konya," the sheik said absently. "Would any of you gentlemen like coffee?"

Karsh answered for all of them with a guttural, "No thanks."

The girl walked away and gracefully sank onto a cushion. She examined Slate's darkened face with interest, then ran her gaze up and down his robed body.

Ranjit added sugar and cream to his coffee, stirred it and sampled it before turning his attention to Slate.

"What were you doing in the men's barracks, Abdul?" he asked in the Mossabahan dialect.

In the same language Slate said, "Liberating a few worthless pos-

sessions I thought the infidels would have no more use for, your highness. I was not aware they were under your protection."

Ranjit smiled slightly. "What is your tribe?"

"The Kadars, your highness."

In English the sheik said to Karsh, "Nomads. Completely loyal. This is no U.N.C.L.E. agent."

"How can you be sure?" Karsh asked.

"I understand that most U.N.-C.L.E. people are excellent linguists, but you can always tell when a language has been learned in school. This man speaks the lower class Mossagbahan dialect without accent and knows the slang.

"It is surprising more liberators of worthless possessions haven't appeared before now, because word of the foreigners' new buildings must have spread among all the nomadic tribes by this time. While no native would dare steal from me because it would be sacrilege, no such religious scruples apply to foreigners."

Karsh was still unsatisfied. "He's wearing some kind of medal around his neck. I want you to look at it."

Without waiting to be told, Slate pulled out the medallion by its gold chain and moved nearer to the sheik.

Ranjit reached out to cradle it in his palm and examine it, then dropped it.

"A Kadar prayer medallion," he said. "A fine one, too. Solid gold with a diamond setting. They sometimes save for years in order to own one. It keeps away evil Jinn and protects against Eblis, you see."

"That's what he said," Karsh admitted reluctantly. "Who's Eblis?"

"The prince of the apostate angels. Allah turned him into a devil for refusing to worship Adam. Adam and Eve are in our mythology too, you know."

Slate tucked the medallion back down inside his robe.

The sheik frowned at the still drawn guns held by Fritz and Perez.

"Put those away," he said. "They aren't necessary. And let's see what's in that sack."

The men meekly holstered their guns. Fritz handed over the gunny sack. After examining its contents, Ranjit gave it to Karsh.

"Return all the items to their owners and forget it. Now that Abdul knows you are under my protection, you won't be bothered again. I'll tell him to spread the word among his tribe, so that none of them will bother you again."

"You mean you're just going to turn this thief loose?" Karsh said indignantly.

The sheik frowned again. "He won't appreciate being called a thief. He broke no Moslem law by 'liberating' possessions from infi-

dels. He wouldn't understand punishment from his ruler and protector."

"But suppose he is an U.N.C.-L.E. agent after all?"

The sheik glanced at the fake Abdul. "You speak English, do you?"

"Some, a leetle, your highness," Slate said with an Arabic accent. "Not good."

"French?"

Slate shook his head. "No, your highness."

In French, which Slate spoke as well as English, Ranjit said to Karsh, "No U.N.C.L.E. agent could fool me into believing he's a Kadar, unless they've actually recruited a Kadar. And that's impossible. It would be against his religion to act against me."

"This man will obey any order I give him, but I'm not going to order anything he would regard as punishment. He has to be released."

Also in French, with an accent nearly as atrocious as his Arabic, Karsh said, "Would he obey your order to stay here and work on the construction project for pay? We could use another laborer, and at the same time we could keep an eye on him, just in case U.N.C.L.E. has managed to recruit one of your loyal tribesmen."

The sheik looked slightly pained by Karsh's refusal to accept that none of his subjects were subvertible, but after considering, he reluctantly nodded.

"That's an acceptable compromise which will save face all around."

He said to Slate in Arabic, "Abdul, the sheik has need of your strong hands in the building of the structure he has commissioned the foreigners to erect. You will receive pay in accordance with the number of hours you work. Understand?"

With a low bow, Slate said, "Yes, exalted ruler."

"Go with Mr. Karsh here," Ranjit said, pointing to the broad-shouldered engineer. "Do as he tells you. I will see that you are paid adequately for your work."

Slate offered another submissive bow.

As he was led from the room, Slate glanced toward the servant girl, still quietly seated on her cushion. She gave him a shy smile.

A friend in enemy territory was always welcome. He smiled back, but his smile wasn't shy. It was so intimate the girl blushed.

The man named Sven was waiting outside the tent. He said to Karsh, "He came on a camel. It was staked behind a sand dune over there." He pointed vaguely to the west.

"What did you do with it?" Karsh asked.

"Put it in the corral." He gestured in the direction of a large barbed-wire corral near the edge of the oasis.

In the moonlight Slate could see an armed Arab sentry slowly pa-

troling along the outside of the barbed-wire fence. That cut off his transportation, he thought. Even if he managed to overpower the sentry, he would be in full view of the guard stationed in front of the tent.

The whole place was crawling with guards; getting out of it was going to be a considerable problem.

And it was essential that he get the microfilm out.

The guard in front of the tent would have to go first, Slate decided. Once he was disposed of, the one guarding the corral could be taken.

Sometime after midnight, when the whole camp was asleep, he would make his move.

Maxim Karsh put a hitch in this plan. Slate had assumed he would be quartered in one of the smaller tents with other Arab laborers. His assumption was wrong. He was led back to the administration building and placed in the single bedroom opposite Karsh's.

"My assistant is in Switzerland locating certain electronic equipment," the engineer explained. "His room will be vacant for a week, so you may as well use it. Aren't you lucky?" Slate knew exactly how Karsh felt about him.

Slate attempted to summon a smile of appreciation.

"We rise at six-thirty and begin work at seven-thirty," Karsh said curtly. "See you at breakfast."

He went out, closed the door

behind him and there was the sound of a key turning.

The cautious Slav was taking no chances, even after the sheik's assurance that Abdul couldn't possibly be an U.N.C.L.E. agent, Slate thought ruefully. He checked the single window and found it barred.

He took off his hooded robe and hung it up on a wall hook. Beneath it he wore the typical costume of a desert nomad: baggy trousers stuffed into well-worn knee boots and an upper pullover garment somewhat resembling a sweat shirt.

Slate kicked off his boots, switched off the light and lay on his back on the single bunk.

After locking the newly hired laborer in his room, Maxim Karsh walked down the hall to the men's barracks. He found all six occupants there.

He said to Fritz, "Did you return everything to the proper owners?"

"All but this," the big blond man said, holding up a fountain pen. "Nobody claimed it."

Karsh took it from his hand and examined it.

"Good pen," he said. "You're sure it doesn't belong to any of you?"

One by one the occupants of the room shook their heads.

"It looks familiar," Karsh said with a frown. "Seems to me I used to have one like it. But how would it get in here?"

The slim Spaniard Perez said, "Maybe one of the fellows borrowed it from you some time, boss, and forgot to return it."

Karsh looked around the group. "Did one of you borrow it? Is this my old pen?"

Nobody would admit being the culprit.

"Somebody here's mighty forgetful," Karsh growled. "Here-after when you borrow something, remember to return it."

He stuck the pen in his shirt pocket.

SEVEN

ROAD TO ESCAPE

IT WAS just past midnight when

Slate was awakened by a low hiss outside his window. Rolling over to look that way, he saw the dim outline of a head and shoulders. This side of the building was in shadow, but the head and shoulders were silhouetted against the moonlight beyond it.

With a catlike movement he bounced erect and went over to the window.

It was the servant girl the sheik had called Konya.

Slate merely smiled at her and waited.

"Hello," she said shyly in Arabic.

"Hello yourself."

After a moment of silence she volunteered, "I am Konya."

"Allah bless you, Konya," Slate said. "I am Abdul."

"Allah bless you also, Abdul. Why have they made you a prisoner?"

"The infidel Karsh does not understand our ways," Slate said. "He thinks I'm a thief. The sheik didn't order me locked up. It's only Mr. Karsh's idea."

"Do you wish me to talk with his highness?" Konya asked. "Perhaps he will order you freed."

Slate contemplated this and decided it might be poor tactics. Having passed one inspection by Ranjit Sighn, he preferred to stay out of his way. The sheik might ask some embarrassing question Slate couldn't answer, such as an inquiry after the health of some sub-chief of the Kadars of whom Slate had never heard.

"I'm not being mistreated," he said. "It's comfortable here. Tomorrow I am to start work on the steel tower the foreigners are building and am to be paid for it."

Konya said wistfully, "In a way I am as much a prisoner as you are."

"I thought you were a member of the sheik's household," Slate said in surprise. "You're a prisoner?"

"Not really. I only feel like one. Actually I have some status. I am the daughter of Orkhim,"

"Orkhim?"

"The chief of his highness' personal guard."

"Oh. Then why do you feel like a prisoner?"

"You do not understand how it is with women in our country, because you are a man. Oh, I am envied by the other women of the oasis because I have fine quarters in the sheik's tent. I would not have to work as his servant. It is my own choice.

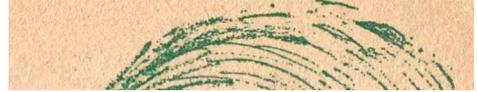
"But what is my alternative? I can live in the small, poorly furnished tent of my father and cook for him."

"You could get married," Slate said. "A girl as attractive as you should have no trouble finding a husband."

"To one of the sheik's guard or one of the laborers?" she said scornfully. "They are all ignorant and illiterate." She added proudly, "I was educated by the sheik's royal tutor. I speak English and French and can read and write in both. I have read in books of how women are treated in such places as the United States of America. Do you know that women there have the same rights as men?"

"Sometimes more," Slate said dryly.

"It is my dream to go to the United States," Konya said wistfully. "I would run away from this place in a minute if I thought I could get there." Then she sighed. "It is but an idle dream. I have no money and no friends in the outside world. I wouldn't get even as far as Fada before I was caught



and brought back and beaten by my father."

Slate said, "Are you really serious about this?"

"I was never more serious in my life," she said fervently. "I hate my life here."

He examined her upturned face, considering whether to trust her or not. She could be a plant sent by the sheik to test him.

Then he decided she couldn't be. The sheik had been so convinced of his estimate of Abdul the merchant, he had been irritated by

Karsh's continued suspicion. He decided to take a chance.

Switching to English, he said quietly, "I could maybe get you to America, Konya."

She looked surprised. In the same language she said, "You?" Then she frowned. "You speak English better than you did in the sheik's tent. You sound like an educated man."

"I'm not exactly illiterate," he admitted.

"You have been to school?"

"Yes."

She gave him a delighted smile. "I knew there was something special about you the moment I saw you. You held yourself with more pride than the cringing dogs who serve the sheik. You are the first Mossagbahan aside from the sheik I ever met who had education."

He decided there was no point in letting her know he wasn't one of her countrymen. He said, "There are many others. Your experience has been confined to desert nomads."

"Could you really get me to America? You are only joking, of course. How could you do it?" she asked eagerly.

"Not only get you there, but see that you are taken care of after you arrived. I have friends. We'll go together."

She gave him a sidelong glance. "You wish me to run away with you?"

He said, "Let's get something

straight. I'm not making romantic advances. I'm suggesting a business deal. You help me get out of this cell and I'll take you with me to America. My friends there who will see that you receive enough training for you to get a job and make your own living. But don't get any romantic ideas."

She looked disappointed. There was a long silence. Finally he said, "Well?"

"You're not teasing me?" she asked. "How come you, a mere Kadar tribesman, have such important friends in America?"

"It's a long story," he said. "I'll explain it on the way to America. But may Allah strike me dead if I deceive you."

She stared at him through the bars for some moments. Then she breathed, "I believe you, Abdul. I do not understand, but I believe you. What do you wish me to do?"

"Do you know where the men's barracks room is?"

She nodded. "On the opposite side of the building."

"Somewhere in the sand just beneath the window is a thin strip of steel about three inches long. Find it and bring it to me."

"A piece of steel?" she said puzzledly.

"Like a nail with a head, only thinner and flatter. It is what is known as a pick-lock. With it I can get out of here."

"But why would such a thing be there?"

"Don't ask questions," he said patiently. "Just go find it."

From birth Moslem women are trained to be submissive to their male betters. Konya was obviously still puzzled, but she obediently moved to the rear of the building and around to the other side.

She was gone nearly a half hour. When she finally returned, she looked in at Slate apologetically.

"I have sifted the sand all around the barracks window with my fingers," she said. "Twice I had to run and hide in the shadows of the building next door, because that side of this one is in moonlight and I heard the guard coming. The thing you wish is not to be found. The sand is so deep."

That should have occurred to him, Slate thought. It was probably like trying to locate a needle in a haystack.

"Maybe it will be easier in daylight," he said. "I'll try to break away from work tomorrow and look for it myself. I guess we'll have to postpone our flight until tomorrow night."

"I am sorry," she said.

"It's all right. This will give you time to pack a few possessions. Don't take many, because we'll probably be riding double on a camel. I'd rather not steal a mount for you."

Konya understood this. A Mossagbahan wouldn't steal from his sheik. Slate thought it unnecessary to explain that moral considera-

tions had nothing to do with his decision. He merely wanted the sheik to continue to believe he was a Mossagbahan, even after he was gone, and that his reason for flight had been simply elopement with Konya.

"Shall I come tomorrow night at the same time?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Now you'd better scoot back to bed before a guard spots you."

"Good night, Abdul," she said softly, and faded away from the window.

Apparently Mossagbah didn't have any labor laws, Slate thought sourly after his first day of work on the launching pad tower. He and the Arabs working with him under the supervision of the THRUSH engineers and technicians put in a twelve-hour day in the boiling heat, with only forty-five minutes for lunch.

All the laborers except Slate were allowed to return to the oasis during the noon break, for lunch prepared by their women folk. Slate lunched in the mess hall under the watchful eye of THRUSH men.

No one objected when after lunch he wandered outside and sank into the shade of the administration building just beneath the barracks room window.

He noted that Perez and Fritz followed him out and sat in the shade on the same side of the building, however. Maxim Karsh was

still taking no chances that Abdul the merchant might just possibly be an U.N.C.L.E. agent.

Idly Slate sifted sand through his fingers. It was so dry and loose, he could probe down several inches. Occasionally he unobtrusively shifted position. By the time Maxim Karsh blew a whistle in signal that it was time to go back to work, he had covered the whole area beneath the window.

His groping fingers had encountered nothing but sand. Probably the pick-lock had worked its way down a foot or more.

Slate contemplated using the next day's lunch break to dig up the U.N.C.L.E. gun buried by the rear door of the administration building, but rejected the idea after some thought. He could hardly shoot his way past seven THRUSH agents, plus the Arab guard. Even if he did manage to fight his way to the corral and escape on a camel or horse, he would be pursued across a hundred miles of desert to the Mossagbahan border.

Besides, that would leave no doubt in anyone's mind that they had been harboring an U.N.C.L.E. agent. Also Slate had promised to take Konya with him.

The only realistic plan of escape was somehow to get out of his cell during darkness. There was no point in recovering the U.N.C.L.E. gun until he was ready to take off.

That night Konya visited him again.

"Did you find the little steel thing?" she whispered.

"No. It's hopeless. I have another plan, but it'll have to wait until tomorrow night."

She looked disappointed. "I am all packed to go, Abdul."

"Then you won't have to pack tomorrow night. Do you know what is in any of the other four buildings?"

Konya shrugged. "The sound of machinery comes from them. I do not know what the machinery's purpose is."

"There must be a work bench with small tools in at least one of them," Slate said. "Would you be challenged if you wandered through the buildings tomorrow?"

She pursed her lips. "I could say I was looking for the sheik. If I wait until the lunch break, there will be few in the buildings."

"Fine. I want you to steal a hacksaw blade. Know what one looks like?"

She shook her head.

"It's a slim, steel saw blade about so long," he said, spacing his palms apart about a foot. "It has little steel protuberances on either end which fit into a frame with a handle. But I don't need the frame, just the blade. Think you'd recognize one?"

"Oh, yes," she said confidently. "You describe very good."

During the morning of Slate's second day of labor a small jet plane was wheeled from the build-

ing farthest north. Ranjit Sighn, wearing a white linen suit and a jeweled turban, was accompanied by an Arab attired in a chauffeur's uniform.

They climbed into the plane. It took off and disappeared into the distance.

"Never mind the rubber-necking," Maxim Karsh yelled from below to the workers on the tower. "Get back to work."

That night Konya passed a slim metal blade between the bars. Slate was elated until he examined it. It was a scroll saw blade.

When she saw the expression on his face, Konya said worriedly, "It is not right?"

"Apparently I don't describe as good as you thought," he said kindly. "This will only cut wood. A hacksaw blade is a little wider and longer and heavier. I also should have mentioned that it will probably be blue steel."

"I saw one of those," she said forlornly. "I thought the little one would be easier to conceal."

"Want to try again tomorrow?"

"All right," she agreed. "But my heart was set on going tonight."

"It's only one more day, Konya. Where was the sheik going?"

"To Cairo. I do not know why."

Slate did. April's ship was due to dock there that afternoon.

After Konya left Slate snapped the scroll saw blade in half and attempted to pick the lock. It didn't work.

He hid it beneath the pad on his bunk for future reference.

EIGHT

"THEY CAN RULE THE WORLD"

WHEN HER ship berthed at Cairo, April Dancer was a little put out to find Ranjit Sighn waiting for her at Customs. She had written him to meet her at the Royal Hotel, where she had an overnight reservation. His meeting the ship confronted her with a problem, because she had planned to stop by Cairo's U.N.C.L.E. headquarters en route to the hotel.

April didn't let her irritation show, however. She clasped both his hands in hers and gave him a delighted smile. His response was just as enthusiastic. She suspected that only the inbred reserve of an Oxford education prevented him from publicly attempting to take her into his arms.

She liked the expensive cut of his white linen suit and admired the turban with a ruby in the center of the forehead. April studied Ranjit for a minute.

"You look more like a sheik than you did in England," she said. "There you merely looked like a handsome race horse owner."

"When in Rome, do as the Romans do," he said with a smile. "In England people stare at a turban. Here it's accepted as a matter of course."

"I like it," she told him. "It makes you look kind of interestingly sinister. You've surprised me, you know. I didn't expect you to meet the ship."

"I couldn't wait until this evening." Reluctantly he released her hands. "Do you mind?"

"I'm glad," she lied. "You can help me through Customs."

He was a help there, so much of a help that her irritation nearly disappeared. With the sheik running interference she had no problem with Customs at all. She was bowed through with only the most cursory inspection.

The same uniformed Arab chauffeur Ranjit had with him in London loaded April's luggage into a limousine, this time a Lincoln. It also had a phone in it, she noted. As a matter of fact the sheik called her attention to it.

"We could phone the hotel from the car and cancel your reservation," he suggested with animation. "Then we could drive straight to the airport."

"I haven't seen Cairo yet," she objected. "I want you to take me night-clubbing."

"Of course," he said instantly. "I am being selfish. It is only that I am eager to show you the wonders of Mossagbah's desert."

He told the chauffeur to drive to the Royal Hotel.

It was only three when they arrived at the hotel. April said she wished to take a shower, and after-

ward a short nap so that she could stay up late for a night on the town. She suggested that Ranjit return for her about six.

Obviously he had been prepared to monopolize her every minute, because he had the afternoon all planned.

"You won't want to miss the bazaars," he said. "And they won't be open tonight."

"I would rather miss them than the night clubs," she told him. "And it's a choice of one or the other. Honestly, I'll be unable to keep my eyes open tonight if I don't have a nap. We had a ship's party last night which lasted until all hours and if you must know, I had a little too much French champagne."

He gave in gracefully. With a parting hand squeeze the Sheik said he would return promptly at six.

On the way up in the elevator with the bellhop, April slipped the flesh-colored earplug from her bag and fitted it into her ear.

THRUSH still wasn't trusting her completely, she discovered when the bellhop keyed open her room door. The moment she stepped inside, a low humming started in her ear.

When the bellhop had been tipped and had departed, April casually moved about the room until she located the bug. This time it was in the lower left corner of the dressing table mirror.



She sat at the dressing table and creamed her face, at the same time unobtrusively studying the device from the periphery of her vision. The mirror was fixed to the wall by decorative glass-headed studs in each of its four corners. The lower left one was slightly different. It was the same design, but there was a tiny glass lens in its center.

A visual bug, she thought indignantly. The peeping Toms! Since she was relatively sure THRUSH didn't really suspect she was an U.N.C.L.E. agent, and this was merely a routine check ordered by the suspicious Maxim Karsh,

the only reason for a visual bug was that some lecherous agent hoped for an eyeful when she prepared for bed.

She would stymie that little peep show, she thought. And right now.

A box of tissues lay on the dressing table for the convenience of the guests. April picked it up, drew out a handful of tissues and carefully wiped off the cleansing cream. When she was finished, she carelessly tossed the tissue box down. It landed at an angle, so that she was still in view of the lens as long as she was seated at the dressing

table, but the view of the rest of the room was blocked.

April let her eyes droop and stifled a yawn. Then she rose, went over to the phone and called the desk.

"This is Miss Dancer in room 312," she said. "I'm going to take a nap and want to get up at five. Will you please ring me?"

The desk clerk said he would be glad to.

Hanging up, April crossed to the bed, sat down just hard enough to make the springs creak and removed her shoes. She dropped them to the floor one at a time. They landed on the carpet with two subdued but distinct thumps.

When she flopped back on the bed, the springs creaked again. She emitted a tired sigh.

Slowly and silently she rolled to the edge of the bed, eased her stockinged feet to the floor and stood erect without allowing the springs to creak this time.

Stooping for her shoes, she tiptoed to the door.

She took a good fifteen second to open the door, turning the knob slowly so that there would be no giveaway click. Just as slowly and quietly she turned the small catch which would leave the door unlocked. When she returned, she didn't want to risk the sound a key would make in the lock.

Easing the door closed behind her and allowing the knob to turn so slowly that the catch re-engaged

without sound, April slipped on her shoes. Then she took out her compact and replaced the makeup she had removed with cleansing cream.

Although she considered it unlikely, it was possible that a THRUSH agent was stationed in the lobby. To circumvent the possibility, she located a fire stairs, walked down three flights and came out in an alley. Then April Dancer jammed a match folder between the door and the frame next to the spring catch of the fire exit so that she could get back in the same way.

Four blocks from the hotel she entered a small book store. When a dark-haired female clerk politely asked what she could do for her, April said, "Do you have Alexander Dumas Pere's *Three Musketees*?"

Momentarily the dark-haired woman's eyes hooded over. Then she said with a smile, "In the original French?"

"No, in Greek," April said.

"That will be in the classical section," the woman murmured. "Come this way, please."

She led the way to the rear of the shop and through a curtained doorway into a smaller room whose walls were lined with bookshelves. At the rear of the room she stooped to touch something on the under side of a lower shelf.

A section of bookshelf swung aside to reveal a divided black curtain.

When April stepped through the curtain, the bookshelf automatically swung back in place.

She found herself in a lobby nearly identical to that of New York's U.N.C.L.E. headquarters. The clerk on duty glanced up, and, failing to recognize her by sight, asked, "Name and assignment, please?"

"April Dancer, Section Two, New York headquarters."

"Ah, yes, Miss Dancer. We've been expecting you. One moment, please." He noticed how attractive she was. Then, consulting his agent file, the clerk pressed a combination of buttons on a small panel before him and glanced up at a screen similar to a television screen fixed on the wall.

The screen began to glow, then front and profile portraits of April appeared on it.

"I guess you pass," he said pleasantly, flicking a switch to darken the screen. He handed her an I.D. triangle. "Last door at the end of the hall. Walk right in. Mr. Raj will know you are coming by the time you get there."

April walked down the indicated hall, opened the door and went in. It felt good to be back at an U.N.-C.L.E. headquarters again. A stocky man with one of the pleasantest smiles April had ever seen sat behind a large, hand carved desk.

Rising and bowing, he said, "Amhed Raj, Miss Dancer. Please

be seated. Did you have a pleasant voyage?"

"Very pleasant," she said, taking a chair. "Has Mark Slate left any messages for me?"

⁴ Amhed Raj sank back into his desk chair. "Unfortunately, no. U.N.C.L.E. is no longer in contact with Mr. Slate. But I'll let your own chief explain the situation. He asked to be contacted the moment you arrived."

Raj pressed one of numerous buttons on a desk panel before him. Light flickered across a large glass screen on the wall and Alexander Waverly's image appeared behind a desk. Young Randy Kovac was standing beside the desk.

"Hi, Miss Dancer," Randy said eagerly. "We sure miss you around here."

In his quiet voice Waverly said, "Glad to see you arrived safely, Miss Dancer. Have you anything to report?"

"Ranjit Sighn met me at the ship," April said. "I managed to shake him long enough to get here, but he's to pick me up again at six. I probably won't have opportunity to contact you again until we get to the oasis, because I'll be with the sheik except when I'm in my hotel room, and my room is bugged."

Waverly frowned. "You're under suspicion?"

"I don't think so. I think it's just routine precaution. Maxim Karsh doesn't trust anybody. What happened to Mark?"

"He was taken three days ago, at the oasis. His last message indicated he thought he could pass himself off as a sneak thief, and we've heard nothing since."

"He's probably okay," Randy put in loyally. "Mr. Slate can wriggle out of any spot."

Waverly glanced dourly at the boy. "Before his capture he learned and reported on what THRUSH's project is at the oasis. The super rocket formula stolen from Professor Bettner's laboratory some time back is in the possession of THRUSH. They are building a space platform at the oasis, presumably with the intention of putting its individual components into orbit, then welding them together in outer space."

April asked, "What advantage will a space platform give them?"

Randy, who kept abreast of all facets of the space program, said dramatically, "They can rule the world. With atomic weapons aimed at Earth, they can deliver notice to every nation that unless the reins of government are turned over to them, they will blast their cities to nothingness one by one."

Cocking an eyebrow in Randy's direction, Waverly said, "Lucidly put, young fellow, but—harumph. That obviously is their aim, Miss Dancer. No doubt they plan to blast a few cities in advance as object lessons. Probably such places as New York, London, Paris and Moscow."

April's dark eyes flashed. "What are your orders, sir?"

"First locate and release Mr. Slate, if he's still alive. If he isn't, recover the Moslem prayer emblem he was wearing around his neck. It contains microfilm photographs of all THRUSH's plans for the space platform. Contact Section Two when that is accomplished for further instructions."

"Yes, sir," April said, her eyes wide with alert understanding of her grave duty.

Ahmed Raj reached for the panel button to cut communication. Before the picture faded, Randy got in the final word.

"You be careful, Miss Dancer," he said.

NINE

THE EVIL PLACE

IT WAS four-thirty when April got back to the fire door leading from the hotel into the alley. She found the match folder she had left in the crack of the door undisturbed. She dropped it in her purse and let the door click shut behind her.

When April reached her room, she kicked off her shoes and picked them up with her left hand. She turned the knob with the same care she had used when she left and cracked the door open just far enough to slip inside.

After easing the door shut, April

Dancer glanced toward the dressing table. The tissue box was still in the same position she had left it, she was relieved to see. If it had been moved, it would have been sure evidence that her ruse had been discovered.

Tiptoeing to the bed, she stooped to lay her shoes on the floor without sound, then carefully eased herself onto the bed. Noiselessly she shifted over a little at a time until she lay on her back in its exact center.

April lay quietly staring at the ceiling for twenty minutes before the phone rang.

The U.N.C.L.E. agent let it ring three times before sitting up and swinging her feet to the floor. When she said, "Hello," into the mouthpiece, April made her voice husky, as though it were still heavy with sleep.

"It's five o'clock, Miss Dancer," the desk clerk said.

"Oh, thank you."

Cradling the phone, she yawned audibly. Then April crossed to her suitcase, took out sheer fresh lingerie and carried it into the gleaming bathroom.

She made a second trip to choose an apple green evening dress and green satin shoes with square rhinestone buckles from her wardrobe trunk. April carried these into the bathroom also.

She was starting to close the bathroom door when a thought occurred to her. Returning to the bedroom once more, April carried her

purse into the bathroom and closed the door.

She fitted the flesh-colored ear-plug into her ear. There was no humming sound. Satisfied that the bathroom wasn't bugged, April removed it and dropped it back into her purse.

On the verge of undressing to take a shower, a pixie thought struck her.

Reopening the bathroom door, she crossed over to the dressing table, picked up the tissue box and pulled out a tissue. After rubbing at an imaginary spot on her dress, she dropped the tissue into a waste basket and tossed the box back on the dressing table. It landed some inches to the right of the visual bug, so that the entire room was again in view of the tiny lens.

Humming to herself, April sat on the edge of the bed, her profile to the bug, and stripped off her stockings. She did it slowly, letting the nylon caress her long, well shaped legs as each stocking came off. Then she rose, reached for the zipper at the back of her dress and slowly pulled it down.

April crossed her slender arms to grip the dress on either side, as though preparing to pull it off over her head, then casually walked into the bathroom just as the hem began to rise.

Closing the door, she smiled. She hoped that the dirty old man who was on the receiving end of the visual bug had high blood pressure.

Anticipation should have raised it considerably, and perhaps the sudden letdown had given him a stroke.

After her shower, April emerged from the bathroom fully dressed.

Ranjit Sighn arrived promptly at six. Tonight his turban was centered by a diamond. He wore black formal trousers, black patent-leather pumps and a white jacket.

He was a handsome devil, April had to admit, when she opened the door to his knock. That she had to regard him as an enemy made April feel some regret.

He seemed equally impressed by her appearance. He said slowly, "I didn't think it possible, but you increase in beauty every time I see you, April."

"It must have been my nap," she said lightly. "You're quite handsome yourself this evening."

"Thank you," the sheik said with a bow, and offered his arm to escort her to the elevator.

In London Ranjit Sighn had been so charming and gentlemanly that April had found it difficult to remember he was a tool of THRUSH. Although he had made no secret of the immense attraction he felt for her, he had never attempted any more familiarity than a good night kiss. This, coupled with his air of almost overpowering virility, had intrigued April more than she was willing to admit.

It wasn't until tonight that she got a glimpse of a side of his nature he had never revealed before, and

finally realized why he had aligned himself with an organization she regarded as the embodiment of treachery and evil.

It was late in the evening, after, a fine dinner and a tour of Cairo's] better night spots. They had finally come to a small, quiet native cafe where a stringed quartet softly strummed the discordant notes so pleasing to the eastern ear, but so difficult to appreciate by westerners.

April sipped a glass of dry wine. Ranjit, who didn't drink alcohol because of his Moslem religion, dawdled over a cup of tea. He dropped a hand on top of one of hers.

"I called you sultana when we first met," he said. "You would make a lovely sultana-mine, dear April."

"Is that a proposal?" she asked lightly.

"Yes."

The simple statement sobered her. After gazing at him for a moment, she squeezed his hand and said, "I'm an American girl, Ranjit. I'm flattered by the offer, but our backgrounds are too far apart. I'm afraid I wouldn't be very happy in a tent—no matter how modern—in your desert so far from Rome."

"You would rule beside me over far more than just a desert, April."

"You mean your Riviera chateau and your Swiss chalet? You told me yourself your favorite home was

the oasis. Besides, I couldn't leave Christianity and embrace your religion."

"Religion won't be a factor in the world much longer," he said. "That's no problem."

She examined him quizzically. "What do you mean by that?"

He shrugged. "Religion is a mean of controlling the masses. I go through the forms of my inherited faith because it's one of the things I use to keep my subjects in order. But soon there will be so many more effective means, religion will no longer be necessary as a social control mechanism."

"Soon? And why?"

"Vast revolutionary changes are on the verge of taking place in the world, April. The old orders are going to crumble and new rulers will emerge. I don't plan to remain merely the ruler of an obscure and almost unknown sheikdom forever. I'm going to be one of the powers in the new regime."

"I'm afraid you're over my head," April told him innocently. "Are you talking about the movement to consolidate the Arab states?"

Releasing her hand, he made an impatient gesture. "I'm not talking about anything you've read in the news. This is something the world is going to discover quite suddenly and drastically." His eyes began to burn with a fanaticism April had never before seen in them—a fire so bright and soul-consuming that,

she instinctively recoiled. It frightened her.

The sheik was too engrossed by his obsession to notice April's reaction. Fixing her with his burning gaze, Ranjit said, "How would you like to become empress of the entire East?"

So that was what had impelled Ranjit Sighn to barter his soul to



THRUSH, she thought. Power. He was selling out his sheikdom, selling out the whole Arab world, even selling out his religion on the promise of being made one of the rulers of the new era.

She would have felt sorry for him if his barter hadn't been so ruthless. If THRUSH succeeded in its monstrous plan, Ranjit Sighn would never rule, she knew. He would be cast aside as a no-longer-necessary tool—probably he would even be assassinated—and some member of the already established hierarchy of THRUSH would move into the promised spot.

Quietly probing for more information while the sheik was still wound up enough in his dream to be indiscreet, April said, "You can't possibly mean that little Mos-sagbah intends to conquer the en-

tire East. Even if you had the military strength, the U.N. wouldn't permit it. You would find yourself at war with the whole world."

"Mossagbah won't even be involved in the matter," Ranjit said confidently. "At least not militarily. I can't go into details, but the revolution I speak of will be world-wide and sudden. All I can tell you is that I'll be in one of the key spots when it's over. You will have to accept that on faith, April. Do you think I'm merely a paranoid with delusions of grandeur?"

April pretended to study him. Then she smiled. "No, Ranjit. I'm sure you're quite sane. And I'm convinced you actually believe what you're talking about. But it sounds so incredible. What kind of revolution is going to take place?"

"I can't tell you that," he said soberly. "But believe me, it is inevitable and it isn't far off. When it comes, I want you with me on the winning side. I'm offering you a choice between sharing in the rule of an important part of the world and the loss of everything you now have. In the new order the idle rich will certainly be stripped of all their possessions. I don't want that to happen to you."

"You frighten me," April said. "I'm really beginning to believe you. I don't know why, because it sounds so fantastic, but all at once you've convinced me that this revolution is actually going to take place."

"It's as inevitable as tomorrow's rising of the sun," the sheik said. "Do you want to be my empress?"

She reached across to squeeze his hand. "Can't we wait until this new order becomes a fact before I decide? And I haven't seen Mossagbah yet, you know, Ranjit,"

The obsessive light in his eyes faded, to be replaced by a mask.

"The cautious Americans," he said dryly. "I've seen the same characteristic in your businessmen in oil deals in countries where the governments weren't quite stable. They always wait to see which faction is going to end up in control before offering backing."

She had momentarily lost him, April felt. Quickly she brought the situation back under control.

"I'm not simply being selfish," she said in an offended tone. "I would want time to consider, no matter what you were or what your prospects are. Even if it meant my financial ruin, I couldn't say yes until I was sure I loved you."

"I'm sorry," Ranjit said with instant contrition. "Of course you may have time. I wouldn't want you unless you loved me."

It bemused April that he made no mention of loving her. She couldn't imagine being proposed to by an American man without first hearing a declaration of love. The Moslem relationship between men and women was so different, perhaps love was something the men didn't understand.

Despite his constant air of gallantry and the respect with which he treated her, April suspected that if she ever did marry Ranjit Sighn, even if she held the title of empress, she would be regarded as his slave.

Later that night when she was alone, April had no trouble remembering that he was a tool of THRUSH. The sheik had given her too close a look at the true nature beneath his charming veneer. Ranjit Sighn was as ruthlessly unconcerned about anything but his own power as any THRUSH agent.

CHAPTER TEN

HOT—OR COLD?

THEY LEFT the airport in the sheik's private jet the following morning. The Arab chauffeur, whom the sheik told April was also a professional pilot, handled the controls with ease.

They had been flying over desert which stretched endlessly to the horizon for some time, when Ranjit suddenly pointed through a cabin window below.

"The Mossagbah border," he said with pride.

April peered downward. There was no sign of change in the forbidding terrain. All she could see was a small concrete structure which she recognized as a pillbox. Then she spotted another pillbox perhaps a mile beyond the first, and

still more arranged in a curving line off into the distance.

Why did Mossagbah need a fortified border, she wondered dismally? Who would want it?

April's question was answered a few minutes later, when they began flying over one oil tower after another. The barrenness of the land was no disadvantage when oil flowed beneath it. Any oil-hungry nation would be glad to step in and take it over if the opportunity arose.

Shortly afterward the sheik pointed out a small dark spot on the burning sand some distance away.

"My oasis," he said, smiling.

As the spot increased in size and its color began to turn to a rich green, April saw that it was ringed by towering palms.

"It is beautiful from the air," she said. "What is it called?"

"It's original name in Arabic means 'The Garden of Life,' but it is never called that. The natives simply refer to it the oasis of Ranjit Sighn."

The plane came in to a smooth landing and taxied over near the edge of the oasis between it and a line of five adjoining buildings which had been built on the sand near the oasis.

The pilot cut the engine, touched a control on the panel, the cabin door automatically opened, and a set of metal steps descended to the ground.

Ranjit Sighn backed out first and

assisted April to the ground. Glancing around, April saw numerous Arabs and a smattering of men in western dress lolling in the shade of the buildings or under palm trees of the oasis. She decided if these men were connected with the project, it must be the noon lunch break.

A partially completed framework of steel girders towered above the buildings some distance beyond them in the desert.

"Why are you drilling so close to the oasis?" April asked the sheik. "It seems a shame to spoil the view of the desert with an oil tower."

"You have to drill where the oil is," he said with a smile. "Here comes Maxim to greet us."

April glanced in the direction Ranjit was looking and saw that the squat, broad-shouldered engineer had just emerged from the central and smallest of the five buildings. Before he reached them, two Arabs arrived from the direction of the oasis.

They seemed to have come to unload the luggage, because when the sheik spoke to them in Arabic, they bowed, climbed the ladder and began hauling out baggage.

Maxim Karsh approached with a sour expression on his face. He was thinking, she realized, that the sheik must have brought her here over Karsh's strong objections.

Nevertheless April threw him a dazzling smile and said, "Hello, Mr. Karsh."

"How are you, Miss Dancer?!" he said politely enough, but without any real welcome in his voice.

"Hello, Maxim," the sheik said casually, then ignored him and offered his arm to April to escort her to the tent centering the oasis.

Maxim Karsh trailed along behind them.

A robed Arab guard armed with a rifle came to attention as they passed into the tent. Another immediately inside momentarily came to attention also, then relaxed quickly at a negligent wave of the sheik's hand.

April gazed around with interest at the oriental luxury so incongruously mixed with western furniture.

Ranjit touched a small gong. A moment later the curtains over a door at the rear of the main room parted and a lovely young Arab girl appeared.

"This is Konya, April," the sheik said. "Miss Dancer, Konya."

The girl inclined her head in a small bow.

April smiled at her and said, "How do you do, Konya."

"Konya will show you your quarters," Ranjit said. "Get Miss Dancer anything she desires, Konya."

"Yes, your highness," the girl said in fair English. "Follow me, please, Miss Dancer."

Maxim Karsh had determinedly followed them into the tent. He stood quietly until April and Konya had disappeared, then looked at

Ranjit with barely suppressed anger.

"You've really managed to put us into hot water," he said. "I have received word that Lin Yang is coming here."

"Lin Yang, eh?" the sheik said with more interest than concern. "What's he want?"

"To inspect our progress on the project, obviously. He'll be furious when he learns you've brought an outsider here. I'm going to tell him you did it over my strong objection."

"Don't worry about April," the sheik said. "She thinks you're drilling for oil. I made sure she knows nothing about oil before I invited her. She thinks that launching pad tower is an oil derrick."

"Well, you can explain her to Lin Yang."

"Lin Yang doesn't worry me. He may be big in THRUSH, but he won't be so big when this is over. And until then, no one is bigger than me in Mossagbah."

"Why do you have to be so difficult?" Karsh complained. "I'm supposed to be in charge of this project. Lin Yang isn't going to take the excuse that I can't control you just because you happen to rule this god-forsaken country."

"This god-forsaken country happens to be my homeland and I consider it beautiful," Ranjit said coldly. Then he relented and smiled. "I'll concede it's probably uncomfortably hot working out there on

the tower and that there isn't much social life to be had. You need to relax. Would you like to dine with me and Miss Dancer tonight?"

Karsh looked somewhat mollified by the invitation.

"All right," he agreed. "What time?"

"About seven."

"I'll be here," Karsh said.

Meantime Konya had led Arpil along a short corridor to the rear of the tent. They passed an opening through which April saw a modern electric stove, a refrigerator and other kitchen equipment. Other openings seemed to give on to sleeping quarters.

At the end of the corridor was a rear exit from the tent. Konya turned through a doorway just before it.

The room was about twenty by fifteen feet, with elaborate jeweled tapestries covering the walls and a rich oriental carpet on the floor.

Like the outer main room, it was furnished in a combination of oriental and western style. There was a wide, comfortable looking sleeping mat and the usual cushions. But there were also a couple of easy chairs and a modern dressing table. In one corner was an ornately carved round bathtub.

The two Arabs brought in April's luggage, placed it where Konya directed, and departed.

Konya said, "Would you like a bath before lunch, Miss Dancer? There is time. Agri will not even

start to cook until she has conferred with his highness."

"Agri?"

"The cook."

"Oh." April eyed the tub. "Sounds interesting, but I don't see any faucets."

"I will bring the water," Konya said. "You like hot or cold?"

"In this weather about luke-warm would be fine," April said.

"I shall return shortly," Konya told her, and departed.

April seated herself at the dressing table, dipped her hand into her purse and brought out a rattail steel comb. At the same time she palmed the flesh-colored earplug. In case she was under visual observation, she didn't want just to push the plug into her ear without camouflaging the act.

With the comb in her right hand and the earplug palmed in her left, she pushed back the hair on the left side of her head preparatory to running the comb through it. The plug slipped into her ear. She ran the comb through her hair several times before stopping, then removed the plug and let it drop with the comb into her purse.

April was slightly surprised that there had been no humming sound in her ear. Maxim Karsh must have finally decided she was harmless after receiving the report that nothing suspicious had been heard or seen by means of the visual bug in her Cairo hotel room.

From her purse she took a foun-

tain pen similar to the one that Mark Slate had dropped into the gunny sack of loot.

Twisting the barrel to cause the antenna to shoot out, April said in a low voice, "Calling Section Two."

After a moment Alexander Waverly's voice said, "Yes, Miss Dancer?"

"I just arrived at the oasis, sir. I haven't had an opportunity to look for Mark Slate yet. There are four rather large buildings and one smaller one near the oasis. Beyond them is a partially completed steel tower somewhat resembling an oil tower."

"Part of the launching pad," Waverly said. "Mr. Slate already described the physical setup in one of his reports before he was taken. Is Maxim Karsh there?"

"Yes, sir," April said. "He finally seems satisfied that I'm harmless, because he knew I was coming and my room isn't bugged."

"Good. Report back as soon as you learn what happened to Mr. Slate. And keep on the lookout for that Moslem prayer medallion."

"Yes, sir," April said. Then, hearing approaching footsteps, she added hurriedly, "Someone is coming," and twisted the barrel of the fountain pen to make the antenna disappear.

April had dropped it back into her bag and was touching up her lipstick when Konya appeared with a steaming earthenware jug balanced on her head.

"This is only the hot," the girl said as she decanted it into the bathtub. "You must wait until I also bring the cold."

ELEVEN

THE GIRL FROM OUTSIDE

APRIL DANCER HAD no opportunity all afternoon to find out what had happened to Mark Slate. She did her best by suggesting after lunch that she would like to see the oil-drilling operation.

"It's too dangerous while drilling is going on," Ranjit told her. "If they happened to strike a gusher while we were nearby, the whole tower might blow up in the air and come down on our heads."

April couldn't decide whether to resent his considering her stupid enough to swallow this, or be pleased that she had convinced him she knew so little about oil-drilling operations.

The sheik suggested a ride on the desert.

"I don't have any riding clothes with me," she said.

Ranjit had a surprise for her. He had accurately estimated her measurements and had brought back from London a complete riding habit in anticipation of her visit. April had no choice but to agree to the ride.

They spent the entire afternoon on a horseback ride across the desert. It was insufferably hot, and



April got the peculiar impression that the sheik had insisted on it as a kind of test of her ability to be a desert queen. Since she had no desire to make him lose interest in her at this point, she managed to pretend that she thoroughly enjoyed the ride. The sheik was quite obviously impressed by April's ability to tolerate the oppressive heat. Apparently, the girl remained cool and collected.

They reined in their horses atop a tall sand dune which gave them a view of the endless waste for several miles.

"I find beauty in the desert," the sheik said. "But perhaps it is because I was born and grew up here. Most westerners see only the sand and feel only the heat."

That was all April could see and feel, but she said with enthusiasm, "There is beauty in it, Ranjit. I really love it."

Ranjit was obviously delighted with April's reaction.

It began to cool by the time they got back to the oasis at six. When April Dancer entered her room at last, she found Konya preparing another bath.

"I saw you ride in," she said. "I knew you would want to freshen up after your hot ride."

April stripped off her riding habit, bathed quickly and put on a cool white dress. She joined the sheik in the main room of the tent at a quarter of seven. The only other person present was the Arab

guard just inside the entrance to the tent.

The sheik took both her hands and smiled down into her face. "Now that you have seen my home, have you come to any decision?"

She glanced at the Arab guard.

"I would rather not discuss such a personal matter in front of people, Ranjit," April said in a low voice.

"Orkhim? He sees and hears only what I wish him to. Otherwise he is blind and deaf."

He tried to take her into his arms, but April twisted away. With a touch of frost she said, "I don't make love in front of an audience, Ranjit."

"Excuse me, my dear," the sheik said with a formal bow. "I was carried away by your beauty. But I would really like an answer one way or the other."

"I haven't had time to think yet," she protested. "You only asked me yesterday."

"Did I?" he asked wryly. "It seems eons ago. Perhaps I haven't been aggressive enough. I know that Americans have a different way of thinking than we do."

April cocked an eyebrow at him.

"And, yes, perhaps this is neither the time nor place to discuss it," Ranjit said with a glance at Orkhim. "His presence doesn't bother me, but it obviously does you. Suppose I drop by your quarters later tonight, where we can talk in privacy."

When she did not reply immediately, he smiled at her. "I said talk. Surely you're not afraid of me?"

April examined him with pursed lips. "Not as long as you understand that this American girl doesn't have loose moral values." Then she decided to change the subject. "I thought Mr. Karsh was dining with us."

"He should be along any minute," the sheik said. Raising his voice, he called, "Orkhim, look over toward the administration building and see if Mr. Karsh is on his way."

As the guard left the tent, Ranjit said, "He's been chief of my guards since I was a young man, shortly after my father died. He's Konya's father, you know."

April was surprised. She had been under the impression that the guard was rather young, because his beard was coal black and he had a powerful build. She looked at him more closely when he came back in and realized by the lines in his face that he was past middle age.

"He is not yet in sight, your highness," Orkhim reported.

At that moment Maxim Karsh was already in the tent, but he hadn't entered by the main entrance. He had come in by the rear way and had slipped into April's room.

Taking a small device from his pocket which resembled a jeweled shirt stud, except that its base was about the size of a half dollar, he unscrewed the jeweled head. At a

point where the wall tapestry was divided, he thrust the base behind it and forced its pointed tip through the material into the center of a cluster of jewels. When he screwed the head back on, it merely looked like one more jewel.

After examining his handiwork critically, he slipped back out the rear way and rounded the tent to the front entrance.

"Sorry I'm late," he apologized to the sheik. "I was held up by an emergency problem." He bowed to April. "Good evening, Miss Dancer."

The sheik touched the small gong which served as a signal for Konya. When the girl appeared, Ranjit said, "You may tell Agri we are ready for dinner."

The dinner, surprisingly, was not Mossagbahan food, but New York steak, and it was delicious. Wine was served to April and Karsh, but in deference to the religion he had confessed to April he followed in form only as a social control mechanism, Ranjit took none.

Conversation was light until, near the end of the meal, the sheik asked Karsh how progress on the "oil rig" was coming.

With a sharp look at April, Karsh said, "I don't think we should bore Miss Dancer with shop talk."

Assuming her best rattle-brained manner, April said brightly, "Don't mind me. I know nothing of the oil business, but shop talk never bothers me. I love to hear men talk busi-

ness even when it's over my head."

"Daytime is for business," Karsh said definitely, looking pointedly at the sheik.

"As you wish," Ranjit said with a shrug. "Your mess steward mentioned needing supplies, however. Does that come under the heading of shop talk?"

Apparently it didn't, because the comment caused Karsh to remember he had a list in his pocket from the mess steward.

Producing it, he asked. "Can you send your plane for these tomorrow."

"Of course," Ranjit said. He reached across the table for the list.

"Wait a minute," Karsh said. "I need a couple of personal items I may as well add on."

Taking out a fountain pen, he added a few words to the end of the list and passed it across to Ranjit. The sheik thrust the list into his pocket without looking at it. Karsh, who had finished eating, continued to toy with the pen.

"When is Lin Yang due here?" the sheik asked.

April pricked up her ears. Lin Yang was director of the mideast for THRUSH.

Maxim Karsh frowned and shot a side glance at April. Looking amused at his caution, Ranjit said to April, "Lin Yang is an oil expert Mr. Karsh is calling in for consultation."

Karsh glared at him, then apparently decided the girl couldn't pos-

sibly know who Lin Yang was and it was too late to suppress his name anyway.

"The message didn't say," he said shortly.

Suddenly, to her horror, April saw a small chromium antenna protruding from the end of the pen Karsh was toying with. Neither he nor Ranjit had noticed it.

IN THE Communications room at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters in New York Randy Kovac was monitoring the central communicator. Suddenly a strange voice came over the audio band assigned to Mark Slate.

The voice had an Oxford accent and was saying, "Have you ever met Lin Yang?"

A guttural Slavic voice answered shortly, "No."

"I haven't either," the first voice said. "It should be quite an experience if all I've heard is true. He's supposed to be a brilliant man."

Then April Dancer's voice intruded, saying, "May I see that pen for a moment?"

After that there was silence. The teen-age on-the-job trainee listened for several more moments, then rushed toward Mr. Waverly's office to report the strange reception.

AT THE oasis, April had plucked the pen from Maxim Karsh's hand at the same time she made the request overheard by Randy. She twisted the barrel as she did so,



causing the antenna to disappear.

As Karsh stared at her in surprise, she said in explanation, "I have one just like it."

In demonstration she lifted her bag from where it lay on the chair next to her and produced her own pen. "See, they are just alike," she said, holding her own up alongside the other. "Where did you get yours, Mr. Karsh?"

"A gift, I think," he said laconically, holding out his palm for its return. "I've had it a long time."

April had no choice but to give it back. Dropping her own pen back into her bag, she returned the bag to its former position.

A moment later Konya came to clear the dishes from the table. When she had brought coffee, she stood waiting next to the sheik until he glanced up.

"Yes, Konya?"

"Will I be needed any more tonight, your highness?"

"Why? What do you want to do?" Konya merely blushed.

"Ah, our lovely Konya has finally found a lover," the sheik said indulgently. "You never had eyes for any of the local men. You haven't taken up with one of the infidel workmen, have you?"

"No, your highness. He is a Mos-sagbahan."

"Then run along while the moon is still bright," Ranjit said with a negligent wave of his hand. "Tell Agri she can clear the coffee cups later."

"Thank you, your highness," Konya said with a small curtsy, and ran from the room.

The sheik glanced toward the sentry at the door. "I hope Orkhim didn't overhear that. He's rather strict with the girl, but it's time she had a lover."

April looked toward the door. The immobile sentry gave no sign of having overheard the conversation.

Konya went straight to her own quarters, slipped a shawl over her shoulders against the cool night air and exited from the rear of the tent.

Making her way to the edge of the oasis, she waited until the guard patrolling the front side of the buildings had his back to her, then sped across the moonlit space to the near side of the administration building.

The man she knew as Abdul the

merchant was waiting at his barred window.

"I could not get back to the machine shop today, Abdul," she said breathlessly. "I am sorry, but I was busy during the lunch hour. The sheik brought a rich American lady to visit and I had to prepare her bath."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I won't need a hacksaw blade now. I saw the lady arrive. I want you to take a note to her."

Konya gazed at him with a mixture of surprise and jealousy. "Would not such a fine lady be offended to receive a note from a poor tribesman?"

"I'm not exactly a poor tribesman," he informed her. "I told you I have friends in America. I know the lady well. She'll help us both to escape from here if you do as I say and don't ask questions."

"All right," she agreed, but she couldn't suppress a pout.

Although Moslem women are used to unquestioning submission to their men, they are as femininely capable of jealousy as women anywhere.

He passed a slip of paper between the bars to her.

TWELVE

NO MAN'S GIRL

THE GUARD changed at eight. Ten minutes after Konya was dismissed by the sheik, Orkhim was

relieved from duty. He went straight to his tent, leaned his rifle in a corner and walked outside again, where his wife Adana was tending a pot over a small fire.

"The meat will be ready in a minute," she said.

"The meat can wait," he said grimly. "Woman, why have you not told me that your daughter has a lover?"

She looked up at him. "My daughter? And is she not your daughter also?"

"Answer me!"

"I know of no lover Konya has," Adana said. "Since she moved to the big tent, she no longer has time for her mother. Will you eat?"

"Not until I settle this," he said, and strode off into the darkness.

He searched every secluded nook of the oasis, his heavy black beard bristling more and more angrily each time he found some secret place empty. He startled bachelors by abruptly jerking back tent flaps and peering into their tents. He covered every bachelor tent on the oasis and found every one home.

Konya was nowhere to be found.

Orkhim was stalking back toward his own tent when he spotted a slim, shawled figure darting toward the oasis across the moonlit stretch of sand between it and the foreigners' buildings.

He was waiting in the shadow of an enormous palm tree when the girl started to slip by.

Konya gasped when he suddenly stepped from behind the tree and snatched hold of her wrist.

"Where have you been?" Orkhim demanded.

"Just for a walk, father," she said fearfully.

Holding her wrist with his left hand, he backhanded Konya across the face with his right. "You lie! You have been with your lover!"

"No, father," she said, trying to pull away. "I have no lover."

"I heard you confess it to the sheik!"

"I did not. It was his highness who used the word lover, not I."

Orkhim twisted Konya's wrist and she winced. "Do you deny you have been with a man?"

"Only a friend, father. Not a lover."

"Aha. A friend, you name him. And you came from the direction where the infidels live. Have you taken up with an infidel?"

"No, no, father. He is one of us and a true believer."

"Lying wench! Nothing but infidels live in 'the wooden building.' He bent her wrist until she was forced to her knees. "Name the dog!"

"Please," Konya said. "There is one living in the wooden building who is not an infidel."

He stared down at her, then slowly released her wrist. "The Kadar? The man who calls himself Abdul the merchant?"

"Yes, father. I only go to him to

talk. Mr. Karsh keeps his door locked and his window is barred, so we do not even touch."

Orkhim frowned. "Why is he treated like this?"

Still on her knees, Konya said, "Mr. Karsh does not understand our ways. He still believes Abdul is a thief. I do not think his highness knows he is locked up at night."

"Hmm. Does this Abdul have any wives?"

"No, father."

"Does he own sheep or goats?"

"I have not inquired."

"Well, I will inquire. If he is a merchant, as he says, he must own something. Merchants are sometimes rich."

"I do not think he is rich," Konya said. "But he is educated. He has been to school. He knows how to read and write."

Orkhim was impressed. Like most illiterates, he tended to be awed by education. The prestige of having a son-in-law who could read and write would be great. Far greater than merely having a daughter with these accomplishments.

As a matter of fact, the latter was something of a disadvantage. It sharply limited her matrimonial prospects, because men were uncomfortable with a woman who was their intellectual superior.

Reaching down, he pulled Konya to her feet.

"Why did you not tell me of your

interest in this man, my daughter?" Orkhim asked in a kindly tone. "Such things should be arranged by your father even before you speak to the man. I will speak to the sheik tomorrow."

"But we are only friends, father," she protested. "Abdul is not looking for a wife."

"Every man should have a wife. An educated man should have an educated wife. Not as greatly educated, perhaps, but enough so that he will not find her dull. Don't worry. Your father will arrange it. I will also protest to the sheik about my future son-in-law being locked up like an animal. He will be freed tomorrow and your mother and I will take him into our tent until the wedding."

"Please, father. You will embarrass me. He doesn't want to marry me."

"How could you know?" Orkhim asked reasonably. "He and I haven't discussed it yet. The sheik will furnish the dowry, of course, since I am chief of his guard and you are a favorite of his. I shall ask for three horses, ten sheep and ten goats. No man is going to refuse a dowry like that."

"Father," she wailed. "I don't want you to arrange anything."

"Be still, child. I know what is best for you. Now I must leave you, because your mother has my meat ready. I will speak to the sheik in the morning."

He moved on toward his tent.

After glaring after him in exasperation, Konya continued on toward the rear entrance to the big tent.

MAXIM KARSH took his departure at eight-thirty. A tall, angular Arab woman with a lantern jaw came to clear the coffee cups. When the sheik addressed her as Agri, April realized she was the cook.

After Agri disappeared, April Dancer said, "I think I'll freshen up a bit, Ranjit. Will you excuse me for a few minutes?"

"Of course," he said rising. Glancing toward the new guard who had replaced Orkhim, he said in a lower voice, "Instead of returning here, suppose I join you in your quarters in—say, a half hour?"

His intimate tone suggested that despite his earlier assurance that the only reason he wanted to visit her quarters was to talk, he had something more active in mind than that. It looked as though she might have occasion to use her judo training, April thought without enthusiasm.

The vagrant thought flitted through her mind that if the sheik hadn't revealed his ruthless and conscienceless inner soul to her in Cairo, she might have welcomed his suggestion, because he was still one of the handsomest men she had ever met. She virtuously suppressed the thought, but it lingered long enough to make her smile of

agreement more promising than she meant it to be.

"All right," she found herself saying. "I'll expect you about nine."

As she pushed through the divided curtain into the rear corridor, Konya came in the back way. They met halfway along the corridor.

"May I see you a minute, Miss Dancer?" the girl said in a low voice. "Inhere."

She pushed aside a curtain and switched on a lamp inside. Following her, April found herself in a tiny but comfortably furnished room. There was no western furniture here. There was only a sleeping pad, a couple of sitting cushions and a small table with washing utensils on it and a small mirror hanging on the tent wall above it.

A round bundle of clothing which looked as though it had been packed for traveling lay on the floor near the foot of the sleeping pad.

Konya tossed her shawl onto the sleeping pad, produced a folded piece of paper and silently handed it to April. Then she stood waiting, her face expressionless.

Unfolding the paper, April immediately recognized Mark Slate's handwriting. The note read:

I am in the last room on the south side of the administration building. No one, including the girl who brought you this note, knows who I really am, I'm

known locally as Abdul the merchant. The only reason I'm locked up at night is because Maxim Karsh wouldn't trust his own mother. Days I work as a laborer on the launching-pad tower. Twelve hours a day! They don't have unions here. How about springing me tonight? Konya is taking off with me, incidentally. She doesn't like it here "either."

Mark

April Dancer refolded the note, dropped it into her purse and glanced at the girl. She caught the barest hint of accusation in Konya's gaze.

Why, she's jealous of me, she thought, and was surprised to find herself feeling a touch of jealousy for the Arab girl also.

Why? she asked herself. Mark was merely a co-worker and a good friend—well, an especially good friend.

His romances were none of her business.

"Is Abdul the lover you went to meet?" she asked.

"He is the one I went to see. He has made it clear he has no wish to be my lover." There was a mixture of wistfulness and bitterness in Konya's tone.

Of course Mark would make that clear, April thought, feeling mild guilt that she had assumed he would be heartless enough to lead the girl on for his own advantage.

She said, "You want to leave here with him anyway?"

Konya gave a determined nod.

"Don't build up your hopes that things will change," April said gently. "The man you know as Abdul will keep whatever promises he has made, but he isn't husband material. Are you sure you want to leave here?"

"I would want to leave here if I had never met Abdul," Konya said passionately. "This oasis is a prison. Abdul promised to take me to the United States. Does he really have friends who will care for me and see that I get training to support myself?"

• "He does," April assured her. "You may trust him completely."

"We will have to leave tonight. Tomorrow night will be too late."

"Oh? Why?"

The girl flushed. "My father caught me returning from my visit to Abdul. He forced me to tell where I had been. I had to tell. He twisted my arm and slapped me, and would have beat me if I refused."

"Oh, oh," April said. "What's he going to do?"

"Tomorrow he goes to the sheik to arrange our marriage," Konya said miserably. "He is going to ask his highness to furnish a dowry. I will die of embarrassment if we do not get away from here tonight."

April patted her arm. "Don't worry. The two of you can leave tonight. Can you get back to see

him again without being stopped by your father?"

"Yes. This time I will be very careful."

"Then deliver a message to him. I won't write it, because it will be safer for you to carry it by word of mouth. Now listen carefully."

For some minutes April explained exactly what she wanted Konya to tell Mark Slate. Then she asked her to repeat it back.

Konya had it nearly letter perfect.

When she finally reached her own quarters, April took Mark's note from her purse and also took out a match folder. Touching flame to the paper, she dropped it into a censer and watched it burn to ashes.

She seated herself at the dressing table and took out her fountain pen communicator and called Section Two. Young Randy Kovac answered.

"Is Mr. Waverly there, Randy?" she asked.

"He's in conference with Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin," Randy said. "Want me to break in?"

"Never mind," April said. "You can relay this on."

THIRTEEN

DEATH TRAP

MARK SLATE was lying on his bunk in the dark, hands behind his head and staring at the



ceiling, when another hiss came from outside his window.

Glancing toward the window, Slate saw the silhouette of Konya's shawled head. He swung from the bunk and padded over to the window in stocking feet.

"Hello again, Konya," he said. "Did you give the note to Miss Dancer?"

"Yes, Abdul. She sent me to bring you instructions. We are going to leave tonight."

"Fine," Slate said with enthusiasm.

"She sent you this," Konya said, passing a cigarette lighter through the bars. "But I do not see how it will get you out of here."

Slate examined it in the dimness and smiled. "You'll see in a few minutes. What else?"

"The guard changes at twelve. She thinks it is best to wait until then, as it will be four hours before the next guard change. That will give us a long start before the next guard change, she says. She is going to *tranquilize* the guard posted in front of the sheik's tent and also the one on duty at the corral, but I don't know what that means. Is she going to kill them?"

"I doubt it," Slate said. "She isn't very gory."

"Well, she says that at ten after twelve she will tranquilize the guard in front of the tent, and by

twenty after twelve she should have the guard at the corral tranquilized also. Just to play safe, she does not want you to appear at the corral until twelve-thirty. I will meet you there."

"How about April—Miss Dancer? Will she be there also?"

Konya shook her head. "She said to tell you she can be of more value remaining here. She said if she also fled, it would be too obvious. I do not know what she means by that."

Mark Slate did. If April disappeared along with him, it would be a dead giveaway that they were both U.N.C.L.E. agents. And Mr. Waverly didn't want THRUSH put on guard until headquarters had a chance to analyze the microfilmed plans of the space platform and could decide what action to take.

The flight of only Abdul the merchant and Konya would be interpreted merely as an elopement by a couple of Arab lovers, he hoped.

Slate said, "Never mind. I understand it. She say anything else?"

"Only that I should ask if you still have the prayer medal."

"Tell her yes. That all?"

Konya nodded.

"Now I'm going to need your help," Slate said. "Where are the guards now?"

"I will check," she said.

She slipped to the front end of the building. When she came back to the window, she said, "They are both coming this way. One is op-

posite the building just north, the other opposite the one just south. They will pass either end of this one about the same time.

"But why do you worry? They cannot see me in this deep shadow when I press myself against the wall."

"They would be able to see what I'm going to have you doing in a minute," Slate told her. "Tell me as soon as they've both passed."

She kept glancing both ways. After a few minutes she whispered, "Now," and pressed herself close to the building.

There was silence for several moments, then she straightened and said, "They are gone."

Slate estimated he would have about fifteen minutes before the sentries came back on their return route. Crossing to the bunk, he stripped off its lone blanket and carried it to the window. He stuffed one end through the bars.

"Pull it on through," he directed.

With a puzzled expression on her face, the girl obeyed.

"Now hold it up in front of the window, but about a foot away," he instructed. "There's going to be a rather bright light in here for a few minutes, and I don't want it seen from the oasis. Don't get the blanket too close to the window or it will catch fire."

Still looking puzzled, she spread her arms and held the top edge of the blanket as high as she could. "Like this?"

"Just fine. Now keep it there."

He touched a nearly invisible catch on the bottom of the cigarette lighter Konya had given him. When he pressed the lever on top, instead of the usual small yellow flame appearing, a thin blue flame nearly six inches long hissed outward.

Slate brought the flame to bear on the base of the center window bar. The metal glowed so white hot, it lit up the room as the thin flame ate through it.

Within less than a minute the bar had been cut through entirely. He cut through the base of the bars on either side, then asked Konya if her arms were tired.

"No," she said. "I am fine."

Pulling over a chair, Slate stood on it to attack the top ends of the bars.

"Hold the blanket a little higher," he cautioned.

Konya strained up on tiptoe, managing to raise the blanket another three inches completely blocking the small gap which had formerly been at the top of the window.

Slate carefully cut the top ends only three-fourths of the way through. Now, when he was ready to leave, a firm shove outward would snap them off the rest of the way. Meantime an unexpected check of his cell would disclose nothing unless the bars were closely examined.

Putting out the cutting torch, he

dropped the lighter into his pocket and carefully stepped down from the chair.

"All right," he said. "You may pass the blanket back in."

Konya lowered her arms and stuffed one end of the blanket between two bars. He drew it back inside and replaced it on the bunk.

With the blanket in front of her face, Konya had been unable to see what Slate had been doing, her only hint being the glow of light and the feeling of heat. She looked at the bars.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"I see no change."

Returning to the window, he said, "Good. That's the idea. I've fixed the bars so that I can get out whenever I want to now. You'd better leave before the guards get back "

"All right," she said. "You will be at the corral at twelve thirty?"

"Uh-huh. See you there."

Konya faded away. Slate went over to the bunk and stretched out on his back again.

There was the sound of a key turning in the lock. Slate sat up, swung his feet to the floor and stared at the door.

It opened. The visitor flicked the wall switch next to the door and the overhead light went on. It was Maxim Karsh, and behind him were the blond Fritz and the wiry Spaniard Perez. Both had guns in their hands.

"All right, Mr. Mark Slate," the

squat electronics engineer said harshly. "On your feet."

ABOUT THE time Konya was leaving by the rear door of the sheik's tent for her second visit to Mark Slate, clutching the lighter April Dancer had given her in her hand, Maxim Karsh was sitting before a work table in the laboratory in the administration building. On the table was a boxlike instrument containing a glass screen and a speaker.

On the screen was the image of April Dancer, seated before her dressing table and speaking into her fountain pen communicator. From the speaker came both her voice and Randy Kovac's.

April was saying, "Mark Slate is still alive. They haven't discovered he's an U.N.C.L.E. agent. They still think he's merely an Arab thief. He's locked up at night, and by day is made to work on the launching-pad tower. I'm helping him to escape tonight, but I won't leave with him. I'll stick around to see what else I can learn."

"Got it," Randy's voice came from the speaker.

"Also tell Mr. Waverly that Lin Yang is expected here, but no one seems to know exactly when."

"I already told him that," Randy said. "I caught it when you were talking to those two men while Mr. Slate's communicator was open. How'd that happen?"

"It was an accident. Maxim

Karsh has Mark's communicator, but he doesn't know what it is. I'll try to get it back before I leave here."

Maxim Karsh took the pen from his pocket and looked at it. He pushed it in several places, finally twisted the barrel. When a small chromium antenna shot out of its end, he smiled grimly, twisted the barrel again and put the pen away.

"Are you in any danger?" Randy was saying.

April said, "Not physical danger, but I have another problem. The sheik is due to visit my quarters in a few minutes."

"You get out of there right now!" Randy shouted jealously.

April said, "Don't worry. If I have to, I'll use my lipstick."

In a relieved tone Randy said, "Oh, the hypo. Sure, give him a shot of chloral hydrate. Okay, I'll relay your report on to Mr. Waverly."

On the screen the U.N.C.L.E. agent twisted the barrel of her pen to retract the antenna and dropped it back into her bag. Maxim Karsh flicked a switch and her image faded.

His face grim, he rose and left the lab. Across the hall he glanced into the men's barracks room, found it empty and stalked up the hall to the mess. All six of his assistants were seated at the long table playing poker.

"You'll have to break it up," he snapped. "We have business to do."

Sven, go get the sheik. Tell him it's urgent that I see him immediately."

"Yes, sir," Sven said.

Folding his hand, he scooped up the money in front of him and put it in his pocket.

He left by the outside door from the mess hall.

"Fritz, Perez, come with me. Do you have your guns with you?"

The big blond man said, "Yes, sir."

The Spaniard merely pulled back his coat to show the holster under his arm.

Both men picked up and pocketed the money before them. Karsh strode back out into the corridor with the two men trailing him. They followed him to the locked door of the room across from his own.

As he slipped a key into the lock, Fritz and Perez drew their guns.

The sheik was just preparing to go to April's quarters when Sven entered the tent. He looked irked when the man delivered the summons from Karsh.

"Can't it wait until morning?" he asked. "What's he want anyway?"

"He didn't say, sir," Sven said stolidly. "He just said it was urgent for you to come right away."

Ranjit looked at his wrist watch, gave an impatient shrug and said, "All right. I'll give him five minutes."

He strode from the tent and Sven followed after him.

FOURTEEN

TRAITORS MUST DIE!

WHEN SOME time had passed without Ranjit Sighn appearing, April Dancer dug her traveling alarm clock from her suitcase and looked at it. She was mildly surprised to see it was ten after nine. Even though she was hardly eager for the sheik's visit, it wasn't very flattering to her vanity to be kept waiting.

Despite what she had told Randy Kovac over her communicator, she had no intention of using her lipstick hypodermic syringe on the sheik. That had been merely to make him stop worrying. The use of such a device would instantly identify her as an U.N.C.L.E. agent, and she expected to retain her guise as a bored American heiress for the rest of her visit.

She felt sure she could fend off any amorous onslaughts by less drastic means.

She therefore had her lipstick tube in her hand for the sole purpose of relining her lips when the sheik parted the door curtains and stepped into the room behind her about five minutes later. She smiled at his reflections in the mirror.

"I thought you had forgotten me and had gone to bed," April told his reflection.

Ranjit smiled back. "Do you take me for an old man? I have

looked forward to this moment for weeks."

Moving behind her, he stooped to kiss the back of her neck. His hand shot over her shoulder and plucked the lipstick tube from her grip. His other hand snapped up her bag and he backed away.

"Just in case you have any more devices in your purse," he said angrily.

April swung around to look at him. His gentlemanly veneer was entirely gone. His face had turned a dull red and his eyes blazed with the fury of wounded vanity.

"You have had your fun, Miss U.N.C.L.E. agent," he said.

"Now it is my turn. Did you laugh to yourself when I offered to share a throne with you? Did your sides split with glee?"

April said soberly, "I never laugh at marriage proposals, Ranjit. I might have accepted if you hadn't sold your soul to THRUSH."

He laughed. "You could have had the world, April, in the palm of your hand. But you chose to align yourself with my mortal enemies."

"I was aligned before we ever met," she said soberly.

"No woman makes a fool of Ranjit Sighn and lives," he said grimly. "You are going to die, Miss U.N.C.L.E. agent. As slow and painful a death as I can devise. Are you still laughing?"

The sheik's face had darkened

even more. He was rapidly working himself into a maniacal rage. She knew he was on the verge of physically assaulting her when a deep voice from the other side of the curtain said, "Your highness?"

The sheik squared his shoulders. With an effort he got control of himself. His color faded to its normal olive hue.

"Come in, Orkhim," the sheik said in a steady voice.

Konya's father pushed aside the curtains and entered, carrying his rifle at trail.

"Ali said you wished me to report here, your highness," he said. "Sorry I was so long, but I was in bed."

"It's all right," Ranjit said curtly. "Cover her."

The chief of the guard showed no surprise whatever. His rifle swung up and centered on the U.N.C.L.E. agent.

"My, you get nervous," April said sarcastically. "Don't you think two big strong men could handle a hundred-and-eight-pound girl without a gun?"

"On your feet," Ranjit said coldly.

The girl rose obediently.

"Put your hands on top of your head."

When April complied, Ranjit stepped behind her quickly and gave her a thorough shakedown. Her expression became indignant when his searching hands touched, but the cold gaze of Orkhim

warned her that he would have no compunction about firing if she made a move. April suffered the search in disdainful silence.

Satisfied that she was carrying no weapons on her person, the sheik told April she could lower her arms. When she did, she had a bobby pin palmed. It wasn't an ordinary bobby pin. It was of hardened steel and one prong was a pick-lock, the other a razor-sharp cutting edge.

"Forward march," Ranjit said, looking harshly at her.

April moved out into the corridor. Orkhim came right behind her, the rifle aimed at the girl's back. The sheik brought up the rear.

"On through and out the front way," Ranjit ordered sternly.

As they went past Konya's room, April got a glimpse of the girl's startled face peeping through the crack in the curtain's center over her door.

With astonishment Konya drew back and the crack closed when she saw her father.

The sentry inside the front entrance, and the one immediately outside too, snapped to sharp attention as the group stepped by. Neither showed any more surprise or curiosity than Orkhim had. April Dancer, despite her dangerous situation, couldn't suppress a touch of admiration for the discipline Ranjit had instilled in his troops.

Outdoors Ranjit took the lead. They crossed the moonlit stretch of sand to the building just north of the administration building. There was a large sliding door in its front, wide enough for trucks to pass through. In its center was a regulation-size door for the use of personnel so that the sliding door wouldn't have to be opened.

When Ranjit pulled this door open, light spilled out from indoors.

The building consisted of one huge room crowded with machinery. There were lathes, drill presses, welding equipment. Chipping and polishing machines lay at random around the floor, where workers had laid them down at quitting time. In one corner was a blast furnace, and near it was a heavy piece of equipment towering twelve feet high and measuring twelve feet in width both ways.

A tool bench with numerous small tools hanging on the wall over it, and lying on top of it was against the wall between the blast furnace and the large, square machine. Overhead, on rails running the length of the building, was a crane with a dangling chain ending in a large steel hook.

Ceiling lights were spaced along the entire length of the center of the room, but only the one immediately over the blast furnace and the cumbersome-looking square piece of equipment was on.

Piles of material were scattered around the floor: stacks of thick

steel plates, steel tubing ranging in diameter from water-pipe size to pipes a man could have walked through by stooping, flanges, piles of angle irons and steel rods.

Four men were near the square machine, but only three were upright. In addition to Maxim Karsh there was a large blond man with heavy Teutonic features and a slim, wiry-looking Spaniard.

Another figure, bootless and wearing baggy Arab trousers and a long-sleeved pullover upper garment, lay on his back on the floor. April studied the face of the man and was both shocked and relieved to see it was Mark Slate. April nearly failed to recognize him because his hands and face were stained a deep brown.

Slate's ankles were bound together and his wrists were tied in front of him.

Maxim Karsh said with acid courtesy, "Welcome to our little gathering, Miss Dancer. You are, of course, acquainted with your colleague, Mr. Slate."

April said wryly, "Hello, Mark."

He gave her an equally wry smile. "Hi, April. What happened?"

"My goof, I think. I had checked my room for bugs, but it didn't occur to me to recheck it. They must have planted one after I checked."

Mark said cheerfully, "You can't win them all."

"Tie her up," Karsh abruptly ordered blond Fritz and the Spaniard.

"Just a minute," Ranjit Sighn said. "I don't care what you do with the man, but the girl is mine. I have plans of my own for her."

The squat engineer swung his oversized head toward the sheik. In a furious voice he said, "This is all your fault. You insisted the man was a native and you brought the woman here over my objections. So scuttle your plans. I'm running things from now on."

"I still rule Mossagbah," the sheik said coldly. "She shall die as I decree. Slowly, as I watch."

"You fool!" Karsh lashed out. "We have no time for personal vengeance. We need information from these people. And we'd better have it before Lin Yang arrives or both of us may die slowly while he watches."

Ranjit Sighn emitted a loud laugh. "Maybe you will, but I won't. In my own country I am supreme."

"Why don't you flip for me?" April asked sardonically. "Odd man out."

Karsh swung back toward his two henchmen.

"I said tie her up," he snapped. Then he added in a still vexed but less angry aside to the sheik, "What you do with her after I'm finished, I couldn't care less. But we'll do it my way first."

Apparently this promise satisfied Ranjit, for he made no further objection. April was made to lie on the floor and was bound in the same

manner as Slate. Fritz lashed her ankles together while the Spaniard tied her wrists.

He failed to discover the palmed bobby pin.

While April Dancer was being bound, Orkhim said in a low voice to the sheik, "Is not the man the one called Abdul the merchant, your highness?"

"He called himself that," Ranjit told him. "He is not one of our people. He is a spy named Mark Slate."

Orkhim decided not to mention that his daughter had been meeting the man clandestinely. It might result in Konya being put to torture too. A parental beating would be sufficient punishment to teach the girl to choose her lovers more carefully.

Maxim Karsh said to the two prisoners, "Observe the large piece of machinery to your left, please."

Slate and April both turned their heads to look at it. The piece Karsh referred to was the twelve-foot-square monstrosity April had previously noted.

Its flat, cast-iron top, nearly a yard thick, was supported at each corner by eight-inch-thick threaded steel shafts—threaded, apparently, so that the top could be lowered or raised to any required height. There was a six-foot gap between the top and the floor of the machine.

A round, convex steel die about eight feet in diameter was bolted



to the underside of the top. A concave die the same size was bolted to the floor directly beneath it.

"Know what the machine is?" Karsh asked coldly.

Mark Slate said, "Looks like a hydraulic press."

"You have been in fabricating plants before, Mr. Slate. This particular press exerts the crushing force of seven hundred and fifty tons. We use it to shape steel plates into the various forms necessary for our project. I will demonstrate."

The stocky man went over to the wall and turned a switch. A set of automatic pumps began to thump. Karsh moved to the workbench, picked out a heavy crowbar and tossed it into the press.

Pointing to a nearby pile of octagonal steel plates about a half inch thick, Karsh said, "Actually the die now in the press is designed to shape those plates into a kind of bowl shape. But they weigh around three hundred pounds each, have first to be heated in the blast furnace and require the assistance of

the crane to get them into the press. So the crowbar will serve for demonstration purposes."

He grasped a lever to one side of the machine and pushed it slightly forward.

The floor of the press rose about a foot and stopped.

"Now the lower part of the die will not rise all the way until this lever is pushed all the way over, you see," Karsh explained. His eyes held a dark, intent gleam. "It rises in proportion to just how far the lever is pushed."

He shoved the lever all the way home. The floor of the press rose, the lower part of the die crushed against the upper with a rumble which made the mammoth machine shake.

When Karsh pulled the lever back toward himself again, the floor of the machine slowly sank to its original position.

Karsh pulled out the crowbar and tossed it to the floor. It had been bent into a semicircle.

"Can you visualize what such force would do to bones and flesh?" he inquired.

April Dancer and Mark Slate merely stared up at him without answering.

"All right, Fritz, Perez," Karsh said crisply. "In with them."

The two men stooped to lift Mark Slate and heaved him into the lower part of the die. A moment later April Dancer lay next to him.

Maxim Karsh gazed in at them with a gloating smile.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"I've had softer beds," Slate said.

Karsh put his hand on the control lever. "Now if I pushed this forward, you would both be smashed into a curved sheet a half-inch thick. Isn't that interesting to contemplate?"

Neither April nor Slate said anything. Their real feelings were expertly masked. April wondered if anyone could hear her heart pounding.

"Are you ready?" Karsh asked.

Slate said in a steady voice, "You don't plan to do it just yet, or you wouldn't be talking so much."

"No," Karsh agreed. "You are quite astute, Mr. Slate. I am merely preparing your minds for what is to come eventually. I want you to have a clear picture of what's in store. But actually you have some time to live yet."

He turned to the big blond man. "Bring me the timer, Fritz."

FIFTEEN

"SPIES DIE AT DAWN!"

FRITZ WENT over to where a heavy boxlike device about two feet square lay on the floor next to the wall and lugged it over to the press. He set it down next to the control lever.

An upright steel rod ending in a screw clamp protruded from a slot

running the length of the top of the box. On the front of the box was a clock face and a couple of adjustment dials.

Maxim Karsh shifted the position of the device slightly until it was exactly where he wanted it, then attached the screw clamp to the control lever.

He made some adjustments of the controls beneath the clock face and pushed a button. The box began to tick.

"The control lever is now attached to a timing device," he explained to the pair in the press. "Every fifteen minutes the lever will move forward just enough to close the press exactly an inch and a half. Since the space between the lower and upper parts of the die is six feet, it will take twelve hours to close completely."

He glanced at his watch, then favored his prisoners with a sinister smile. "It is now ten. It will be nine hours before you are in acute peril. By seven tomorrow morning there will be only a foot and a half of space left. Shortly after that the crushing will begin. Your last hours will be extremely painful, because the crushing will be so gradual."

Ranjit Sighn had been watching the entire procedure with a frown on his face. Now he said, "Why drag this out so long, Maxim? Why not set the timer so that it will close in a half hour? I assume your purpose in all this is to force some information out of them. They'll be

more eager to talk if you speed it up."

Karsh threw him a withering look. "You obviously don't understand the psychology of interrogation, Ranjit. These people have been conditioned to resist answering questions. If I speeded up the timer as you wish, they would simply lie there and heroically let themselves be crushed to death.

"But contemplating their gradually nearing doom over a matter of hours will be quite a different thing. The terror will build slowly, slowly enough to gradually overcome their mental programming. In the end they'll be glad to talk."

The sheik said, "I could accomplish the same thing in a lot less time with a white-hot poker."

Ignoring him, Karsh turned back to Slate and April. "I think you both understand what I'm doing. I'm quite sure no physical torture will overcome the brainwashing you've been given by U.N.C.L.E. I'm equally sure you won't be able to withstand the mental strain of watching a horrible death come closer and closer over a period of hours. Don't you agree that the psychology is sound?"

"You're a genius," Slate assured him.

Karsh showed his teeth in a humorless grin. "It is my opinion that if you don't break, you will both lose your minds before you are finally crushed to death. Now all I wish to know is exactly how much

you have reported to your headquarters about our project here and what U.N.C.L.E. intends to do about it.

"At any time during the next nine hours that you become willing to talk, I'll be quite willing to listen. The moment I am satisfied you have told all you know, I guarantee you'll be removed from the press."

"And be killed some other way?" Mark Slate inquired sardonically.

"Not necessarily. We might find a place for you in our organization. You could never return to U.N.C.-L.E., of course, after breaking under pressure. It would save a lot of time and trouble if you would agree to talk now, but I don't suppose you're ready yet."

When neither answered, Karsh said, "Obviously you're not. It might speed things up considerably if you will both keep concentrating on what the press will do to your bodies when it has closed sufficiently. Periodically I will return to inquire if you are ready to bargain for your lives. Meantime you will be under the close observation of a guard at all times, so you may give up all hope of somehow working loose from your bonds and escaping from the press. Any questions?"

Neither Slate nor April had any.

Karsh said, "Keep in mind that you will not be removed from the press until after you have answered all questions put to you. A mere promise to talk won't be enough,

because you might change your minds the moment you are out of danger. So don't wait too long. Once started upward, the movement of the press can't be reversed until it has closed all the way. You would be wise to allow yourself plenty of leeway."

The bottom of the press lurched upward an inch and a half. April felt as though her heart were in her throat.

When the floor rose no farther, she felt slightly better.

"You take first watch, Perez," Karsh said to the wiry Spaniard. "Fritz, you will relieve him at one A.M. I'll appoint other guards for the rest of the night on a three-hour shift basis."

Both men nodded understanding. Perez dragged an empty wooden box to within six feet of the press and sat down facing it.

With a gesture to the sheik, Maxim Karsh moved toward the front door. Orkhim and the blond Fritz trailed after them.

Outside Ranjit showed April's purse to Karsh and said, "There may be other interesting items aside from the communicator pen and the hypodermic lipstick in this. Come on over to my tent and we'll examine it."

"The lab is closer," Karsh said. "Let's go there. I want to give a closer look to an item we found on Slate too. He didn't have it the first time we searched him, so it may have some significance."

He took a cigarette lighter from his pocket and flicked it alight.

"Looks like an ordinary lighter." Ranjit said.

"The fountain pen looks like an ordinary pen and the lipstick tube like an ordinary lipstick." He turned to Fritz. "You'd better catch some sleep, Fritz, so you can relieve Perez at one."

The blond man said, "Yes, sir," and headed for the administration building.

Orkhim said, "Do you need me any more, your highness?"

"No," the sheik said. "Go on back to bed."

The bearded Arab didn't go back to bed, though. He made straight for the sheik's tent and entered by the back way.

A light was glowing behind the curtain over the entrance to Konya's room.

Orkhim jerked the curtain aside and found his daughter, fully clothed, kneeling on a prayer mat. She looked up at him in fright.

"You had better pray, spawn of the devil."

He lay down his rifle and slowly untied the heavy ropelike cord around his waist.

"I have done nothing, father," Konya protested. "What do you accuse me of?"

"I suppose you didn't know that your fine lover, Abdul the merchant, is really an infidel spy named Mark Slate."

She stared at him in astonish-

ment. "Mark Slate? He is not a Mossagbahan?"

"You know what he is. American? Englishman? What does it matter. You nearly caused me to lose caste by asking the sheik for a dowry for an infidel dog."

"That was your idea, father. I begged you not to."

"Impertinent wench!" Orkhim said. "I will teach you to contradict your own father!"

He doubled the ropelike cord, raised it overhead and brought it down across the girl's shoulders. Burying her face in her hands, she crouched on the prayer mat and uttered no sound as the stinging cord fell across her shoulders and back a dozen times. Her body trembled under the impact of each stroke, though.

Finally Orkhim halted, panting. She raised her head from her hands and turned her tear-streaked face upward.

"What have they done with him?" she asked.

"You still feel concern for the dog?" he said in outrage. "Do you wish another twelve strokes?"

"No, father," Konya said wearily. "No matter what you believe, he was never my lover. I merely asked what has been done with him."

"He is being taken care of," Orkhim assured her grimly.

"And Miss Dancer? Why was she led away under guard?"

"Ah, that one. She is a spy too."

A comrade of your fine Mark Slate."

"Is the sheik going to have them killed?"

Orkhim shrugged. "His highness submits to the plan of Mr. Karsh, at least for the moment. The infidel Karsh is trying to get information from them. I suppose they will die eventually. That is not my business."

At least they were both still alive, Konya thought thankfully.

Orkhim tied the cord back around his waist and picked up his rifle.

"Have you learned your lesson, girl?" he asked her.

"Yes, father," she said with weary obedience.

"Then may Allah help you mend your ways."

He pushed through the curtain and was gone. Konya rose to her feet, lowered her garment from her shoulders and looked over her shoulder at the reflection of her bare back in the small mirror hanging on the tent wall.

It was criss-crossed with livid welts.

"I will get to America if I have to walk to the ocean and swim there," she resolved under her breath solemnly.

MAXIM KARSH unlocked the laboratory door and switched on the overhead light. Ranjit Signh followed him in and lay April's purse on the work table.

"I don't see what you expect to accomplish by this nonsense in the machine shop," he said to the engineer. "I could almost tell you what they've reported to their headquarters. They can't know much, because neither one has seen any of the shops until tonight, and according to you, Slate couldn't have gotten to the plans in the safe."

"He's been working on the launching pad tower. He must have drawn some conclusions from that. It's highly improbable that U.N.-C.L.E. has any idea of what this project really is, but they certainly know it involves rockets and they're probably trying to make an educated guess. I want to know just what they're thinking and what their counter-plans are."

Karsh took the lighter from his pocket and examined it. He clicked it alight, put it out again and turned it over. After some study he spotted the small catch on the bottom and pushed it. When nothing happened, he turned it rightside up again and pressed the lever again.

Instead of the small flame he expected, a thin blue-white flame spurted out for a distance of six inches. The intense heat it generated startled him into dropping the lighter.

As soon as he released the lever, the flame went out.

Warily retrieving the device, he tried it again. This time he picked up a paper clip with a pair of for-

ceps and directed the flame at its end.

The end of the clip touched by the flame instantly dissolved.

"A cutting torch," Karsh said admiringly. "This will be useful to our agents."

Then he had a sudden thought. Dropping the lighter on the work bench, he said, "Maybe we had better take a look at the room Slate was in." He headed for the door.

The sheik followed him up the hall to the now vacant room. Karsh switched on the light, crossed to the window and bent to examine the bars.

Taking hold of the center one, he pushed outward. The bottom of the bar swung outward and there was a sharp snapping sound as the top broke loose.

Karsh threw the severed bar onto the bunk. Breaking off the other two cut bars, he tossed them there also.

"Miss Dancer must have sneaked over here and slipped him the torch," he said.

He switched off the light and they returned to the lab.

SIXTEEN

"WE ARE READY TO TALK!"

THE SHEIK upended April Dancer's purse on the work bench. A variety of items fell out. He picked up the fountain pen, twisted the barrel and looked with interest

at the small antenna which popped out. Just as he started to make a comment to Karsh, he caught himself when the squat man put a finger to his lips.

Retracting the antenna, the sheik lay the pen next to the cigarette lighter.

"I'm so unused to a secret gadget like this, Maxim, I completely forgot U.N.C.L.E. headquarters could hear me when it was open," he said apologetically.

Ranjit picked up the lipstick tube and examined it gingerly. After a few moments he discovered the catch which allowed a thin needle to pop from its end. Retracting it again, he lay the tube with the pen and lighter.

Meantime Maxim Karsh had picked up a steel comb. It looked like an ordinary rattail comb, but upon examination he discovered it was made of surgical steel and the tail was as sharp as a stiletto.

"The agent's innocent looking purse contains a whole arsenal," he snapped, tossing it with the other items already examined.

The sheik set aside a handkerchief and a wallet after checking both and deciding neither had any function aside from its original purpose. Then he picked up a flesh-colored earplug.

After studying it for a time, he gave up and handed it to Karsh. The electronics engineer puzzled over it; finally an enlightened expression formed on his face and he

popped it into his ear. Picking up the pen, he turned it on, then held up a solid hand for silence.

Karsh listened for several minutes with a vacuous bored expression on his face, indicating he was hearing nothing. Finally he shrugged, retracted the pen's antenna and removed the earplug.

"Probably a receiver used when they don't want anyone to overhear the reception," he said. "Nobody's broadcasting on the band at the moment, apparently. Our scientists should be able to analyze its principle and build similar gadgets for our own people."

Ranjit picked up April's compact, and put it to his nose as he opened it. He looked into the mirror and ran his finger along the line of his moustache for a second. Then lifting the powder puff, he sniffed at the powder, replaced the puff, and probed various places with his index finger. He failed to find the secret catch which would have converted the mirror to a transistorized TV screen.

"Just an ordinary compact, I guess," he said, setting it aside.

Maxim Karsh picked up a miniature perfume atomizer. Directing it away from both of them, he released a brief spray.

The only result was a pleasant odor of violets.

Karsh carefully examined the atomizer, but failed to find anything unusual about it.

It didn't occur to him to pull the

plunger instead of to push it, which was just as well for him and the sheik.

If Karsh had, the room would have filled with tear gas.

"Just expensive perfume," he said, putting it with the other checked items. "I'm sure she didn't buy this herself."

Only two items remained: a package of chewing gum and one of candy mints. Karsh partially stripped one of the sticks of gum and sniffed at it, then rewrapped it and slid the stick back into its package.

"An American vice," he said disdainfully. "I understand all American women chew this stuff."

If he had chewed a piece, then had carelessly spat it out on the floor, he would have blown up the building.

The sheik was examining the mints. He decided they were nothing but candy and put them with the other items.

It was just as well he didn't try one. Dropped in a glass of water, one of the mints would convert the glass to a smoke pot. Saliva would have had the same effect as water, causing him to spurt smoke like a dragon. Aside from a singed tongue, it wouldn't have hurt him immediately, but it might have brought on a heart attack.

"Lin Yang will want to examine all this," Karsh said. "Let's put everything back in the purse."

When the items were all re-

turned to their original source, Karsh added the fountain pen from his pocket and locked April's bag in the safe.

IN THE machine shop Perez was stationed too close to the press for April and Slate to converse without being overheard. But the others had hardly left when he began to find the box he was seated on uncomfortable.

Rising, he came over to the press and peered in at April and Slate. Satisfied that they couldn't move, he went over to a pile of burlap bags several yards away and lifted a few from the stack.

April took advantage of the opportunity to say in a low voice, "The medallion?"

"Still next to my skin," Mark Slate whispered back. "They apparently didn't remember it. Karsh lifted your lighter, though."

"I have a cutting edge palmed in my hand," April said hopefully. "I'll pass it to you as soon as I get my wrists free."

Then they both lapsed into silence when Perez returned to the box, piled the heavy burlap bags on it for upholstering and reseated himself.

April went to work surreptitiously with the cutting edge of her bobby pin. She had to use it cautiously, because the guard's gaze was fixed on them steadily from a distance of six feet and she knew any obvious movement of her

hands would cause him to investigate.

The floor of the press had lurched upward a second inch and a half, again making her feel more helpless than ever. With enormous concentration and effort she managed to slice entirely through her wrist bonds. She kept her wrists crossed, with the severed rope lying across them.

April couldn't pass the bobby pin to Mark Slate without being seen. When Perez's attention had not shifted by the time the floor raised a third time, April said, "Are we allowed to have water?"

"No," the Spaniard said.

There was nothing to do but lie there and hope something would distract his attention. Nothing did, and time dragged on interminably.

The opportunity finally came at one, when the blond Fritz came to relieve Perez. As the big man entered by the front door, Perez glanced that way, then stood up and stretched.

April's hand darted sidewise and slipped the bobby pin into Slate's eager hand. The attention of Perez was still on his approaching colleague when she rearranged the severed rope across her wrists.

Fritz looked with interest at the press. Its base by now had risen a foot and a half.

"They show any sign of breaking?" he asked.

The Spaniard shook his head. "The girl asked for water a couple

of hours ago. When I told her no, she shut up. The man hasn't said anything at all."

"Karsh didn't expect results so early," Fritz said. "He doesn't think they'll break until it starts to get close. I kind of go along with the sheik. If they set that thing so it would only take about a half hour to close all the way, I bet they'd start talking in fifteen minutes."

"The boss usually knows what he's doing," Perez said. "He says they need lots of time to overcome the brainwashing U.N.C.L.E. gave them."

Fritz seated himself on the burlap-padded wooden box. Perez lifted his hand in a casual good night and left.

Fritz examined the pair in the press. The jaws closed another inch and a half at that moment.

"Either of you feel like talking yet?" Fritz asked.

Neither answered for a few moments. Then Slate said in a husky voice, "We're not going to get out of this, April. I don't want to die in this horrible thing."

Instantly playing along, she made her voice tremble. "I don't want to either, Mark."

"Want to throw in the towel?"

"Yes. Please do something to get us out of here. Anything."

Slate called to Fritz. "Go get your boss and tell him we're ready to talk."

"He'll be along eventually," the guard said.

"But we want to talk now."

"Relax. You'll feel even more like it when he gets here. I'm not taking my eye off you two until he does."

He didn't either. Long after she was sure Mark Slate had cut his wrist bonds, the two U.N.C.L.E. agents had to continue to lie still. With their ankles still bound, it was impossible for either to leap from the press and get to the guard before he had time to draw his gun. If Slate tried to sit up and cut his leg bonds, April knew he would be covered before he could even complete that maneuver.

An hour passed, and now the gap between the lower and upper dies had closed to four feet. April gave up hope of the guard ever relaxing his vigilance enough for Slate to cut their leg bonds. Their only salvation was to lure Fritz into grabbing distance, she decided.

In a low whisper she said, "Mark?"

- "Uh-huh," Mark said.

"I think the rope is beginning to give a little."

She pitched her voice so low that it was barely audible, but she whispered instead of using her normal tone and merely dropping the volume. She knew a whisper would carry much farther than a low tone.

Slate played along by whispering back, "Shut up. He'll hear you."

Fritz rose from his box, came over to the press and stuck his head inside. April had been tensing her

arm muscles as though straining against the bonds. Suddenly she relaxed them as though afraid the guard would notice her effort.

The floor of the press lurched upward another inch and a half at that moment, and the blond man nearly fell over backward getting his head out of it.

Looking a bit shamefaced, Fritz gave the control lever a dubious look and leaned in again to examine the rope across April's wrists.

Finally he decided to crawl into the press to give the rope a tug.

The hard edge of Mark Slate's palm arced sidewise and thumped solidly against the side of the blond man's neck. Fritz collapsed on his face.

When he sat erect, Slate's head nearly touched the top of the press. With a quick motion he sliced through the rope binding his ankles, then cut the rope around April's.

They had manipulated themselves with effort from the press and Slate was handing April the bobby pin when a hard voice cracked out, "Hold it right there!"

Both slowly turned their heads toward the main entrance to the machine shop/They hadn't heard Maxim Karsh and the sheik come in together. Ranjit was covering them with a forty-five automatic and Karsh held a revolver. Keen disappointment showed on April and Slate's tired faces.

Hustling forward on his short legs, Karsh said gutturally, "We

seem to have timed our visit just right. We came to see if you were yet ready to talk, but you obviously aren't. I'll relieve you of that little item Mr. Slate just handed you, Miss Dancer."

April reluctantly dropped the bobby pin into his outstretched palm.

After examining it, Karsh smiled grimly and dropped it into his shirt pocket. "You don't keep all your tricky little devices in your purse, do you, Miss Dancer? A more thorough personal search of both of you seems in order. But that can wait until we see what you've done to poor Fritz. Ranjit, pull Fritz out of there and see if you can revive him."

The sheik put his gun away, took the blond man by the feet and dragged him from the press. Rolling him onto his back, he slapped Fritz's face until the man sputtered and sat up. He gazed around stupidly.

"Get on your feet, you!" Karsh snapped.

The big man managed to make his feet coordinate, and stood swaying.

"What happened?" he asked thickly. "I was checking the woman's bonds when everything went blank."

"Your mind was blank before you crawled in there," Karsh told him. He turned back to April Dancer and Mark Slate. "Take off your clothes."

"What?" April said, outraged.

"Take off your clothes! Right down to your buffs. This instant, or I'll put bullets in both of you!"

SEVENTEEN

THE PRACTICAL JOKE

"T

ALTHOUGH RANJIT Sighn's attitude toward human life was strictly oriental, his attitude toward women had been somewhat reconditioned by four years at Oxford. A few hours earlier he had been sadistically eager to torture April to death, but now he wasn't prepared to let her suffer this type of indignity.

"Just a minute, Maxim," he said coldly.

Karsh looked at him.

"You don't have to be such an utter boor. I'll send for some women to search Miss Dancer in private."

"She's a spy." Karsh was impatient. "Why should we treat her with kid gloves?"

"It's not a matter for discussion," Ranjit said in a definite tone. He drew his gun and held it negligently pointed downward.

Karsh eyed the gun warily. Finally he said, "Well, send for your blasted women then."

The sheik looked at Fritz. "Are you able to walk?"

"I'm all right," the blond man said, rubbing his neck. "Just a little groggy is all."

"You know where Orkhim's tent is? The chief of my guard?"

"Uh-huh."

"Go there, wake him up and tell him I want his wife Adana to come here at once. Then go to my tent and get Agri, the cook. She sleeps in the room just off the kitchen."

"Yes, sir," Fritz said.

He swayed slightly en route to the door, but he made it all right.

As Fritz disappeared, Karsh said sarcastically, "In deference to his highness we won't make you watch while we search Mr. Slate, Miss Dancer. You may turn your back and move in the direction of the press about three feet."

April obediently turned and moved away a couple of paces. Karsh glanced at the sheik to make sure he had both prisoners covered, then put his own gun away.

"All right, Mr. Slate," he said. "Take your clothes off."

Cocking his eye at April's back, Slate reluctantly complied. Karsh carefully examined each item of clothing as it was handed over. Then he carefully observed the athletic physique of the American agent, even feeling his scalp. He lifted the chain with the Moslem emblem hanging from it from around Slate's neck.

"All right, Slate. You may redress."

As Slate pulled his clothing back on, Karsh studied the emblem. Noticing the small node on its back, he pressed it and unwittingly took

the sheik's picture, but since apparently nothing happened, he decided the node was merely an imperfection in the metal.

"Where'd you get this?" he asked Slate gruffly.

"In a shop in Fada."

"They can be bought in any goldsmith's shop," Ranjit offered.

Karsh dropped the emblem into his shirt pocket.

By the time Slate had finished redressing, Fritz was back with the lantern-jawed cook and another wiry, middle-aged Arab woman. The sheik spoke to both extensively in Arabic, which April didn't understand.

When he finished, April looked at Slate questioningly.

"He's instructing them," Slate said. "He's going to give Agri his gun—she's the tall one with the big jaw—and the two of them are going to take you behind that stack of steel plates over there." He pointed to the pile of octagonal half-inch-thick steel plates.

"You're to strip and the other one, Adana, is to bring the sheik your clothing. He asked Agri if she could use the gun, and she said yes. He also told her to shoot you if you don't behave. So will you do me a favor and cooperate?"

"You save me the trouble of explaining it all again in English," the sheik said approvingly. "Maxim, please cover Mr. Slate so that I can hand Agri my gun."

Karsh drew his gun and the sheik

gave his forty-five automatic to Agri. The cook gestured with it for April to precede her behind the pile of steel plates.

When Adana brought out April's clothing, Karsh insisted on examining it himself. Handing Ranjit his gun to cover Mark Slate, he went over each piece with microscopic thoroughness, laying it on the burlap-upholstered box as he finished with it.

Finally satisfied that the clothing contained no implements April might use to again cut herself free, he told Adana in Arabic to go back behind the pile of plates and search the girl's body.

"Don't miss a thing," he said. "I even want every hairpin she is wearing."

In a few minutes Adana returned with a pair of earrings, a charm bracelet and several bobby pins. The bobby pins were all ordinary ones. Karsh examined the charm bracelet and found nothing unusual about it, failing to recognize that the various ornaments hanging from it were all bugging devices. He did grasp the significance of the diamond earrings, however.

"Glass cutters," he explained to the sheik. "The woman carries a machine shop as well as an arsenal around with her."

Stowing all the items in his shirt pocket, he pointed to the pile of clothing on the box.

"Give it back to her," he told

THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

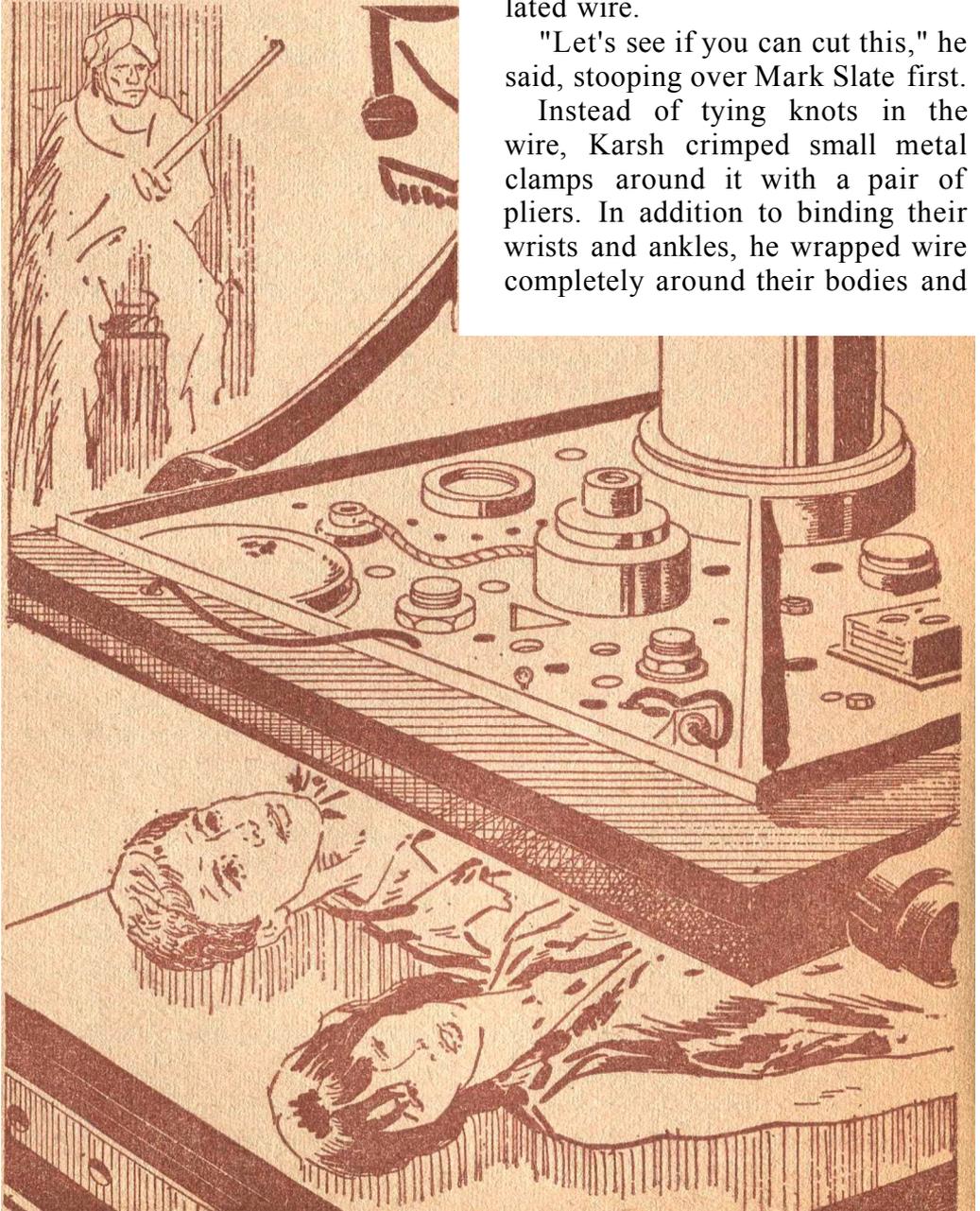
Adana. "Then bring her back out here."

When April was led from behind the stack of steel plates, again fully clothed, the sheik dismissed the

women. Karsh instructed Slate and April to lie on the floor on their backs. Going over to the work bench, he probed in a drawer and returned with a roll of heavy insulated wire.

"Let's see if you can cut this," he said, stooping over Mark Slate first.

Instead of tying knots in the wire, Karsh crimped small metal clamps around it with a pair of pliers. In addition to binding their wrists and ankles, he wrapped wire completely around their bodies and



across their forearms between the elbows and wrists, so that their arms were tied down immovably.

It was just three when the pair was shoved abruptly back into the press. The gap had now closed to three and a half feet.

Meantime Karsh had decided that Fritz was still too groggy from the judo chop to resume guard duty. He sent the big blond to get the man named Sven to take over.

Maxim Karsh's instructions to Sven were explicit. The man was to keep his eyes on Mark Slate and April Dancer at all times, was to hold his gun in his hand and was not to go near the press no matter what happened.

"If either of them do anything to excite your suspicion that they might be working themselves free, shoot first and investigate later," he concluded. "Understand?"

Sven said he understood.

Karsh went over to the press and looked in. "You people want to be sensible?" he asked. "The only way you're ever going to get out of there is by answering questions. In another three hours you'll be wanting to. Why don't you save yourself all that discomfort and talk now?"

Neither made any reply.

Ranjit came over to the press and his gaze burned at April.

"They're not going to talk, ever," he told Karsh. "Why don't you just push the lever all the way forward?"

"We'll handle it my way," Karsh

replied. He turned back to the pair in the press. "I'm going to give you plenty of time to make up your minds. I won't come back until a few minutes before seven. By then the press will have closed to a foot and a half, and you'll have about fifteen minutes before it closes another inch and a half and clamps you in so that we couldn't get you out even if we wanted to.

"It won't start to crush you at that point. You shouldn't be in even the slightest pain. But you'll be inextricably wedged in. The next upward movement, fifteen minutes later, will start to break bones. It won't kill you, though. You'll have at least another fifteen minutes of agony before the jaws close enough to put you out of your misery."

"You paint a delightful picture," Slate said calmly.

"I'm trying to. I want to impress on you that you had better start talking rapidly the moment I walk in next time. Because if you haven't finished within fifteen minutes, you'll be beyond help."

He gestured to Ranjit and the two left together. Sven seated himself on the box, a pistol balanced on his knee, and fixed his gaze on the tightly bound pair lying in the press.

Time stole by. It was easy to measure, because every fifteen minutes the floor of the press lurched upward another inch and a half. April Dancer shuddered every time it happened.

She knew when it was six by counting the number of times the floor of the press moved upward. The upper part of the die was now only a little more than a foot from her face and about six inches from the tips of her breasts.

There was the sound of a door opening and closing; then Sven said in a tone of surprise, "Morning, Sheik. What are you doing up so early?"

Ranjit Sighn's voice said, "I couldn't sleep."

He came over and stared into the press. "Still being nobly silent, are you?"

Neither answered.

"You're not going to talk, are you?" he said. "Maxim is wasting his time, isn't he?"

April said steadily, "Yes, he's wasting his time."

"I thought so," the sheik said. He turned away. "Isn't someone supposed to relieve you about now, Sven?"

"Yes, sir. A couple of minute ago. Perez is supposed to come."

"Go rout him out. I'll take over here until he arrives."

"Okay, sir. Thanks a lot."

The sheik waited until the door closed behind Sven, then stooped beside the press and did something to the ticking box on the floor. The press had raised another inch and a half only a couple of minutes before, and April experienced a moment of terror when it suddenly began to rise again. It rose only its

usual inch and a half before stopping, however.

Ranjit grinned in at her. "Just a little practical joke, my dear. I set the clock forward fifteen minutes. Maxim won't be back until just before seven, expecting to have time to pull you two out of there if you agree to talk. But you're not going to talk anyway, so I'm leaving a surprise for him. You'll be wedged in too tightly to pull out by the time he gets here."

They heard the front door open and close again. A moment later the face of Perez peered in at them.

"You can take over now, Perez," Ranjit said. "Good-by, April. I'll be back about seven to witness the beginning of the end. Will you scream prettily for me?"

April closed her eyes and made no reply. She saw him walk away and heard the door open and close.

The next time the press rose, it put them too high above the floor to see their guard when he was seated on the box. April raised her head until it touched the top part of the die and was barely able to see his black hair.

Fifteen minutes passed by. With a rumble the press rose another inch and a half. April's bosom was now within an inch and a half of the top die. Again she raised her head, but this time she couldn't see the guard at all.

She did see something else, though. By now the sun had risen and sunshine was steaming j

through the machine shop's windows. There were no windows at the rear of the shop, but she caught a momentary flash of sunlight from there as the back door opened and shut.

She wondered if the guard had noticed it, then decided that if he had, he had recognized whoever had entered as someone authorized to be present, because there was no sound from him.

Probably a shop maintenance man coming to get tools ready for the day's work, she thought.

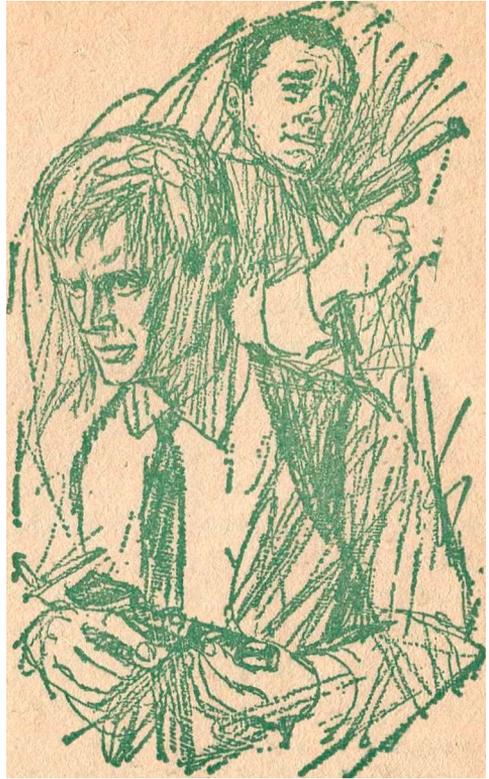
April lay back in suspense and waited for another agonizing fifteen minutes to pass. After a few moments she decided to take one last look at the shop. The next upward movement of the press would raise her just enough to touch her breasts to the top part of the die, and while she still wouldn't be jammed in hopelessly, she wouldn't be able to raise her head for any more scrutiny.

The captured agent from U.N.-C.L.E. wanted one last look at the world outside the press, even if all she could see was machinery and stacks of ugly material.

April Dancer raised her head slightly and looked out. Several yards behind Perez, whom she could no longer see, a slim figure crept from behind a pile of steel tubing.

It was Konya and she had a large wrench clutched in her right hand.

At the same moment April Dan-



cer heard the drone of an approaching plane.

EIGHTEEN

IMPORTANT VISITOR

RANJIT SIGHN had just finished breakfast when he heard the sound of the plane. He went outside to peer in the direction of the sound. It was a small jet and it was coming in for a landing on the desert sand.

It touched down and taxied toward the oasis. As the sheik strode

toward it, Maxim Karsh appeared from the administration building and headed hurriedly that way too.

They simultaneously reached the plane as a set of stairs lowered from the cabin. A lean young Chinese man in a flying suit backed out and held up his hand to assist the other passenger out. The latter was a gray and wizened Chinese with a drooping mandarin mustache resembling two wisps of gray silk. He wore an ankle-length silken robe of jet black with a design of white dragons on it. On his head was a black, buttoned skullcap.

Assisted by the pilot, he came painfully down the steps. When he reached the ground, he straightened his bent figure and peered nearsightedly at Ranjit and Karsh.

"You will be Sheik Ranjit Sighn, I imagine," he said to the sheik in a reedy voice. He turned to the electronics engineer. "And you are Mr. Karsh?"

The sheik merely nodded. Maxim Karsh said nervously, "That's right, sir."

"I am Lin Yang," the old man announced.

"Yes, we've been expecting you, sir," Karsh said.

Lin Yang indicated his companion. "This is my pilot and body-guard, Mr. Hop Foo."

The young man in the flying suit made a graceful bow with his hands clasped together in front of him in the Chinese manner. Karsh bowed with equal formality. The sheik

acknowledged the introduction with a bare nod, as befitted royalty when meeting a peasant.

"How is the project coming?" the aged Chinese asked.

The squat engineer said uncomfortably, "Well, sir, except for one slight hitch."

The almond-shaped eyes glittered. "Hitch, Mr. Karsh?"

"A couple of U.N.C.L.E. agents managed to infiltrate."

When the old man glared at him, Karsh added hurriedly, "They were both apprehended before they could learn anything of value. Everything is under control. It wasn't my fault. I advised the sheik—"

His voice tapered off at the frigid expression on the old man's face. Lin Yang said in his reedy voice, "Are you or is Sheik Ranjit in charge here, Mr. Karsh?" It wasn't a question; it was an accusation.

"Well, I am," Karsh said uneasily. "But it's the sheik's oasis, and he insisted on bringing the woman here."

"The chief of a project doesn't shift blame, Mr. Karsh," the Chinese said ominously. "Since you are in charge, any slip is your fault."

Karsh gulped. "Yes, sir."

"Where are these people?"

"In the machine shop, sir." His voice became placating. "In a way it was an advantage that they came here."

"How's that?"

"We captured a number of their

devices, including two of their communicators. We'll be able to listen in on U.N.C.L.E.'s broadcasts."

"Hmph. Where are these devices?"

"In the laboratory, locked in the safe."

"I will inspect them first before seeing the prisoners," Lin Yang decided. "Give me your arm, Hop Foo."

The younger Chinese offered his arm and the old man leaned on it heavily as he followed Karsh and Ranjit to the administration building. The latter two walked slowly, so that the old man could keep up.

In the lab Karsh knelt before the safe and opened it. He drew out April's purse and a manila envelope.

"The purse is the woman's," he said, emptying it out on the work table. "It contains everything which was in it when we took her, plus the communicator belonging to the man."

He explained each item one at a time. Lin Yang examined each, then dropped it back into the purse as he finished with it. He seemed as interested in the chewing gum as he was in the other items.

"Did you know that chicle was an invention of the Chinese?" he asked Karsh.

"No, sir," the engineer admitted.

"It took the Americans to add flavor," the old man said. "But the Chinese chewed it long before Columbus discovered America."

He stripped a piece, popped it into his mouth and offered the pack to Hop Foo. The younger man took a stick also. Lin Yang dropped the rest of the package into one of the voluminous pockets of his gown.

"What is in the envelope?" he inquired.

"Items obtained from the agents' persons," Karsh said, opening it and spilling the contents out onto the workbench. "There is nothing of great significance here. This bobby pin is a rather clever device, but hardly sensational. One prong seems to be a pick-lock, the other a cutting edge.

"These other bobby pins are merely what they look like. The earrings are glass-cutters. The charm bracelet seems to be merely ornamental, however, as does this medallion which the man wore about his neck."

Lin Yang examined each item and dropped it into April's purse when he was finished with it.

"It is wise to keep everything together," he said. "This will be turned over to our central research section for thorough investigation. You've made a valuable catch, Mr. Karsh. It quite makes up for your breach of security. I shall see that you get proper credit at central headquarters."

While Maxim Karsh was beaming with pleasure at this praise, the old man dropped the purse into the other voluminous pocket of his gown.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "I wish to see your prisoners."

KONYA DISAPPEARED from April's field of vision as she crept closer to the press. Then April caught a glimpse of a small dark hand raising the wrench high. It swung downward out of sight and there was a sickening crunch.

An instant later a body hit the floor. Then Konya's frightened face peered in at them.

"Good girl," Mark Slate said. "See if you can pull us out of this contraption."

The Arab girl grasped Slate's feet, but was unable to budge him. She tried to pull April free with no more success. Because the lower part of the die was shaped like a shallow dish, she lacked the strength to pull them up and over the lip.

For the same reason neither could roll out of the press, because it involved rolling uphill.

"There's a tool bench over against the wall," Slate said. "Get a knife."

"A knife won't cut this wire," April objected. "Get a wire cutter, or a bolt cutter, or some tin snips*"

Konya looked confused.

"Just find anything that looks like a pair of scissors," Slate said. "Hurry, Konya—you're a good girl."

Konya's face disappeared and they heard her run toward the tool bench. There was the clatter of

tools being tossed around. The noise went on for a while.

"Hurry it up!" Slate called.

"I can't find anything that looks like scissors," Konya called back frantically. Then, in triumph, "Wait. Here's a pair."

The press shuddered and rose slowly another inch and a half. April Dancer felt her bosom push against the top.

The space between the upper and lower dies was now only a foot and a half. Another upward movement would pin them in inextricably.

Konya thrust her head and shoulders into the press. Her right hand gripped a large pair of scissors.

"Those are just plain scissors!" Slate said. "But never mind. You haven't time to hunt for anything else. Cut!"

The girl started to slide the scissor blades over the wire binding his wrists.

"Not there!" he said. "Cut the wire around my body first."

Konya moved the blades to the wire circling his body and began sawing it back and forth.

"It's not cutting," she said in despair.

"Keep working," Slate said soothingly. "Try both hands."

Konya wriggled farther into the press and got both hands on the scissors. Frantically she sawed back and forth. April was sure that nearly another fifteen minutes had

passed before she heard the wire snap.

There wouldn't be time to cut her bonds, she thought despairingly. The press was ready to rise another and fatal inch and a half any second. There wasn't even time to cut Mark's wrist bonds.

"Get out of the press, Konya," Slate said. "Fast!"

He knew there was no more time and didn't want Konya to be caught too, April thought. But as the girl drew her head and shoulders from the press, she realized he had simply wanted her to get out of the way.

Even though his wrists were still bound, Slate's arms were no longer tied immobily to his sides. Reaching up, he gripped the underside of the upper die and gave a mighty jerk.

His body shot forward feet first and he slid out of the press as though impelled by a spring.

Falling to hands and knees, he bounced erect, balanced precariously on his still-bound legs, made a hopping about-face and moved back to the press. The machine started to rumble as he grasped one of April's feet with his bound hands.

He jerked on the foot mightily, turning his back to the machine as he pulled. April slid from the closing jaws an instant before the floor of the press jolted upward. Slate fell flat on his face with April on top of him.

She lay there for some seconds, hardly believing she was safe, then gently rolled off of him.

Slate pushed himself to his feet and hopped over to the workbench. Konya scurried after him. Supporting himself on the edge of the workbench, he looked over the array of tools there.

"Start pulling open those drawers," he told the girl.

In the second drawer she opened he spotted a tin-snip. "Use that," he said, holding out his wrists.

When she had cut the wire, he took the tin-snips from her and used it on the wire binding his ankles. A few moments later he had cut April free.

April continued to sit on the floor for some moments, rubbing the circulation back into her arms and legs. Slate sat on the box recently occupied by the still unconscious Perez and did the same for himself.

Finally he stood up and pulled April to her feet. Then he looked down at the floor and glanced around in all directions.

"What happened to Perez's gun?" he asked Konya.

"It slid across the floor over that way," she said, pointing to the stack of octagonal steel plates.

The plates were resting on two two-by-fours, leaving a two-inch space between the bottom one and the floor. Slate bent to peer into the space, then started to reach his hand into it.

"We'd better get out of here," April said. "Karsh said he'd be back a few minutes to seven and it must be past seven now."

At that moment the front door started to open.

NINETEEN

"ESCAPE ME NEVER!"

FROM THE corners of his eyes

Mark Slate saw the door opening too. He quit groping for the gun and bounced to his feet.

"Run!" he said to April, grabbed Konya's hand and headed for the protection of a nearby steel pipe which had a diameter of about five feet and stretched along the floor for a distance of a dozen feet.

April darted after them. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw four men entering the door. Maxim Karsh and Ranjit Sighn were first. Behind them came an ancient Chinese leaning on the arm of a younger Chinese man.

Slate and Konya reached the near end of the pipe and ducked inside as guns came out and were leveled. She wasn't going to make it in time, April thought, tensing her body in anticipation of the impact of bullets as she made a desperate dive for the pipe.

Only a single shot sounded, and it went wild.

April was sliding along the inside of the pipe on her stomach by then, and hadn't seen what caused

the delay in effective fire. The younger Chinese had jumped in front of Ranjit Sighn, blocking his aim, then had fired so quickly his bullet went high.

The older man, suddenly losing the support of the younger's arm, had floundered against Maxim Karsh and had thrown his arms around him in a desperate attempt to regain balance. Instead he had knocked the squat man off balance too, and they both tumbled to the floor tangled together.

Slate dragged Konya from the other end of the pipe and headed for the protection of a drill press. Scrambling to her feet, April scurried after them.

She saw the sheik running their way with his gun leveled. She ducked behind the drill press. Karsh, looking annoyed, was just getting to his feet.

Ranjit fired, but by then the three were running for the cover of a pile of steel rods, keeping the drill press between them and their pursuers. From there they darted behind an enormous steel lathe, and finally across an open space toward the rear door.

Fortunately the door opened outward. Mark Slate, still dragging Konya by the hand, hit it with his shoulder and lifted the latch at the same time. As April sped through the door behind them, bullets smacked into the door frame on either side.

Hand in hand, Slate and Konya

headed for the rear of the administration building at a dead run, with April right behind them. An Arab sentry between the two buildings, but at the front end of them, turned to stare their way.

Slate and Konya disappeared around the corner of the administration building. Another two bullets slammed into the edge of the building as April rounded the corner after them.

Mark Slate had dropped to hands and knees and was frantically digging in the sand. Konya had flattened herself against the building next to the rear door. Gasping for breath, April flattened herself next to Konya.

Slate's hand closed over the buried U.N.C.L.E. gun and brought it up just as Maxim Karsh raced around the corner. Karsh screeched as he came to a halt. His finger was whitening on the gun trigger when the U.N.C.L.E. gun flashed.

The squat engineer was blasted over on his back and lay still.

Slate peered around the corner, then hurriedly drew back as three shots winged his way.

"Ranjit and a couple of Arab guards," he said. "Is that door unlocked?"

April, who had already tried it, shook her head.

Slate blew it open with his U.N.-C.L.E. gun and led the way inside.

Slamming the door behind them, he said rapidly, "It's just about

time to start work, so the building should be empty. We'll make a break from the other end and try to get to the corral before they realize what we're doing. Let's go."

The building wasn't quite empty, though. Fritz and Sven, because of their night guard duty, were sleeping in, and had been awakened by the shots. In pajamas and with guns in their hands, they both suddenly appeared from the barracks room.

The U.N.C.L.E. gun flashed twice and both men dropped.

Hardly slowing stride, Slate rushed by the prone bodies with Konya scurrying after him and April Dancer bringing up the rear. As she passed the two fallen men, April slowed enough to scoop up both their guns.

At the far end of the hall Mark Slate flung open the mess hall door, gave the room a sweeping glance, then ran across to the door leading outside when he saw the room was empty. He paused to peer through the curtains of the door's upper pane.

Konya and April crouched on their knees at the window alongside the door in order to peer out.

Led by Orkhim, a half dozen Arab guards with rifles were running their way from the oasis. From the other direction three THRUSH technicians with drawn pistols were moving in.

"Don't shoot my father!" Konya said pleadingly.

Slate looked at her, then glanced toward the windows at the side of the room toward the machine shop. Following his gaze, April saw Ranjit and two Arab guards between the two buildings, moving cautiously toward the rear of the administration building.

"Looks like we're hemmed in," Slate said grimly. "We'd never shoot our way through that mob."

April hefted the two guns she had picked up. "We have three guns."

Slate cocked an eyebrow at her. "Two-gun April from the wild west. We'd still never make it."

"You won't shoot my father, will you?" Konya said.

Slate started to give her an irritated look when the building was rocked by a nearby explosion so loud, it sounded as though a bomb had been dropped from an airplane. All three instinctively fell flat.

Mark Slate was first to his feet again, and April was only a micro-second behind him.

Konya was still cowering on the floor when they reached the side windows.

The roof of the machine shop they had just left had collapsed and the building was enveloped in flames.

A second terrific explosion sounded and the building beyond the machine shop spurted flames skyward.

Ranjit and the two Arab guards

between the administration building and the machine shop halted their stealthy advance toward the rear of the building and rushed toward the burning machine shop.

The three THRUSH technicians ran toward the second burning building.

Third and fourth explosions sounded from the other direction. Slate and April ran across the room to stare out the windows on that side.

The remaining two large buildings were enveloped in flames.

This turn of events was too much for Orkhim and the other riflemen who had come from the oasis. They had halted uncertainly at the first two explosions. Now they turned tail and headed back for the oasis at a dead run.

"Let's go," Slate said.

Jerking open the door, he stooped to pull Konya to her feet by the hand and ran outside. April was right behind them.

Slate started toward the corral on the oasis, then spotted the plane the two Chinese had arrived in and changed direction.

It was a fifty-yard run, and April was sure they must have broken some kind of track record. When they reached the plane, Slate yelled for the girls to climb inside, and ran beneath the wing to kick away the chocks blocking the wheels.

Konya merely stood there gasping for breath. April grabbed her shoulder, pushed the Arab girl up

the steps leading to the cabin and crowded after her.

There were several seats in the cabin. Konya was in such a daze from all the excitement and exertion, she simply stood there panting until April unceremoniously shoved her into a seat. April herself dropped into the one immediately behind the pilot's seat, then tossed her two guns onto the seat across the aisle from her.

Through the front cowling April could see that all four of the larger buildings were total losses. As she watched, the walls of the administration building burst outward and flames shot more than twenty feet into the air.

She spotted the running figure of Ranjit Sighn. Apparently he had given up hope of saving any of the buildings and was making a last desperate effort to rescue something from the wreckage, because he was running toward the launching pad tower.

He was nearly there when a mushroom of smoke and flame erupted from the base of the tower. As the steel-grid edifice began to topple, Ranjit turned and ran the other way.

He never made it. April closed her eyes and clenched her fists an instant before the figure of the running sheik was blotted out by the geyser of sand that spurted upward as the huge tower crashed to the ground directly on top of him.

Mark Slate came through the

cabin door, slid into the pilot's seat and examined the instrument panel.

Tentatively he pushed a couple of buttons. The jet engine started to fire, then died.

"Do you know how to fly this thing?" April asked.

"I have a pilot's license," he said. "I've never flown a jet."

"Oh, fine," April said, starting to rise from her seat. Let's head for the corral and kidnap some camels."

"Relax," Slate told her. "I know the basic idea. I'll work it out."

April glanced toward the burning buildings and spotted two figures racing their way.

"You'd better figure it out fast," she said dryly. "Or at least figure out how to raise the steps before we're invaded."

Slate glanced toward the running figures. The one in the lead was the ancient Chinese who had fallen against Maxim Karsh in the machine shop.

Close behind him was the young Chinese pilot.

The old man was running with remarkable agility for one who shortly before had required assistance to walk.

"I think this raises the steps," Slate said, pushing a button.

The cabin lights went on.

Slate abandoned trying to raise the steps and fired the engine again. This time it caught. He knew that without a few seconds of warmup

they would probably crash on take-off, though, and the two approaching Chinese were nearly to the plane.

He drew his U.N.C.L.E. gun as the old man in the mandarin costume started up the steps.

Then his jaw dropped. He stared. His hand went to his forehead.

As he came up the steps, the elderly Chinese tucked his thumb under his chin and peeled his whole face upward.

The rubber mask came off to expose the serenely smiling face of Napoleon Solo.

Behind him the younger man had ripped off a rubber mask too. It was Ilya Kuryakin.

"You people occupied everyone nicely while Ilya and I ran around and tossed plastique explosives," Solo said. "I'm afraid we used up all your chewing gum, April, but here's the rest of your stuff."

He tossed her purse to her, then sank into the seat next to her.

Ilya Kuryakin jerked his thumb in the direction of the seats behind the pilot's seat.

"Move to the back of the bus, boy," he said. "And let an expert take over."

ONE WEEK later Mark Slate, April, Mr. Waverly, Randy and Konya had lunch together at a New York restaurant. Konya was smartly attired in a Fifth Avenue dress selected by April and had her dark

hair done in an attractive modish upsweep.

"I can hardly believe my freedom here," she said to Alexander Waverly. "And my good luck in being accepted by the U.N.C.L.E. academy. It is all so wonderful. Do you think I can pass all those courses?"

"I'm sure you can," Waverly said in his usual formal tone. "Your I.Q. tested well above our mini-mum requirements, and they are quite high."

"It'll be a breeze," Randy told her. "I could pass most of the tests myself, and I'm just an on-the-job trainee."

"There's one test you couldn't pass," Slate said dryly. "U.N.C.L.E. agents are supposed to be modest."

Randy grinned at him, unabashed.

"You will be assigned to Cairo headquarters, of course, when you finish your training," Waverly said to Konya. "With your background, you'll be more valuable there than anywhere else."

The girl threw a wistful look at Mark Slate.

Catching it, Alexander Waverly smiled dourly.

"I will occasionally give Mr. Slate a middle-east assignment," he assured the girl.

April Dancer had seen the wistful look too.

She gave Alexander Waverly a frown of disapproval.

Meet BIG BROTHER

THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE



YOU'VE READ *The Girl from U.N.C.L.E. Magazine*. Now meet her older, famous big brother, the sensational rating-topping *The Man from U.N.C.L.E. Magazine*. Like the magazine which you have just read, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* features in each issue a brand new novel targeted to your reading pleasure and starring the greatest cast of spy-adventure headliners ever assembled anywhere! During the short but exciting magazine life of this brilliant series, it has taken the espionage-adventure reading public by storm. It will do the same thing to you!



METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER-ARENA'S smashing nation-wide television show, now in its third record breaking year, stars also Napoleon Solo, Illya Kuryakin and Alexander Waverly—whom you will also see in this magazine with April Dancer and Mark Slate and the other great characters. Note—these companion magazines will be 1967's sensation. That's not a prediction—it's a promise!

AND REMEMBER—*The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* will continue to give you a new full length U.N.C.L.E. novel each month—plus stories of quality by world-famous authors. And the famous Department of Lost Stories—the most widely acclaimed magazine feature of the year!



Alexander Waverly and his two key agents live with danger and sudden death. You'll thrill with them in their never-ending fight against THRUSH. A suggestion! Reserve your next copy now at your newsdealers. Some issues have sold out very early!

STEFANIE POWERS

She's sultry, lithe and all girl, the "dark-haired, armful of danger" who portrays "The Girl from U.N.C.L.E.:" in the new television play of the same name.

by **WALTER DALLAS**

LOVELY Stefanie Powers, "The Girl from U.N.C.L.E.," is that rare creature, a Hollywood native, who had to travel exactly two blocks to audition for her first professional role.

She didn't get the part. But a director saw her test and gave her the lead in a low budget picture. Since then, the young Hollywood high school girl has appeared in over a dozen films.

She's a natural for the part of April Dancer, who is described by no other than dour Alexander Waverley as "An armful of dark-haired danger."

If, in her role in "The Girl from U.N.C.L.E." she is required to travel to faroff places in the world, she won't break down and weep.

She adores faraway places, the more glamorous the better.

Mexico and England are her present loves. For the immediate present, however, Stefanie will have to be content with the magic of television at MGM studios in Hollywood, where as the latest in sexy secret agents, she is doing as much to make the Mod look popular in fashions as any girl in the land. Her 5' 5" well distributed version of girl is made for the new styles, and she handles the whole thing with a magic perfection.

She is quite frank about it.

"I saw these new styles in England and loved them," says Stefanie. "I feel they fit right in with April Dancer's personality."

Anyway, they fit—and how!

*She
Tossed
Aside
Screen
Stardom
to
Take The
Scintillating
Role
of
APRIL DANCER*



There are many, even at this early stage, who feel that Stefanie's looks, figure and dark allure would go with anything, while she's chasing spies and THRUSH bad guys.

As Kathleen Carroll reports, Robert Vaughan called Stefanie a few weeks ago, greeting her with "Hi, girl, this is man."

It's a good phrase. For if Napoleon Solo is The Man from U.N.C.L.E. just as surely April Dancer is The Girl from U.N.C.L.E. and all first raves indicate that she is here to stay, in the person of svelte Stefanie Powers.

For a kid of barely twenty-three, Miss Powers has done a lot of things. Like portraying, in unforgettable fashion, a young pio-

neer girl in labor ("Stagecoach") and like throwing away a budding screen career to make television, her first and only love.

"The Girl from U.N.C.L.E." will be an addition, not a part of its famous predecessor, "The Man from U.N.C.L.E." Solo, Kuryakin and Waverly will appear from time to time, and of course, that perennial menace, THRUSH, will be a common foe.

But April Dancer, with her sparring mate, companion in danger and staunch friend, Mark Slate, will dominate the action and story line of this brilliant new show.

It's the first hour-long weekly show the network has ever built around a woman star!

He was a dead man. But he had one last thing to do—shoot his wife . . .

Murder-Care by STEVE APRIL

As THREE WITNESSES, all of them passing motorists, stated, in effect "This young woman came staggering out of the little house, her face and head all bloody. She



was moaning, or sobbing, 'My husband . . . my husband—shot the gun!' She crossed the road, we had to hit the brakes to prevent running her over; then she seemed to lean on this fence, along side the river.

"Before any of us could reach her, she fainted, fell into the river. The current was strong and she was carried out to sea, floating face down. Judging by all that blood on her head, she couldn't have lived very long anyway. We saw this at a few minutes after one, on the afternoon of June tenth."

The young woman's name was Mrs. Mavis Young. Inside the old cottage the sheriff found her husband, Todd Young, in bed, a .38 pistol on the sheets. Todd was a skeleton of his former beefy self and under sedation.

He reportedly told the sheriff, "I'm sick of Mavis always bugging me about my dying. Always reminding me I'm dying, dying—said she didn't want to be alone. Yes, I fired the shot. I asked my cousin, Ed, to lend me his pistol yesterday."

"Yesterday?" the sheriff repeated. "Are you sure it was yesterday? Todd, you're dazed, drugged. Be careful what you say. Yesterday makes it premeditated—murder one."

Todd grinned up at the sheriff. "Make it anything you wish. I won't live to stand trial."

Todd Young's folks had lived in

Bottle Harbor since the days of 1776, when the Harbor had been a prosperous whaling port. The killing put the now shabby little village in headlines across the nation, many papers carrying stories about, "*Dying Husband Kills Nagging Wife!*"

Todd not only lived to stand trial, but months later in the county courthouse he looked stocky and ruggedly healthy as he calmly sat beside his court-appointed lawyer, listened to the various witnesses for the State.

His cousin, Ed Davis, plainly uncomfortable at having to give testimony, said on the witness stand, "Todd, he started complaining of pains in his gut shortly after Christmas, lost a lot of weight. The way I heard it, there wasn't anything they could do for him. It was driving Mavis crazy. She tried giving him herbs, stuff like that. Mavis was part Indian. Todd met her when he was building a road near the Southampton Reservation, got married."

The dapper county prosecutor asked, "To your knowledge, was there any resentment in the family over this intermarriage?"

"Resentment? Not a bit, Mavis was a great girl. As for her being Indian, well, I guess everybody whose people have lived around here for a lot of generations has some Indian blood in them."

"Mr. Davis, did Todd ask you to bring him your pistol?"

"Yes sir."

"When did you give it to him?"

"The day before the shooting. He asked for it in the morning and I brought it over later in the day."

"By day, do you mean June 9th?"

"That's right. I was dropping in to see Todd almost every day. He'd lost over seventy pounds by then and was in pain all the time. He told me Mavis was always talking about how she wouldn't let him die—she'd been raising hell all over the county trying to help him."

"Will you explain what you mean by raising hell, Mr. Davis?"

"Yes sir. When Todd first took sick, naturally he went to see Doc Harris, the only doctor in the Harbor. Todd told me Doc Harris said he thought Todd had a kind of growth on his gall bladder, but it was too big an operation for him to handle. They sent Todd to the county hospital where they said some kind of radium machine, a special sort of X-ray machine, was needed. Also there was only two doctors in the U.S. who could do this kind of delicate operation. That's what Todd told me."

"Mavis told me the docs wanted \$5000 for the operation, plus the expense of moving Todd to a big city hospital."

"Naturally, Todd and Mavis, none of us, had that kind of money. If Todd had been a vet, the government would have paid for the operation at a VA hospital."

But Todd was too young for Korea and too old for the draft now, so that was out. That's what was driving Mavis buggy: the county hospital couldn't do anything more, Doc Harris was afraid to operate, so Todd was just dying.

"He was drugged most of the time, they gave Mavis pills to give him for the pain. He couldn't eat solids, either. He asked me for the pistol because he was alone in the house, flat on his back, a good deal, what with Mavis rushing around, on the phone at the store calling Washington and the governor, trying to get help."

"Did you assume he wanted the gun for protection?"

"Yes sir."

"To your knowledge, Mr. Davis, was Todd being threatened?"

"Of course not. But when a guy is weak and alone—" Ed stared at the floor. "I was thinking Todd couldn't take it no more, wanted to kill himself. But I never thought he'd shoot Mavis."

This was stricken from the record when Todd's lawyer objected. The prosecutor asked, "Mr. Davis, did you stop in to see Todd Young on the morning of June tenth?"

"Yes sir."

"Tell us exactly what Todd told you on that morning."

"Well, Todd was kind of high from his pills, I mean, I thought he was talking wildly. He told me, 'All Mavis can talk about is how she'll keep me from dying. I tell

her to shut up, I don't want to hear about dying. But every other word she says is dying . . . dying. I—" Davis' voice faded.

"Think, Mr. Davis, was that all Todd told you on the morning of June tenth?"

Glancing at Todd, his thin face almost in pain, Ed Davis mumbled, "He said, 'I could kill her.' "

"You're positive Todd Young told you, 'I could kill her,' Mr. Davis?"

Davis mumbled. "Yes, sir, that's what he said."

"And by 'her,' you understood he meant his wife, Mavis Young?"

"Yes, sir."

Under cross-examination Davis eagerly agreed with the defense lawyer that he did not consider the statement a threat, but merely, "—some wild talk. The pills Mavis gave him for the pain, they kept Todd in orbit. If I'd thought Todd meant it, I would have taken my pistol from under his pillow."

The sheriff testified that only one bullet had been fired from the pistol, that the slug had never been found, that only Todd's fingerprints had been found on the gun.

Dr. Harris took the stand to state: "This is one of these tragic circumstances. Neither I nor the county hospital had the necessary equipment for this delicate operation. I brought Todd Young into the world and I felt, in all good faith, that the operation was so complicated it would have been

murder for me to even attempt it. The Youngs didn't have the money to pay for the services of a specialist. Mavis Young and I consulted every possible government, county and state agency for help.

"I would have gladly loaned them the money, if I'd had it, but I'd just set my sons up in business, had mortgaged my land to do that. I agreed to co-sign a bank loan, but the bank turned that down. I'd written to our Congressman, urging him to see if he could have Congress pass a bill giving Todd the five thousand dollars. It seemed fantastic that in these days a man should die because he couldn't afford medical services.

"But such a bill, even if it could be passed, would take time and Todd was fast running out of that. I phoned each of the two specialists, long distance, appealed to them, but they're very busy men. It was a case of everybody wanting to help, but due to circumstances, being unable to do a thing."

The prosecutor asked, "In your opinion, as a medical man, if Mavis Todd had been shot in the head and carried out to sea, could she have lived?"

"No, sir. In my opinion she probably was dead when she toppled into the river."

"Thank you. You may step down, Doctor Harris. Your Honor, the State rests."

The youthful defense lawyer immediately made a motion that the

homicide charge be dismissed because the body had never been found. When the judge denied the motion, after some hesitation the lawyer said, "Your Honor, against my advice, my client insists upon taking the stand. I now call Todd Young."

Walking with a springy step, Todd Young took the oath, sat in the witness chair.

His lawyer asked, "You're aware that you are under oath to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, Todd?"

"Yes sir, I know that."

"Were you happily married to Mavis Young?"

"We were very happy; a man couldn't ask for a better wife. I loved Mavis more than life itself. I still do."

"Your cousin, Ed Davis, has testified that you said you could kill Mavis for constantly talking about you dying. Did you say that?"

"Yes, I did, but I didn't mean it."

"You just told us you loved Mavis more than life itself. There has been testimony that Mavis said she couldn't live without you. Todd, did you two arrange a suicide pact? Did you shoot her and then didn't have the strength to shoot yourself?"

"No, sir. We never talked of suicide. I'm a crack shot. I fired the gun, but not at Mavis. I fired out the window, at the woods."

"Are you saying, Mr. Young,

that you never meant to shoot your wife?"

"That's right. I didn't shoot her."

"On the morning of June tenth, you were under sedation. Were you aware of what you were doing?"

"Yes, sir. I didn't take any pills that morning, I wanted to keep a clear head."

"A clear head for what?" the lawyer asked.

"For what I had to do. It was Mavis' idea."



The lawyer hesitated, uncertain as to where the testimony was heading. Then, puzzled, he asked, "Exactly what was her idea?"

"Well, it wasn't her's only. We both thought it up. Mavis kept on saying how crazy wrong it was, me needing this operation for which we couldn't afford to pay. I didn't blame the specialists. They were busy men, had no time for charity. Mavis told me, 'Todd, if you were a vet, the government would pay for the specialists. If you were over sixty-five, medicare would handle it. If there was time, we could move to some big city and get on relief and then the city government would see that you had the opera-

tion. But we're poor, young and happen to live in Bottle Harbor. It's a case where the government agencies mean well, but rules stop them from doing anything.

"I'm not going to stand by and watch you die. What we have to do is make it easy for the government to help you.' That's what we did, sir. I want it known I was the one that did everything."

"I don't understand; what did you do?" the lawyer asked.

"Mavis, she was always reading and she'd read some place where the government would go to any lengths to make certain a man thought guilty of murder would stand trial. She put catsup on her face and I fired a shot out the window. Mavis staggered out of the house. When the sheriff questioned me, I bragged how I wouldn't live to stand trial.

"I guess everybody knows the rest: they took me to a state prison

hospital, rushed both specialists in to operate, made sure I got the necessary post-operation treatments. Look at me. I've never felt better in my life. But none of this would have happened if they didn't think I was a murderer."

"Mr. Young, are you saying your wife is not dead?" his lawyer asked.

"I'm sure she isn't. Mavis is a good swimmer."

"Then, where is Mavis Young?"

"I haven't seen her, but I'd hoped she would be here."

A young woman in the rear of the court room jumped up, pulling off a floppy hat which hid her pretty face. "I'm Mavis Young. Perhaps what we did was a fraud, but it was the only way Todd's life could be saved! We'll pay back every cent it cost the State to save my husband's life and—"

Her thin voice was lost in the uproar.

In the Next Issue:

THE DEADLY DRUG AFFAIR

The New GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E. Book-Length Novel

by **ROBERT HART DAVIS**

Something new . . . something entirely different. . . an excitingly fresh variation on a famous theme . . . that's "The Girl from U.N.C.L.E." Starring glamorous April Dancer, co-starring Mark Slate, you'll thrill to this brilliant new addition to "The Man from U.N.C.L.E." family. Buy it regularly!

NOEL HARRISON

He's Rex Harrison's son and you're going to see a lot of him in "THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E." Now, for the first time, you can see why he was chosen as co-star!

by **PETER OPPENHEIM**

NOEL HARRISON is Rex Harrison's son.

He doesn't talk much about it. After all, he's a pretty independent young man and wants to stand on his own feet, artistically as well as in private life.

Perhaps these traits, as much as any other, culminated in his getting one of Hollywood television's juiciest, most coveted roles—the part of Mark Slate, co-star in the "Girl from U.N.C.L.E." playing opposite sultry Stefanie Powers.

Actually, the part will be virtually his big first acting role of importance anywhere. He interrupted a U.S. tour as a ballad and folk singer to take the screen test that awarded him his first American acting role. He will play, of course,

the young U.N.C.L.E. agent transferred from the London branch to pair up with the "Girl" agent portrayed by Miss Powers.

Noel is no stranger behind the footlights. He began an acting career in Ipswich, England, varying thespian parts with singing in small clubs and coffee houses. His singing seemed to catch on the best and for the most part he has been concentrating on it.

In his role as secret agent Mark Slate, Harrison will do the heavy cloak and dagger work for agent April Dancer. Illya Kuryakin, dashing agent in "The Man from U.N.C.L.E." says, "I must admit that Mark is resourceful and courageous."

Nice work if you can get it.

*The
Incredible
Story
of the
English
Folk Singer
You Know
as
MARK SLATE*



As Mark Slate in "The Girl from U.N.C.L.E.," Noel will have a role which corresponds in importance to that played by David McCallum, who plays his counterpart in "The Man from U.N.C.L.E."—and who in the process has captured the hearts of young women here and abroad with his sensitive portrayal of agent Illya Ktirakin.

But Mark Slate will be no paper copy. He is his own character completely, forceful, debonair and unpredictable as the wind. April Dancer alone knows him well—how well only she knows, and she's not the kind of girl to talk, which makes her Alexander Waverly's kind of secret agent.

Yes, Noel Harrison as Mark Slate stands alone on his sturdy English feet!

Noel is a versatile gent. Among other things, he was on the British Olympic ski teams in both 1952 and 1956 and served two years as an officer in a cavalry unit. Last but not least, he's a properly loving father of three daughters and a son. His wife, Sara, a Canadian, was a top London model before their marriage.

His ambition? To buy a home in Italy (he speaks Italian, French and German) where they can spend part of each year.

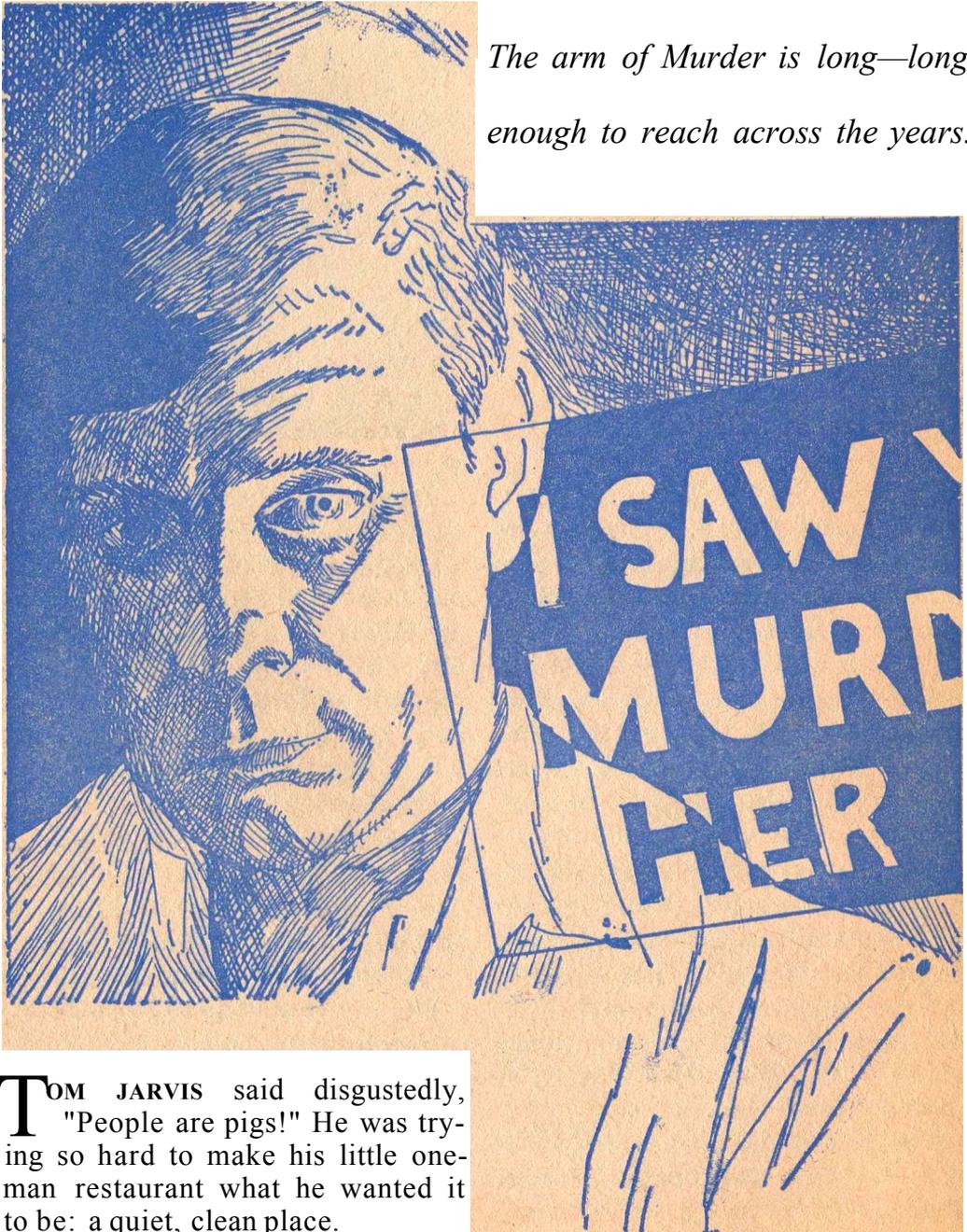
For the immediate present, however, he will have to explore caves, castles, dungeons and sundry other eerie abodes looking for THRUSH baddies—with April Dancer, of course, at his side.

Not too scary a task, at that, come to think of it!

The Kookhouse Murder

by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

The arm of Murder is long—long enough to reach across the years.



TOM JARVIS said disgustedly, "People are pigs!" He was trying so hard to make his little one-man restaurant what he wanted it to be: a quiet, clean place.

True it was a mere hole-in-the-wall, with three small and three larger tables, and a counter that seated six; a place where couples and families from near-by apartments could become regular diners, and single-roomers could eat their dinner after work in restful surroundings where nobody would hurry them if they wanted to linger over coffee and a cigarette.

He opened only for the dinner hour, from five to nine. He did all the cooking as well as the waiting so that the profits as well as the expenses were all his.

He was a good cook of simple food, from the days when his name hadn't been Jarvis. He lived in two rooms off the restaurant proper, and he ate his own cooking. It was an ideal solution for a man who wanted nothing more from life than to be let alone.

But he did have a wine and beer license, and that meant he had to have public rest rooms. And he did have plenty of customers who weren't regulars and whom he didn't know.

So every morning when he did his slow, thorough cleaning he was confronted by those scribbles on the walls of the three booths in the men's room—and sometimes in the women's as well.

"You prig, you prude," his wife used to jeer at him when she was still alive.

Perhaps she was right; he had hoped once to become a minister,

but there hadn't been enough money and he had had to go into his father's restaurant business instead.

Mella's blatant immodesty was one of the many things that had made his marriage so desperately unhappy.

As he scrubbed away the crude drawings, the obscene invitations, the dirty jokes, he muttered to himself often what pigs people were. He was entirely too busy while the restaurant was open to notice who did or didn't go to the rest rooms. What could he do about it anyway—accuse customers, offend them, and lose them? For months he pondered, and then he evolved a way of alleviating the nuisance if not curing it. He painted the walls with a shiny dark blue enamel that wouldn't take pen or pencil.

The next day he found that somebody had used a penknife to scratch a particularly nasty message in one of the booths. He had to scrape it and paint it over.

So he had a inspiration. In each booth, men's and women's, he fastened to the wall a small blackboard, with a piece of chalk attached to it by a string, and at the top of each blackboard he stenciled: "If You Must Write, Please Write Here."

The innovation worked. To be sure, a few of the more irresponsible young customers—one of them, to his distaste, a girl—made sniggering comments as they paid their

bills, to which he responded only with a tight disapproving smile.

Let them consider him a prude, as Mella had done; they were nothing to him. The important thing was that the walls were not disfigured any longer, and a damp rag quickly effaced the evening's contribution to pornographic and scatological art and literature.

Then one morning he found, neatly printed on one of the blackboards, a single sentence. It said: "I SAW A MURDERER IN THIS RESTAURANT TONIGHT."

Jarvis felt himself turning cold. Who had written it? Whom had the writer seen? On what knowledge or imagination was his indictment based? Did the writer expect somebody to do something about it? Or had the message only been left for a later comer to see?

He tried very hard, the next evening, to observe the comings and goings through the door leading to the rest rooms, but it proved quite impossible.

Two days later there was another sentence on another blackboard. "A MURDERER MAY GET AWAY WITH HIS CRIME, BUT HE HAS TO LIVE WITH HIS CONSCIENCE."

He washed that one off too.

There was nothing more for a week, though Jarvis took to inspecting the blackboards as soon as the resturant closed.

Worry over the messages was keeping him awake.

The third was more specific. "DID YOU THINK NOBODY KNEW WHAT YOU DID TO HER?"

So the victim had been a woman, the murderer a man.

Of the next one he had, so to speak, an advance notice. His last customer of the evening, a retired engineer who ate in the restaurant daily—his name, Jarvis thought, was Robinson or Robertson—went back to the rest rooms after he had finished his meal. Jarvis watched him sharply, deciding to keep an eye on him henceforth and see if he did that again. But he changed his mind when Robinson or Robertson appeared at the door and beckoned to him.

Jarvis left the sink where he was stacking silverware and followed the customer to one of the booths.

"Look there!" said the man excitedly. "See what somebody wrote on this board."

"I KNOW HOW YOU MURDERED HER. I SUPPOSE I KNOW WHY. BUT WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO GET STRAIGHT WITH YOUR CONSCIENCE AND GIVE YOURSELF UP?"

"I know," said Jarvis miserably. "There have been lots of them. I can't find out who does them."

"Why don't you tell the police?" said the engineer.

"Tell them what? That somebody unknown keeps writing on these boards, accusing somebody else unknown of murdering a third person also unknown? They'd just say it's some crazy man, and to

stop bothering them. Or perhaps that it's meant as a bad joke."

"I see," said the customer in a tone that meant he didn't see at all. "But it gives a very bad impression. It gave me quite a start when I saw it."

"I'm sorry. But what can I do? Can I use a loudspeaker and ask my patrons if they are writing accusations of murder? Can I post a notice here asking them to spy on other people and report to me? Can I watch everyone who goes in here and leave everything to go in after each one leaves and see if he is the writer?"

He cut himself short. He mustn't let his nervous anxiety get the better of him.

"It's a shame. I know how hard you work and how nice you've kept this place—a real family restaurant. But this sort of thing could drive your best customers away. Who wants to let his young son discover messages like this?"

"Yes," said Jarvis bitterly, "and talk about them until I'll be driven out of business. But what can I do?"

Robinson's (or Robertson's) eyes lighted up. He was an avid reader of mystery stories.

"You could hire a private eye," he suggested eagerly, "and station him in here all evening. He could note everybody who went in a booth, go in as soon as the person left, and then if there was something like this on the board he'd be

able to describe him and you could face him with it."

Jarvis looked harassed. "I couldn't possibly—" he began. The engineer interrupted him.

"I know that would cost a lot. Look, I have plenty of time on my hands—too much of it. Let me take a try at it. I could eat early, as soon as you open, and then go in there for the rest of the evening. Take a chair and a book, and sit and smoke, and as soon as I heard anyone coming I'd be at the washstand washing my hands.

"I'd be glad to do it for a while—my guess is it would only be a few days, maybe less. Let me! It would be a real adventure." The joy of amateur detecting shone in his face.

Jarvis shook his head. "I couldn't let you do that, Mr. Robinson—"

"Robertson."

"The room is too small, for one thing. And suppose this chap comes in legitimately, as it were, and sees you there. The next time, when maybe he means to do one of his scribblings, there you are again. He'd get suspicious at once, and lay off. In fact, my guess is that he never does any writing when there's anyone else around."

Robertson looked crestfallen, but he nodded. "You're probably right," he said. "And that goes for a real detective, too, I suppose. But can't you do *something*?"

"I'll figure something out. Thanks for your interest."

Tom Jarvis watched Robertson go. Perhaps he felt snubbed and wouldn't come back. But Jarvis had his own reasons for not wanting outsiders meddling, and perhaps ending up by having the police stick their noses into his business.

Nevertheless, Robertson was right; somehow this lunatic or avenger or whatever he was had to be stopped.

There was no telling which blackboard the man would use next. That night Jarvis lettered neatly at the top of each of them: "TELL ME. PERHAPS I CAN HELP. THE OWNER."

It might lead to calamity, but at least he would know where he stood.

But all it got him was a reply, two days later: "YES, PERHAPS YOU COULD HELP. BUT I'LL PLAY THIS MY OWN WAY."

Was he being sarcastic?

Worry was cutting into Jarvis's sleep and getting him down. Either he had an insane person eating almost nightly in this little restaurant, or for all his caution the life he had built up for himself here was gravely threatened.

Things had to come to a head, so of course they did.

What happened next Jarvis knew nothing about at first. It was staged in the district police station around the corner.

A fussy, elderly little man marched into the station and up to the counter.

A bored officer looked up from his paperwork.

"Something?" he inquired.

The little man took off his hat, revealing a bald head.

"Whom do I see to report a murder?" he asked.

The policeman sat up straight. Probably a nut, but you never could tell. He directed the man to the homicide office, and watched curiously as the visitor determinedly climbed the worn stairs.

The door was open. He walked in and approached the nearest desk. He took off his hat again, and his bald head gleamed.

"The gentleman downstairs," he announced in a precise voice, "told me to come here to report a murderer at large."

Sergeant Cliff Connolly turned from the typewriter on which he had been laboriously pounding out a statement, and looked the speaker over in a swift practiced glance.

"This is the homicide bureau," he said. "Sit down and tell me about it. What is your name?"

"Does that matter? He's a vicious character. I tried to frighten him by private methods, but they didn't work. I'd hoped to make him give himself up, but I guess he's too hardened. I want him punished. So I thought if I told you, you'd take care of it."

"If you have any evidence about a murder," Sergeant Connolly said, "it's your duty to report it immediately to the police."

"I know," the little man said apologetically. "It's just—I believe we all have consciences, no matter how wicked we may seem. I tried to appeal to his. I don't believe in compulsion unless it's absolutely necessary."

"I suppose you know this may make you an accessory after the act?"

"Oh, my goodness, no! I wouldn't! I—"

He stood up suddenly.

"Sit down," Connolly ordered. "It's too late to change your mind. If you have information about a crime, I want all the details. And first I want your name and address. We'll protect you if you need protection."

The little man sighed and resigned himself.

"My name is Samuel Mackey," he said meekly. "I live at 424 Belmont Street. I have a room there. I'm an accountant, retired four years ago. I worked thirty-eight years for Weldon Associates."

"I see. And this person you accuse of murder?"

"I don't know his name, but I know him by sight. I don't know his exact address, either, though it must be very near mine. But I know where he can be found."

"Go on."

Mackey drew a long breath.

"Three or four times a week I eat dinner in a little restaurant near here, on Summer Street. It's called the Kookhouse."

"I know it. Run by a man named Jarvis."

"Is that his name? Very nice man, very deserving. He's all alone, does everything himself. It's a blessing to find a place right in the neighborhood where one can get good plain food at a price that anybody like me, living on a pension and social security, can afford."

"Are you accusing him of killing somebody?"

"Good heavens, no! But that's where I see the man I *am* accusing, practically every time I go there. I was so upset the first time I had to stop eating. I was in two minds whether to walk right out, or to go up to him and accuse him to his face.

"Then this scheme occurred to me. I thought it would work. It would have worked with me, in his place, if I could imagine myself guilty of destroying a life and getting away with it."

"You mean you have actual evidence that this man has committed a murder?"

"Let me tell it just the way it happened, so I won't forget anything. That first night, as I said, I was so upset I felt actually ill. I hurried back to the rest room.

"I got control of myself in a few minutes and felt able to go back and finish my dinner. But still I couldn't decide what I should do. Then, while I was splashing cold water on my face, I noticed the lit-

tie blackboards, and this idea came to me."

"What blackboards?"

"Well" —Mackey reddened slightly—" you know how it is. People with dirty minds write things in lavatories, and Mr. Jarvis evidently was just as much disgusted by that kind of thing as I would be. He'd put up a little blackboard in each booth, with a piece of chalk attached to it. Then if any nasty stuff *was* written, either another customer or he himself could wipe it off before anybody else saw it.

"So I thought, 'Maybe this man never comes back here. Maybe he doesn't even eat in this place regularly. So I wrote on one of the blackboards, 'I saw a murderer in this restaurant tonight.' Then I went back to my table."

"So?"

"Well, I don't know whether he ever saw that one or not. But, as I said, I've kept seeing him; apparently he eats there every night. I made a point after that of watching him, and sure enough he always goes back to the rest room; lots of people do, if they have an engagement after dinner, to wash up and see their hair is smooth and so on."

By this time Connolly was pretty sure his time was being wasted. He suppressed a smile at the reflection that seeing his hair was smooth was one thing that need never bother Mr. Mackey, and said brusquely: "Get to the point, please."

"The point is that now I've writ-



ten at least six messages, each one stronger than the last. I'm sure he must have read at least some of them, and known they were meant for him. But he keeps on eating his dinner as calmly as if he hadn't a care in the world. I can't deal with a hardened criminal. So I came to you."

"All right. You should have come as soon as you spotted him, if you really do have any evidence that he has committed a crime."

"Oh, I do!" Mackey said urgently. "I didn't actually see him kill her, but I saw him sneaking away. I was at the window, getting ready to call her to come in from the back garden. And she died, in agony, an hour later. The doctor said she was poisoned. I am certain he gave her whatever she ate that killed her."

"She?" the detective said sharply. His wariness turned to alertness. A child? An imbecile who would accept cake or candy from a stranger? There was no uncertified or suspicious death in his current file.

"She was dearest and closest to me," the little man said simply.

Tears shone in his eyes. "I loved her."

"What was her name?"

"Lila."

"Lilawhat?"

"Why, I never thought—it would be Mackey, of course, the-same as mine."

"Your wife? Your sister?"

"I've never been married. I'm an only child."

"Then—"

"If there'd been any good reason!" Mackey was weeping openly now. "If she'd ever harmed him, ever harmed anybody— Oh, I've had complaints; I've had to move twice because of her. I suppose he's one of those intolerant people without understanding or sympathy. Just because sometimes she annoyed people by barking—"

There was a moment of complete silence. Connolly got hold of himself.

"Lola was a dog?" he asked gently.

"A Scottie. I'd had her since she was a baby. She was like a child to me."

"Mr. Mackey," the sergeant said kindly, "I'm sorry, but you've come to the wrong department. Here we deal only with murder."

"If it isn't murder to destroy a beautiful, loving, living being!" Mackey exclaimed, blowing his nose in a large clean handkerchief.

"I know how you feel. I had a dog once myself, when I was a kid. Poisoning an animal is a criminal

offense, but it isn't homicide. You go back downstairs and tell the man in charge that you want to report a man, whom you can identify, for the killing of your pet dog. You *can* identify him, can't you?"

"I still consider this murder," Mackey said with dignity. "Certainly I can identify him. As I said, I don't know his name, though I think I've heard it. It's something common like Smith or Brown or Robinson. I know he lives near me somewhere, and I think he's retired too. I can point him out any night at the Kookhouse."

Sergeant Connolly watched him go through the door, and he was torn between a desire to laugh and pity for a lonely old man nursing a silly plot for vengeance on what was probably another lonely old man who might well have become his friend if only they had both been dog-lovers. But of course that didn't mean that the second man could be allowed to get away with poisoning a dog. Scotch terriers were awful yappers. His own beloved pet had been a collie.

His shift ended at four, and as he walked to his car it occurred to him that the Kookhouse was just around the corner, and it might be a friendly thing to do to drop in and warn Jarvis that one of his guests might be picked up by a police officer. He'd noticed the place often and it looked pleasant; some evening when he was off duty he must take Ellie out to dinner there.

The restaurant didn't open till five, but when he knocked he heard the proprietor hurrying to the door.

It was opened a crack and Jarvis looked out.

Perhaps he was expecting a delivery. Connolly glanced through the crack and saw with approval that the little place looked clean and inviting; the tables were being set and Jarvis had one hand full of forks and spoons. The detective, used to quick appraisal, noticed that the man was too thin and seemed tense and nervous. No wonder, if he was doing all the work of the restaurant himself.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "but we don't open till five."

"I know; I just wanted a word with you," Connolly said amiably. "May I come in?"

Dubiously the proprietor let him in and looked at him inquiringly.

"I'm Detective Sergeant Connolly, from the precinct station around the corner. I thought I'd better warn you that we'll be sending an officer here."

Jarvis started visibly.

"Why?" he asked anxiously. "There's nothing wrong, is there? I follow all the rules, and the health department just inspected the place. I obey all the fire regulations, and I have an on-sale wine and beer license. Has there been some complaint?"

Suddenly Connolly recollected the sad dignity of the little man who had wanted Homicide to handle a

case of dog-killing, and he smiled.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I'm in the homicide bureau, and one of your customers informed me this afternoon that he has been trying to catch a murderer on his own, and having failed he asked us to handle it for him—as he should have done in the beginning."

Jarvis paled.

"A murderer?" he stammered. "Here?"

"Yes," the detective said, his eyes twinkling. "He recognized a man here whom, as he put it, he had good reason to suspect of murdering his—"

And then, to Cliff Connolly's profound astonishment, Tom Jarvis dropped the silverware from his hand and fell into the nearest chain.

"Those—those messages—"

"Uh-huh. He thought they'd break the suspect down, but they didn't. So—"

Jarvis groaned. He clenched his fists and forced himself into self-control. He stood up and looked the detective in the eyes.

"All right," he said quietly. "I did it. My life was unbearable. I couldn't stand any more. I should have known you'd find out!"

"I won't make any trouble. I'll take what I have coming to me. Do you want me to go with you now? I'll plead guilty to first degree murder."

"Mella didn't die of a heart attack; she was suffocated. I killed her. I killed my wife."



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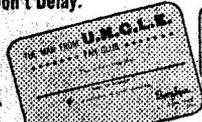
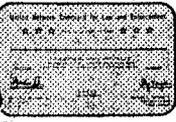
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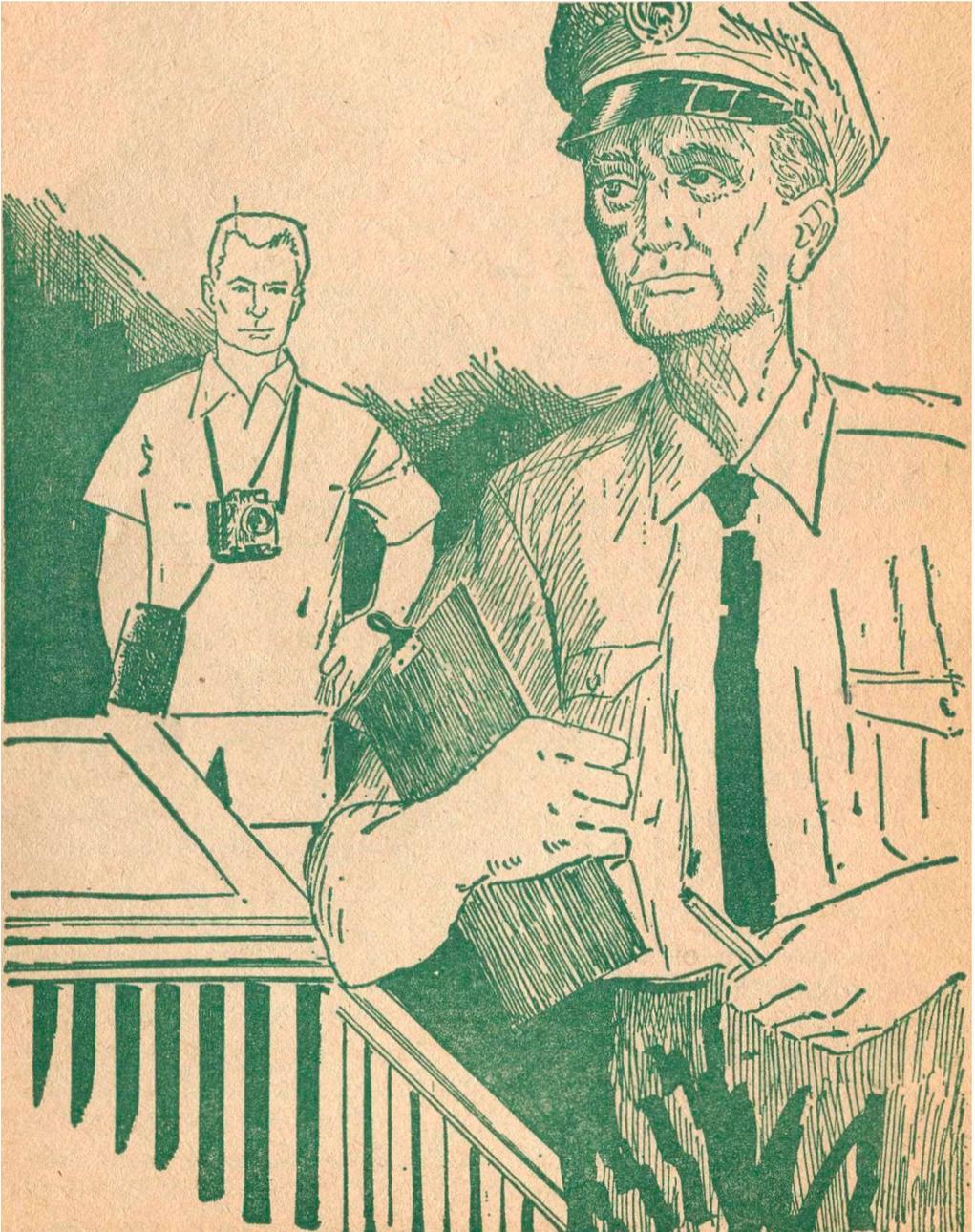
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TWO HOURS



TO ANACORTES

Somewhere on that boat a man waited with money. Money he needed more than duty, honor, even life. Nothing could stop him now. Except, perhaps, the look in a girl's eyes . . .

by **CARL HENRY RATHJEN**

U. S. CUSTOMS INSPECTOR Fred Cramer stiffened inwardly when the man, two stools away in the Friday Harbor snack bar, slid him a carefully folded section of newspaper.

"Care for part of the paper, Inspector?"

"Thanks," Cramer said carefully. Was this the advance pay-off he was expecting but didn't want, though he had no choice? Or just a friendly gesture?

Maybe the guy was an undercover agent, aware of what was going to happen in the next two hours on the ferry trip to Anacortes, Washington.

Cramer's hand looked steady, but didn't feel that way as he drew the paper closer and partly opened it. There was no concealed envelope with half of the ten grand

he'd demanded for helping to slip stolen ice past the chief and other inspectors in Anacortes. Relieved, but only temporarily, Cramer sipped his coffee.

Just how was he supposed to get that stuff through? The lid was down tight on all U.S. ports of entry from Canada. There had been a series of summer jewel burglaries in British Columbia holiday spots. Then ransom pay-offs, with no questions asked by U. S. insurance companies; but they'd want that stopped too.

Maybe this guy was an insurance investigator, helping to make it difficult to smuggle stolen ice across the border. So they had sought "inside" assistance, had learned somehow of Cramer's dire financial needs and had put the squeeze on him. He was it,

and today was the day. The next two hours, to be exact.

He tensed again when he heard the moan of a boat whistle. That was the big ferry *Evergreen*, approaching Friday Harbor on her run from Sidney, B.C. to Anacortes. The ice would be aboard her, and his advance pay-off.

Cramer tugged down the silver-braided blue cap on his dark head tinged with gray, tucked his portfolio under his arm. He stood up, tall and solid.

The bald-headed cashier, taking his coffee money, asked, "How's your boy doing, Fred?"

"The braces come off his legs next trip to the hospital," Cramer replied. "Then I suppose he'll want to ride his bike in front of trucks again."

He strolled out into the August brightness and wished he had been hit by that truck. It would have saved him from today's uncertain set-up. He also wished he hadn't sent Vicky and the kids up to Victoria to visit her folks the past few weeks. She would have sensed something was dragging him down, and would have had it out of him. He knew what she would have said.

She would have reminded him of what he'd said before they married. He'd never become rich on a civil service salary, but came a depression, recession, or whatever they called it next time, there would always be that check com-

ing in, no lay-offs so long as he kept his nose clean.

And later there would be a pension, though he also told her that his father, meeting a fishing boat sneaking in one dark night, hadn't lived to collect his pension.

Vicky had said, "When we come to closed doors, Fred, we'll open them. If we can't, we'll keep our heads up and look for another way. We'll get by somehow."

And they had, without resorting to flimsy false fronts like a lot of people he knew. Swank cars with a finance company listed as legal owner. Swank clothes and expensive luggage bearing stickers from expensive places.

Getting by on sham, trying to get through with undeclared stuff and becoming abusive when an underpaid guy doing his job caught them at it.

He never became envious or resentful, just pitied them because he and Vicky *owned* their happiness—until a truck crushed Brucie's legs, pulverized the savings account, pressed a mortgage on the house, pyramiding bank loans, and it still wasn't enough . . .

Vicky's brother, Morgan, who was in insurance, couldn't seem to get action on claims. So bills piled up, nights were sleepless, and then a man he had never seen before approached him recently while Vicky was away. Pride and temptation grappled. He'd called Morgan about the claims and nearly

spilled the beans. Morgan would have called him a fool.

Cramer nodded to himself as he left the snack bar at Friday Harbor. Maybe he was a fool, but it was too late. Anyway, he'd had no choice. He glanced toward vehicles, bound for the mainland, waiting in line near the ferry slip gangway. A husky, sun-bronzed tourist, in blue-striped T-shirt and khaki shorts, stood ahead of the line with the inevitable movie camera as the ferry approached. Nice' evidence, Cramer thought grimly, if the pay-off were caught on film!

The big *Evergreen*, second largest car ferry in the world, cut a white scimitar on the blue water as she arced in toward the slip. Her lower deck was jammed with six lanes of bumper-to-bumper cars, Campers, trailers, transporters, outboard boats and trucks.

Up on the passenger wings people crowded forward. More cameras.

Bells jangled deep within the *Evergreen*. Under her rounded bow a screw pounded in reverse, churning up white water, and Cramer's stomach began churning when a familiar voice called down to him.

"Daddy!"

Startled, he looked up at nine-year-old Brucie, clutching a white sailor cap as he moved braced legs to lean over the rail. To either side of him Jobina, eleven,

and Vicky waved from the starboard wing. Cramer's hand shook as he raised it in greeting. What were they doing, coming home?

First Mate Doheny, whose black brows stuck out like radar screens, leaped ashore with two deckhands to lower the ramp and secure the mooring lines.

"How goes it, Fred?"

"The same as with you," Cramer replied, eyeing his suddenly unwanted family. "Too ' many tourists."

Hammerschmidt, the purser, called from the car deck. "I got three for you, Fred." He motioned toward an elderly woman foot passenger and two cars that were occupied. This was the ferry's first American stop since leaving Sidney on British Columbia's Vancouver Island, and since Cramer was scheduled to sail with her, he would first have to clear anyone who wanted to come ashore. The *Evergreen* shuttled inspectors back and forth on her runs.

Cramer's legs felt stiff as he jumped the squeezing gap between ferry and slip. Would the advance pay-off he had requested be attempted under all those curious eyes on the upper deck? The contact man had told him the "boss" would handle it.

No details given. No password necessary. When Cramer got half the dough, that would be time enough to know.

So it could be anybody. Cramer

tensely approached the old woman.

He touched his cap. "I have a few questions to ask you for U.S. Customs."

Her eyes were like the blue sequins on the only party dress Vicky got by with since Brucie's accident.

"Just for U.S. Customs," the old gal repeated in a merry high voice. "That's the trouble with getting old. You don't ask them for yourself."

Cramer managed a chuckle. "My wife's watching." Then he went through the routine concerning citizenship, how long she'd been in Canada and where, what had she bought, and was anything being sent back by mail or express. He looked at a sales slip she offered, then spread wide the neck of her knitting bag and stared at many balls of colored yarn.

"You've rolled the skeins already," he remarked.

"Busy hands stay out of mischief," she replied.

And, the thought uneasily, ice could be concealed inside those balls. A trick as old as smuggling. But still people attempted it with toothpaste tubes, false bottoms in suitcases, false heels, false bras.

He hefted a green mass of yarn, poked his hand down among the others, but all the time he was covertly watching the old woman.

"Thank you. That's all," he said.

She winked at him. "Next time don't bring your wife."

Smiling briefly, his tenseness returned as he moved toward the nearest car with a driver at the wheel. It was a beat sedan, about the same vintage as his own. A boy about Brucie's age sat between the man and young woman who held another boy on her lap. The man stared ahead through the windshield in a dark, sullen mood that matched a jaw which probably had to be shaved twice a day.

"Whattaya wanta know?" he demanded, not looking at Cramer.

"Would you mind opening your trunk, please?"

The guy lurched out, brushing against Cramer. Had something been slipped in his pocket, or was this just bad temper? Cramer accompanied him to the rear of the car.

"When did you enter Canada? Where?" He got one-word answers until he asked, "What did you buy?"

"Sixty bucks worth of motels, food, and gasoline."

"No extras?"

"No extras," the guy snapped. "I'm just a working stiff."

"So am I," Cramer said, lifting an old raincoat covering scarred luggage and a kid's potty. Moving forward to look inside the car, he resisted the urge to feel his left pocket. The two boys big-eyed him.

"Are you having a lot of fun?"

he asked as he folded back a blanket that concealed an empty cracker box, muddy shoes, and crumpled little T-shirts and pants.

The boys just stared. The young mother answered. "Oh, it's been wonderful! Everything's so green up here! Not like the desert where we live!"

She reminded him of Vicky. She probably made the best of wherever she was or who she was with. He turned to the husband.

"Thank you."

"Is that all there is to it?"

This must be the first time outside and back through customs. "Have a safe trip home," said Cramer.

The guy's manner flopped over abruptly. "Well, gee, thanks, mister." He grabbed Cramer's hand, and Cramer was suddenly glad he didn't feel anything pressed into his palm.

The other car had British Columbia license plates. The stiff-necked, ruddy-faced, mustached man at the wheel spoke before Cramer could.

"Just coming over for a brief holiday, officer, to visit my daughter who married one of your countrymen. Happened quite often during the war, you know."

"That's how it happened to me," Cramer remarked.

The man went right on. "We are transporting no spirits, firearms, or tobacco." His wife nodded very primly.

"Have a good time," Cramer said dryly when he finished with them.

The two cars drove off. Hammerschmidt, the purser, looked at his watch and urgently waved for the others to hurry aboard. Cramer glanced up at the starboard wing. Jobina waved, then ran aft, with Brucie hobbling after her. Vicky smiled down, and the bright sun brought out the ginger in her hair.

It was always good to see her, and yet now it wasn't.

Going slowly up the starboard companionway, Cramer uneasily slipped his hand in his left pocket. Just a book of matches which had been there when he came aboard. The *Evergreen*'s whistle sounded warningly. Two hours now to Anacortes. The deck and Cramer trembled as Jobina, blonde hair bleached by sun and freckles more pronounced, rushed to hug him.

"Were you surprised to see us?"

"Very." Cramer held out his hand to Brucie, but the boy stayed back, moving about, clutching his cap.

"Look how I can walk now, Daddy."

"Swell." Cramer pushed up his visor and leaned toward Vicky. He could see the gray among the ginger now. Her lips held his warmly.

"How come?" he inquired.

"Don't you want us home?" The smile that overcame the pretended

pout didn't erase a studying look in her hazel eyes.

"Sure," Cramer said. "But I thought—"

"My fault, Fred," said the hearty voice of Morgan, Vicky's brother. Cramer turned. Morgan always gave him the impression of being secretly amused. He was lean-cheeked, toothy, thanks to his British ancestry, but living in the States had Americanized his dress to Madison avenue style, Oxford gray tailor drape and everything else that befitted an up and coming insurance executive and man about town. "I dropped off to visit the folks between insurance deals. I guess the kid sister—" He put his arm around Vicky. "—read more to my answers about you than I told her."

"I was just homesick," Vicky said, moving away from her brother and coming closer to Cramer. The way she studied him made Cramer uncomfortable. He looked away at people who were eyeing his uniform.

"I've got to earn my pay," he said. "Why don't you go in the canteen? I'll join you later."

Morgan took Brucie's hand. "Milk for you. Got to keep strengthening those bones." His amused glance lifted. "Hope you don't mind, old man, that I brought them along."

"Not at all," Cramer lied. "See you later," he said to Vicky. She just nodded slightly.

His steps felt jerky as he made his way to a small counter at the corner of two bulkheads. He was arranging stacks of forms when a stoutish woman in a flowery print dress, with matching bandana about her head, crossed the swaying deck without the uncertain gait of a landlubber.

"Inspector," she began stridently, "I bought some costume jewelry and dress materials in Victoria. They are for my *own* use. Now do I have to pay duty on—"

"How much did you buy and how long were you in Canada?" Cramer interrupted. "Have you got your sales slips?"

She placed her over-the-shoulder bag on the counter and began searching. "Maybe I've still got them, but even so . . ." Her lips stopped moving, her voice lowered. "Blue Cadillac. Illinois license." She murmured the number. "Waiting in Sidney they boasted of how much they bought." As she spoke, fumbling in her bag, she briefly revealed a shield.

Cramer quietly noted the license number. If those people didn't make an adequate declaration with him, or with the inspectors at Anacortes—*everything* in their car, on their persons, in their luggage, would have to be accounted for.

He gritted his teeth when the stoutish woman left the counter. Were there anymore undercover

inspectors aboard to make the payoff a very tight affair? He wondered how hush money, if it could be passed any more successfully than undeclared goods, could be spent without letting it show.

Morgan slid a mug of coffee onto the counter. "Hope this will hold body and soul together until you can join us. Anything else you'd like?"

Just keep Vicky and the kids out of the way, Cramer thought. "No, thanks," he said, placing the cup below the counter. Some of the coffee slopped over. Morgan didn't miss it.

"You ought to take some time off, Fred. A leave of absence."

"I can't. I'm working for my creditors."

"Vicky isn't that worried about things, Fred. But she *is* worried about you."

"Because you told her," Cramer said curtly. "Our problems have never bothered you before. Why didn't you go on minding your own business?"

"Easy, Fred." Morgan glanced around. People were watching the passing islands in the San Juan Archipelago. T-shirt was panning his camera. No one was near the counter. Morgan leaned his tailordrape carefully on it and spoke confidentially. "Sorry, but I had to have them along as a cover."

He nodded as Cramer squinted. "Do you think I do my traveling just to sell insurance? I went to

Victoria, where the last burglary took place, in hopes of making contact."

"To ransom—"

"Of course, what else? But things were a little too sticky. I've been led to believe I can make the meet on this boat, or as soon as we get ashore."

Cramer sat very still. This was confirmation that the stolen ice *was* aboard to be smuggled through. The armpits of his shirt clung to him. Did he dare confide in Morgan? Better not.

"Fred, why look so dour about it?"

"You're condoning crime," Cramer said.

Morgan showed his teeth with amused sarcasm. "Use your head. We'd never get them back otherwise. It's cheaper than paying out full claims."

"You're no better than they are," Cramer declared, and felt his face redden.

Morgan pushed back from the counter. "It's business. Give and take. The trouble with you is all you do is give for a measly salary. I tried to warn Vicky before she married you. You're a fool, Fred."

He turned away abruptly. A tall man, in a pin-stripe suit, slid his eyes to watch Morgan leave, then came closer with a broad, studied smile.

"Good afternoon, Inspector." He nodded after Morgan. "They always give you a bad time, don't

they? You and the income tax collectors." He laughed, extending his hand over the counter, wide open, nothing concealed in it. "I'm Congressman Ackerman, 43rd District of—

Hanging onto Cramer's hand he prattled away. Cramer half-listened, wondering if he should have taken Morgan into his confidence and helped arrange a cheaper, less risky deal. The congressman talked about contacts and close friends he had in the Treasury Department. Finally he got to the real point.

"I have an appointment down in 'Frisco—"

"Don't call it that when you get there," Cramer advised.

Ackerman laughed appreciatively. "*San* Francisco it is, Fred. Thanks for the reminder. As I was saying, I really should have flown down, but the little lady wanted to make this trip through the islands. You know how it is. So I was wondering, if you could speed things up for me when we reach Anacortes."

Was that how the ice was to be slipped past the chief and other inspectors?

"Have you anything to declare?" Cramer inquired.

The studied smile became a little more fixed. "I don't think so, Fred. Understand, I want to be above-board about everything. I know the little lady put the bite on me for more than I expected, but I'm

positive it's well within the limits we're allowed duty-free, and that's why I thought—"

"Better check with her," said Cramer, holding out a form. "If you get it all declared now, it will save time at Anacortes."

The congressman ignored the form. "I tell you all this red tape is unnecessary. And since, in a manner of speaking, we're both in the service—"

"That's right." Cramer looked him in the eye. "You make the laws, Congressman. I enforce them."

"Damn snoopers!" Ackerman snapped, grabbing the form so hard he crumpled it.

Vicky was waiting. Cramer smiled at her.

"What have you got to declare, lady?"

"A half-dozen jars of strawberry preserve for you and Brucie." Her eyes weren't twinkling. "Now I want a declaration from you, Fred. I was going to wait until you came to the canteen, but Morgan seemed so upset after bringing you coffee."

"What's come over you?" he stalled. "So suddenly suspicious of me, so attentive to what big brother says after ignoring him as much as possible." Cramer looked past her to some people standing back from the counter. "May I help you?"

Vicky waited while he helped several passengers fill out their declarations. He tried, but couldn't

be as patient as usual. He was too scared that someone might try to slip him the advance in front of Vicky. He stretched out his work until the *Evergreen* whistled for Orcas. Then he had to go below and clear one car off from Canada.

The ferry backed out, swung around, and threshed for headway. The pound of the screw throbbed up his legs and through his body. There would be no stop at Lopez Island. Next stop, Anacortes. So anytime now, from here on in . . .

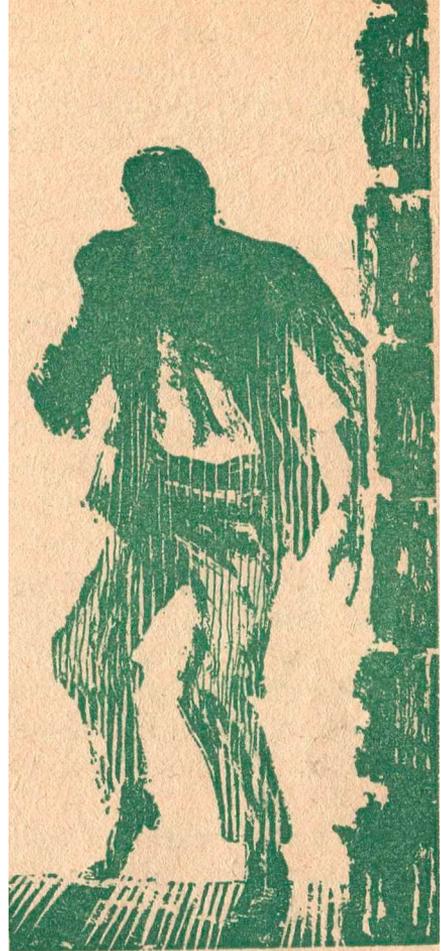
Vicky met him at the head of the companionway.

"Morgan's taken the children out to feed the sea gulls. So you can take time for a cup of coffee with me, can't you?" He knew there would be trouble if he evaded it. She waited until they were halfway through their coffee. "I don't have to listen to anything Morgan says. I can see it for myself now. What's bothering you, Fred?"

"Debts."

She gave him a chiding look. "We went all through that before I went to Victoria. Brucie's big expenses are about over. We agreed that soon we'll start getting our noses above water. So what is it, really?"

He sighed, thinking he'd rather argue with some determined dame about her declaration. He had the whole customs service standing back of him. Now he was alone, and very vulnerable where Vicky



was concerned. But did he dare tell her?

"All right," he growled. "It's just that—that I haven't done right by you and the kids." He wouldn't let her interrupt. "We had a nice little nest egg. Now it's gone. By the time we've built up again, the slow way on my salary, we'll be too old to—"

"Fred! I've never complained, and I'm not now. And in the years ahead—"

The *Evergreen* rocked as it cleared Shaw Island and caught a surge of tide. A man staggered against the table, putting out his hands toward Cramer, pawing his coat. Cramer shoved him away quickly.

"Watch what you're doing!"

Of all the dumb, amateurish ways to attempt a pay-off, if it was an attempt! In a crowded area like this! Cramer glowered around at people who were staring, including T-shirt who'd been panning his camera. Vicky looked frightened.

"Fred, he couldn't help it. What's making you so edgy? Have you done something foolish about those debts while I was away?"

He could answer that one truthfully. "Not yet. We'll talk about it later, maybe. I've got to get back to work."

Congressman Ackerman waited by the counter. He slapped down a completed form. Cramer made some calculations.

"How much?" Ackerman demanded, pulling out a wad.

Cramer stared. Was this it? No, not so openly.

"Pay ashore," he snapped, then discovered Morgan was back, leaning amusedly at the end of the counter.

"You didn't play that smart, Fred. You could have got a nice split from that declaration."

Something *twanged* in Cramer. He looked at Vicky's brother a long time. He noticed things. He'd

seen them before, of course, but had always pushed them aside because they concerned Vicky's brother and she seemed to prefer forgetting him when he wasn't around. But now Cramer really looked, and saw the shrewd, cold eyes, the selfish, determined lips, the feeling of cruelty waiting to strike.

It all began to fit. The way Morgan had forced himself more into their lives after Brucie's accident. He was *so* concerned for the kid, but had no personal funds available to help; and he was *so* embarrassed when, despite his insurance connections, he couldn't get action on the claims he had filed for Cramer. Had they been filed?

Then came this summer's jewel burglaries. Morgan never let that subject come up, he remembered, not until the lid had been clamped on the ports of entry, not until Vicky had gone away.

He must have been sounding Cramer out, calculating if the sucker was ripe for a strange man to approach with a bribe offer. Now, suddenly, everything became very, very clear.

Cramer spoke through his teeth. "What's your take on the ice, Morgan? Who gets the insurance company ransoms? You?"

"When I get the stuff back to the States. That's where you come in now." The eyes became extremely cold and hard. "Don't be a fool now, Fred." Morgan raised his

voice, but the eyes didn't change. "Here's my declaration, Inspector." There was an envelope under the form. Morgan spoke through set lips. "Don't try anything. Keep it out of sight."

As he leaned on the counter, his fingertips nudged his coat open slightly. Cramer saw the butt of a gun in a shoulder holster.

Pretending to check over the form, sliding the envelope under other papers on his desk, he asked quietly, "Now what?"

"You'll get the rest ashore, after we're through customs. And after that, if you're smart, there will be more jobs."

Cramer's lips felt dry, but he didn't wet them.

"I can't play ball until I know what I have to do. Where's the ice?"

Morgan laughed soundlessly. "I'm not too sure of you yet, because of Vicky. I'll tell you just before we land. But just remember this, Fred, and think about it. No one saw me give you anything but a form. If you sing, I don't know anything about that dough. My fingerprints aren't on it. If the ice is found, I rigged a ransom deal in Victoria, very confidential. I concealed the ice only for safety in transportation. I planned to declare it. Think it all over, Fred. You're stuck, and stuck good. So play it smart."

Cramer sat alone, sweating. He opened the envelope and saw a

sheaf of bills, old ones of small denominations. He knew he couldn't keep this money. What did he do now in the light of Vicky's suspicions? Could she know about her brother? That might make a big difference.

Cramer closed shop for this trip, placed the envelope in his inner pocket, and tucked the portfolio under his arm. Off to starboard, the westernmost tip of Fidalgo Island was sliding into view. The *Evergreen* would soon be in Anacortes.

He found Vicky standing alone, shoulders drooped, on one of the wings at the stern. Good. They could talk without being overheard. She just looked at him when he joined her at the rail.

"You're right," he began. "I have got something on my mind. Someone found out how tough things have been. I've been approached."

She looked quickly at him, then shook her head. "Not you, Fred. You're too proud of your father and your own record."

"Vicky," he cut in. "Don't act startled." He touched the slight bulge of his coat. "I've got an advance. About five thousand dollars'

"Oh, no!" she murmured, gripping the rail, staring at the wake of the *Evergreen*.

"Now I've got another blow to hand you. I got this money from—from Morgan."

She closed her eyes. He wasn't sure whether she was swaying or was it the motion of the boat?

"Smuggling?" she asked finally.

"Stolen diamonds. It's not the first time, Vicky." Her eyes came wide and straight at him. "For him," Cramer added quickly. "It's the first time for me."

He wanted to cringe under her scrutiny.

"Fred," she said, "don't get started. How many times have you told me it doesn't stop? It can't. It goes on and on. It isn't worth it."

"Even if it means—" He hesitated.

She finished it for him. "Even if my brother goes to prison." Her voice gained strength with anger. "It'll be a blow to Mother and Dad. But think back, Fred. How much did I have to do with him in our early married life? I didn't even want to talk about him. I should have known he was up to no good visiting us so much after Brucie's accident.

"But I was so upset. I didn't even guess when he—he tortured me again by not offering to help, by refusing with excuses when I asked him point-blank. Now I know why. He wanted to get you in a spot. Fred, don't let him do it. Don't—"

"We'll be in soon," said Morgan behind them. Cramer whirled. Morgan's right hand was hooked in the V of his coat, his left hand firmly grasped Brucie's. He was

amused again. "I thought if I gave you a little leeway you'd tip off the kid sister, Fred. I *know* she won't interfere."

"Daddy," Brucie began, trying to pull away.

"Don't bother him now," said Morgan. "Your daddy's got work to do ashore, helping to inspect luggage. And when he tells his friends that you're not feeling well—

"I feel swell."

The kid winced as Morgan's hand tightened. Vicky gasped. Cramer stepped forward. Morgan's hand slid into his lapel.

"Don't be crude," he advised. "Let them inspect our luggage. Just hurry them up, past a package with the sales slip on it."

Vicky sucked her breath sharply. "Those jars of preserves you offered to pick up for me!"

So that was it, thought Cramer. Inspectors examined one another's luggage when necessary. But when a man was liked, not subject to suspicion or grudges, the examination was apt to be cursory. But in this case, maybe . . .

Morgan read his thoughts. "Brucie, I'll carry you down to the car. I don't want to see you get hurt again."

The *Evergreen* sounded her whistle for Anacortes. Morgan jerked his head commandingly. Cramer grasped Vicky's arm and moved ahead. Despite the shock in her eyes, this was no time to ex-

plain further about this situation. Vicky paused suddenly.

"Where's Jobina?"

"She'll meet us in the car," Morgan said tersely, watching Cramer.

Helping Vicky down the companionway, Cramer knew innocent people might be hurt if Morgan began shooting. Passengers were climbing into their cars. Others took pictures of the ferry easing into the slip.

Vicky got in Morgan's car beside Jobina.

"Brucie rides in front with me," said Morgan.

"Like a co-pilot," said Cramer, pulling his son into his own grasp. He held the kid too high and brushed off the sailor cap in the car doorway. He crouched quickly to retrieve it. "Here, Morgan."

Too late Vicky's brother saw it wasn't the cap he was grasping. It was the long envelope. He drew back his hand as though burned.

"Get it?" Cramer called to T-shirt with the movie camera. At the same time he jumped to pinion Morgan. But the gun was already coming out.

A woman's purse, swinging on a long strap, sent the gun flying to the metal deck where it skittered under a car. Cramer and the inspector in the flower print dress closed in. Morgan twisted away like an eel. At Cramer's shout, the

first mate and deckhands faced around. Morgan straight-armed his way through and leaped toward the slip. The gap was too far. He struck the edge, then fell back under the ferry's bow just as the screw shuddered in reverse. Cramer, peering over the maelstrom, saw white water turning crimson.

T-shirt grunted beside Cramer. "I think I caught the envelope on film the first time he handed it to you. I thought you'd rig a re-take for the chief. But a shyster might have made something of it in court. Maybe it's just as well this way."

Cramer nodded and turned back toward the car. Before he got to it, Congressman Ackerman leaned from a big shiny sedan.

"What the devil was that all about?"

"Just enforcing the law," Cramer replied. Flower-print held the envelope by the edges. Cramer smiled wryly at Vicky. "Too bad we can't keep it."

Her eyes had a proud sheen. "We don't need it that way, Fred. We'll get by. Maybe those insurance claims now will—"

"We'll see," he said, then nudged Brucie, who acted as though he'd been briefed by Vicky not to ask questions now. "We'll have to talk her into stopping at a market on the way home. You and I are clean out of strawberry preserve."

A man with murder on his mind... a road which had no way back ... a bloody day when their strange paths met.

CRIME AND PUZZLEMENT

by CARROLL MAYERS



THE SHERIFF was finishing a phone conversation when I came into his office that Friday morning. He broke the connection

with a frown pinching his leathery forehead.

"Official confirmation of a radio report of a bank holdup in Steel City yesterday," he informed me. "A one-man job. He got clear with some thirty thousand. He's eluded road blocks in a stolen convertible. They figure he's traveling the back roads of this area, doubling back, trying to break through."

He started a cursory description of the bandit, then stopped, catching the expression on my face. "Something?"

I nodded soberly toward the front office.

"The widow Jenkins," I said.

Sheriff Chris Connor sighed, briefly closed his eyes. A well-intentioned woman with no true streak of perversity, Sarah Jenkins nonetheless was a constant saddle-burr to Connor with her periodic complaints over real or imagined infringements of her rights or privacy.

"You warn* those Sickie kids about stealing roses from her garden?" Connor asked me. ,

"Yes, sir," I said. "I even made them replace the bushes they'd trampled."

"How about the trash collection crew banging her garbage cans?"

"I spoke to the super."

The sheriff sighed again.

"All right," he said.

"Let's get it over with."

A tiny woman, frail looking,

with snapping black eyes and an approach which belied fragility, Sarah Jenkins came straight to the point.

"Sheriff," she told Connor crisply, "you've got to do something about Len Deacon."

Deacon, a shrewd but basically indolent character, ran an of-sorts body and fender shop on the outskirts of town. The rear of his property abutted the back of Sarah Jenkins' plot.

"Yes, ma'am," Connor said, accepting the inevitable. "What's he done?"

"Kept me up half the night with his hammering and pounding," the widow said. "One o'clock in the morning, he's banging on some silly fender or something."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Connor said, "but it is his business. I can't regulate the man's working hours."

Sarah Jenkins shook her head.

"You most certainly can," she snapped. "You're charged with maintaining the peace, and Len Deacon was disturbing my rest."

"He's kept you awake before?"

"Well, no. But I insist you speak to him."

The sheriff still tried. "But if this is the first time—"

Her black eyes sparked. "Even once is too much, Sheriff. I want you to see he won't do it again."

Connor's neck began to redden, but he yielded with no further comment.

"Yes, ma'am," he said quietly,

"I'll have Deputy Hollister speak to Deacon."

The widow favored me with one penetrating glance.

"Very well," she told Connor. "The man must be insane, creating a racket like that after midnight." With that, she stalked out of the office.

The sheriff cocked a challenging eye at me. "What else could I say?"

I couldn't check a smile.

"I'm not sure," I said, "but you might have remembered Deputy Hollister was about to take off for a well-earned weekend of fishing."

"I know, Steve," he told me wearily, "but see Deacon as you leave town. It's none of our business, but the woman has a point."

I'd packed my gear the night before. After lunch, I checked with Connor, then drove off. My destination was Mirror Lake, an anglers' retreat some twenty miles north of town. First, though, I stopped at the drugstore for a tube of liniment to ease a sprained wrist I'd picked up halting a tavern brawl the night before between two of our town's more pugnacious citizens. Then, per the sheriff's instructions, I went on to Len Deacon's place.

The proprietor was in his cluttered office, idly perusing a magazine.

"Not too busy, eh?" I suggested.

Deacon was a lanky character with knowing eyes.

"Been busier," he grinned. "You

have some work for me, Deputy?"

"No," I said, "just a question."

"Eh?"

I indicated the magazine. "If you have all that time today, why the big sweat last night?"

He looked at me uncertainly. "I don't follow you—"

I cited the widow Jenkins' complaint. As I finished, Deacon started to scowl, abruptly grinned again.

"That old biddy's always grouching about something," he said. "Well, for her information and yours, I had a hurry-up job come in late yesterday afternoon. Aluminum siding salesman working this territory banged up the fender on a company car. He stayed in town overnight, wanted me to iron out the wrinkles so's he could get going early this morning." Deacon shrugged. "It was work late or lose a job."

What could I say to that? The widow's sleep had been interrupted, but there had been a good reason for it. However, I did tell Deacon, "Sheriff Connor would rather you didn't overdo the after-hours bit."

Deacon indicated his understanding.

"It's hardly likely," he said. "First rush job I've had in months. Any more, though, I'll try to watch the time."

So that was that. I got rolling again, anxious to make the most of my weekend and thinking, as I had before, how smart it would be to

build a summer cottage right on the lake. In point of fact, several of the local citizens had done just that, including one of the participants in the previous evening's tavern caesthenics, a smoke-shop proprietor named Alec Asher.

There were several alternate routes up to Mirror Lake. I chose Young's Road, a secondary stretch the county highway department habitually ignored, but which was perhaps some five miles shorter. Because of its deplorable rutted condition, the road got little or no traffic, and I tramped the gas pedal harder than maybe I should have for safety. Realizing, I eased up a bit.

Even so, I almost missed spotting the wreck. The car, a green convertible, had left the road at a blind bend, plunged halfway down a scrub-dotted slope, crashed into a stand of dead pine.

I braked fast, stopped, clambered down the slope to investigate. I discovered more than I'd anticipated. There was a dead man in the convertible, his chest crushed by the steering post.

His features, sallow, pock-marked, somehow triggered speculation.

After a moment, gears meshed. I recalled Sheriff Connor's brief summary of the morning's phone call, realized the dead man was the fleeing Steel City bank heister.

My fishing jaunt was cancelled, of course. Before speeding back to

town, though, I made two checks. The corpse was stiff in neck, chest and arms, but not abdomen or legs. On the knowledge that rigor mortis begins in from one to twenty-four hours after death and that if a healthy person is killed suddenly, the stiffening may not set in for some time.

I judged the bandit had been dead for approximately twenty hours. Say, from about six Thursday night.

My second check was not a matter of judgment but fact: the heister might have gotten clear with some thirty thousand dollars, but the money was not on his person or anywhere in the convertible.

I figured I had a fair bombshell for Connor, but before I could begin the sheriff topped me. "Don't know how you got the report so fast, but I'm glad you're here," he told me. "If Fred Timms isn't our man. I don't know where we go. And Timms swears he didn't do it."

I blinked. "Do what?" I asked.

Connor gave me an odd look. "Kill Asher—" Then he stopped. "You mean, that's not why you came back?"

I drew a breath. "It sure isn't," I said. "You're saying, Fred Timms killed Alec Asher?"

"I'm saying he's our only suspect," the sheriff answered heavily. "After their brawl last night, and with no real alibi, I had no choice." He nodded toward the cells beyond



the office. "I had to pick up Timms."

The murder, it appeared, had been violent. Asher had been killed sometime between midnight last night, Thursday, and one-thirty this afternoon—stabbed in the chest with a carving knife. His body had been discovered in the kitchen of his bachelor quarters behind his smoke-shop by Connor and a couple of regular customers, the latter becoming curious when the shop still remained closed after noon, and summoning the sheriff to investigate.

Asher's killer, of course, could be anyone. The man had a mean mouth, was careless of everyday amenities. More, while our office had never been able to prove it, suspicion was that Asher ran a profitable book. Any disgruntled loser, or any heavy winner Asher.

had been stalling on paying off could have wielded that knife.

The the prime suspect was Fred Timms, a part-time barkeep. Timms was known to blow a lot of money on the bang-tails. In addition, he was the man with whom Asher had had the tavern go-around Thursday night, a session I'd broken up but for which Timms still could have nursed a grudge.

Lastly, Timms could provide no verifiable proof of where he'd been or what he'd done between the time of the tavern fight and the discovery of Asher's corpse.

"But if you hadn't learned of the killing," Connor finished his briefing, "what made you come back?"

I told him of spotting the wrecked convertible, of my investigation. "Where it was, off that road, the car and body might have remained undiscovered for days," I concluded.

The sheriff nodded slowly.

"Everything at once," he said. "By the way, how'd you make out with Len Deacon?"

"I think he'll be more considerate in the future," I said.

Connor grunted. "Let's hope so. Well, at least that wreck's out of our jurisdiction; the state police can step in there." He swiped at his brow and reached for the phone.

A couple of hours saw the wrecked green convertible towed to a garage, the bandit's body

identified as the Steel City gunman and taken to a mortuary, where the local coroner confirmed my estimate of time of death. However, locating the heisted thirty G's was a harder nut. The state cops found no trace of the money.

The general opinion seemed to be that the bandit, convinced of imminent capture, had buried the cash somewhere for later recovery. If so, its ultimate unearthing now appeared highly dubious, although the authorities were not giving up and were checking the heister's known associates for possible leads.

Meanwhile, our own investigation wasn't exactly setting the town on fire. While Alec Asher had numerous ill-wishers, some doubtless potentially violent, we'd come up with no likely suspect other than Fred Timms.

And Timms steadfastly maintained his innocence.

"You can't hold me like this, Sheriff," he protested when we questioned him again. "I didn't see Asher at all after our fight." A lean character with prominent Adam's apple and thinning brown hair, he hunched tensely on his cell bunk.

Connor's gaze was direct. "But you were soured on the man?"

"Is that a crime?"

"Over a gambling payment?"

"Could be."

The sheriff's tone hardened.

"Don't be cute, Timms. You're in a spot. Was it or wasn't it?"

Timms bridled. "All right—it was. Asher was stiffing me for three hundred. That's what the fight was about in the first place. But I didn't kill him and you'll never prove I did."

Back in his office, Connor slumped tiredly behind his desk. "The man's right, you know," he told me. "Without some concrete evidence, we can't continue to hold him."

I nodded. "Timms knows that too," I said. "He isn't dumb."

Connor sighed. "Well, let's get on with it. Go back to the smoke-shop, talk to the tradesmen around there. Maybe somebody saw something—"

But nobody could definitely place Fred Timms or anyone else acting suspiciously—in the vicinity of Asher's shop between midnight Thursday and before noon today, the period in which the murder had been committed. After two hours of no progress, I checked back with Connor.

The sheriff was just finishing a phone call. "Thanks for the information, Wilbur. I appreciate it."

The only Wilbur who came immediately to mind was Wilbur Farrell, desk clerk at the Manor House. I said, "Farrell call in with something?"

Connor shook his head, mien oddly speculative. "I called him," he informed me briefly. He fur-

rowed his brow, staring at nothing in particular for a long moment. Abruptly, he heaved from his chair. "Where's the garage the state boys towed that wrecked convertible?"

I thumbed my note book, told him. "Why?" I added.

"I'm not sure," Connor said, "but I want to check something out. I should be back in an hour."

"Couldn't I run over there?"

He nodded. "You could, Steve, but I want to follow this through myself."

I hadn't the slightest notion what idea he'd come up with, but I found myself awaiting the explosion with mounting impatience. When it came, it left me mildly stunned.

"We can release Fred Timms," the sheriff told me upon his return. "Len Deacon's our man."

My jaw dropped. "Deacon?"

Connor nodded tightly. "Deacon killed Alec Asher for the thirty thousand dollars."

I still was lost. "Asher had that money?" I hazarded.

"I'm convinced of it," the sheriff said. "Asher ran into the heister's convertible on that back road late Thursday afternoon. Probably Asher was returning from his cottage at Mirror Lake. After knocking the convertible off the road on that blind bend, Asher climbed down to the wreck. He found the guy dead. He also recognized the bandit's description

from earlier radio reports, so he searched the convertible, found the money."

Connor paused, marshaling his thinking. "That's when Asher had his inspiration," he resumed. "He figured to keep the money, with nobody ever the wiser. But he was known to travel that particular back road, and with the convertible wrecked there somebody could have become suspicious if Asher's own car was seen to have been hit. So he drove to Deacon's shop, gave him a story to account for the damage, and conned him into doing an after-hours repair job Thursday night."

I said thoughtfully, "Deacon didn't know about the wreck on Young's Road, but he *had* heard news about the bank holdup, the robbers escape tactics. Late Thursday night, after he'd finished Asher's car, maybe he began to think Asher's story was fishy. Maybe, knowing Asher's habit of using that road, he even guessed what could have happened, made a quick trip and spotted the wreck himself.

"Whatever, he delivered Asher's car that same night, threw his suspicion in Asher's face and tried to blackmail him for his silence. The session got violent and Deacon stabbed Asher. Then he searched Asher's quarters, located the money and got clear."

The sheriff nodded again. "Exactly," he said.

I sighed. "It works out, but it's still all theory," I said.

"Not entirely," Connor countered, but he did not pursue the point.

"Come along," he told me, "we'll drive over and pick up a killer."

On our arrival at the body and fender shop, the sheriff shouldered summarily inside, wasted no time.

"Where's the money, Deacon?" he queried bluntly, stabbing the man with a penetrating gaze.

"Eh?" Slouched on a chair, Len Deacon jerked erect at the question. "What money?"

"The bank cash you took after you killed Alec Asher," Connor rapped.

Deacon's knowing eyes narrowed, but after that first stiffening instant his composure did not desert him.

"You're talking riddles, Sheriff," he said.

"I think not," Connor said, and launched a terse summation of his theory, all the while continuing to eye Deacon closely.

A tic began pulsing in Deacon's cheek and he wet his lips slowly.

"You can't prove any of that," he said flatly.

The sheriff's rejoinder was sharp. "I think we will. To start, you told my deputy you'd worked late Thursday night on a rush job for a siding representative, but I've talked with the desk clerk at the hotel and no such salesman

registered. Also, I've checked Asher's car behind his shop. You did a slick job; there's hardly a trace of repair. But Asher's car is gray, and there's gray pigment on that wrecked green convertible. The state crime lab may tell us more."

I didn't feel too good about that paint bit; I should have scored there myself. Deacon, though, refused to be stampeded. "*May*," he came back shortly. "And who says that salesman had to spent the night at the hotel?" He gave Connor a defiant look. "Where's the money you claim I took from Asher?"

The sheriff's look was equally set. "It's here somewhere," he said. "We'll find it."

Len Deacon swore. "Theories—that's all you've got!"

Connor ignored the man. "Get with it, Steve," he instructed me. "Take this place apart." His expression became bleak. "And don't tell me I need a warrant," he told Deacon.

I got on with it. While the sheriff watched Deacon, I methodically ransacked the shop and living quarters, checking flooring, walls, furnishings, every conceivable hiding place. I even scoured every foot of ground outside for evidence of a freshly buried cache. I found nothing.

Deacon watched my progress in taut silence. When it became evident I would come up with a fat

zero, his silence was supplanted by triumphant disdain. He relaxed on his chair, fired a cigarette. "Now what, Sheriff?" he said.

Connor's features were grim as he studied Deacon. "Don't crow, mister," he said thinly, "you're our man—"

The sheriff broke off, gaze slitting to a speculative glint. He indicated Deacon's fingers as the man handled the cigarette. "Some nasty scratches there. How'd you get them?"

Deacon said shortly, "Cat comes around here, had a little touch of distemper, clawed me. Look, Sheriff—"

The glint in Connor's eyes was suddenly sharper. "I'll do just that," he said, starting outside himself. "Bring him along, Steve."

Deacon swore again, kicked back his chair, that tic pulsing harder. "Damn it, Sheriff—"

I gripped his arm firmly. "Let's go," I said.

Outside, Connor had already circled to the rear of the shop, was moving onto the back of Sarah Jenkins' property. Abruptly, Deacon whirled, tried to break my grip. He didn't succeed; I dropped him, out cold, with a looping smash to the jaw.

When I looked up, Connor was kneeling beside a row of freshly-planted rose bushes in the widow Jenkins' garden, tugging bushes free, digging into the loose earth with his hands. Another moment,

he unearthed a compact, newspaper-wrapped package.

It was, I knew the stolen thirty grand. Aware his own premises would be thoroughly searched should he come under suspicion, Len Deacon had shrewdly temporarily buried the cache where fresh digging would not be suspect, a spot, ironically, I myself had provided by having those Sickie youngsters replace some of the widow's bushes they'd trampled.

Connor eyed Deacon's inert form dourly as he approached me with the money package.

"He almost pulled it off," he muttered. "If I hadn't spotted his hands, remembered what you'd said about the Sickie kids and had a sudden hunch about what thorn scratches could mean—"

The sheriff broke off as Sarah Jenkins suddenly appeared at her back door, then quickly advanced on us, black eyes snapping as she took in the fresh violation of her garden.

"Really, Sheriff, this is really too much—"

And then the good widow also stopped short as she glimpsed Len Deacon, now beginning to regain consciousness. Her intake of breath was audible and her eyes widened in wonderment.

"What is all this, Sheriff?"

Connor sighed, hauled Deacon to his feet, clicked on handcuffs. Obviously, the strain of events was

beginning to tell and a detailed explanation at this time to his perennial saddle-burr was not appealing.

"Deputy Hollister will explain everything, ma'am," he answered simply, and led Deacon off to the car.

Sarah Jenkins again surveyed her uprooted rose bushes with icy disfavor, swung back to me.

"Well?" she demanded.

I, Deputy Hollister, frustrated fisherman, stepped into the breach. I said, "We're sorry, ma'am, but this is how it was . . ."

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*The I*ush<PV€*r*

b y

**JERRY
JACORSON**

*He had blood in his eye
and murder on his mind,
and his little victim didn't
have a chance. Not much!*

THE HULKING man in the business suit who was taking up more than a normal amount of space at the corner table in Herbie's Bar turned on his friend and laughed.



"That the guy? That the one?"

"Where?" asked the hulking man's friend.

"The guy built like the chicken. The pip-squeak at the bar, third stool inside the door."

The other one squinted out through the smoky darkness, trying to make out the features on the slim face in the bar mirror. He swung his head back to his Manhattan.

"Can't say for sure," he said, with a light frown.

The hulking man began to brood in the darkness. Dark eyes began to glow with raging light. "Go over and find out. I wanna know."

His friend's face froze, bearing a sudden, sober expression. "Far be it from me, Artie, to tell you how to conduct the affairs of your life," said the sober face, "but I really think you ought to let it go this time. First off, it's no way for a man to behave and second, this one's hardly worth it.

"I mean, look at the way he sits on his stool, like he's afraid he's gonna fall off." He grabbed a fistful of unyielding bicep. "You don't want to hurt a guy like that, Artie? Forget it, okay Artie?"

Artie grimaced and shook his head like a child refused his Saturday matinee.

"No," he rumbled, "I told Estelle, I told her."

"And she told you, Artie."

"We got an understanding, me and Estelle. I told her no new boy friends unless I give 'em the green

light. And this one, he definitely don't get no green light. Accountant. Pencil-pusher. It probably takes another guy to help him get his pencil up off the table. Well, that ain't no kinda guy for Estelle."

"Artie, far be it from me to define things, but what Estelle does now isn't a mutual matter. I mean, divorce has a way of dissolving things."

Artie downed his cocktail in a single gulp; the green olive disappeared. "Well, I got a way of dissolving things myself," he said. "An' I'm gonna dissolve this one like you take a soda cracker and crush it in a bowl of soup."

"But maybe he isn't the one, Artie.

"And maybe he is. What's the name? Harold? Harlowe?"

"Harmon," said Artie's friend. "Harmon Hillman."

Artie grinned. "Harmon Hillman? Why don't he just change his name to Shirley and get it over with? Go over and find out. Go over and find out if this chicken legs at the bar is Harmon Hillman."

Reluctantly the smaller man nodded. He rose and walked across the quiet lounge and at the bar slapped the slender man on the shoulder. After amiable talk, they shook hands and Artie's friend returned.

"Harmon Hillman," he told Artie. "I said I was Sidney So-and-So and we met at a party. Artie?"

He's a nice little guy. Talks polite, listens polite. What d'ya wanna go bust up a guy like that?"

"What he is," Artie told him, "don't make no difference. I told Estelle how it goes. She's gonna phone tonight about this one. I don't like women when they start pleadin'. I hear her start goin' on about this Harmon Hillman's hands, about how I should be careful I don't hurt 'em, or somethin'. Well, I cut her off just like that.

"I don't listen to women when they start beggin' and pleadin'. I don't go for this sympathy stuff, like when Estelle says this new one goes to group-therapy Tuesdays and Thursdays. Like it's somethin' great to be goin' around with a nail-biter."

Artie's friend scratched his forehead. "You keep this stuff up, Artie and one of these times they'll throw you in with the real trouble-makers. All it takes is for one of 'em to blow the whistle."

"No chance," Artie spat. "When I get through with 'em they got the wind frightened out of 'em for life. When I get through with 'em they all of a sudden got better things to do than go hangin' around Estelle. An' after this Harmon Hillman has his accident he won't be comin' around Estelle no more, either."

Artie rose and buttoned his jacket. "Come on, Maurie," he said. "You and me's gonna wait outside for this Harmon Hillman. We're gonna make it so's he don't wanna

be hangin' around with Estelle no more."

Maurie shook his head. "No, I ain't goin' with you this time, Artie. I ain't gonna be any part of it. Before I thought it was because you loved Estelle, but now I see it ain't that way at all. You just love to hurt guys; you just love bustin' guys up."

"Then you ain't comin'?" Artie said. "I can't count on you no more as a friend? That the way it is?"

"That's the way it is," Maurie said. He looked at his heavy-set friend with something like disgust. "Artie, no kidding, I think it's you oughta be goin' to group therapy. I think it's you that's got all the problems."

Artie huffed, his eyes still riveted on the little man at the bar.

"Only got one problem," he said, his voice low and angry. "This Harmon Hillman what's been running around with my Estelle, cuttin' in on my time."

"Artie, your time with Estelle is over."

Artie turned toward his friend and glared. "Okay. So you comin' with me when I do a job on this little guy?"

"No. I told you no."

Artie stood up. "Okay. No skin off me, you know? I'll do it all by myself."

Maurie's eyes began to water. His expression twisted to a pleading look.

"Leave this one alone, Artie," he



said. "Don't do it. Don't bully little guys."

Artie wasn't listening. "Maurie? You don't go callin' the cops, and you don't go tell this Harmon Hillman to go duckin' out the back. You don't do nothin'."

"Maybe I'll call the cops. I don't like anybody beating up on little guys. Maybe I'll call the police."

"Inna few minutes they're gonna find Harmon Hillman outside," Artie said, threateningly. "They're gonna need a flashlight to find all of him and a couple of paper sacks to take him away."

"So?"

"So—you don't mind your own business, Maurie, and they're gonna need a flashlight and some paper sacks for you, too!"

There was no one at the bar when Maurie finally moved to it from the table. Both Artie and Harmon Hillman were somewhere out in the night. Maurie felt he ought to do something for the little guy, but there was really nothing he could do but wait for the sounds of ambulance sirens, wait for Artie's unreasonable rage to unleash itself

on a man half his size. He was getting sick to his stomach and asked Herbie to make him a seltzer with four tablets.

"Stomach troubles?" Herbie said as he set the glass down on the clean bar. "My brother-in-law's got that. He's in the insurance game. Lotsa competition. You get competition, and you get stomach troubles. It comes with the job, you know?"

Maurie hummed in agreement and finished off his seltzer, feeling its bubbling ingredients begin to go to work.

"The little guy," he said to Herbie. "The one that was sitting at the bar a few minutes ago. He say where he was going?"

"The accountant, you mean? The thinker?"

"That's the one," Maurie said. "I think he's in big trouble. I think he's gonna take a beating. If I knew where he was going I could tell the police."

"The police?" Herbie said. "The little guy's gonna need the police?" Herbie laughed toward the ceiling, with no restraint, like a man hearing his favorite joke. "That's funny, what you just said. It's the funniest thing I heard all week."

"I don't see anything funny about a little guy getting beat a pulp by a giant," Maurie told him. "I don't see the slightest bit of humor in that."

Herbie was still chuckling. To cut his laughter short he had to slap hard on the bar-top. "I didn't mean

to go crazy, but that little guy—well, you don't have to worry about him, none."

"He's gonna get killed," Maurie said. "Nobody should worry about that?"

"You get a look at those milky white hands on the little guy?" Herbie said. "Those dainty fingers?"

"That's what I mean," Maurie said, sadly. "That's exactly what I mean. He couldn't fight his way out of a loose batch of excelsior and not get scratched."

"He goes to group therapy classes," Herbie said. "He tell you? He's got some kind of new superiority complex nobody over there can figure out. Coupled with that other thing he's got goin' for him, he could be a real bomb-shell. A real weapon. The little guy, he don't go nowhere where he might get into a scuffle. He even drops his new girl friend because her ex goes around beating up on all her new boy friends. He don't want trouble, you know?"

"Well, he's got some now," Maurie said, wincing. "He's got six feet, six inches of it."

"I mean, who would have guessed it about this little guy?" Herbie went on, methodically wiping glasses. "Who ever would have guessed it?"

"That he's got a complex?" Maurie said. "Everybody's got a problem."

"No, I didn't mean about the complex. I meant about the little guy's hands. How dainty and white they were. Like white gloves with no fingers in them. Then he shows you the edges of them. Boy, you never know, you never really know about people."

"Know? Know what? Never really know what?"

Herbie took up a wet glass and jammed the white towel down its throat. "—never know, that's all. Like this little guy. Whoever would have guessed him for one of them back-belters, one of them karate experts? The kind that can kill."

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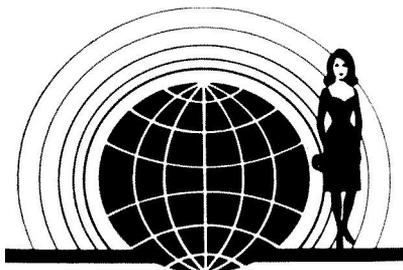
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