



Someone else leaped from the opposite side of the room and slammed the whole Island of Cuba onto his skull

A
Complete
Mystery Action
Novelet

COPPER'S HOLIDAY

By JOSEPH J. MILLARD



Being heir to a fortune doesn't stop Mal Shade from plunging into action when some fast sleuthing's needed!

CHAPTER I

ONCE A COP . . .

THE sound rose abruptly on the quiet night, quivering with an intensity of agony and terror. It was more than just a yell—as near to a shriek as the masculine voice can achieve. It keened out, hung for a quivering moment and was chopped off in mid-note, leaving only the haunting echo of its terror in the night.

The sound jarred Malcolm Shade from his sleep. It was gone by the time he was fully awake, but the hazy memory of it remained, ringing down the far corridors of Shade's mind, bewildering him. For a moment he poised between waking and sleeping, trying to identify the sound, trying to remember where he was.

The night was full of queer sounds and unfamiliar sensations. The darkness around him pulsed with a rhythmic, monotonous thunder that filtered up from somewhere

below. Closer to him and sharper, he could hear a steady hissing and the chuckle of gurgling water.

But louder than all these was the haunting, chilling memory of that single cry, still ringing in his ears.

It was characteristic of Mal Shade that, even awakening as he did, not a muscle of his lean, hard body moved. He lay perfectly still, staring wide-eyed into the darkness, trying to orient himself.

His first sleepy thought was that he was still in his bachelor apartment in New York, dragged from sleep before dawn to tackle some tough case. Then memory flooded in and he relaxed, grinning into the darkness, stretching lazily.

He didn't have to get up and go to work. He would never have to get up and go to work again. He didn't even have a job. He was no longer Inspector Mal Shade of Homicide.

NOW he was plain Malcolm Shade, millionaire playboy. An uncle whom

Shade had never met had done that, leaving his whole fortune to Shade on his deathbed. So in his first daze of wealth, Shade had quit his job and set out to see a world he had never known extended beyond Atlantic City, or the Caribbean cruise ship, *Buccaneer*.

These pleasant memories took no more than seconds slipping through Shade's mind, and on their heels the tumult started.

Somewhere down the corridor that passed Shade's door, a woman began to scream in little breathless yelps of hysteria that climbed steadily to a peak of full-throated terror. The scream was still ringing when feet pounded heavily past Shade's door. Other feet raced on the deck outside his open port and men's voices called soft commands.

Shade was out of his berth, fumbling in the velvety dark for slippers and robe and the gun in his suitcase when the pulsing rumble of engines broke. The big ship shuddered to the dragging bite of reversed screws. Caught off balance, Shade teetered and fell on his berth.

The inviting softness almost made him yield and go back to bed. After, all, he wasn't a cop any longer. After ten years of chasing screams and terror and violence, let somebody else have the headaches.

Then the steady shuffle of quiet feet past his door and the hissing of excited whispered conversations dragged his curiosity to the breaking point. He got up, cursing himself, slipped his worn old service pistol into the pocket of his robe and opened the door.

A white-faced steward hurrying past tried unsuccessfully to pretend he didn't see Shade.

"What's up?" Shade demanded.

"Not a thing, sir," the steward assured, trying to look as though he meant it. "Bit of the ship's routine, is all. We dock in Havana shortly after daybreak, you know. It'll be a busy time. You'd better get your sleep, sir—"

He left the sentence dangling and hurried off.

"Horsefeathers!" Shade grunted irritably.

He set his jaw and marched after the

steward. The way led up to the deck and forward where a small knot of sailors, officers and passengers in various stages of undress clustered under a puddle of emergency light by the rail.

The group was all looking overside. Shade looked, too, and saw a small launch *putt-putting* quietly around in widening circles, chasing the blade of its own searchlight beam back and forth across the white froth of the liner's wake. Shade sauntered up to the nearest passenger.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Man overboard, I guess. That's what they say, anyhow, but there's something, screwy about it. That woman"—the passenger pointed toward a middle-aged couple off to one side, talking to the captain and first officer—"heard a frightful yell from somewhere on the deck above her cabin. She looked out her port just as the poor devil went tumbling by and splashed into the sea. Her screams brought a steward and he stopped the boat."

"Who was it?" Shade asked with mild curiosity.

"Fellow by the name of Fetzer or Fitzer or something like that, on B Deck. I've seen him around. Kind of a gloomy-looking cuss who sat off by himself and never talked much."

Shade grunted and strolled on. The launch had finished or given up its search and was curving in to the ladder. A moment later the officer of the watch, a gaunt Swede name Hargutson, came into sight carrying what looked like a water-soaked Turkish towel streaked with red paint.

Shade knew Hargutson slightly from having sat in on a little off watch poker session the evening before. He worked closer and stood around until Hargutson saw him.

"**O**H, HELLO, Copper." Hargutson edged Shade around into the lee of a ventilator. "Messy business. I'm glad that infernal screeching didn't awaken any more passengers."

"Find the body?"

"Not a sign. Only a bloody towel floating out there."

Shade's eyes widened. "Then it wasn't an accident?"

"Officially," Hargutson grunted, accenting the word, "the guy committed suicide in a fit of despondency. He probably slashed his wrists, yelled at the pain and then took the dive. Sparks is trying to check him with New York now."

"Horsefeathers!" Shade snorted. "I've seen too many sueys to swallow that malarkey. You don't whoop like that from a cut wrist."

"I said 'officially' that was the yarn," Hargutson reminded. His eyes narrowed speculatively. "Maybe you got an idea or two."

Shade leered at him happily. "Hah! Not one piddling ten-cent idea, sucker. I don't need one. I'm retired—and retiring. Right back to my little bed to forget the whole thing. Happy headaches, pal!"

He strolled away, savoring his new freedom with whole-hearted delight, and almost walked into the Frightened Girl.

Shade had no idea who she was. He had given her the title of the Frightened Girl in his own mind because every day he had seen her promenading on B Deck alone, avoiding the advances of fellow travelers. Twice, when he had met her at close range, Shade had been struck by the almost physical impact of some haunting emotion in the depths of her eyes.

He had wondered and puzzled and schemed to meet her. But the schemes had fallen through and there was something about her air of frightened reserve that discouraged advances.

Now, coming around the corner of the deck cabins, Shade had to stop short to keep from colliding as the girl hurried up the companionway to the deck. Shade caught his breath. She had been beautiful at a distance on deck, but here at close range, with her wealth of bronze hair cascading loosely down over

perfect shoulders and a light wrap doing nothing at all to camouflage her slender curves, she was breath-taking.

They both stopped at the near-collision. Shade drew a deep breath, grinned and extended the cigarette case he had been about to open.

"Pretty terrible thing," he remarked conversationally. "Suicide on a pleasure cruise seems worse than anywhere else."

"Suicide?" She stared at him, ignoring the proffered cigarette. "Who—who was it? Do you know?"

"Man by the name of Fetzer, I think. Had a cabin on B—"

"No!" All the terror within her seemed to explode in the cry. She caught at Shade's arm with unconscious ferocity. "You—you aren't sure that's who it was, are you? You're only guessing—"

Shade's eyes narrowed. "I'm afraid there's no guesswork about the identification. Was he a friend of yours?"

"No!" Her head dropped. "No, I never heard of him before."

With a muffled sob, she whirled away and stumbled blindly to the companionway stairs. Shade said, "Horsefeathers!" under his breath and took a step to follow.

"Once a copper, always a copper," a softly husky voice beside him jeered.

"Why didn't you slap bracelets on her, playboy?"

Shade whirled fast, his breath rushing out in an explosive curse. Duke White leaned against the cabin wall, grinning sardonically, a red carnation like a splash of blood against the lapel of his exquisitely tailored white mess jacket.

BACK in New York, Duke White was known as the smoothest racket boss who ever bought a judge. His enemies died, but it was always some punk torpedo who fired the shots. He had golden pipelines into every profitable branch of crime but neither Shade

nor any other cop had ever tagged Duke White with so much as a traffic violation.

He was suave and handsome and aristocratic and as deadly as a cobra. His presence aboard the *Buccaneer*, ostensibly for a vacation in Havana, had been a thorn in Shade's side from the first hour at sea. He almost wished he were still a cop for one last shot at pinning Duke White's ears back.

Duke leaned away from the wall, lighting a cigarette with a diamond-set lighter. Behind him, a small, olive-skinned Latin with the soft, dark eyes of his race and a puckered knife scar along one cheek moved out beside him.

Duke nodded to the dark man. "Look him over, Gomez. There's a horrible example of a cop who retired in ten years with a fortune salted away."

Shade's face went white and then suddenly relaxed. His fists unclenched and his sudden grin was almost affectionate.

"You know, Duke," he said pleasantly, "there are some advantages to not being on the Force any more. For instance, I can sock you and there won't be any commissioner or any newspapers on my neck. I can hammer the living daylight out of you, pay my 'salt-and-bat' fine and turn right around and start in again." His smile grew dreamy. "Go ahead and ride me, Duke. Just keep on riding me, my boy."

The sudden red burst of murderous rage in Duke White's eyes was the most beautiful picture Shade had ever seen. This time it was the gangster and his Cuban companion who turned away, and Mal Shade who sent a little irritating chuckle after them.

On his way back to his cabin and bed, Shade hummed gently to himself. He felt swell. This retirement was great stuff. He could say and do what he pleased to whom he pleased and let somebody else stick his neck into crime and violence and sudden death.

That was what Shade thought, then!

CHAPTER II

MURDER IN THE BAG

WHEN Shade strolled onto the *Buccaneer's* deck in sport shirt and slacks, the morning sun was beating down on the grandeur and beauty of Havana. The liner had made her traditional curtsy before Morro Castle and was sliding gently through the narrow, almost mile-long channel into Havana Harbor. Passengers were excitedly pointing out the "O'Donnell—1844" on the Morro Lighthouse, and the clear-weather signal—a black ball above blue-and-yellow flag—on the signal mast nearby.

Shade hesitated, clinging to the tan suitcase he had brought on deck with him, leaving his trunks to be delivered ashore. Then the lure of the excitement along the rails proved too much for him. Skidding the suitcase into the lee of a convenient ventilator, Shade dived in the crowd to goggle wide-eyed at the passing shores and toss coins to the ebony diving boys surrounding the ship.

The liner passed La Fuerza, warped around in the harbor and nosed into her berth alongside Machina, one of the Havana Dock Company's three great wharves. The crowd began to drift away from the rail to collect baggage or form a line in front of the table being set up on deck by the newly arrived Cuban customs authorities.

Shade dug out the pink landing card issued him by the purser and went in search of his suitcase. He found the ventilator, all right, but there was no tan suitcase waiting beside it. Shade gaped and swore and glared at the swirling crowds.

He was about to hunt up the purser when his eye fell on a tan shadow some thirty feet away, near the cabins. Shade galloped that way and gusted a sigh of relief. It was the familiar tan suitcase, evidently moved by mistake or simply shoved along by excited crowds.

Shade picked up the tan bag, started to turn, and a gasping, sobbing fury landed on his arm. It was the girl with the bronze hair, beating at him with one clenched fist while her other hand jerked at the suitcase. Her eyes were afire with stark, unreasonable terror.

"My bag!" she panted shrilly. "Give me my bag!"

"Your bag?" Shade growled, clinging to the handle and backing away from the flailing fist. "Take it easy, sister. This is mine. I just set it down two minutes ago." He slammed the bag down on the deck and jerked out a ring of keys. "Here, if you don't believe me you can try on my underwear. If it fits you, I'll apologize."

In spite of the excitement of docking, quite a crowd was beginning to collect. Shade, hunkered down on his heels over the suitcase, with the red-haired girl breathing sobbingly against his neck, was getting all set to lose his temper. Suddenly, through the forest of legs crowding in, Shade caught sight of a second tan suitcase, the duplicate of the one before him, sitting a short distance away.

"Hey! That must be your bag over there."

The girl whirled, stared and darted for it with a muffled, "I'm terribly sorry," thrown back over her shoulder.

Shade got up, red-faced and furious, glared at the interested spectators and shoved his way into the lineup before the customs table. He decided then and there that he had had enough of screwballs, male and female, to last him for life. It was too bad, too, because if the gal would have acted halfway human—

Shade said, "Horsefeathers!" and shoved the whole incident, including the girl, clear to the back of his mind.

Half an hour later he marched down the gang-plank and out of the covered wharf into a maelstrom of peddlers, yelling cab drivers, newsboys and beggars. Beyond the wooden gate stood a row of *fotingos*, which is Cuban for taxicab, and their bright-eyed, noisy *chofers*.

WITH an inborn frugality that antedated his new wealth, Shade chose a twenty-cent zone cab and murmured, "Hotel Palacio" in what he hoped was creditable Spanish. His one extravagance had been to cable ahead for a room in this modest hostelry.

Shade was climbing into the cab when a hand fell lightly on his arm. He turned sharply. Duke White stood at his side.

"So you really retired from the Force," Duke said softly. He was smiling but there was no humor in his eyes. "I couldn't believe it."

"Definitely," Shade said flatly. "I wouldn't even polish off the cuffs to snap them on you, Duke—and that's *really* retirement."

Duke sighed and studied his manicured nails.

"You were smart to clear out of it, Mal," he murmured finally. "Don't spoil your vacation by forgetting you aren't a cop any longer."

Shade checked an angry retort.

"Thanks for your solicitude, Duke. I hear they've modernized the jails here since Machado's regime and have around two thousand of the finest cops in the world. When you get settled in your new 'apartment' I'll drop around—on visitor's day."

Duke White's lips peeled back from his teeth and his eyes were murderous. He laid a gloved hand on the cab door as Shade slammed it.

"You're a very funny guy, Shade. You've got a terrific sense of humor. And that's kind of bad, in a way. Laughter sounds terrible coming up from the bottom of a grave."

Shade's fist traveled less than eight inches, but the enthusiasm behind it made up for distance. When it landed on Duke White's chin there was a sharp clop and the window of the cab was suddenly empty. Shade, his fist still doubled, looked at the gaping cabby.

"Scram, my little brown brother," he said.

The taxi went away with a lurch and a wail. Looking back, Shade saw Duke White

sitting on the sidewalk holding his jaw. He was the center of a voluble and excited crowd and a grinning black boy was down on his knees, apparently trying to sell Duke a shoeshine. Shade chuckled and felt better.

AT THE Palacio, Shade registered and was escorted to an immense marble-lined room overlooking noisy Zulueta Street. From the window he could see the Parque Central, Havana's Central Park, surrounded by clubs and theaters, and a short section of the Prado, the great boulevard with its double row of trees and dizzying pavement.

Shade was in a daze of excitement, boyishly eager to bathe and shave and dress and plunge out into that exotic and noisy setting at his feet.

He whirled furiously, snatched out his keys and attacked the lock of the tan suitcase. It resisted his efforts. He swore, turned the key around and tried again. No dice. Shade lifted the tan case to the bed, knelt in front of it and jabbed the key with stubborn determination.

It suddenly occurred to Shade, in the midst of his grunting efforts, that he had something like a million dollars and here a little matter of an eight-dollar suitcase was keeping him from enjoying his first ramble through Havana.

With a glint in his eye, Shade opened his pocket knife, jabbed the heavier blade under the stubborn flap of the lock and pried. Something snapped sharply. The lid flew up.

Shade rocked back on his heel and forgot all about Havana and his impatience. The suitcase was identical with his own, a duplicate, but it was not his. Shade was positive of that. His suitcase had been full of clothing and personal items. This suitcase was jammed and packed to the top with crisp new twenty-dollar bills in sheaves and bundles!

The only space not filled by bills was a small hollow in the center. In that hollow, like an Easter egg in its nest, lay the severed head of a man!

Shade's nerves and stomach jumped in unison. He said, "Gug!" and lost his balance. The jar shocked him back to some degree of sanity. After all, the sight of violent death was not altogether a novelty to an ex-Homicide inspector. It was the totally unexpected appearance and the leering grimace on the dead face that got to him at first.

He stood up and examined the head. From the condition of the gory stump and the color of the blood, he judged the head had been severed from a living body within the last six or eight hours. And the expression on the dead face suggested that the victim had watched the doom approach. He had been a man of perhaps forty, bony-faced and somber, with a ragged graying mustache. Shade decided, after a critical examination, that decapitation had been done in one swift stroke by an exceedingly sharp and heavy blade.

His face wooden, a glitter deep in his eyes, Shade unlocked his trunks and got out the implements of his hobby—an expensive camera and portable lights. Setting these up, he photographed the head and its nest of bills from several angles. Then, on impulse, he removed the exposed film and found a hiding place for its light-tight container under the rim of the bathroom wash bowl, holding it in place with strips of surgical tape.

Putting away his equipment, Shade lighted a cigarette and stood staring at the grisly exhibit in gloomy indecision. Through no fault of his own he seemed to have been hurled into the very midst of a grim and bloody mystery. And the last thing in the world Malcolm Shade needed or wanted just then was a mystery. He was through, quit, retired—bent on pleasure and nothing else. Havana had cops who were paid to worry about messes like this.

Shade went over and picked up the telephone. Then he said, "Horsefeathers!" and slammed it down again. He stood glaring at the wall, cursing under his breath.

He could pretend his change of mind was because he didn't want to be slapped in jail himself while the cops figured out whether or not he was involved. But the real reason for his action was the red-haired girl.

This was unquestionably her suitcase, and the way she had fought to snatch it on the boat indicated that she didn't believe it was jammed with a mere assortment of lingerie and face powder. But no matter how hard Shade tried, he could not picture her cold-bloodedly carrying that head in her case, fighting for its possession, boldly marching with it down the crowded gangplank.

And there was Duke White. Shade had never seen any evidence of connection between Duke and the red-haired girl, yet Duke's veiled warnings had both come on the heels of Shade's involuntary meetings with the girl. Shade ground out his cigarette and swore again.

"I'm a sap," he growled furiously. "For ten years I've been watching dames with the faces of angels turn out to be torturers and killers and crooks of every description. I'll call the cops."

HE MARCHED across, reached for the telephone and it rang as his hands touched it. He snatched the receiver.

"Mr. Shade?" The throaty feminine voice sent an electric tingling up Shade's nerve ends. "This is Karyl Landers—the girl on the *Buccaneer*, you know."

Shade's face tightened. "I know."

She gave a little embarrassed laugh. "We—we argued about our bags on the boat this morning and—well, it seems I must have been right.

I'm afraid you have my bag after all."

"Yes," Shade said grimly. "I'm afraid I have."

"Then—" She hesitated. "I—I'm afraid I wasn't very ladylike, Mr. Shade, but when my key wouldn't work, I was frantic. I had no idea who you were or where you were going.

So I got a knife and pried your bag open. I found your name and copies of your hotel reservation. Have—have you opened my bag?"

She sounded scared and worried, but not half worried enough for a girl in her predicament. Shade scowled, weighing his answer.

"Yes," he said finally. "I opened the bag." "Oh!" she gasped. "Then you—you must be wondering—"

"I am curious."

It was a masterpiece of understatement.

"I know," Karyl Landers said breathlessly. "Look, Mr. Shade. Please don't say or do anything until I've had a chance to explain. I can explain—really. Look, I'll take a cab and bring your bag right over to you at once and pick up mine. And I promise I'll give you a complete and satisfactory explanation. Please don't mention what—what's in it to anyone, will you? It might cause a great deal of trouble and embarrassment."

"It might," Shade admitted grimly, "do just that. All right, you come over and I'll listen."

He hung up and wandered irritably to the window. Havana, exotic and foreign and noisy and colorful, still surged and screamed outside, but somehow the flavor of it was gone. Shade's mind was inextricably fastened to the mystery—to death that waited in the suitcase to be claimed by a red-haired girl.

Time dragged, though actually it was only a little more than half an hour after the phone call when someone knocked softly on the panels of Shade's door. He had been 'waiting, pacing nervously before the suitcase, now closed. At the knock he whirled, conscious of a little thrill of anticipation.

"Coming," he called.

He went across the carpet and threw open the door.

A tall, pale man, an utter stranger to Shade, pushed the sharp muzzle of a Luger pistol into Shade's middle and bowed politely

over it.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Shade. Shall we step inside where we can transact our little business in privacy and comfort?”

CHAPTER III

GRIM COMPLICATIONS

SHADE said “*Ugh!*” at the impact of the pistol barrel and involuntarily backed up a step. The tall man followed, crowding him, keeping the pressure of the pistol hard against Shade’s diaphragm as he reached behind him to slam and lock the door.

Shade tried to speak, and choked on his own rage. His captor was a thin-lipped man with a fish-white face, pale protruding eyes and a smudge of blond mustache riding uneasily over a ruler-straight mouth line. He wore white linens, tailored carefully to his long, stiff body, and there was something crisply military in both his bearing and his movements. There was also something vaguely and tantalizingly familiar about his face.

Shade backed away from the gun, keeping his hands loose and open at his sides, his face white and tight around the hot fury in his eyes.

“What the devil’s the big idea, monkey?” he said thickly.

The tall man’s eyes flicked toward the tan case on the bed.

“I believe you know, Mr. Shade.” He nodded toward a chair. “Sit down, please, and fold your hands behind your head.”

Shade looked at the pale, bulging eyes, devoid of any trace of feeling or emotion, and sat down. The tall man moved backward, covering Shade with the Luger, until he could reach out his left hand and flip open the unlocked case. His eyes slid toward it and back in a movement that gave Shade no chance to try a break. He slapped the lid down again.

“Intact,” he said gently. “You have not, of

course, disturbed the money.” It was a statement, not a question.

Shade ignored it. Rage had stirred his mind, sharpened it, waked up old half-buried memories of the past. One of these suddenly flamed to brilliance as he studied the intruder through narrowed eyes.

“Got it,” Shade said, relaxing. “Walter Geist, alias Willie Hartrampf, alias Captain Ludvig Franz van und zu Geissler, alias heaven-knows-what else. I thought that puss was familiar. I had your mug up on the board when the boys from Washington smashed up that Bund you headed, exposed your Fifth Column activities and also showed you up as a chiseler who was milking his own comrades.”

The pale man clicked his heels and bowed stiffly.

“Your memory is excellent, *Herr* Shade. But one correction. I am Captain Ludvig Franz von und zu Geissler. That is not an alias. The day draws very near when neither my name nor my activities for *Der Fuehrer* can be questioned by common swine.”

Shade’s eyes were wide and innocent. He nodded toward the suitcase.

“What did poor Fetzter there do? Forget to *heil* some heel?”

The bulging eyes flickered and then grew still.

“So you know who he is?”

“Don’t be a dope,” Shade said irritably. “Who else could he be? He lost that head quite recently and it come from the *Buccaneer*. Who else could it be? He saw the blade coming and yelled. You hid his head, wrapped a towel around the neck to keep from spattering blood and tossed it overboard, probably weighted to sink fast. If that towel hadn’t slipped off and floated, you’d have had a perfect suicide or accident gag. Is that your usual payment to helpers?”

VON GEISLER’S cheeks showed a faint trace of color.

“Fetzter was never in my employ,” he said

frigidly.

"Then what was the idea?" Shade persisted. "A new kind of game to keep yourself in practice for *Der Tag*? Or do you just *like* to chop heads? And how come the dough? What happened to Karyl Landers?"

"None of those silly questions will be answered, of course. Please stand up and face the wall."

Shade stared up at him. "Why?"

Von Geissler's eyes were cold. "Why? Because I must be leaving and this pistol makes too much noise."

"Oh!"

Shade got up slowly, his face wooden. "How about it, old boy? Can I have a redhead carry my skull around in a suitcase, afterward?"

Von Geissler's smile was painfully humorless. "You are what is known as 'whistling in the dark', my friend. A rather pitiful subterfuge intended to conceal your fear of approaching death."

Shade was turned away with both palms now flat against the wall at shoulder height. He twisted his head around, grinning back at the tall man over one shoulder.

"Sure," he agreed genially. "I'm scared as the devil. Just see me jitter and shake."

Von Geissler spat something unintelligible and came up behind Shade. He lifted the heavy Luger for a chopping, skull-crushing blow and Shade kicked upward and back.

His heel went quite a distance into a belly whose muscles had had no time to set themselves for defense. The Luger was hissing down as Shade acted. He pushed the wall with both hands, hurling himself down and aside.

The Luger barrel missed his head and dragged brutal agony down one arm. Shade kept on moving, pivoting, and came up out of his spin with his right fist driving. The Nazi was going backward from the kick, staggering on his heels, making little sobbing noises in his throat. The right hook smeared the lips under the blond mustache.

Shade followed, crowding him, butting with his injured shoulder while his sound hand clamped onto the Luger, twisting and tugging to jerk it loose. Von Geissler was every bit as nail-hard as he looked. He brought up a hard knee and Shade doubled over it, grunting. The Luger jerked free and began to hammer on Shade's unprotected skull.

Shade saw blinding lights and felt the jar of each blow clear down to his heels. If von Geissler could have recovered his breath from that first paralyzing kick, any one of those blows would have ended the fight right there. But the Nazi was still weak and the blows lacked steam.

Shade twisted away, missing with a sizzling punch. The break gave von Geissler a chance to back up a step and center the Luger on Shade's middle.

"Noise," he panted hoarsely, "is not so important as your death."

His face was like something out of Dracula. Shade read his own doom in the fierce blaze of the pale eyes.

The gun slammed like a cannon, but Shade was already leaving his feet in a headlong, sweeping dive. He felt the hiss of the slug past his cheek. Then his shoulders were slamming into von Geissler's knees, driving him backward and down. He fell heavily and Shade let go with wild rights and lefts.

Outside in the hall, people were running and yelling. They had not yet located the shot but it was only a matter of time. Shade threw a punch and felt flesh and bone yield to his knuckles. The Nazi squirmed and grunted, trying to get the Luger lined for a killing shot.

SHADE suddenly let him, and then came around the gun in a smash punch that had all his weight and desperation behind it. The Nazi shuddered, stiffened, and then went limp. As Shade climbed shakily to his feet, fists started hammering on the door of his room.

"Just a minute!" Shade called breathlessly. "Be right there."

He staggered, fighting for breath, trying to think. If he got involved in a mess now, having neglected to call the police at once, he would see plenty of Havana's modernized jail. And there was the fate of Karyl Landers, innocent or guilty, that tugged at Shade's nerves with a desperate urgency.

The pounding started again, heavier this time. Shade sprang over, caught von Geissler's limp figure and staggered with it into the bathroom. He dumped it unceremoniously in the bathtub, grabbed armfuls of clothing from his open trunk and piled it on top, hiding the unconscious German.

Then straightening overturned chairs on the way, Shade snatched his pistol and New York police identification from the trunk and raced for the door. A dark-skinned Cuban clerk, a tall hotel detective and half a dozen scared guests from adjoining rooms were crowded in the hall.

"Senor," the clerk said, taken aback by Shade's disarming calm, "we thought— That is—"

"You thought you heard a shot." Shade smiled sweetly. "You did, too, and I owe you all my apologies. I was cleaning my pistol and it accidentally discharged. Here is my identification and permit to carry the gun. I'll pay for damages, of course and if the police wish to—"

"Oh, no, senor," the clerk gasped, staring pop-eyed at Shade's identification as a New York inspector. "But of course not."

The group dissolved with protestations and apologies. Shade slammed the door on their retreating backs and fell against the panels, his chest heaving, a sheen of moisture on his face. That was close—too close.

He went in and uncovered von Geissler. The Nazi was breathing jerkily, his muscles twitching. Shade turned the long head, selected a spot behind one ear and tapped skillfully with the butt of his own pistol. Von Geissler went back to sleep.

Shade knelt by the tub and explored the Nazi's pockets. He found little of interest beyond a key bearing the tag of the Hotel Marmol on Calle Obispo, and a folded newspaper clipping. Unrolled, the clipping turned out to be merely a resume of the executive order by which the President of the United States had frozen the funds of Nazi nationals in America, prohibiting the export of cash to Germany.

Shade scowled at the clipping, shook his head and stuffed it back in von Geissler's pocket. He put the key in his own pocket and shoved his service pistol into the waistband of his trousers. For a moment he stood frowning, considering the sprawled figure in the tub. To keep von Geissler a prisoner for long after he awoke was out of the question. Shade shrugged and turned away. For another hour or so, at least, the tall man would be out of circulation.

Shade went downstairs and out onto the street, carrying the tan suitcase with its lid carefully wedged shut. He hailed a cab and gave the Hotel Marmol as his destination.

Leaning back, Shade closed his eyes and considered the unwelcome mystery. He was neck-deep in it now, and whether he wanted to or not, he was almost forced to see it through in self-defense. The longer he clung to that gory head, the harder time he would have explaining himself to skeptical Havana police. But, though he cursed himself for the admission, his main reason for sticking was the red-haired Karyl Landers.

MAL SHADE steadfastly refused to believe she knew of the presence of the head in her case. Then how did it get there? What was the core of the mystery? Where did von Geissler fit in—and Duke White, and the dark-skinned Gomez who looked like a killer?

The presence of von Geissler made it look as if Shade had stumbled onto some Nazi espionage. But, on the other hand, the tall man's patriotism had not stopped him from

looting his own Bund of swastika kissers to line his pockets. Maybe this was merely some new profit crime, with Duke White's slim fingers dipping into illegal pie, as usual.

The decapitation of the man, Fetzer, bothered Shade. Murder was no novelty to either Duke White or von Geissler, but mutilation was hardly their style. And there must be some logical reason for keeping the grisly head and carrying it particularly in the case of money.

Those were puzzles, but Shade's mind annoyingly persisted in returning to Karyl Landers. From her actions, she was part and parcel of the crime. She had fought like a wildcat over the suitcase containing the head. Then she had made an appointment to be sure Shade would remain in his room and let the murderous von Geissler keep that appointment.

But, despite all that, Shade grimly refused to believe she was guilty. There must be an explanation for her actions, he told himself. Even her obvious lie when she denied knowing Fetzer.

Fetzer! There was a key that might unlock a door to knowledge. Shade had overlooked that. Now he leaned forward and spoke to the cab driver.

"Hey, fellow. Drive me to a good newspaper office, instead. Newspaper—savvy?"

"*Si, si. El Pais.*"

"If you say so," Shade grunted dubiously.

CHAPTER IV

ONE-WAY PASSAGE

MINUTES later, Shade was seated in a thoroughly metropolitan news room, in the presence of a dark-skinned Cuban who introduced himself as Joe Riley and talked slang.

"Henry Fetzer?" Riley said, in answer to Shade's question. "Sure. We got the whole

yarn set up right now. If he committed suicide like the *Buccaneer* crowd claims, I'm nuts. Any day a detective on a fat expense account does the Dutch—"

"Detective?" Shade's jaw dropped.

"Sure, didn't you know? Fetzer was a private dick from Miami. Ran a little one-legged agency there, with no splash but a pretty good rep for square shooting. The local law is still trying to find out from Miami what case he was on and why he was coming here on the *Buccaneer*. So far it's been no dice, but I'm betting whoever he was working on knocked him off."

"How about a gal named Karyl Landers? Know anything about her?"

Joe Riley kissed ecstatic fingers at the ceiling.

"Not half what I'd like to, boy. Not the half. Who doesn't know sweet Landers in these parts? Her daddy just about ran the sugar market down here up until his death last year, when he left the works to her."

"The devil!" Shade grunted. "Then she's local."

"Nope. Miami, too. She commutes here every month or two to check up on things. She and her older sister, Evangeline, grew up out in the *Vedado* section. Then her sister married a German, Count Lutspiel, and moved to Germany back in the pre-Hitler days. Rumor is that Lutspiel got himself purged a year or so back for trying to be a gentleman. Evangeline never came home, though, so maybe she likes it there. I know I wouldn't, but—"

"Thanks a million. I'll give you a break if I stumble over any news." Halfway to the door, he turned. "By the way, where does Karyl Landers stay when she's in town?"

"In the family *palacio*, out on the Western Shoulder."

"Thanks." Shade went back to his waiting *fotingo*.

Riding once more toward the Hotel Marmol, still carrying the tan suitcase, Shade marshaled his thoughts. He still knew nothing

whatever about the grim and senseless mystery that had been dumped into his lap, but he did have enough background established to let him hazard a few guesses.

He tried random theories, here and there, and suddenly he found one that fit. It was not a pleasant theory in any way. It explained von Geissler and Duke White and the murder of the detective, Henry Fetzer. It also explained, in a way, the presence of Karyl Landers, not as a guilty accomplice to crime, but as the helpless victim. But worse, it suggested to Shade's mind that the girl was in constant deadly danger.

His eyes were bleak, his lips thin and straight as he went through the lobby of the little Marmol. On impulse, he swerved into a nearby telephone booth, struggled with copybook Spanish and finally succeeded in getting a call through to the Landers residence.

An obsequious voice with an English accent informed Shade that Miss Landers was not in. She had left her baggage there and gone out some time ago, without saying where or when she would return. Shade hung up, feeling a sudden cold tingle along his nerve ends.

The key tag Shade had appropriated from von Geissler bore the number *Tres Cero Nueve*. According to Shade's pocket guide to Spanish, that meant Room Three hundred and nine. He rode up and found it midway down a dark and windowless corridor. There was no sound from within, though Shade listened for several moments with an ear to the panels.

FINALLY he unbuttoned his coat, set down the suit-case, took a firm grip on his service revolver and used his left hand to rap on the door. Nothing happened. The only sounds came from other rooms up and down the hall.

Shade rapped again, then slid the purloined key into the lock and swung the door back.

The room he looked into was small, alternately light and dark as a breeze played indolently with a drawn fiber shade over the single window. In the flashes of brightness from outside, he could see an open suit-case on the bed. Shade picked up the suit-case he had brought, closed the door carefully behind him and started cautiously toward that other suit-case.

He passed a tall, woven-reed chair with a high wing back, took two more steps and dropped flat on his face.

A shadow stirred behind the wingback chair and something silvery and glinting hissed past Shade's head and *thunged* vibrantly into the wall. The dark-eyed, knife-scarred Gomez who had been with Duke White on the *Buccaneer* came out from behind the chair in a silent dive, tugging at a second blade holstered up his left sleeve.

Shade leaped to his feet, smashing a blow at the Cuban knife wielder that knocked him backward into a chair, groggy. Shade was tugging at the service pistol in his waistband, when someone else leaped forward out of the shadows at the opposite side of the room and slammed the whole island of Cuba onto his skull and upflung hands.

He got no more than a glimpse of that second figure, but as he fell endlessly down a star-spangled tunnel of blackness, he heard the voice of Duke White floating from some vast distance.

"I told you the copper was wise, Gomez. Slip that sticker into his ribs and don't miss this time. He brought the dough right back and laid it in our laps so we could clear out. . . ."

Shade awoke with the feeling that he was supposed to be dead, and a mild amazement that he was not. Then he opened his eyes and saw that the difference was only one of time. If he was not dead, then he shortly would be.

He was lying in a low, rough-timbered cabin that smelled of fish, cordage and salt water, along with numerous other smells that Shade, being unfamiliar with south sea

commerce, could not identify. The floor beneath him rocked gently and outside he heard the steady lap-lap of wavelets.

Both his wrists and his ankles were securely, even painfully, bound. His mouth was full of rags that tasted of oil, and a longer rag was bound around his face, holding the makeshift gag in place. Attached to the ropes at his wrists and ankles were immense chunks of jagged coral.

The inference was obvious. Shade was to be tossed overboard, weighted down with the coral, at some point in the very near future. He was vaguely puzzled that it had not already happened until he realized that the faint haze of light was due to daylight seeping through cracks in the walls. Probably, he decided, his captors were waiting for darkness to mask their activities.

Shade writhed and swore inwardly, tugging and jerking at his bonds without success. A rat scurried noisily across his feet, giving him a glittering, baleful stare. Cockroaches crept out of their corners to ring him in. Overhead, feet padded nakedly across the timbers of what, Shade guessed, must be the deck.

There were no voices, so apparently a lone guard was the only other occupant. From time to time, Shade heard distant voices ringing across the water, as if from passing boats, and there was a steady drone of vehicle traffic.

GRADUALLY reconstructing sounds and impressions in his mind, Shade decided he must be a prisoner on one of the multitude of small fishing boats and cargo tubs clustered at one end of the harbor. Not that the conclusion was of any material benefit, but it gave Shade a pivot for his furious and desperate thinking.

Suddenly he heard the splash of paddles and the grinding impact of a small boat against the side of his prison. Feet thudded over his head. There was a rapid-fire exchange

of liquid Spanish, and then Duke White's voice.

"I'll take a last look at that slipper goon. It wouldn't be the first time he cheated the undertaker."

Shod feet pounded across the planks and down echoing stairs. A door somewhere behind Mal Shade creaked open and fading sunlight moved over him.

"Well, well," Duke White chuckled, moving around to grin down at Shade. "Fancy seeing you here, copper."

Shade made strangled noises of fury behind his gag. Duke laughed and bent down to test the binding cords. He stood up, nodding.

"You'd have to shrink plenty to wiggle out of those ropes, chum. Me and the gal friend will be thinking of you as we float away through the tropical night to our rendezvous with a dream." He raised his eyebrows in pretended surprise. "Oh, haven't you heard? Karyl Landers and I are taking a boat out at sundown, heading for Natal, down on the hump of Brazil.

"At least that's where she thinks we're heading. But she might not get there, you know. If the sea got rough, she might accidentally slip and fall overboard. That would be terrible, wouldn't it?"

He flipped a sardonic salute and moved around Shade, out of range of his vision. His mocking voice floated back from the stairs.

"Give my love to the fishes, Mal. We'll miss you around little old New York."

His feet thudded across the deck overhead. Then the sound of paddles receded and vanished.

Shade strained and tugged at his ropes until sweat poured down his face.

He knew now, for sure, that his guesses had been right, that Karyl Landers was to die in the sea after dark, just as he was. And there was no hope in the world of saving either himself or her.

Shade gave up the ropes and squirmed to a

sitting position. His hands were tied before him, close to the block of coral. He could not reach the knots, but he could close his fingers around a jagged corner of the block.

He seized it, tugging furiously, and found he could manage to lift it from the floor. It weighed, he guessed, between seventy and eighty pounds. By alternately lifting and sliding, he managed to move the two weights together where he could reach the ankle cords with his fingers.

CHAPTER V

GUNFLAME WELCOME

DESPERATION gave Mal Shade strength and disregard of pain. He tore at the stubborn ropes, ignoring ripped fingernails and bleeding hands, and finally managed to loosen the cords enough to kick his feet free.

He lay back on the deck, kicking his feet together to restore circulation, trying to chart his next moves. His hands were still bound and he was still more or less anchored to a great mass of coral rock.

Then his eyes fell on the low doorway with its stairway to the deck above. Rough timbers made a shallow ledge above this door, at about shoulder height.

Shade grunted behind his gag, got a tight hold of the coral and staggered to his feet. Lugging the dead weight, he reached the door and managed to set the coral on the timber above it, balancing it there with his bound hands. It was the slimmest kind of a chance he was taking, but any chance at all was better than dying without a struggle.

Panting, Shade held the coral in position while he began to kick the closed door. At the third resounding impact, he heard feet move overhead and then come cautiously down the stairs. Shade stopped his kicking and waiting, pressed close beside the door, his bound hands holding the heavy rock precariously balanced before him.

Presently the door slid open and the face of the ugliest and meanest-looking black Shade had ever seen came poking through. Shade tugged and the huge block toppled from its perch.

Since his wrists were still bound to it, the momentum of the falling weight dragged Shade to the floor with a force that stunned him. But what that weight did to Shade was nothing compared to what a sharp edge of it did to the skull of the black.

Shade shook his whirling head, struggled onto his knees and inched around, poking fingers into the dead man's pockets. He finally found what he was seeking, a long fish knife in a sheath against the right hip. Shade worked this out, clamped it upright between his knees and went to work, sawing his bound wrists up and down against the blade through the scant three inches of slack allowed him.

In five minutes he had wrist cords cut and his gag removed. He stepped over the widening pool around the guard's head and went cautiously up the stairs. Darkness was falling with a velvety splendor, silhouetting the masts of other boats crowded around him. Less than a hundred yards away, car lights crawled past along the harbor road. Shade stepped to the rail, took a deep breath and went over in a clean dive.

A cab stopped at his hail, the *chofer* gaping at Shade's soggy clothing.

"I always swim with my clothes on," Shade snapped. "I'm just modest. Where can I get the straight dope on any ships that would be sailing about now, heading down the east coast of South America."

Shade was wondering about how to say the same thing in Spanish when the driver turned and grinned at him.

"Why don't you try askin' me, chum? I been everywhere and seen everything." He laughed at Shade's wide-eyed stare. "Heck, friend, half the *habaneros* in town used to live in New York."

Shade gulped down his surprise. "All

right, I'm asking you."

"Sure. The answer is the *Teta*, a coastal tub that freights down to Rio, with the sweetest crew of cutthroats on the Spanish Main. She's due out at sundown—right about now."

Shade's heart did a flip-flop. "Ten bucks if you catch her."

"Brother, just hang on while I retract my landing gear and pump out my wings."

THE cab took off so fast that Shade's head bounced from the back cushions. He hung on, fighting down the surging panic that clawed at his nerves, hating every flying minute that slipped through his fingers. He was sure, now, that he knew the plot, and that in his hands lay Karyl Lander's only hope of escaping her planned death at sea.

"There she is," the cabby said suddenly, pointing ahead to a row of floodlights shining from a rickety wharf onto a small, dirty tramp steamer moored alongside. "And here we are."

Shade tossed bills and was out and running before the cab had stopped. He could see through the open doors of the long shedlike wharf and see black stevedores and dockmen busy uncoiling hawsers and throwing them up to dirty sailors on the deck. The *Teta* was casting off.

In the same breath, Shade realized that he was completely weaponless. His gun had been taken, of course, and he had even neglected to retain the fish knife that had cut him free. All he had were his fists and his fury, but those would be of little use against the swarm of burly toughs on the wharf.

Then Shade saw that a narrow boardwalk extended along the outside of the wharf, running out into the darkness, presumably clear to the end. It was his one hope of reaching the *Teta* in time and getting aboard unseen.

He could see the shadowy outline of the squat foredeck, dimly lighted, with the spidery V of a cargo boom jutting behind it. A squat,

heavily-whiskered white man in dirty dungarees stood by the rail, bellowing hoarse Spanish at the men on the wharf. Shade darted onto the narrow walk and raced along it on tiptoe, toward the glow of light at the tip where the *Teta* was preparing to sail.

His heart was pounding and a cold dread layover him. What if he had guessed wrong and Karyl was not on this boat? By the time he could get on board—if he could—and learn the truth, it would be too late. But there was no alternative. This was his hand and he could only play it out and hope.

He was almost to the end of the wharf when he heard the jangle of bells, shouts, and the rhythmic accelerating thump of heavy engines. The prow of the freighter slid quietly into view, moving inexorably past the end of the wharf, out into the dark channel—toward Natal.

Shade burst out onto the end of the wharf and saw the dark bulk of the *Teta* sliding away. It was some fifteen feet out, raising a slim white bone as the screws took hold, widening the gap between ship and wharf with every passing second. Over Shade's head, the flukes of a rusty anchor jutted from its port, almost overhanging the wharf.

There was not even time for thought. Shade took a short hopping step and sprang straight up. One outstretched hand caught and clung to the triangle of rusty iron. Then he swung up, got a two-handed grip and hung on.

There was a groan of rusty metal, a clang and a thump as he struck but the sound of engines muffled it. Back on the wharf, a black stevedore yelled and pointed, but his words were lost in the growing noise. Shade clung, sweating arid panting, above the hissing water and wished the boys at Center Street could see him now.

The *Teta* picked up speed, threading its way back to the channel and out to sea. Shade clung, waiting for darkness to fall as they left the wharf lights, and pondered his problem. The port beside him led into the anchor chain

lockers and was too small for entry. The only alternative was the deck above.

SHADE stood up cautiously, pressing himself against the dirty bow and stretched upward. His fingers could just touch the rim of the deck, without projecting far enough to gain a purchase. Shade gathered his muscles, hopped straight up and closed his hands around a rail support.

Kneeing the hull for lift, he drew himself up until he could just peer over the rim of the deck. His breath went out in an explosion of relief. The foredeck was completely dark and deserted. Sailors worked, coiling ropes and fastening hatches, back near the deckhouse, but there were none forward or looking that way.

Shade hauled himself up, bellied under the rail and fish-flopped to the slim protection of a battened hatch. He lay there for a moment, catching his breath and considering.

He was aboard the *Teta* and so far undiscovered. But was this the right ship? So far there had been no evidence of it and, right or wrong, he was in the hands of a dozen or more exceedingly nasty-looking Caribbean sailors of as many nationalities. The prospect was not heartening.

Then suddenly the whole doubt in Shade's mind was dissolved in a flash. The Prussian figure of von Geissler suddenly marched out of the deckhouse door, barked something up to the wheelhouse above and went back out of sight. Shade took a deep breath.

"Now we're getting somewhere," he muttered.

He started to squirm to a better position and something hard and sharp gouged painfully at his chest. He grunted and felt the bulky outline of a waterproof matchbox in his shirt pocket. He had bought it years ago, during his beat-pounding days, and had clung to it ever since from sentiment. It was a big ungainly square of water-tight metal, enclosing a box of common matches for

protection against dampness. Now they gave Shade an idea.

He examined the hatch before him and discovered that the canvas cover was, as common with most boats, liberally oil-soaked and stiff with pitch. Waiting until no faces were turned his direction, Shade scratched a match and touched it to a frayed corner of the tarpaulin.

It caught and flared up hotly, throwing tongues of yellow, smoky flame at the dark night. Shade whirled away, dived for the rail and wriggled overside out of sight, hanging by the tips of his fingers from the deck rim. No one would see him here and when the crew raced past to attack the fire, he could edge back and make a dash for the door where von Geissler had vanished.

He heard the startled yells of the sailors and the pound of heavy feet racing up. Shade risked a quick glance, then dropped back with a groan. He saw the crew tearing forward, all right, but he also saw half of them swerving aside, jerking at belaying pins or unsnapping clasp knives as they headed straight for his precarious roost.

His mistake was easy to see, now that it was too late to rectify. He had completely forgotten the invisible helmsman up in the wheelhouse. That individual, facing forward straight across the bow of the *Teta* had seen the first flicker of flame and Shade's leaping figure. Now he was bending from his window, yelling instructions to the crew below.

There, were just two directions Shade could go. Up—into the arms of the roaring crew; or down—into the black channel below. The crew made a mistake in figuring Shade would undoubtedly drop into the water and try to swim for shore.

Shade did exactly the opposite. He yelled like a banshee and came up over the rail in a swinging rush.

THE crew caught their wits and tried to stop him, a second too late. Shade was

already on them, swinging dynamite fists, butting with shoulders and knees and lowered head. He felt teeth give under a blow that numbed his arm. He chopped off a gobble of Portuguese fury with a left hook to a fat belly.

It was not a stand-up fight or Shade would not have lasted two seconds. The crew was disorganized and Shade had only one grim purpose—to get through them and go places.

There was almost a fleeting flurry of fists and boots and flashing knives. Two blacks went down. A square-faced blond man ran around doubled over his crossed arms, retching and sobbing.

Shade took a knife-thrust on a lifted arm and felt the sting of steel and the warm gush of blood. He kicked the knife out of a yellow hand, getting a gashed ankle in the process, and broke a jaw-bone in retaliation.

Then suddenly Shade was through, leaping for the cabin door with the yelling survivors at his back. The crew was completely disorganized, for the ignited cordage was blazing furiously and threatening to engulf the whole ship, and their comrades around it were bellowing for help.

A round-faced little Japanese sprang out of nowhere and shoved a nickel-plated pistol almost in Shade's face.

"You stop plenty, yes," the Jap panted and started jerking the trigger like a nervous woman.

Gunpowder sprayed Shade's skin and stung his eyes. With every explosion the muzzle of the little pistol jerked and slugs whistled around Shade in all directions. The little Jap was terribly earnest about wanting to kill Shade, but he was not too expert at it.

"I stop plenty—*no!*" Shade said, and came up under the wild gun with a punch that had started down against the deck planking.

The Jap went a foot into the air and when he came down he was through wanting to kill anyone for a good many hours, and Shade was in possession of a weapon of questionable value.

With the pistol in his hand Shade hurdled the plump ruin and hit the cabin door with his shoulder. A knife zinged into the wood three inches from his head as the yelling crew raced up. The door slammed open and Shade drove through into the cabin alley.

A belaying pin glanced stingingly off his arm and went clattering down the alley. Then Shade was slamming the door, dropping the weather-bolt into its socket and backing away from the cursing wave that smashed into the door a moment too late.

Gasping for breath, holding the nickel-plated gun in his hand, Shade backed away from the bulging panels. Behind him, the crisp precise accents of Captain Geissler said:

"I have missed killing you twice. Once I failed. Again, at the Marmol Hotel, I would not let Gomez use the knife because of the blood. It was fortunate for you that I recovered and returned in time. But here there is nothing in the world to stop me from finishing my pleasant, self-appointed task. *Achtung!*"

Shade whirled, trying to center the cheap pistol. He got far enough around to see von Geissler's tall figure almost filling the narrow alley, to see the glow of triumph in the pale, bulging eyes. Then he saw the Luger in the Nazi's white hand, saw a slim forefinger squeeze back.

The Luger hid itself in flame. Shade saw the recoil mechanism on the breech pop up like a jack-in-the-box and then something struck his chest a terrible, agonizing blow that deflated his lungs and turned his muscles to water. He felt himself whirled around in a mad, crazy waltz, felt himself drifting endlessly downward until the floor smashed itself against his face. He lay there, utterly helpless, feeling the terrible deadness seep through his veins.

Van Geissler stepped toward him with crisp, precise steps and stood over him, looking down.

"It is good," he said curtly. "Over the heart where it should be. You will not suffer long.

That is merciful of me, *nicht wahr?*”

Shade tried to move, to lift the gun in his hand, to speak. He found he could do none of these. The deadness was spreading.

He could only look and, looking past van Geissler's boots to the far end of the alley, he saw Duke White suddenly pop into sight. Duke was grinning and there was a black automatic in his hand.

“You won't suffer either, Dutchy!” Duke said softly.

He centered the automatic on von Geissler's broad back and triggered twice. The corridor was rocking and bursting with the mad echoes of those shots when von Geissler grunted softly. His stiff, military knees sagged and he came down, coiling like a worn rope, falling across Shade's body.

“That's what I call a complete clean-up,” Duke said, grinning down at Shade's glazing eyes. “You and the Nazi at one time. And that squarehead thought I'd be satisfied with a forty per cent split when this way I get all the dough and the girl besides. Well, so long, suckers.”

He turned and went back out of sight through an open cabin door. The voice of Karyl Landers screamed once, softly, from inside.

CHAPTER VI

INTERNATIONAL RACKET

KARYL LANDERS was sitting on a dirty, unmade bunk, her face buried in her hands, her slim body rocking. Duke White stood just inside the door, grinning and licking his lips as he put the automatic away under one arm.

“They killed her!” Karyl was sobbing into her hands. “The dirty, filthy Nazi beasts killed her! And then they had the nerve to try to blackmail me. Two hundred thousand dollars—and she was already dead. Already dead!”

“There, there, Baby,” Duke said hoarsely, moving forward. “You stop your fretting. Von Geissler was behind it and he's dead. Now it's just you and me, Baby. You and me and the two hundred grand. Can you imagine, that guy thought he was the only one who could buy Cap Zayas and his crew. Hah, I paid them more to land us at Cape Haitien. We can grab a boat back to New York from there and live high.”

“You and me?” Karyl looked up through her fingers. “He's dead?”

“As dead as they come, Baby,” Duke whispered, and bent over to pat her shoulder. “But I'm alive—plenty alive, Baby.”

Karyl's hand slashed down under the covers of the rumpled bunk and came up, gripping a high-heeled slipper by the toe. She put everything into a furious, slashing blow. Duke White squawled and stumbled back, cursing breathlessly, prodding incredulous fingers at a four-inch gash in one cheek, opened by the spike heel.

“You hell-cat!”

Karyl was on her feet, crouched, holding the pitifully inadequate slipper ready for another swing. Her face was pale and drawn but there was flame in her blue eyes.

“Try that again,” she begged. “Come on, you treacherous, lying murderer! Give me one more chance. I'll hit your eyes this time.”

“That's your finish,” Duke snarled, his face dead-white with his eyes shiny pools of black ink in that deadness. “You had your chance and muffed it. If that's how you want it, that's how you'll get it. You were slated for a long swim, anyhow.”

He slid the black gun into his hand, began creeping forward, his eyes murderous with rage. The gun came up, leveled. Duke White was shaking with a terrible fury, but he was too close to miss. Karyl stood waiting, facing death with her head up.

From the cabin door, behind Duke White, Shade's voice, dry and harsh and tight with pain, croaked:

"Turn around, Duke! Turn around and take it, or so help me, I'll shoot you in the back as you deserve, you rat!"

He was clinging to the door frame, sagging against it, the whole left side of his white coat looking as if drenched in port wine. His face was a taut, terrible mask, deep-etched with furrows of agony. But the cheap pistol was rock-steady in his right hand.

Duke White cursed in a high, incredulous voice and whirled, firing at the sound before he was completely around. Splinters tore from the door casing, spraying Shade's face. Then Shade was firing, the pistol barking like an angry dog, and Duke White's turn became a helpless spin that ended when the gangster crashed heavy on the floor. The automatic flopped from one limp hand and fell, almost at Karyl Landers' feet.

Duke White was dying, but not dead. His eyes blazed hatred at Shade and his lips peeled back.

"Gomez!" he screamed, from some last reservoir of strength. "*Gomez!* Kill—" The rest bubbled off into silence.

Shade was slipping, sagging forward, his gun drooping. He hung for a moment, then slipped to the floor.

OUTSIDE, a door slammed and feet scurried toward the cabin. The dark-eyed Gomez appeared in the door, holding a long slim knife by the hilt, shoulder high. He stopped, wide-eyed at the dead Duke White.

Then Shade, on the floor at his feet, groaned softly and his muscles twitched. Gomez jumped back, catlike, then crept forward, lifting his knife high. His little sharp tongue came out and licked at his lips as he crouched over Shade's back.

From her crouch against the bunk across the cabin, Karyl Landers caught up Duke White's automatic and fired. The automatic jerked in her slim hand but she fired three times. Gomez screamed in a high, choked voice as he was literally blasted back through

the doorway by the impact of .45 slugs at close range.

SHADE got his head up and managed a grin.

"You're all right, kid. Plenty—all—right. . ."

When Shade opened his eyes again, the cabin was full of colorful police and army uniforms, worn by some of the handsomest Cubans he had ever seen. Shade's head was resting on some soft cushion and a gray-haired doctor was slapping tape on his chest. The doctor was an American, with an Irish jaw and a flashing smile. He looked up at Shade and chuckled.

"Hello, Hard-shell! How does it feel to be the luckiest guy in the world? Or do you carry that oversized matchbox over your heart just for the purpose of warding off slugs. Aside from a couple of smashed ribs and some missing skin, you're disgustingly healthy."

Shade squirmed his head around and discovered that the pillow under his head was Karyl Landers' lap. She gave him a warm, tremulous smile. Shade discovered his right hand could move and used it to capture her fingers.

"Hi, Brick-top! I'm sorry about your sister."

She nodded soberly. "How did you know?"

"Hangover from my detective days," Shade said cheerfully. "Von Geissler approached you, didn't he? Told you your sister was alive and would be allowed to escape Germany if she paid the Reich a ransom. Right?"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand," Karyl agreed. "All I could raise was two hundred thousand."

"The money in the suit-case," Shade said. "No wonder you fought me for it on the boat and told me over the phone I must be curious when I saw it. The U. S. Government clamped down and forbade sending any money to the

Nazis, even before war started, so you had to raise it secretly.”

“Yes. I couldn’t sell holdings or draw on my bank accounts without explaining to the Government some time or another what became of the money. Von Geissler had the answer to that. He brought Duke White in and arranged a robbery to snatch my jewelry and other assets and pay me a fraction of their value. They were to accompany me here where I could raise the balance. I insisted on keeping the cash so they let me, telling me I’d be watched every minute and that if I tried anything, my sister would die.”

“The rats!” Shade gritted. “But you hired Fetzer, a detective, to tag along, didn’t you? They got wise and Gomez decapitated him. They planted the head in your suit-case to show you they had you covered every way.”

THERE was a choke in Karyl’s voice when she said:

“I didn’t know about the—the head when I called you. Von Geissler made me phone and then he said he’d pick up the case himself. I didn’t know about the head until tonight. And I didn’t know until a few minutes ago how I’d been tricked. My—my sister was dead. She had killed herself almost a year ago, when those butchers murdered her husband for opposing Hitler.”

“You weren’t going to pay off without some proof, were you?” Shade demanded.

“No. They said she was in Africa, ready to be flown across to Brazil with some other refugees. I was to meet the plane and pay over the money when we actually met. What they really planned was to toss me overboard, take the money, and head back to some other victim. They were building up an international racket, preying on people with loved ones caught in the Nazi trap.”

The doctor had been listening intently, turning his head from time to time to translate the story into swift Spanish for the benefit of the listening officers.

“You folks did a job, smashing that ring,” he said, extending his hand to Shade. “Captain Reina asks me to extend his sincere thanks and that of the people of Cuba. This crowd on the *Teta* were also engaged in espionage activities that the Cuban government has been trying to stamp out. You’ve done us all a good turn.”

Karyl clung to Shade’s hand.

“When he told me my sister was dead, he laughed—*laughed!*”

Shade squeezed her hand. “Easy, Kid. His laughter’s going to sound kind of out of place, where he is now.”