

Couffignal is a two-hour ride from San Francisco. It is not a large island, and is joined to the mainland by a wooden bridge. Its western shore is a high, straight cliff that comes up out of Pablo Bay. From the top of the cliff the island slopes eastward to a beach, where there are piers and pleasure boats.

Couffignal's main street has the usual bank, hotel, movie theater and stores, but there are also trees and lawns, and no ugly flashing signs. The buildings seem to belong beside one another, as if they had been designed by the same person.

The streets that cross the main street run between rows of neat cottages near the bottom of the slope, but higher up the houses are larger and further apart. Most of the owners of these houses are rich, well-fed old men who will spend what is left of their lives nursing their health among their own kind. They admit to the island only as many storekeepers and working people as are needed to keep them comfortably served.

That is Couffignal.

It was some time after midnight. I was in an upstairs room in Couffignal's largest house, surrounded by wedding presents whose value would add up to something between fifty and a hundred thousand dollars. The ceremony had been performed in a little stone church down the hill. Then the house had begun to fill up with wedding guests, and had stayed filled until the bride and her new husband had gone off to catch their train.

A private detective at a wedding is supposed to look like any other guest, but this is never possible. He has to spend most of his time where he can see the presents, and what he is doing soon becomes obvious. Anyway, I recognized eight or ten of the guests as clients or former clients of mine.

Soon after dark a wind smelling of rain began to pile storm clouds up over the bay. Those guests who lived some distance away, especially those who had water to cross, hurried off for their homes. Those who lived on the island stayed until the first drops of rain began to fall. Then they left.

The Hendrixson house became quiet. Tired house servants disappeared to their bedrooms. I found some sandwiches, a couple of books and a comfortable chair, and took them up to the room where the presents were now hidden under a gray- white sheet.

Keith Hendrixson, the bride's grandfather (her parents were dead), put his head in at the door. 'Have you everything you need for your comfort?' he asked.

'Yes, thanks.'

He said good night and went off to bed - an old man, but tall and thin like a boy.

The wind was blowing and it was raining hard now. I pulled my chair close to a lamp, and put sandwiches, books, ashtray, gun and flashlight on a small table beside it. I lit a cigarette, made myself comfortable in the chair and picked up a book.

It was about a tough, violent man called Hogarth, whose modest plan was to hold the world in one hand. There were robberies and murders, escapes from prisons, and diamonds as large as hats. It sounds crazy, but in the book it was as real as a dollar.

Hogarth was still winning when the lights went out.

I pushed my cigarette into one of the sandwiches, put the book down, picked up the gun and flashlight, and moved away from the chair. Listening for noises was no good. The storm was making hundreds of them. I needed to know why the lights had gone off. All the other lights in the house had been turned off some time ago, so the darkness of the hall told me nothing.

I waited. My job was to watch the presents. Nobody had touched them yet.

Minutes went by, perhaps ten of them.

The floor moved under my feet. The windows shook violently. Then the sound of a heavy explosion filled the air, drowning out the noises of wind and falling water. It was not near, but nor was it off the island.

I walked over to the window. I should have been able to see a few misty lights far down the hill. Not being able to see them meant that the lights had gone out all over Couffignal, and not only in the Hendrixson house.

That was better. Maybe the storm had put out the lights, caused the explosion. Maybe.

I had an impression of great excitement down the hill, of movement in the night. But it was all too far away for me

to have seen or heard anything even if there had been lights. I turned away from the window.

Another explosion spun me back to it. It sounded nearer than the first, maybe because it was stronger. Looking through the glass again, I still saw nothing.

The sound of bare feet hurrying came from the hall. A voice was anxiously calling my name. I put my gun in my pocket and switched on the flashlight. Keith Hendrixson, in night clothes and looking thinner and older than anybody could be, came into the room. 'Is it...?'

'I don't think it's an earthquake,' I said. That's the first disaster every Californian thinks of. 'The lights went off a little while ago. There have been a couple of explosions down the hill since-'

I stopped as I heard three shots, close together. Shots that only the heaviest of rifles could make. Then, sharp and small in the storm, came the sound of a handgun firing.

More feet were running in the hall. Excited voices whispered. A servant, partly dressed and carrying lighted candles, came in. He put the candles on the table beside my sandwiches.

'Brophy, will you try to find out what is the matter?' Hendrixson said to him.

'I have tried, sir. The telephone is not working. Shall I send Oliver down to the village?'

'No, I don't suppose it's that serious. Do you think it's anything serious?' Hendrixson asked me.

I said I didn't think so, but I had heard a thin scream that could have come from a distant woman, and the quick-firing of more shots. Then came the sound of the heavier guns again.

The doorbell rang suddenly - loud and long.

Brophy went away and came back.

'Princess Zhukovski,' he announced.

She ran into the room - a tall Russian girl who I had seen earlier at the wedding reception. Her eyes were wide and dark with excitement. Her face was very white and wet.

'Oh, Mr Hendrixson!' She was like an excited child. 'The bank is being robbed, and the chief of police is dead! When the explosion woke us, the general sent Ignati down to find out what was the matter. He got there in time to see the bank blown up. Listen!'

We heard a wild burst of mixed gunfire.

'That will be the general arriving at the bank!' she said. 'He'll enjoy himself wonderfully! As soon as Ignati returned with the news, the general gave a gun to every man in the house and led them out.'

'And the duchess?' Hendrixson asked.

'He left her at home with me, of course. I crept out of the house while she was trying to make tea. This is not the night to stay at home!'

Hendrixson looked at me. I said nothing.

'Could you do anything down there?' he asked.

'Maybe, but. . .' I nodded at the presents.

'Oh, those!' the old man said. 'I'm as interested in the bank as in them. And we'll be here.'

'OK, I'll go down. Leave Brophy in here, and put the chauffeur by the front door. Give them guns if you have any. Is there a raincoat I can borrow?'

Brophy found me a yellow rubber raincoat, then Hendrixson and the princess followed me downstairs. She was going with me.

'But Sonya!' the old man protested.

'I'm not going to be silly, though I'd like to,' she promised him. 'I'm going back to the duchess, who will perhaps have made some tea by now.'

'That's sensible,' Hendrixson said, and he let us out into the rain and the wind.

It wasn't the weather to talk in. We went down the hill, the storm driving at our backs. At the first break in the trees I stopped, nodding towards the black shape of a house. 'That is your-'

Her laugh stopped me. She took my arm and began to hurry me down the road again. 'I only told Mr Hendrixson that so he would not worry,' she explained.

She was tall. I am short and thick. I had to look up to see as much of her face as the rain-gray night would let me see. 'I don't know what we'll find down there,' I said. 'I can't look after you.'

'I can look after myself,' she said. 'I'm as strong as you, and quicker, and I can shoot.'

We hurried on.

Occasionally dark figures moved on the road ahead of us, but too far away to recognize anyone. Then a man passed us, running uphill.

'They've finished the bank and are at Medcraft's!' he shouted as he went by.

'Medcraft is the jeweler,' the girl informed me. The houses were closer together now. Below, the occasional orange flash of a gun could be seen through the rain. We got to the main street just as a short, sharp RAT-TAT-TAT of gunfire broke out.

I pushed the princess into the nearest doorway, and jumped in after her. Bullets tore through walls, and I knew then that the RAT-TAT-TAT came from a machine gun.

The princess had fallen back in a corner, against a boy of about seventeen who was taking shelter in the doorway. He had one leg and a crutch.

'It's the boy who delivers newspapers,' Princess Zhukovski said, 'and you've hurt him.'

The boy smiled as he got up. 'I'm not hurt, but you scared me, jumping on me like that.'

'What's happening?' I asked him.

'There must be a hundred of them,' he said. 'They've blown the bank wide open, and now some of them are in Medcraft's, and I guess they'll blow that up, too. And they

killed Tom Weegan. They've got a machine gun on a car in the middle of the street.'

'Where is everybody?'

'Most of them are up behind the Hall. The machine gun won't let them get near enough to see what they're shooting at. Bill Vincent told me to get out, because I've only got one leg- but I could shoot as good as anybody, if only I had something to shoot with.'

'You can do something for me,' I said. 'You can stay here and watch this end of the street, so I'll know if they leave in this direction.'

'You're not saying that to make me stay here out of the way, are you?' he said.

'No,' I lied. 'I need somebody to watch. I was going to leave the princess here, but you'll be better.'

'Yes,' she said, catching my idea. 'This man's a detective. Do what he asks, and you'll be helping more than if you were up with the others.'

The machine gun was still firing, but not in our direction now.

'I'm going across the street,' I told the girl.

'Aren't you going to join the others?'

'No. If I can get around behind the bandits, maybe I can do something useful.'

The princess and I ran across the street without getting shot at, then moved along the side of a building before



turning into an alley. From the alley's other end came the smell of the bay.

The big figure of a man appeared ahead of us.

I stepped in front of the girl and went on towards him. Under my raincoat, I pointed my gun at his stomach. He stood still. He was larger than he had looked at first. His hands were empty. I flashed the torch on his face for a second.

'Ignati!' the girl exclaimed over my shoulder.

He began to speak in Russian to her. She laughed at first, then shook her head and spoke sharply. He shook his head, then spoke to me.

'General Pleshskov, he tell me to bring Princess Sonya home.'

'Take her,' I said.

The girl looked angrily at me, then laughed. 'All right, Ignati,' she said in English, 'I shall go home.' And she turned and went back up the alley, the big man close behind her.

I moved on down to the beach, then went quickly along the shore towards the sounds of the machine gun and smaller gunfire. I heard three explosions, close together - bombs, hand grenades, I thought, remembering the sounds. That would be the jeweler's shop blowing apart. Another grenade went off. A man's voice screamed in terror.

I turned down to the water's edge. I had seen no dark shape on the water that could have been a boat. There had been boats along this beach in the afternoon. With my feet in

the water of the bay I still saw no boat. The storm could have blown them away, but I didn't think it had. The wind was Strong here, but not violent.

I went on up the shore. Now I saw a boat. A black shape ahead, with no lights. Nothing I could see moved on it. It was the only boat on that shore. That made it important.

A shadow moved between me and the dark back of a building. I stopped. The shadow, the size of a man, moved again, in the direction from which I was coming.

Twenty feet from me the shadow suddenly stopped.

I was seen. My gun was pointing at the shadow.

'Come on,' I said softly. 'Let's see who you are.'

The shadow came nearer. I couldn't risk using the flashlight, but I could just see a handsome face with a dark stain on one side of it. He was one of the Russians who had been at the wedding.

'Oh, how do you do?' the face's owner said lightly. 'You were at the wedding this afternoon.'

'Yes.'

'Have you seen Princess Zhukovski? You know her?'

'She went home with Ignati ten minutes ago.'

'Excellent!' He wiped his stained face with a stained handkerchief, and turned to look at the boat. 'That's Hendrixson's boat,' he whispered. 'They've got it, and they've got rid of the others.'

'That means they're going to leave by water.'

'Yes,' he agreed. 'Unless . . . shall we try . . .? There can't be many of them on the boat. God knows there are enough of them on shore. We both have guns.'

Staying close to the walls of the buildings, we crept towards the boat. It was about forty-five feet long, rising and falling in the water beside a small pier. There was something across the stern of the boat, but I couldn't see what it was. Moments later, a dark head and shoulders showed over the puzzling thing in the stern.

The young Russian's eyes were better than mine.

'He's wearing a mask over his face,' he whispered.

The man with the mask stood still. We stood still.

'Could you hit him from here?' the young Russian asked.

'Maybe,' I said. 'But better to get as close as we can, and start shooting when he sees us.'

Discovery came with our first step forward. The man in the boat made a low sound. The young man at my side jumped forward. I recognized the thing in the boat's stern just in time to throw out a leg and trip him. He fell down on the sand. I dropped behind him.

The machine gun in the boat's stern poured metal over our heads.

'Roll out of it!' I shouted.

I gave an example by rolling towards the back of the building we had just left.

The man at the gun fired wildly across the beach.

Around the corner of the building, we sat up.

'You saved my life by tripping me,' the young man said coolly.

'Yes. I wonder if they moved the machine gun from the street, or if this is another-'

The answer to that came immediately. The machine gun in the street joined its RAT-TAT-TAT with the one in the boat.

'A pair of them!' I said. 'And how many bandits?'

'I don't think there are more than ten or twelve of them,' he said, 'although it's not easy to count in the dark. The few I've seen are wearing masks, like the man in the boat. We attacked them while they were robbing the bank, but they had a machine gun on a car and we couldn't compete with that.'

'Where are the islanders now?'

'Hiding, I expect, unless General Pleshkev has succeeded in getting them together again.'

'Suppose you stay here and watch the boat,' I suggested. 'I'll see what's happening further up, and if I can get a few good men together I'll try to get on the boat again, probably from the other side.'

'You'll probably find most of the islanders up behind the church,' he said.

I moved off towards the main street where I stopped to look around before crossing it. Everything was quiet. The only man I could see was lying face down on the ground

near me. I crawled to his side on my hands and knees and looked at him. He was dead.

I jumped up and ran to the other side of the street. Nothing tried to stop me. In a doorway, flat against a wall, I looked out carefully. The wind had stopped, and the rain was now a steady downpour of small drops. Couffignal's main street was empty.

I walked quickly towards the bank. From high up on the hill I could hear a machine gun throwing out its stream of bullets. Mixed with this noise were the sounds of smaller guns, and a grenade or two.

I left the main street and began to run up the hill. Men were running towards me. Two of them passed, but I stopped the third one. He was white-faced and breathing hard.

'They've moved the car with the machine gun up behind us,' he gasped. 'Back there somewhere. He's trying to take the car, but he'll never do it.'

Other men had passed us, running downhill, as we talked. I let the white-faced man go, and stopped four men who weren't running as fast as the others.

'What's happening now?' I asked.

'They're going through the houses up the hill,' a sharp-faced man with a gun said.

'Has anybody taken the news off the island yet?'

'Can't,' another said. 'They blew up the bridge.'

'Can't anybody swim?'

'Not in that wind.'

'The wind's quieter now,' I said.

The sharp-faced man gave his gun to one of the others and took off his coat. 'I'll try it,' he said.

'Good! Wake up the whole country, and get the news through to the San Francisco police boat. Tell them the bandits have a boat with a machine gun ready to leave in. It's Hendrixson's.'

The sharp-faced man left.

'A boat?' two of the men asked together.

'Yes. If we're going to do anything, it'll have to be now. Get every man and every gun you can find down there. Shoot at the boat from the roofs if you can. When the bandit's car comes down, shoot into it. You'll do better from the buildings than from the street.'

A hundred yards further on, what was left of the general's men came out of the night, running downhill, with bullets flying after them. I got off the road into soft, wet grass, and continued my uphill journey. The machine gun on the hill was silent. The one in the boat was still at work.

The one ahead started again, firing too high to hit anything near. It was helping its partner below, shooting into the main street.

Before I could get closer it had stopped. I heard the car moving towards me. Rolling into the trees, I lay there. I had six bullets. When I saw wheels on the road, I emptied my gun, firing it low.

The car went on.

I jumped out of my hiding place.

The car was suddenly gone from the empty road.

There was a loud crash. The noise of metal folding on itself. The sound of breaking glass.

I ran towards those sounds.

Out of a black pile where an engine coughed and died, a black figure jumped - and ran off across the wet lawn. I went after it, hoping that the others in the wreck were dead.

I was about ten yards behind the running man. I was tempted to throw my empty gun at his head, but it was too risky. A dark building appeared. My man ran to the right, to get around the corner.

To the left, a heavy gun went off.

The running man disappeared around the house corner.

'Sweet God!' General Pleshkev's voice complained. 'How could I miss him at that distance?'

'Go round the other way!' I shouted, running around the corner after my man.

His feet ran on ahead. I could not see him. The general came around from the other side of the house.

'You have him?'

'No.'

In front of us was a stone-faced bank, on top of which was a path. On either side of us were high and solid bushes.

A pale triangle showed on the path above - a triangle that could have been a bit of shirt above the opening of a jacket.

'Stay here and talk!' I whispered to the general, and crept forward.

'He must have gone the other way,' the general said, as if I were standing beside him, 'because if he had come this way I should have seen him, and if he had raised himself above the bushes, one of us would have seen him against. . .'

He talked on and on while I climbed the stone bank. The man on the path, trying to make himself small with his back in a bush, was looking at the general. He saw me when I had my feet on the path.

He jumped, and one hand went up.

I jumped, with both hands out.

A stone, turning under my foot, threw me sideways, saving my head from the bullet he sent at it.

As I went down, my arm caught his legs and he came down on top of me. I kicked him once, caught his gun arm, and had just decided to bite it when the general came across the path and pushed the man off me with his gun.

I stood up. I had hurt my ankle and it was difficult to stand. I put most of my weight on the other leg and turned my flashlight on the prisoner.

'Hello, Flippo!' I exclaimed.

'Hello,' he said, not happy to be recognized.



He was a fat Italian of twenty-three or four. I'd helped send him to prison four years ago for his part in a robbery. He had been out for several months now.

'The prison board isn't going to like this,' I told him.

'You've got it wrong,' he said. 'I Wasn't doing anything. I was up here to see some friends. And when this thing broke loose I had to hide. If the police catch me here I'll be in trouble. And now you've got me and you think I'm part of it.'

'You're a mind reader,' I told him, and asked the general, 'Where can we lock him away for a while?'

'In my house there's a room with a strong door and no windows,' said the general.

He took Flippo's arm while I walked painfully behind him, re-loading my gun. We didn't have far to go. The general knocked on the door of his house and called out something in his language. The door was opened by a Russian servant with a heavy mustache. Behind him were the princess and an older woman.

We took Flippo up to the room with no windows as the general told the others what had happened. We locked our prisoner inside, then went downstairs.

'You are hurt!' the princess said to me.

'I turned my foot over, that's all. But it would be better with some support. Do you have a bandage?'

'Yes,' she said; and spoke to the servant, who went out of the room and returned with a bandage.

There was no sound of gunfire coming up the hill now, and the rain was lighter. The night was almost over, and it would soon be day. I had tied the bandage round my ankle and was fastening the button on my raincoat when there was a knock on the front door. I heard someone speaking in Russian, then the young Russian I had met on the beach came in.

'Aleksander, you're-!' the older woman screamed when she saw the blood on his face, and fainted.

He took no notice of this, as if he was used to her fainting. 'They've gone in the boat,' he told me, while the girl and two servants picked the woman up and laid her on a sofa.

'How many?' I asked.

'I counted ten.'

'The men I sent down there couldn't stop them?'

He lifted his shoulders and let them drop again. 'It takes a strong stomach to face a machine gun.'

The woman who had fainted was now asking questions in Russian. The princess was putting on her coat. The woman stopped questioning the young man and asked her something.

'It's all over,' the princess said. 'I'm going to look at the wreckage.'

That idea appealed to everybody. Five minutes later all of us were on our way downhill. Other islanders were

hurrying down in the rain, too, their faces tired and excited in the morning light.

A woman ran out of the crowd and began to tell me something. I recognized her as one of Hendrixson's maids. I caught some of her words.

'Presents gone . . . Mr Brophy murdered . . . Oliver . . .'

'I'll be down later,' I told the others, and went after the maid.

She was running back to the Hendrixson house. I couldn't run, or walk fast. She and Hendrixson and more of his servants were outside when I arrived.

'They killed Oliver and Brophy,' the old man said.

'How?'

'We were in the back of the house, upstairs, watching the shooting down in the village. Oliver was just inside the front door, and Brophy in the room with the presents. We heard a shot in there, and immediately a man appeared in the doorway of our room, threatening us with two guns, making us stay there for perhaps ten minutes. Then he shut and locked the door and went away. We broke the door down - and found Brophy and Oliver dead.'

'Let's look at them.'

The chauffeur was just inside the front door. He lay on his back, with this throat cut straight across the front. His gun was under him. I pulled it out and examined it. It had not been fired.

Upstairs, Brophy was lying against a leg of one of the tables on which the presents had been spread. His gun was gone. There was a bullet hole in his chest.

Most of the presents were still there. But the most valuable ones were gone.

'What did the man you saw look like?' I asked.

'I didn't see him very well,' Hendrixson said. 'There was no light in our room. He was just a large man in a black rubber raincoat, and wearing a black mask.'

As we went downstairs again, I told Hendrixson what I had seen and heard and done since I had left him.

'Do you think you can get information about the others from the one you caught?' he asked, as I prepared to go out.

'No. But I expect to catch them.'

Couffignal's main street was full of people when I got down to it again. Some men from the San Francisco police boat were there. A hundred voices were all talking at once.

The bank had been completely wrecked, and so had the jeweler's shop. Two doctors were helping the injured villagers. I recognized a familiar face under a uniform hat - Sergeant Roche of the harbor police - and pushed through the crowd to him.

'What do you know?' he asked as we shook hands.

'Everything.'

'Who ever heard of a private detective who didn't?' he joked as I led him out of the crowd.

'Did your people see an empty boat out in the bay?' I asked when we were away from audiences.

'Empty boats have been floating around the bay all night,' he said.

I hadn't thought of that. 'Where's your boat now?'

'Out trying to catch the bandits. I stayed with a couple of men to help here.'

'You're in luck,' I told him. 'See the old man across the street with the black beard?'

General Pleshkev stood there, with the woman who had fainted, the young Russian whose bloody face had made her faint, and a pale, fat man of forty-something who had been with them at the wedding. Near them stood Ignati, two men-servants I had seen at the house, and another who was obviously one of them.

'Yes, I see your man with the beard,' said Roche.

'Well he's one of the people you want. And so are the woman and the two men with him. And those four Russians standing to the left are more of them. There's another missing, but I'll take care of that one. Pass the information to your chief, and you can catch them before they get a chance to fight back. They think they're safe.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm sure.'

I began to move through the crowd to the other side of the street. The princess didn't seem to be among those present. My idea was that, next to the general, she was the

most important member of the gang. If she was at the house, and she did not suspect anything, I guessed she would not give me too much of a fight.

Walking was hell. The pain from my ankle went straight up my leg, like a knife.

'None of them came down that way,' a voice said.

The newspaper boy with one leg was standing by my elbow. I greeted him as if he was my pay check,

'Come with me,' I said, taking his arm. 'You did well down there, and now I want you to do something else for me.'

I led him to the doorway of a small yellow cottage. The door was open, left that way when the owners ran down to welcome the police, I guessed. Just inside the door was a chair. I pulled the chair outside.

'Sit down, son,' I told the boy. Then I took his crutch out of his hand. 'Here's five dollars to rent it, and if I lose it I'll buy you one made of gold.'

I put the crutch under my arm and began to push myself up the hill. The hill was longer and steeper than some mountains I've seen, but the path to the Russians' house was finally under my feet.

I was still about twelve feet from the house when Princess Zhukovski opened the door.

'Oh!' she exclaimed. And then, recovering from her surprise, said, 'Your ankle is worse!' She ran down the steps to help me climb them, and I noticed she had something

heavy in the right- hand pocket of her jacket. With one hand under my elbow, she helped me into the house. Why, I wondered, had she come back to the house after starting to go down with the others?

She put me in a soft leather chair. 'You must be hungry,' she said. 'I will see-'

'No, sit down.' I nodded at a chair opposite mine. 'I want to talk to you.'

She sat down. She did not look nervous, or even curious. And that was her big mistake.

'Where have you hidden it all?' I asked.

Her face was white, but it had been like that since I first saw her. Her voice was smoothly cool.

'I don't understand your question,' she said.

'I'm charging you with helping in the gutting of Couffignal, and with the murders,' I explained. 'I'm asking you where the things you stole are hidden.'

Slowly, she stood up and looked at me. 'How dare you speak to me like that! Me, a Zhukovski!'

'I don't care who you are;' I told her. 'You're a thief and a murderer.'

Her white face became the face of a wild animal. One hand - claw now - went to the heavy pocket of her jacket. Then, as quick as a flash, the animal had disappeared. And there was the princess again, cool and in control.

She sat down, crossed her ankles, put an elbow on an arm of her chair, put her chin on the back of that hand, and looked curiously into my face.

'How did you get an idea as strange and fantastic as that?' she murmured.

'It's not strange or fantastic,' I said. 'First - whoever planned the job knew the island, every inch of it'. Second - the car on which the machine gun was fixed was local property, stolen from the owner here. So was the boat in which the bandits were supposed to have escaped. Bandits from outside the island would have needed a car or a boat to bring their machine guns and grenades here. So why didn't they use that car or boat instead of stealing a fresh one? Third - this job wasn't the work of professional bandits. The worst burglar in the world could have robbed the bank and the jeweler's without wrecking the buildings. Fourth - bandits from the outside wouldn't have destroyed the bridge. They might have blocked it, but they wouldn't have destroyed it. They might have wanted to make their getaway in that direction. Fifth - bandits planning on a getaway by boat would have cut the job short, not spread it over the whole night. Enough noise was made here to wake

California all the way from Sacramento to Los Angeles. What you people did was send one man out in the boat, shooting, and he didn't go far. As soon as he was at a safe distance, he swam back to the island. Big Ignati could have done it easily.'

I stopped counting with my right hand, and began counting on my left.



'Sixth - I met one of your men, the young man, down on the beach, and he was coming from the boat. He suggested that we tried to get on the boat, and we were shot at, but the man behind the gun was playing with us. He shot over our heads. He could have killed us in a second if he had wanted to. Seventh - that same young man is the only person on the island, as far as I know, who saw the departing bandits. Eighth - all of your people were very nice to me. The general even spent an hour talking to me at the wedding this afternoon. No professional criminal would do that. Ninth - after the machine gun car had been wrecked, I chased its occupant. I lost him around this house. The Italian boy I caught wasn't him. He couldn't have climbed up on the path without my seeing him. But he could have run around to the general's side of the house and disappeared indoors. The general was obviously helping him, because his shot managed to miss him from less than six feet away. Tenth - you only called at Hendrixson's house to get me away from there.'

That finished my left hand. I went back to my right.

'Eleventh - Hendrixson's two servants were killed by someone they knew and trusted. I'd guess you got Oliver to let you into the house, and were talking to him when one of your men cut his throat from behind. Then you went upstairs and shot the unsuspecting Brophy yourself. Twelfth - but that ought to be enough. I'm getting a sore throat from listing them.'

She took her chin off her hand, took a cigarette out of a thin black case, and held it in her mouth while I put a match

to the end of it. She took a long pull at it and blew the smoke down at her knees.

'That would be enough,' she said, 'except that it would have been impossible for us to do all those things. You saw us - everyone saw us - many times.'

'That's easy!' I argued. 'With a couple of machine guns, grenades, knowing the island from top to bottom, in the darkness and in a storm - it was easy for you. There are nine of you that I know about, including two women. Any five of you could have done the work, once it was started, while the others appeared here and there providing alibis. Everywhere I went, there was one of you. And the general! That old joker running around leading the islanders to battle! They're lucky that there are any of them alive this morning!'

She finished her cigarette. 'And now what?'

'Now I want to know where you have hidden the things you stole.'

I was surprised by how ready she was to answer.

'Under the garage. We secretly dug a place there some months ago.'

I didn't believe that, of course, but I learned later it was true.

I didn't have anything else to say, so I picked up the crutch, preparing to stand up.

'Wait a moment, please,' she said. 'I have something to suggest.'

Half standing, I held out a hand. 'I want the gun.'

She nodded, and sat still while I took it from her pocket, put it in one of my own, and sat down again.

'You said a little while ago that you didn't care who I was,' she began. 'But I want you to know. There are so many of us Russians who were once important people but who are now nobodies. We were forced to leave Russia With what we could carry of our property. In London we opened a Russian restaurant, but London was suddenly full of Russian restaurants. We tried teaching music and languages, but found that too many other Russians were doing the same thing. Our money was almost gone. There was no plate for us in the world. It was easy to become a criminal. Why not? Did we owe the world anything? The world had watched as we were robbed of our place and property and country. We planned it before we had heard of Couffignal. We would find a small group of wealthy people, suitably isolated, and after becoming accepted and trusted by everyone, we would rob them. Couffignal seemed to be the ideal place. We had just enough money to rent this house for six months. We spent four months getting ourselves accepted by the people here, collecting our guns and grenades, waiting for a suitable night. Last night seemed to be that night, and we thought we were prepared for anything that could happen. But we weren't prepared for you - a clever and observant detective - being here on the island.'

'The truth is that you made mistakes from beginning to end,' I said. 'You people have no criminal experience, but you tried to do a job that needed the highest criminal skills. Look at how you all played around with me! A professional criminal with any intelligence would have either left me

alone or murdered me. And the rest of your troubles? I can't do anything about them.'

'Why can't you?' she said softly, putting a white hand on my knee. 'There is wealth beneath the garage. You can have whatever you ask.'

I shook my head.

'You aren't a fool!' she protested. 'You know-'

'Let me tell you something,' I interrupted. 'We won't talk about whatever honesty I have, or loyalty to my employers. You might doubt them, so we'll forget them. I'm a detective because I happen to like the work. I could find jobs that would pay more, but I like the work. And liking the work makes you want to do it as well as you can. Money is nice. I haven't anything against it. But in the past eighteen years I've got my fun out of chasing criminals and solving puzzles. It's the only kind of sport I know anything about, and I can't imagine a pleasanter future than twenty years more of it. I'm not going to wreck that!'

She shook her head slowly, looking at me with her dark eyes. 'You speak only of money,' she breathed. 'I said you can have whatever you ask.'

That was out. I don't know where these women get their ideas.

I stood up. 'You don't understand do you? You think I'm a man and you're a woman. That's wrong. I'm a hunter and you're something that's been running in front of me. We're wasting time. I've been thinking the police might come up here and save me a walk. You've been waiting for

your friends to come back and get me. I could have told you they were being arrested when I left them.'

That surprised her. She stood up, fell back a step, and put a hand on her chair. She said something I didn't understand. Something Russian, I thought, but the next moment I knew it had been Italian.

'Put your hands up!' It was Flippo's voice. He stood in the doorway, holding a gun.

I raised my hands as high as I could without dropping my crutch. So this was why she had come back to the house! If she freed the Italian, we would have no reason for suspecting that he hadn't been one of the criminals, and so we would look for the bandits among his friends. But as a prisoner, he might have persuaded us he was innocent. She had given him the gun so that he could either shoot his way out, or get himself killed trying.

Flippo took my gun away, and the gun I had taken from the girl.

'A bargain, Flippo,' I said. 'You're in trouble with the police. You could easily be sent back to prison if I tell them I found you carrying a gun. But I know you weren't part of this job. I think you were up here on a smaller one of your own. But I can't prove that and I don't want to. Walk out of here alone and I'll forget I saw you.'

Flippo thought about this.

The princess moved nearer to him. 'You heard what I offered him?' she said. 'Well, I make this offer to you, if you will kill him.' Then she said something hot and heavy in

Italian. He listened, breathing harder. 'Well?' she said. He was young and she was beautiful. His answer wasn't hard to guess.

'But not to kill him,' he said in English. 'We'll lock him in the room I was in.'

The girl wasn't satisfied with this suggestion. She spoke more hot Italian to him. She was depending on her charm to persuade him. And that meant she had to keep him looking at her.

He wasn't far from me.

She came near to him. She was whispering Italian words into his round face.

His whole face said yes. He turned-

I knocked him on the head with my borrowed crutch.

The crutch broke. Flippo's knees bent. He fell on his face on the floor, and a thin stream of blood crawled out of his hair on to the carpet.

A step, a fall, some hand-and-knee movements, put me within reach of Flippo's gun.

The girl, jumping out of my path, was halfway to the door when I sat up with the gun in my hand.

'Stop!' I ordered.

'I shan't,' she said, but she did, for the moment at least. 'I am going out.'

'You are going out when I take you.'

She laughed, a pleasant laugh, low and confident.

'I'm going out before that,' she said.

I shook my head.

'How will you stop me?' she asked.

'I don't think I'll have to. You're too sensible to try to run when I'm pointing a gun at you.'

She laughed again. 'I'm too sensible to stay. Your crutch is broken. You can't run after me. You pretend you'll shoot me, but I don't believe you.'

She looked over her shoulder, her dark eyes smiling at me, and moved towards the door.

'Stop, you fool!' I shouted at her.

She walked steadily to the door. I took a deep breath and my hand tightened on the gun. When her right foot was in the doorway, a little laughing sound came from her throat.

'Goodbye!' she said softly.

And I put a bullet in her left leg.

She sat down - bump! Complete surprise stretched her white face. It was too soon for pain.

I had never shot a woman before. It felt strange. 'You ought to have known I'd do it!' My voice sounded hard and angry, and like a stranger's in my ears. 'Didn't I steal a crutch from a cripple?'