

CHAPTER ONE

Highways are often a detraction from a landscape. They are scars upon it. They are cuts, sometimes bleeding cuts, in it. They are an unnaturalness intruded into a countryside.

There aren't a hundred highways in the world of which this isn't the case. There aren't more than a dozen that actually add a new and striking beauty to a beautiful countryside. The Grande Corniche is one of the few that, running through really beautiful country, adds a new and extraordinary touch to that beauty.

Constantine Quiche drove a new Sassari Twelve, tooling along just east of Nice. He was on an assignment, and he might stop with friends if it seemed likely that it could further the carrying out of the assignment, or he might veer away if that visit seemed to call out "Danger!"

He had fair directions and a permanent invitation to a villa that the Marqabs had rented some months before. With a gala sundown at his back, Quiche believed that he could locate the Marqabs by dark. He could find anything that it was necessary for him to find. He was the best detective in the world.

He had a very recent memory of an encounter so violent and colorful that he had not yet assimilated it. There were unreal elements about it as of something that had happened underwater. And he was in a glorious purple daze from it. He had driven out of that unreality onto the Grande Corniche that was at least half real. Now he drove off into scenery so splendid that it almost had to be contrived. He began to find that central element of scenery that is often ignored by the eyeless. He knew that he was very near to the Marqabs and their sort. This was exquisite. The central element of scenery, the one feature of that whole region that can hardly be duplicated elsewhere, is "People as Scenery." Here that central element was outstanding.

The French people at large have an angularity and awkwardness to go with their sincerity of body and their originality of movement. But the very best of them do not have this angularity and awkwardness. The Italians in ordinary have a sloppiness that is the "beyond" of carelessness and that almost gets in

the way of their beauty, and they have a shoutingness that is the “beyond” of lyricism. All except the most excellent of them have these things. The Corsicans have the provincialism of all islanders, and the rocky faces of all peoples who come from rocky coasts. All except the most superb of the Corsicans have these things. But here, along the Grande Corniche and the sundown lanes that led off from it, here were the best, the most excellent, the most superb of all these peoples. They were on the blue coast, on the beaches, all through the beautiful hills, around the villas and cabanas. These were the beautiful people so necessary to a grand scenery.

There were other sorts of people there also, Britons and Americans and Norwegians, Germans and Poles and Turks, and the people of the parts of Libya around Cyrene. All these people were extraordinarily scenic.

Constantine Quiche, with the eye of the best detective in the world, picked out the two most scenic persons of all. They were his friends, Salaadin and Regina Marqab. They were standing by their own villa in the evening. It is true that there was something that called out “Danger!,” but it called in an ambivalent voice. Constantine did not veer away. He stopped. He was there.

This was delight, but the rituals were observed on the meeting.

“An evening full of linnets’ wings,” Constantine spoke and bowed.

“Oh lost sheep of the house of Marqab, alight!” Salaadin added his ritual.

“Bless by your visit our poor house,” Regina Marqab completed the ritual. They all hugged and kissed and were happy. (And yet something bothered Constantine a little. “Wherever did I learn this ritual that comes so naturally?” he asked himself. “And wherever did I know these Marqabs who are my best friends? The hound has eaten a piece of my memory.”)

“Where did you get it, Constantine?” Salaadin asked, referring to the second guest, the splendid automobile. “And where was it made?”

“The car? I got it in Marseilles today. There was no way I could refuse it. It is a Sassari Twelve, the first one I have ever seen. There was an old monitory voice that shrilled at me, Salaadin, “It is bait: it has a hook in it: do not take it or you are hooked.” But I took it, so I suppose that I am hooked. Yes, I am hooked on it as I am hooked on the two of you. Oh, it was made in Sassari.”

“Sassari, Sardinia?” Salaadin asked.

“That’s a funny thing about it,” Constantine said. “All the papers on it say that it was made in Sassari, Sandaliotis. Sandaliotis? I will have to look that up. I believe that it is a very old name for something either in legend or in

geography. Are Sardinia and Sandaliotis the same place? Have they revived an ancient name for the island, and why? I hadn't heard about such."

The Marqabs brought Constantine in for a fine supper then. A place had already been set for him, or for some extra person. There were other guests, three of them. Julien Moravia was there, Amelia Lilac from England, and John Seferino from Istanbul. Oh, they were like three bolts of evening lightning named "Danger" and "Love" and "Death." It was both a pleasure and shock to come on them there, an especial shock in one case since Constantine knew that one of these three persons was dead.

These were three more of the exceptionally scenic people who inhabited that region like gorgeous ghosts that night. Constantine knew who all of them were, though he could remember meeting or knowing only one of them. Towards Amelia Lilac, Constantine had the memories of the twin passions of love and death, one old, one new.

Julien Moravia had the air of a totally cultured and urbane person; and it was out of that air and impression that he often spoke crudely and cruelly. Amelia had the name of being very beautiful. That she was so almost had to be accepted: really, there was no way to get a good look at her. She seemed always to be wrapped in a lavender cloud or shadow. But she did give the impression of almost total beauty.

John Seferino was somehow different from other people, and it always took a while to decide in what that difference consisted. He was very much larger than other people, that was it: but why did one have to seek for that explanation?

Constantine joined them all at table. Mushroom quiche was the opener, already there.

"It is for you, Constantine Quiche," Regina said, "after your name and flavor. Someday I will devise the excellent dish, the Constantine quiche, full of cucumbers and cheeses and sour fruits and pomegranate cider. But for now it is the mushroom quiche in your honor."

"But you did not know that I was coming," Constantine said, "and one does not make mushroom quiche in a moment."

"But of course we knew that you were coming," Regina Marqab said. "Would God send us such a special guest and not tell us that He was sending him?"

"Ah yes, I am sure that God told you that I was coming, told you through some strange instrument," Constantine murmured, casting his eye over the

other three guests. “And yet no one could have known, for I had not decided to come here for certain until I saw you two Marqabs standing against the green and gold sky. And the invitation to me was an open one given some months ago. But my place was set here, and this dish has a tie-in with my name. Which strange instrument might it have been?”

“For here are Julien Moravia and Amelia Lilac and John Seferino, three famous “agents,” though nobody knows whom they are agents for. I know them by their fame and by their little pictures on their dossier clips. But I have met only one of you three before, *and that one of you is not here now.*”

“But, Constantine, our friend and our companion and our ghost, is it not a clever counterfeit of that person who *is* here?” Amelia Lilac spoke as if out of a lavender shadow. That girl carried mystery around with her.

“The surrogate, I believe, surpasses the original,” Julien Moravia spoke as if in admiration of someone present. “Then let us exalt the surrogate and demote the original.”

“Have you not heard, Constantine Quiche, the account of the person who went out dressed like a shoddy impersonation of himself?” John Seferino asked. “He easily convinced all the curious persons that he was a counterfeit and someone other than himself.”

“I have heard it, I have done it,” Constantine said, “but this here-present person is not a shoddy impersonation. Really, the impersonation is almost too perfect, almost too splendid.

“Three “agents” here. You are the three people in the world I would least want to run into in a nervous situation, though I admire you all and perhaps love one of you. All of you are here in the home of my very dear friends, and what are the odds against any of you three even knowing my very dear friends? They are very long odds for even one of you three. They are prohibitive odds for all of you together. And yet I am certain that there are sincere accounts of the connections to be had. Are there not, bright dove Regina?”

“Oh, I knew Amelia in England many years ago,” Regina said.

“You are not even many years old, Regina,” Constantine told her. “And who knows Julien Moravia?”

“Why, both Salaadin and myself have known him for a very long time,” Regina said. “Why are you mistrustful tonight, Constantine? Do you not recall the story of the man with his neck in the noose and his feet on the trap who

still reassured himself ‘These are my good friends. They have *got* to be kidding.’”

“I recall the story, Regina. I am the one who told it to you once. You and Salaadin have known Julien for a very long time, you say?”

“They have known me for a very, *very* long time,” Julien Moravia gave it the escalating echo.

“And John Seferino?” Constantine asked as if he were a dog worrying an old rag.

“Oh, Constantine, Seferino and I have business together,” Salaadin said. “We have business in Levantine Lands and Waters. We are both members of a very secret and very rich-to-be corporation right now.”

“We could get you into it, Quiche, for some rather startling profits,” John Seferino said, “but discretion is required. Constantine Quiche, you, the best detective in the world, do you believe that you have enough discretion to enter into corporation with us?”

“No,” Constantine said. “Sometimes I haven’t any discretion at all. There are five of you here. Two of you, my hosts, are very dear to me, my very best friends. The other three of you are living legends. Ah, pardon there. Two of you three are living legends. The third one of you is a legend who has died very recently. But how, among the five of you, are there no tears? Have you no grief at all for someone who has been very close to you and now is dead? In five such sensitive and superior persons, there should be at least a trace of tears.”

“Why should we shed tears in your happy presence, Constantine our love?” Regina asked.

“Oh, for the one of you who has died today,” Constantine said. “I find it quite sad.”

“One of *us* has died today, my friend?” Salaadin asked.

“Yes. One of you five here present. Died about two hours ago, I guess it was.”

“Sad, yes,” Julien Moravia said. “Very sad. Where did it happen?”

“Marseilles.”

“How did he or she die, best detective in the world Constantine?” Amelia Lilac asked with easy merriment out of her self-contained shadow.

“I killed him or her,” Constantine said. “Really, I had to.”

“And you are not startled when you come here and see that person to be alive, yet or again?” John Seferino asked.

“Only half-startled,” Constantine said. “I half expected it.”

There was the beauty of old but bright art about this company at table. That painted beauty was here, and there was an unearthly thrill when such painted beauty moved and spoke. It gave one the feeling that the old legend was true, that there had once been a singular and extraordinary race of beautiful people whose homeland had been destroyed and who had scattered into small enclaves in many nations. The legend said that these people still maintained a small but tight nation even in their scattered exile, and that the people of that nation would always recognize each other.

Five of the six people at this supper table could well belong to that mysterious nation of the beautiful people. One of them, Constantine Quiche, could not. To some other nation, to many other nations he might belong, but not to the nation of the beautiful people.

“Is it not possible, Constantine, that not just one of us, but all three of us whom you call ‘agents’ have been killed?” Julien Moravia asked. It seems either comic or tainted to speak of beauty in a man, but how else could one speak of Julien? “Is it not possible, astute detective, that there are three rather than one interloper here with you at this table? Would it not balance it out right to have three dead persons and three live persons here? You said that you had met only one of us three agents before, the one who isn’t here. Yet I recall that we have all been in company together before. What if all of us here are false agents?”

“I don’t know,” Constantine said.

“And what if none of us is false?” John Seferino asked. “And what if you killed no one at Marseilles? What if you have only thrown that rock into the pond to see what sort of eddies it can stir up?” (If there had been a separate nation of *elegant* people, John Seferino would have belonged to it also.)

“For that small part, I know what I know,” Constantine said. “And you do not.”

Bec rouge onion soup had followed the mushroom quiche on the table.

“Ah, but what if you did not kill, but instead were killed, at Marseilles?” Amelia Lilac proposed. “And what if another person were substituted for *you*? Should we not be very alert against you then?”

“In that case, I would not be here at table with you,” Constantine said. “It would be another person here. But it isn’t. It is myself. I happen to be sure of this.”

(But he wasn't quite sure. He lied a bit there. He had the unreal feeling on him and had had it for several hours.)

By and by, they had salmon in aspic. They all ate with a vigor that belonged to them by right. Superficial people are at their worst when eating. But these beautiful people ate beautifully. And boar was being roasted outside. Boar is the test.

"What case can the best detective in the world be working on now?" Amelia Lilac asked out of those pleasant shadows that always surrounded her. (It was as though the light that was bright on everyone else was dimmed on Amelia, and she was picked out instead by a muted, lavender spotlight.) "Not only is the best detective in the world here, but the three most mysterious agents in the world are here also, seemingly to thwart him. Is it High State Doings that you are on, Constantine?"

"Possibly, possibly," said Constantine, "or it may be very low doings by very monstrous states or corporations."

"Is it International Intrigue, worthy opponent?" Julien Moravia asked.

"Possibly, possibly, international or interworld," Constantine Quiche told them.

"Is it genocide, or war or murder? Or is it perhaps a securities or a real estate manipulation?" the elegant John Seferino asked. "Oh, it must be a grand case!"

"The only thing grand is in the name," Constantine said, "for I believe that it is more on the order of a grand larceny."

"The best detective in the world on a case of larceny? It must be grand indeed," Amelia remarked. "It must be a very special case of larceny to have such a cast of characters starring in it, you and ourselves."

"And will you catch the thieves, Constantine?" Julien asked.

"Catch them easily. And prevent them, I hope."

"And what is it that the thieves are trying to steal?" Seferino asked.

But Constantine Quiche seemed a little embarrassed by that question.

"It is an awkward thing," he said, "and I am not at all certain that it will even be attempted. I work on a tip here, and the tip may be in code, to bring me to the area. I would rather not say what it is that the tip indicates may be stolen."

"Oh come along, prediletto," Regina said. "Salaadin and myself are among your best friends. You can distrust us or you can trust us, but we will still remain the best of friends. And these three that you believe to be agents, if

indeed they are here to thwart you, they already know what is to be stolen. And if they are not here to thwart you, then they are as innocent as ourselves. What do you believe that someone will attempt to steal, my Constantine?"

"Monaco."

"What? Do you believe that the casinos will be robbed? But that is done quite often, Constantine. And, just as often, the thieves are apprehended. This happens even without the services of the best detective in the world."

"I mean that there may be an attempt to steal the principality of Monaco."

"What? All of it?" Salaadin asked laughing.

"All of it, yes," Constantine said glumly. He didn't like this scatter shot.

"What, Constantine, will they line up every person in the little realm and rob them?" Julien asked.

"No. My information is that they may attempt to steal the entire principality. They may attempt to steal the two square kilometers of it, and the 50,000 inhabitants of it, and the 50,000 visitors also. They may attempt to steal the two cities of Monaco and Monte Carlo, and all the buildings and all the land, and all the water, too, I suppose. And, on another hand, nobody may attempt anything remotely like this."

"What would they haul it *off* in?" Amelia Lilac asked.

"I don't know," Constantine said. "They have some pretty big equipment. They couldn't take it all in one bite, but they could take it all in a dozen bites. Or maybe they won't take Monaco or anything else away. Maybe they will bring something instead and leave it."

Constantine Quiche felt rather out of it for the remainder of the evening. He couldn't shine at all in this bright company. The best detective in the world had never been much of a shiner.

They all went out of doors to eat roast boar on wooden tables and benches. The really beautiful people do not use silver or plate to eat roast boar, and they do not eat it inside. The boar was unjointed by a servitor with a bone saw. It was hacked apart by a second servitor with a hacker. And it was cut up by a third servitor with a two-tined fork and a set of long knives. The weathered-wood tables had first been drenched with lime juice and then with sour yellow wine. They had been salted and peppered. And then the joints and cuts of boar had been flung directly onto them.

The boar was eaten bare handed and bare faced. You had to belong to the beautiful people to eat it this way. Nobody else could get away with it.

“I wonder how long it has been since boar was last eaten in this manner?” Constantine asked, feeling himself an outsider now.

“Oh, on Sandaliotis, they have never ceased to eat it this way,” John Seferino said. Seferino pronounced it ‘San-dal-EE-o-tis.’ Seferino was a completely elegant person, so his pronunciation had to be the correct one.

“This is the second time today that I have encountered the name Sandaliotis,” Constantine said.

There were crocks of quince vinegar there. When eating boar, one dipped the hands into this vinegar sometimes to cut the grease. There were pandanus leaves there on which one wiped the fingers if one wished, but one felt that they were an imperfect substitute for something.

“No cubs, wonderful hostess?” Amelia Lilac asked Regina.

“No cubs,” Regina said. “That is a disadvantage of living in the world. There are so many things that one assumes will be available, and at the last moment they aren’t.”

“What are the cubs?” Constantine asked.

“Oh, on Sandaliotis, bear cubs are always there to lick the diners’ hands when they eat boar,” Seferino explained it. “This is the old custom. I could never abide the vulgarity of having hounds instead of cubs to do it. No, the pandanus leaves are better than the hounds. Any thing is better than the hounds.”

Constantine ate it awkwardly. It was as if he were of a lineage that did not even extend back before utensils and plates.

“Who is going to steal Monaco, Constantine?” Amelia Lilac asked out of her own aura of lilac shadow.

“I don’t know,” he said weakly. “I suppose I will have All the beautiful people ate the boar beautifully. Only to find out if I am going to stop them.”

“I hear that there is a general breakdown in the art of gathering intelligence,” that elegant Seferino was saying. “And I hear that World Interpol is about to fall on its face again in one of these deals. And the bleakest and most lost department even of World Interpol, they say, is the Sortilège Department. It is pathetic the inept things that are going on in that organization. Quasi-law is simply not what it used to be, and larger things than Monaco are likely to be stolen unless competence is brought to it.

“Whom are you working for now, Constantine Quiche, best detective in the world?”

(How could this man Seferino remain so elegant when he was up to his big elbows and ears in roast boar?)

“For the Sortilege Department of World Interpol,” Constantine said, “as you know very well.”

“Oh, for World Interpol?” said Julien. “Have they *real* people working for World Interpol now? I had heard that it was otherwise.”

Of course none of them at the boar tables laughed. And certainly they did not titter. But there *was* a titter there. It was something like the sound of night insects, of cicadas or crickets. Who was the bug master or cricket master there? Constantine had the feeling that somebody at the table was bugging him with bugs.

“What wine is this?” Constantine asked. They had been drinking cup after cup of warm, sweet wine; not very good wine either.

“Falernum,” Regina Marqab said. “It’s very strong, but you can let yourself go on it; you’re with friends. It’s the only ancient wine that burns freely.”

“But Falernum hasn’t been made for sixteen hundred years,” Constantine objected.

“On Sandaliotis, they have never ceased to make it,” John Seferino said, just as if there were such a country as Sandaliotis, just as if this really was old Falernum.

The “agents” had begun, as agents often do, playfully to pretend that they were drunker than they were. But Constantine was much drunker than he pretended. Why were the others not so? There was a treachery about this false Falernum. It has been laced for Constantine, and not for the “agents,” and not for the Marqabs.

Constantine, by careful effort, began to unconfuse himself, but that forced him to recognize just how confused he had been. The confusion had begun back at Marseilles where someone had been killed. It was very unprofessional for the best detective in the world to be going around in such a confused state. But any other than the best detective in the world would not be going around confused: he would be dead.

Constantine had to admit now that he did not know where it was that he had known his two best friends the Marqabs. How odd that he could not recollect where he had been acquainted with his two best friends in the world, nor how it had become so securely set into his mind that they *were* his two best friends.

He did not recall where he had known the violet-clouded Amelia Lilac, though he was sure that he had once had some very spirited and ambivalent dealings with her. He did not know at all where he had met the other two agents, Julien Moravia and John Seferino, though he had recognized them both on coming to them, and one of them had said that they had all been in each others' company before.

And he did not remember who had assigned him to this most important case in this area; he did not remember who his superior at World Interpol was; he did not remember anyone else at World Interpol; and he hadn't any idea at all how that ridiculous story about thieves stealing the principality of Monaco had come into his mind and onto his tongue.

Constantine suddenly left the party when the Falernum was burning the brightest. But he did not go to his room in the house of his two best friends in the world, and he did not go to his car ("It's death-trapped, it's death-trapped," he had sense enough to whisper to himself), which was in front of that house.

Instead, he scanned back over the winding landscape that he had come through on his arrival, and he remembered every detail of it. He recalled, from a second long flashback one of the false lanes that he had followed for a while on picking his way there, a rock heap in a crackling thicket. It was a rock heap that would be hidden from almost every view.

Constantine moved there very quickly, and not by roads. He had an animal way of moving; not a way of one of the beautiful animals, a way of one of the scurry animals. There was swearing after him in beautiful-people voices. There were rapid footsteps after him, and he gave the slip to those footsteps. The darting and scrambling people can sometimes move with more cunning and stealth than can the beautiful people themselves. And one does not get to be the best detective in the world without having certain talents of movement and escape.

Constantine slept in that concealed rock pile that night. There is something very safe about rock piles in the midst of crackling thickets when they are chosen on the impulse of the moment. The best detective in the world had slept on rocks often and he did now.

Through the night, he was interrupted only once, not into wakefulness, but into a dream. The rock pile seemed to have become an under-ocean rock pile, a grotto, a cave, a booming tidal cavern. A female dolphin visited him there with her springy fish-flesh and her cool ways. She smooched him in that

slurpy way that female dolphins have, and there was an underwater echo to it. Then he felt the needle stabs that are so often a part of those strange-species kisses.

“They have needled me with more confusion before I was out of my old mix-up,” he said. “Well, I will have them yet, I will have all of them. They leave a trail whenever they meddle with me, and I can follow any trail.”

The rest of the night, until an hour or so before dawn, he slept as easily and restfully as anyone can sleep on a rock pile. And yet he recalled in that sleep a few of the words that the female dolphin had whispered to him before she gave him the needle:

“We live in caves under the ocean and we have a dog that lives in the sky. Sometimes we come up. We whistle to our dog and we both gambol.

“If you hear anything else of us, do not believe it. This is all that we do.

“Will you not come and see me in my cave sometime, after this little ritualistic action that we are engaged in now is finished with?”

But the best detective in the world is always receiving various sorts of communications.

CHAPTER TWO

But very early the next morning, Constantine Quiche was traveling with his hostess, Regina Marqab, by the sea shore.

“See, you have foiled them,” she said. “Monaco hasn’t been stolen. It is still there.”

“But what else is there?” Constantine asked. “What is that south of it, and going into the distance forever? A fog bank? But it is almost too thick for fog. And it looks as if it is bright green. When the morning sun hits it it will change, I suppose. But it seems to come right up to the principality. And what are the high bridges coming out of the heights of the principality itself? What sort of channeled waters are they crossing?”

“Why, it’s the great mirage,” Regina said. “It even has a name, I believe. It is not seen once in five years. But it is more like a cloud bank. It doesn’t come clear down to the ocean. You can see the dawn under it. It would be too spooky otherwise. I don’t know how the effect of the high bridges is obtained. Sometimes they do look like bridges, and sometimes they are only shimmers.”

“The ship whistles, the ship whistles, there are too many of them,” Constantine said. “They are too near off shore, but then there are more distant ones too, farther to the south. There is no way there should be so many ship whistles. It sounds as if all the flotillas in the world were assembling here.”

“There is only one sort of ship whistles like those,” Regina said. “They have been advertising the ships everywhere for three weeks, in every paper in the world I believe. It sounds as if there were thousands and thousands of them, like gulls barking before a storm.”

“Excursion-boat whistles!” Constantine said. “You are right. There are no other ship whistles like them. But where can they all be going? There aren’t any ports there to accommodate them.”

“I’ll bet that there are now,” Regina said.

Constantine had been up quite early this morning. Sleeping on rocks in a scenic wilderness is pleasant and it is stimulating, but it is also conducive to early rising. He had checked his new car, his Sassari Twelve. Why, it would

hardly have been a death trap for him, even in his befuddled condition of the night before. The wiring and the bombs were absolutely amateurish. It gave him a small feeling to be treated to such an inept and small-time operation. Why, that had been no more than a bit of banter, such a childish placing of the explosives! They had been having fun with him, and only long-shotting on killing him if they had intended that at all. No, the explosives hadn't been intended to kill the best detective in the world, not even if he had really been so bombed on the wine the night before. Such death threats could have been no more than good-natured warnings.

"What was in my wine last night, Regina?" Constantine asked as they rolled along in the Sassari, that purring luxury cat of a car.

"Galveston Gimlet," she said. "It's just one of the older and more basic knockout drops from the States. I didn't do it, of course, but it was fun to be in on it. Oh you do go goofy in the face when you find out that you're being taken! They play rough in the set lately. They have deals going on for a while. And then the rough play is partly from being so jaded and surfeited and all. We were betting when and where you would fall, but you gave us the slip (and you *couldn't* have, to turn one of your own phrases). Where *did* you fall?"

"In a rock pile, in a preselected rock pile. And there I was visited by an intoxicating creature, as if I needed any more intoxication. It was not you was it, Regina? Are you of dolphinish flesh?"

"It was not I, Constantine. I must have a rival in your affections. Who do you know who is a dolphin? And you didn't have any trouble with your car this morning? I worried about that a little bit. But they all said that, if it killed you, it would prove that you weren't the best detective in the world after all."

"No trouble with it, Regina. But, in a way, it proves that they are not the best 'agents' in the world. Agents should not be jaded or surfeited. They should be avid and hungry.

"Is it not almost lustful the way this car rolls along, Regina? That little arrangement at the car, it was only to amuse me, I am sure; but I haven't the same humor as they have in the 'set.' I am not too sure that Monaco is still safe, though she is still there. There seem to be strange flags flying over her this morning. Can she have been 'stolen' by a coup? And physically there are too many lines and attachments to her. And that mirage, that cloud, I just don't trust it at all. There are really two of them. There is a low cloud on the

surface of the sea that is green, and there's a high cloud bulking downward in the air and it's a sort of lavender color; it's much thinner than the green cloud. It's moving down entirely too low now. It will touch the surface cloud."

"Can we drive under it, Constantine? Let's try it. I never rode under a mirage before. If you would just veer a little bit more to the right, Constantine, we could do it. We're not on the old road anyhow. You've jumped it. We're just on the rocky shore, but they're using a lot smoother rocks this morning."

"Regina, for the last half mile we've been riding over land that was always ocean before."

"You are sure?"

"I'm sure. But is it not a well-paved road that we come onto now? It is so light and springy, as if it were built out of air. Springy? But it does not have the look of extreme newness. It has the look of being under water for a long time and until very recently. Yeah, until as recently as about an hour ago. What kind of road is this? Light and springy? Built out of air? Not new at all? Been under water so recently?"

"And look at those bridges above us. They are bridges, inasmuch as they are anything. Whoever saw such light and airy engineering? Airy again. What is this all? They can't hold up anything if they are as light as all that, but they are holding up something. There are cars moving over them now, rather airish-looking cars too. We may as well resign ourselves to the whole world being light and airy today and not built out of very much of anything. Shimmering bridges, dawn-beam bridges, but they must be a little bit more substantial than shimmers. Look at the cars. Most of them look like Sassari, as mine is, and I never heard of the make till yesterday. And no two of them are very much alike. They must make an incredible number of models."

"And look, Regina, your mirage is a little more detailed as the day gets brighter. Now there are rocks, cliffs, headlands, promontories, bays, capes, timber, towns, harbors, and ports, ships (well, what is wrong with ships, though I never before saw the flags that some of them are flying under), excursion boats (Regina, they must be hauling a million people here! Yes, and there is this *here* that wasn't here before), canal boats, tug boats. I don't remember either canal boats or tug boats off the coast of Monaco before. We won't be able to drive under the mirage, Regina."

“No. Let’s drive over it then. We’re on a road that was always ocean before, but we are shoreward (to the Monaco shore I mean, there’s another one now) from the canal.”

“A canal has no more business here than has a caravan of camels,” Constantine said.

“This road looks as if it continues along the shore just a little bit back from the docks and slips and basins,” Regina said, “and we’ll go under the high bridges. Or we can take a turn off on one of these ramps and go ...”

“Yes, we can go around and up and around again, and go *over* one of those high bridges, and drive out onto the mirage itself. It looks much more substantial than it did, and the lavender cloud is coming down lower and lower on it; they will merge. I do believe that the high bridges and high roads are elastic and that they are contracting to take up the slack when everything comes into place. Do you know, Regina, that a single string of molecules is unbreakable if properly shaped and linked? I read that in the ‘Science and Stuff’ column this week. Some of those bridge cables look almost as thin as a single string of molecules. But they are holding it all up.

“Do you see what the bottom hundred meters of the violet mirage really are, Regina? It’s underwater sorts of rocks and shelvings, and whatever is it doing up in the air and in that transparent form? It’s as though it were the ghost of certain underwater strata. It is the roots of a land hanging in the sky, and now those roots have touched down to the blue water and the new green land. Easy, easy does it. Does it not come down gently? It’s almost like a blessing. There will be some turmoil, but, at its present rate of descent, in 10 minutes’ time, the water line of that purple fog will be down to the real water line. So that is the way that the demiurges and titans build land, is it? Oh yes, let us drive upon it.”

“Constantine, where did you get the weird idea that Monaco might be stolen? Not that there aren’t other weird things going on, but how did you ever get the idea that Monaco might be stolen?”

“Oh, that’s what an ‘agent,’ of a sort, said under his death torture. We play rough in our set too. He had broken before his death, of course, and his words were not rational. But some of our experts can put things together out of images dredged out of torture deaths, and what they put together was a great change in the neighborhood of Monaco. And there was the idea of something being stolen from the world. I was sent here then, as the best detective in the world, to find out the meanings behind those things. I believe

that Monaco *has* been stolen, but not taken away: she has been adjoined to something that has arrived. There has been some special meaning all along to Monaco holding onto a technical independence. She was part of, she was a token of, something that had gone away for a while and left her as titular head of it.”

“Would World Interpol be that worried if someone *did* steal Monaco? What are they really worried about? Monaco doesn’t even subscribe to the services of World Interpol, as I understand, and whenever did World Interpol have any concern for a nonclient?”

“What we are really worrying about, Regina, is a bomb, a big one, more than 300 miles long, that is coming towards earth and is to be intruded inside our defenses. A ticking bomb that big is dangerous. It may be a world bomb, and it may be intended to destroy the world, so at least is some of the coded advice.”

“Did World Interpol get that coded advice about the possible world bomb from another ‘agent’ under his death torture?”

“Yes, I believe so, Regina. But how did you know that?”

They missed one turn-up ramp but they took the next one. They went up on a spiraled trestle. Spiders spun more substantial-looking things than that trestle was. Whoever had ever seen such light and clean engineering? This was like ‘exchanges and bridges’ in free flight.

There was a toll booth where they straightened out on the high road coming onto the bridge, and a good-natured man in it was jingling coins and singing a little tune.

*“Un franc, un florn,
Un lir, un corn
Un cal-ke-vil
Por pont d’Eghil.”*

So Constantine paid the good-natured man a franc and they drove over Eagle Bridge.

“They must go alphabetically,” Regina said. “This is E, Eagle Bridge, but why is it Eghil instead of Aghil? And it is the fifth bridge from the west.”

Constantine almost forgot to wonder how he had understood the man, but it would have been impossible not to understand his little jingle:

*A franc, a florin,
A lira, a crown,*

*A what-you-will
For Eagle Bridge.*

“It’s like one of those little languages that people invent out of romance roots to be International Tongues,” Constantine said.

“Constantine, all that fish dip you were telling me, about the 300-mile-long bomb and all, maybe it’s just what you’d like me to tell the ‘agents’ you’re working on. Maybe it’s not really what you’re working on at all.”

“Maybe not,” Constantine said. “Maybe it’s just what my superiors are telling me I’m supposed to be working on,” Constantine said. “What I am really working on at the moment is dolphin flesh. I’m not even sure that I *am* Constantine Quiche. Maybe Constantine Quiche is just a code way of referring to me and I’m a different sort of person altogether.”

It was beautiful to wheel along on the high road above the canal, for a canal is what it was below them, a boat-filled and ship-filled canal that cut through two isthmuses of land that connected a huge new peninsula to the underside of a continent. One could see for endless golden and blue miles from the high-flying Eagle Bridge, and the best detective in the world allowed himself to be overwhelmed by the wonder of it.

“Oh pull off here!” Regina cried. “We cannot go on till we have seen all of this.”

They pulled off into a little green observatory park. To the north was the principality of Monaco as they had known it, well mostly as they had known it. Monaco seemed to have a case of morning nervousness over the great thing dangling off south of it for so many miles into the sea. Two isthmuses, each about two miles wide and 10 or 12 miles long, and perhaps 15 miles apart, connected the huge appendage to the main land. The isthmuses were deep cut by the canal, as was the intervening water and the shallows outside them: and the whole of the isthmuses and the water between them was high spanned by the shimmering bridges.

But this new land was nothing like Monaco. It was like nothing that had ever been seen before. This was a great land extending south eternally, a color-drenched land with rocky shores and green-and-blue valleys inside, and with white- and pastel-colored cities. And Constantine and Regina were, in the parkwayed order of the interchanges, right at the entrance throat of a fine city.

“What country *is* this?” Regina asked a handsome lady with mahogany-colored hair.

“Sicoro, L’es *Sandaliotis*,” the lady said. “No conostu?”

“Where have you *been*, Sandaliotis?” Regina cried in rapture. “Oh how could this be? It is the paradise on earth, and how have we forgotten it?”

“Have a small care for the snakes, Regina,” Constantine said, “that you do not tread on them or they on you. Snakes are always a danger in paradise. And have a small care also that you do not overplay it. You know much more about things than you pretend.”

“It is the story of my life,” she said. “It has got me where I am today, on a piece of land that wasn’t here yesterday with a fellow whose tag says that he’s the best in the world.”

Oh the scenery of town and country and coast that could be seen from there, or waterways and beaches and cliffs, and commerce! And oh the scenic people who were going by! Constantine had come through the drenchingly beautiful scenery of the Grand Corniche the day before and this morning, and he had never seen such scenery as this.

There was a public phone there on a little kiosk. Constantine shoved francs into it and found that it accepted them. Possibly, like the toll booth, it would accept any sort of money. Was it possible that phones in this country that hadn’t been here before were connected in to the phones of the world? Constantine punched a number, and pretty soon he had someone on the line.

“Quiche,” he said. “Monaco is physically all right, though possibly in morning shock. Monaco has not gone, but something else has arrived or is happening. There is a complete new country here now. It is a peninsula and it attaches to Europe at Monaco. It extends south as far as the eye can see.”

“About a thousand miles in the air is it, would you say?” the voice asked. Constantine was a little bit relieved at hearing the voice, for it was familiar and it brought pieces of memory flooding back into Constantine. But he was also furiously exasperated by the foolishness of it.

“No, no, Grishwell,” he said. “It sure is not a thousand miles up in the air. It is right here in the Mediterranean Sea and I am right here on it. I know it is hard to believe, but there is a whole new country here that wasn’t here before.”

“Instrumentation shows that there is an object about 300 miles long that is hovering about a thousand miles high,” the man on the phone said. “Likely there is something wrong about your data or about you. How high did you say that it was?”

“I am on the high point of it, for the region close around here. I am about a hundred meters high. There are some spiraled highways going up here and some spanning bridges. The roots of the thing are deep under the sea now. It is integrated now, though earlier this morning it seemed to be made out of a green fog down on the sea and a lavender fog up in the air. They combined. It is big and it is not hovering up in the air. It is a peninsula in the middle of the sea. It is here.”

“Oh my God!” came the voice on the phone. “We are too late then. How have they done it? Has it landed for sure?”

“Landed and rooted, yes. But we don’t seem to be talking about the same thing. This is a peninsula with people living on it. And thousands of people arriving to it by—get this, Grishwell—by excursion boats. There are a thousand excursion boats coming into dozens of ports. I never saw a peninsula with so many ports.”

“Is it—oh my God, Quiche, what can we do?—is it armed?”

“I suppose that it is, Grishwell,” Constantine said. “If it is intended to be armed, then it is. This looks like a complete country with roads and cities. The only armed person I see is a policeman of sorts. He has a happy look about him, but I wouldn’t want to tangle with him. He is armed with a service revolver and a snapdragon.”

“A snapdragon? I never heard of that.”

“Nor I either, Grishwell. The name of it just popped into my mind, but I’m sure that it’s the correct name. It’s a neat little contrivance. Why didn’t I think of that? With a snapdragon in one hand, you could, well you could easily snap a man’s neck and kill him.”

“Where are you calling from, Quiche?”

“From one of their own public phones. The name of the town on whose edge I am is Civita do Nord or North Town. The name of the country is Sandaliotis. Both, as far as I can find out, were born new this morning after a gestation period that seems to have been no more than three to six weeks and was mostly talk.”

“They have phones there, on a country that wasn’t there yesterday, by which you were able to dial my secret number here?”

“Yes, I tried it, Grishwell, and it worked.”

“Have they clocks there, Quiche?”

“I suppose so. This is a complete city, apparently, and it would have everything. Yes, I see a clock in the tower of an insurance company

building.”

“Call me every 30 minutes then, Quiche.”

“Should the best detective in the world be tied to the end of a telephone? I’ll call you from time to time if I think it necessary.”

“Is it ticking, Quiche, is it ticking?”

“Is what ticking, Grishwell?”

“The thing you are on, the bomb which the instruments say is a thousand miles in the sky and you say is on the surface of the Mediterranean Sea, the bomb which seems to be camouflaged to resemble a country. Is it ticking?”

“I will let you know if I find out.”

“There’s only two explanations. Our altimeters are a thousand miles off or—Quiche, when you move about on whatever it is that you’re on—”

“Yes?”

“Wear a parachute.”

Constantine Quiche hung up the phone. He needed a moment to adjust to his different sorts of data. It was as if he were seeing one world with one eye, and Grishwell were describing a completely different world to his other eye, and he had a split head from trying to focus the two together. The parting suggestion seemed to make no sense, but what could it hurt?

Constantine went into a mod parachute shop that happened to be the nearest building. He went in and bought a parachute. He fitted it about his waist and turned himself into a little pudgy man. A parachute! What nonsense! If it hadn’t been for the possible saving of his life he wouldn’t have bought it at all.

But was there ever a discovery like this one? Columbus had never come onto anything as new-made as this, and John Chancel had not. Here was a brilliant new world planted down into the middle of the oldest and most storied sea, and it wasn’t apparent yet how much the sea was perturbed over the thing. It was the morning of the third day and the Creator had just said “Let the dry land appear,” and so it was. It was the morning of the third day in an African cosmology also when the turtle had just swallowed all the seas and made the dry land appear and had decided that it was too much land. And he had spit part of the water over his shoulder then to cover a part of the land and to create again some of the sea. But who since that morning turtle had seen such new land?

Here was a brilliant new world planted down in the middle of a variety of different old worlds and lands. It had its alien elements, but they were not too

confoundedly alien. One could understand the talk of the people pretty well. One could read the newspapers, even if you didn't know what language they were written in. It was a little bit like the languages that rich and multilingual children at school in Switzerland put together for fun. It was a little bit like the languages that philologists put together seriously to serve as common tongues. It was gibberish, but it could be understood and read.

But this new-discovery world was an unprecedented situation. At the Sortilège Department of World Interpol, they believed that this was a 300-mile-long world-bomb that had been set down through Earth's defenses during the night, and that it might be ticking off the moments until "Moment Destruction." And who was to say that it wasn't such a world-bomb?

Who knows what a highly sophisticated, highly camouflaged, 300-mile-long bomb might look like when it was trying to put on its most deceptive appearance? But how to find out whether it was such a mechanism—what else could it be, if such a thing was known to have been hovering over the Earth?—how to find out whether it was really that dread, ticking bomb?

No, no, they hadn't gone to any extraordinary trouble over it, not if they were already going to the trouble of blowing up Earth. A few hundred or a few thousand technicians along its 300-mile length could as well play the roles of an innocent populace of a newly appeared country as any other roles. But what was the delay now? Did it have to activate itself? Could it have gotten through Earth's defenses and sensors if it had already been activated then?

"Is it ticking, Regina?" Constantine asked Regina, his hostess of the evening before as he found her again after he had phoned to his superior.

"Sandaliotis, you mean?" she asked. "You'd better believe that it's ticking. This is one ticking country! I talk to the people who go by, and they sure do have things moving here. They have a common law here that is so old and full of holes that you can do almost everything with it. I can get a Unilateral Divorce from Salaadin in one minute. Then, after a three-minute interval for 'seemliness,' I can marry you. And they're having a honeymoon special at the hotel across the street. They're doing a raging business with the real estate people: there are more than a million of them arriving on the excursion boats and they are all looking for a change. This *is* the other side of the fence, the advertisements say. The grass *is* greener here. This is really bargain day.

"Then I can have both the divorce and the marriage set up on a one-hour or two-hour or three-hour rotation, or whatever basis I want, so they will revert

and put me back into the *status quid quo*, as they say it here. Salaadin certainly couldn't object to that, especially if he doesn't know about it, and if I'm married back to him automatically before he knows I was divorced from him. Well, come on."

"Regina, just where and when was it that you and Salaadin became my best friends in the world?"

"I'm puzzled about that too. I know it's true, of course, but I don't remember about it, not how it happened at all. Well come on!"

"Aw, Regina, I'd like to, but there are responsibilities that go with being the best detective in the world. I'm in the middle of a case, you see, a big one, and—"

"All right, all right, all right, you best detective in the world you! I'm not sure you're as sharp as you're supposed to be. I say maybe that's why the robbers beat the cops 19 rubbers out of 20. I'll just go across the street and say yes to that young man there who asked me. He's waiting for an answer."

But Constantine, after spending ten minutes over a local newspaper to perfect himself in the language, went into the big library. It was five minutes till seven in the morning. The sun was up. It lighted everything and dispelled all possible unreality. As he went in, there were patriots in the street, high on morning wine, singing with ringing melody and with tears:

*"Oh nine times risen from the Sea,
With Meadows green,
Oh SandalEEotis our land,
Where have you been?"*

*Oh land where every day is Yule!
Thou Saint Sardine!
Oh gracious land, Oh beautiful!
Where have you been?"*

"I have never seen such patriotism anywhere in the world," a real estate man off one of the excursion boats said to Constantine. "Are you a native?"

"No, this is my first visit here," Constantine said.

"I have never seen such burning patriotism in my life," the real estate man said.

"Nor I," Constantine agreed. He went on into the library and he knew what to do there. One does not become the best detective in the world by not knowing how to operate in a data center. The indexing system was not quite

the same as in other libraries of the world. It was slightly different and slightly better. And the service was fast. Constantine ordered six different histories of Sandaliotis at random, and he was ear-deep in them when a young lady came and tied a napkin around his neck.

“What is this?” he asked.

“A napkin,” she said. “Do they not use them in your country? One is not allowed to eat breakfast in the library without one. One gets butter and marmalade on the books. You know how it is. Will you order in particular, or would you rather receive the breakfast of the day?”

“The breakfast of the day will be fine, young lady,” Constantine said.

“All right, I dial it in,” she said. “Is that not easy? Shall I rub your neck while your breakfast is coming? Many gentlemen like their necks to be rubbed in the mornings. They find it relaxing. Do you not? You are not a native of Sandaliotis? You are one of the outer barbarians then? I understand that many of the outer barbarians are greatly puzzled this morning by the very fact that there *is* a Sandaliotis, but all of them are wanting to buy land here. Their eyes had been darkened before and they had not been able to see our country.”

“Do the people of Sandaliotis have dolphin flesh?” Constantine asked.

“Oh, what a way to put it! Dolphin flesh! Many of the people of Sandaliotis are of the dolphin clan, but I’m not. I’m a sardine. As you may not know, Sardinia was an ancient name for one of the provinces of Sandaliotis. There are quite a few different clans in our country.”

“And what a country!” Constantine cried. “If this is fakery, then some faker has gone to a lot of trouble.”

“A lot of trouble, yes, but not quite as much as it might seem at first eye. This is North Town. We make it look good here. And then there is Ichnusa, the capital. They really faked it there. But most of the rest of it is still blank. Nothing looks so blank though when you color it green.

“But on the larger scale there is no faking. Only an outer barbarian would speak of God as a faker. How gross of you! But I overlook it because you are ignorant and I am magnanimous. You are something big, you believe, like a real estate man maybe, so you cannot see with common eyes. But the common people of the barbarians, the fishermen, the mule-drivers, the octopus-trappers, the grape-treaders, the bee-herders, olive-pickers, slate-miners, fig-breeders, cheese-makers, card sharks, sponge-divers, they have always known about Sandaliotis. They have visited us here freely, and they have

worked here as itinerant workers. There have been no problems with people on the common level.

“And there have been no problems with the exquisite people (for many of you outer barbarians *are* exquisite). They have always known about Sandaliotis. I mean the kinetic philosophers and the goat-hair prophets, the attenuated artists and the music makers, the high comedians and the soul people, the best of the detectives and of the corporation chairmen, they have always understood about us. It is the great middle class of the outer barbarians who never could see us, for reasons not easy to explain. Today they can see us and our land, and it will confuse them for a little while. We must unconfuse them as much as we can. I will unconfuse you, and then you can unconfuse some of your countrymen.”

“Is Sandaliotis nine times risen from the sea, young lady?”

“Yes, but these times are not in sequence. It is as though one should say ‘nine times strong’ or ‘nine times glorious.’ Sandaliotis is always nine times risen, but she does not rise and sink again. It is more like the eyes of dim persons blinking open and shut and open again, so they do not see her all the time.”

“Young lady, is all that rigmarole you are giving me true?” Constantine asked.

“Well no, not all of it. But some of it may be true in a special sense. And there are several clearly true items imbedded in the matrix of parable. It is really just a little entertainment that I devise to tell you while your breakfast is coming. And here it is.”

One does not get to be the best detective in the world by doing just one thing at a time. Constantine Quiche ate his excellent library breakfast, matched chatter with chatter with the gracious young lady employee of the library, squeezed the juice out of six different histories of Sandaliotis, dialed for other books, and spun contingent theories in his neat and foxy set of brains.

The six different histories of Sandaliotis gave a consistent (though, to the great middle class of the outer barbarians, seemingly impossible) account of the peninsula of Sandaliotis. It had always been there, right where it was now, in the middle of the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The reason that it had not always been seen was that a sea-mist (the *velo*, called anciently the *peplos*, the veil) often surrounded the land and made it invisible. Sandaliotis had always been the great and beautiful peninsula between Italy and Spain,

somewhat kindred (though several degrees superior) to them in culture and inclination. It had been visited by all the same early visitors, by the people of Phoenicia, of Tyre and Tharsis, of Crete and Egypt and Greece and Asiatic Greece. It had always been peopled by the same Mediterranean stock (always beautiful people, but most beautiful in the case of Sandaliotis). It had been an inner ally and affiliate of the Roman Republic and Empire, though not an intrinsic part of Rome. It had known, it had seduced, it had civilized all the same conquering barbarians. It had been redeemed by the same Christ and church by the same Church (that patriarchate of Ichnusa of Sandaliotis was the most ancient of them all except that of Antioch, and one history said that it was more anciently established even than Antioch, by one year). Sandaliotis had been sickened by the same heresies, and its reigning heresy was "elitism." It had stood slightly outside of the Industrial Revolution, or perhaps it had had its own slightly superior industrial revolution. The industrialization of Sandaliotis was based on the mining of white coal or leukophanoko, that superior fuel that is mined nowhere else in the world.

Why then had so much of the rest of the world been in ignorance of the very existence of Sandaliotis? It must have been a sort of eye-disease suffered by the rest of the world, the histories said, something even beyond the obscuring effect of the veil or sea-mist.

The ancient references in these histories gave one a sort of lilt of impossible recognition, for they referred, by number and description, to certain lost books of Pliny and Strabo and Tacitus and so many others. These books, lost to the rest of the world, were not lost to the people of Sandaliotis.

When Constantine had finished his breakfast, the lady attendant washed his face and hands and kissed him. Then she went off to attend to other clients. But she showed him how to dial for her, or for another assistant, if he needed aid in anything.

Constantine had recalled that Sandaliotis was the ancient name for Sardinia. In fact, his remembered data now told him that the Greeks had given the name of Sandaliotis to the Island of Sardinia because it was shaped like a sandal. Yes, that was a good enough explanation, except that Sardinia *wasn't* shaped like a sandal.

The Sandaliotis histories that he was perusing said that the Greeks had given the name of Sandaliotis to their peninsula because it was shaped like a peninsula. Yes, that was well enough. The maps in the histories revealed that Sandaliotis *was* shaped like a sandal, much more so than Italy was shaped

like a boot. But it was only full Sandaliotis that was so shaped, and not Sardinia. The maps of Sandaliotis were fascinating.

The ends of the drawstrings of the sandal were the two narrow isthmuses that attached Sandaliotis to the continent of Europe at Monaco. The full shape of the peninsula, which included Corsica and Sardinia swallowed in it, was a sandal exact. It was not the low sandal with the strap passing between the toes. It was the real *sandalion*, the *solea*, the *crepida*, the high sandal, the *coturnus* with its red straps or strings. Constantine knew that the two straps or strings, the two isthmuses that connected the peninsula to the mainland, would appear as red strings from the air, for he had already seen their incredible red flowers and their russet countrysides and the red-tiled roofs of the isthmus towns. This was the classical sandal, and if one wanted to know what it looked like, it was the sandal that the people of Sandaliotis still wore.

Constantine dipped into the accounts of the literature of Sandaliotis, of the drama, the art, the music, and the politics-as-art of the Sandaliotistics. There were many of the named names that had a familiar ring. There was the painter Theotocopuli who had gone to Spain to live with the people there. He had been in trouble before he had left home, and he did not tell the people of Spain for sure where he had come from. And neither did he correct them when they guessed wrong on him. Besides, El Greco makes a better nickname than El Sandaliotistico.

There was a little corporal from northern Sandaliotis who had become a big man among the French. But that raised again the question in the mind of the best detective in the world. Where did Corsica and Sardinia fit into the conception of Sandaliotis? Both of them were included in the outline of the peninsula as shown on the maps. And the names of Corsican and Sardinian mountains were found in their right latitudes and longitudes as mountains of Sandaliotis. Someone was playing free and loose with these things.

Constantine dialed for an aide girl, and one of them came. It was not the girl who had given him his breakfast, but another one. It would not matter greatly. There was not that much difference between the girls. All of them were beautiful and all of them were charming. And if it did not matter which one of them was which, that also fit in with a theory that Constantine was about to devise about Sandaliotis. It *should* make a difference which girl was which, in any other place and condition.

Constantine explained his difficulty to the girl, that there seemed to be a contradiction here; that there seemed to be, in these particular cases, two sorts of lands occupying one and the same area.

“How can there be a Sandaliotis, and at the same time be a Corsica and a Sardinia in parts of the same places?” he asked fairly enough. But the girl nearly became exasperated, except that such a thing would not be possible to one of the pleasant inhabitants of Sandaliotis.

“Have you no black cattle in your own country?” she asked defensively. “Have you no sheep in the closets of your own houses? Have you no unburied bones in your own attics, and no striped snakes in your own cellars? Oh, these are not things that we are ashamed of, but they are things that we would wish were better. There are ways of seeing parts of us, but there are better and more accurate ways of seeing those same parts. So we are double dealers sometimes? Will we never live that down? There are the beasts inside of us, but there are more pleasant and higher creatures inside of us also. The Corsica and Sardinia are sometimes seen by the outer barbarians (and it is an embarrassment that such people should be able to look into our most dismal nightmares), and the waters that are seen about those ‘islands’ even when those waters are not physically there, these are concretions of our psychotic unconsciousnesses and they are not meant to be seen by daylight. They are our shaggy manifestations; they are our woolly anxieties and our unsettling agitations. It is good to be able to send them off to high and waste places. But they are not the real essence of those places, no more than the morning dew is the real essence of a meadow that it covers briefly. When there is dew on the meadow, it is technically under water. When there is a peculiar dew on parts of Sandaliotis, they are technically under water, and the other parts, the parts not affected by the dew, seem to be islands. But if people would look at things our way and not their own way, they would know that Sandaliotis has always been here, complete and unchanged.”

“You must have very deep dew here,” Constantine said.

“Oh yes we do,” she agreed happily. “In certain areas, we have the deepest dew in the world.”

“Is this map of Civita do Nord, of North Town, accurate?” Constantine asked, and he showed her the map he was studying in one of the histories. “I have been studying this map and I now have it engraved on my eyeballs.”

“I have an uncle who engraves maps on walnuts,” the girl said, “but how do you engrave them on your eyeballs? Yes, the map is correct in every detail, but the city itself might not be correct all the time. They had workers making those streets and alleys all night until daylight this morning, but they got only about a third of them finished. Then they had to stop. They weren’t supposed to be making any of the things after the real estate people and other visitors got here.”

“Is all this that you have been telling me really not a long jabberoo that says hardly anything, young lady?” Constantine asked.

“Yes it is,” she said. “I will have to shorten it and sharpen it up. But some things are not so easy to explain. They instruct us ‘Make up something to tell them if they question you on that aspect.’ Or they instruct us ‘Tell them something without telling them anything if they question you in that area.’ A person would have to be a barbarian to know what sort of questions you barbarians were going to ask and to have answers ready. It isn’t easy to make up things for every occasion.”

“What about the waters around and between these islands,” Constantine asked, “the waters which this map here says do not exist. Isn’t there a place where very deep fog becomes tolerably deep ocean? Ships and boats have sailed for ages in these waters where this map shows land, where in fact I would probably find land if I went out looking on this unnatural morning. Fish have swum for ages in these waters where this map and yourself say that there are no waters, where you say that there is never more than deep dew.”

“That is false,” the girl said. “How have ships and boats sailed right through the place where Sandaliotis is? How have fish swum through here? Give me the name of one ship, of one boat, of one fish that has done this. Go ahead. Give me the name of the leastest fish that has done it. I do not ask for the name of any big thing. Only of a fish no longer than your finger. You cannot document what you say. If it had happened, it would not be so hard for you to come up with the name of just one little fish.”

“Ah, young girl, I will inquire the names of the ships and boats and fish later,” Constantine said. “Now I am going to visit a hotel that I used to know in the mountains of Sardinia. The mountains still have the same name on the map of Sandaliotis that they used to have in Sardinia. That one hotel in the mountains, I will not forget it. I will see if it is still there.”

“With all burning hope for your success,” the young library girl said, and she kissed Constantine affectionately. There has always been a legend of a

very affectionate people in a Mediterranean land, but is it possible that the Sandaliotists are the people of that legend?

Constantine, on his way to the airport and a plane to take him to a certain mountain, stopped at a phone and punched a number.

“The library here is better than those in many places,” Constantine said to himself. “I will give it a citation for excellence if it ever falls in my way to do so.”

And then the person came onto the line.

“Quiche here,” Constantine said. “Grishwell, I have known bombs and I have known realms, but I am not sure that I have ever known a real combination of the two. But from where I stand, on the surface of our item of discussion, I believe that this is a realm, impure and not simple. I do not believe that it is a world-bomb.”

“Quiche,” Grishwell said, “there is something wrong. Instrumentation (which of course can be fooled when the stakes are as high as they are now: our survival or extinction) shows that the world-bomb is still in hover a thousand miles above Earth. We cannot get a visual on it; it’s too sophisticated for that. We cannot get a radar or a magnetic on it; it is certainly too sophisticated for that. But we do know that it is there, or that there is a meteorological disturbance in the shape of a 300-mile-long bomb still hovering there. It could, of course, have left the disturbance in a high hover and itself come down through our defenses. We cannot say.”

“Are you sure that there *is* a world-bomb?”

“Of course not, but we must act on the possibility.”

“If there isn’t, then what am I on?”

“I don’t know, Quiche, but stay on it. And keep it there.”

“How does one keep a 300-mile-long peninsula here if it decides to move?”

CHAPTER THREE

It was just eight o'clock in the morning. Lesser detectives might just be getting up then, but the best detective in the world had been up and doing for hours. Out of the library and into the streets of Civita do Nord (North Town, this was the name of that northernmost City of Sandaliotis) Constantine Quiche began to run into people he knew in too high a proportion. This, he discovered, would always be a characteristic of Sandaliotis, just as it was the characteristic of dreams and of intensity states, to encounter an inordinate number of persons with whom one was already acquainted.

First there was Regina Marqab, his host of the night before and his companion of that early morning. She introduced Constantine to a new husband.

“But this is not the same young man that you joined earlier,” Constantine said.

“Oh him. No. That didn't work out at all,” Regina said. “But I'm on an hourly rotation now. Maybe I will settle down a little bit later in the morning. They will set it up for you that way here, and their rates are very reasonable. This is Conrad Squarehauser. He is in real estate and is authorized to buy land on Sandaliotis for more than eight thousand persons. There is a great hunger for land, he says, and all the land on Sandaliotis is so green and new looking! There are a million and a half real estate people who have landed on Sandaliotis already this morning, he says, and there are more coming yet this morning. They are landing at more than a hundred ports.

“I have phoned Salaadin to join me here and have told him how much fun it is. I believe we should buy land here and settle. Both of us are of Sandaliotis ancestry. He is furious though, about my divorcing him mostly. But he'll come around to my style of life when he sees how much fun it is. And we can always marry again any hour we wish to. By the way, I have an eleven o'clock open if you're interested. I was always very fond of you, as you know. I am one of your best friends in the world.”

There were many tourist-strangers about who clearly did not come from Sandaliotis, but who just as clearly liked it. They had pleasant but odd

appearances. They were either Scandinavian or off-world. These were in addition to the thousands of real estate people. They spoke of having old ties with the place. “Your grandmother came from here,” a lady was telling her little girl. “Is it not lovely here?”

“No, Regina, I’m not sure where I will be at eleven o’clock,” Constantine said. “Right now I am going to travel quite a distance south to a place where I have visited before. There I will try to find the answer to one aspect of the situation. Do you have any answer to the Sandaliotis phenomenon?”

“What is to answer? It is the life-style. You like it or you do not. I like it.”

“Regina, you weren’t like this before, were you?” Constantine asked. “Or were you? Though you and Salaadin are my two best friends in the world, I just don’t remember you before.”

“No I wasn’t, except sometimes on perverse streaks. Sandaliotis does this to some people, they say, if they already have leanings to openness. I’m not sure that this is entirely good for me. When I was talking to Salaadin on the phone, I reminded him of the old proverb ‘When in Sandaliotis, do as the Sandaliotistics do’. He says that there is no such proverb, and he says that he doesn’t believe that most of the Sandaliotistics are like that at all. What I have run into here, he says, is a bit of border-town morality. He says that I’m acting like a typical border-town girl. I suppose that I am.”

Regina went away with her latest husband, Conrad Squarehauser.

The streets were now completely overflowing with real estate people wanting to buy the bright buildings and the bright building lots of the city (“Yes, we can have the building by noon,” a Sandaliotis huckster was heard to say; “we are the fastest and best builders in the world, and you can see that there is beauty and utility in every line of every one of our buildings”), and green acres in the countryside. There were hundreds of guides and Department of Federal Real Estate Transactions people (with their lavender armbands) herding the many thousands of real estate people and speaking to them from observation platforms and from Living Master-Map areas. One of the DFRET persons was the first young lady who had assisted Constantine Quiche in the library.

“This show has a chance to make it,” Constantine told himself. “Everybody is willing to double in brass.” But he didn’t at all understand the intense activity. It was as if all the shimmering green land of Sandaliotis had to be sold that very day.

Then Constantine saw Julien Moravia, one of the “agents” who had been in the Marqab’s house the night before, Julien the beautiful man. Julien was dressed in magistrate’s robes now and he was followed by a retinue of bravos.

He saw Constantine, and his face brightened in the most ambivalent look ever, sheer delight at seeing him and sheer evil for some opportunity here, the impulsive waywardness of the rich and mighty, and the glittering cruelty that is to be found near the surface of all beautiful men.

“Arrest that man there!” Julien ordered and he pointed at Constantine. “It will be necessary to take him into custody and possibly to hold him for a very long time. Or it may be that he will break under the torture very quickly. So many of them do nowadays. He is an enemy of the realm and an obstruction to our civil policies.”

“Julien, this is me myself,” Constantine Quiche called out. “You know me. We have shared the same hospitality. Oh, this is a grand joke!”

“Arrest that man at once,” Julien cried again. Though he was choking with laughter, he seemed to mean it, and the bravos moved to arrest Constantine. “He is wanted for murder on the mainland,” Julien was saying, “and we have to throw a few bones to the mainlanders as evidence of our good faith. They will have so many evidences of our bad faith this morning that we must do something to counteract. He is a murderer and he is a conspirator.”

No, no, they were not about to arrest the best detective in the world so easily as that! In the library, Constantine had memorized the map of Civita do Nord and held it firmly in his mind, every street and alley of it, every jurisdiction marker and boundary. The girl in the library had said that the map was accurate but that the city might not be because, for some reason, it had not been finished in all details.

But Constantine knew where the airport was, and he had noticed that it was in a different district from Civita do Nord; it was under the police of the Air Ministry. It would require authority from a different set of magistrates to effect an arrest there. Constantine knew just about what streets and alleys would lead to the airport while seeming to lead away from it. It was a complex of streets and byways which by their very shape had to be designated as “quaint.”

Constantine broke into a run, bowling over two bully boys as he made his break for it. With the parachute turning him into a pudgy little man with a bulge around the waist, he could not run as well as he had counted on. Maybe

that didn't matter. But he was still the best detective in the world, and he was in the best shape of the world.

For, oh, oh, oh, this was a patterned chase that quickly developed. Constantine could win this. There wasn't even a cut-off man sent out. There wasn't any flanking or herding. The pursuers let Constantine set the directions and conditions of the chase. The strong and chesty and bronzed Sandaliotis runners simply ran after Constantine, and they didn't run quite as hard as they might. It really seemed as if they had compassion on him, and in a perverse corner of his mind he complained about it, that they weren't making a good enough show. And Julien Moravia was left far behind, and Julien had the look of a conditioned and fleetfooted man. He was left behind, all except his voice. His voice belled grandly as if he were coursing and urging hounds on a country chase.

Oh, this had excess of pattern! It was the jumbly-alley run, over-the-fence, down-a-dark-passage, through-an-abandoned-warehouse, over-another-fence, and down-another-alley pattern. There were all those alleys and no streets. There were all those backs of houses and buildings and no fronts. There were all those meetings of three or five alleys, but no straight crossings. Yes, this was a quaint part of town. On his cutbacks, Constantine never had to bowl over more than two pursuers on one foray, and the pursuers were eminently bowl-overable. These chesty bravos were not patsies. Well then, they were secretly on his side. Why were they? Or were they really?

This had a nightmarish quality, and that broke through especially in the belling voice of Julien Moravia who was always in the background. This was like being chased by automatons, by puppets on strings, and being oneself a stringed puppet. This was all thimble theatre stuff, and that will shrink a free person more than anything in the world, to be abridged into such a setting as that.

Constantine reached the airport. He was out of the old jurisdiction, and no new jurisdiction had been alerted to pick him up. There had been no time for that. The pursuers now stood and gnashed their teeth at him, in real or in simulated frustration. What sort of pursuit had it all been? Julien Moravia cried out his theatrical frustration, in a rich belling voice, at his prey having escaped him.

And the timing was perfect. It was all perfect. There was a plane just leaving, and it was going very near to Constantine's destination.

Not until he was in the air did Constantine question himself:

“Have I been made a hopping fool of by the ‘agents’ and knaves? Has the best detective in the world been had? Are they showing me that Sandaliotis does not follow behavioral laws any more than it follows physical laws? And who was it who put it into my mind to go to a mountain inn in the boondocks of Sardinia? Why was I allowed to escape from such an easy trap in North Town? There were several jaws of that trap that opened of themselves and let me out, as I see it now. Why in law-abiding Sandaliotis should a magistrate have the authority to arrest an innocent man? And what gave me the idea that Julien Moravia in a clown suit *was* a magistrate? How has this indecision and easy acceptance been put into me?”

“Oh what dark things will be done in Civita do Nord while I am tricked away into the lonesome mountains of the south? Oh, probably none.”

This was a fine green countryside that they were flying over, iridescent green, twinkling green, light-suffused green, enchanting green. But what was that green made out of? A crop-duster was one of the things that Constantine Quiche had been on his way to becoming the best detective in the world, and he knew what crops looked like from the air.

“Young lady, what is that growing down there?” he asked of a stewardess. “It is beautiful, and it misses by a very little bit a tiresome uniformity. Yet it is all apparently of one thing, and I do not know what. It is too fine grained for trees or brush. It is not grapes or olives or almonds or dates or chestnuts. It is not lemons or grapefruit or apples or quince or medlars. It is none of the cereal grains, nor wheat or buckwheat, or rye or barley or oats, nor yet rice. I know what all of them look like whether green or brown. It is no sedge or cane nor reed nor lichen nor clover nor grass that I have ever seen. It looks like wonderful cropland, and I have never seen rolling land so beautifully green; but what crop is it?”

“Oh you poor man,” the stewardess said. “That land is not for cropping; it is for selling.”

But a Sandaliotis man with an official look to him corrected this.

“She is joking,” that man said. “Of course it is for cropping. That is the new magic plant, candle-grass. It is the perfect food for man and beast both.”

They came down at Lanusei which now had its name shortened to Lanos. They were in sight of the mountain which Constantine intended to take as a verification point of reality. And the mountain looked the same as it used to. It looked real.

“Where can I get a conveyance to take me to Monti del Genargentu, or nearly there?” Constantine asked a tall and bearded young man who was on the fringe of the airport. He was reassured by the appearance of this young man. He looked like a genuine piece of old Sardinia, not of new Sandaliotis. The man turned his back and refused to answer. Yes, he was a piece of old Sardinia, that was sure. Yet this irritated Constantine, as he believed that he knew this man slightly. Peasants and mountain wranglers do not turn their backs on the best detective in the world without a scathing. Constantine caught the big oaf by the arm and spun him around.

“I asked where I could get a conveyance to take me to Monti del Genargentu, or nearly there,” he repeated firmly. Say, that was a big and muscular man that he was swinging around that way!

“Why do you want to go *nearly* there?” the man asked sullenly. “You are nearly there now.” The man spoke the old Sardinian dialect instead of the new and more simple stuff of Sandaliotis that sounded like a hedge-child of Esperanto. “And faggots now call it Mont Genorg.”

“I’m no faggot. I don’t call it that,” Constantine said, speaking Sardinian now. “How do I get there?”

The man seemed to mellow a little bit on hearing the old dialect used, but he still had plenty of bristles. He was one of those mountain hedgehogs.

“You can walk,” he said. “Or you can go by mule. You can see the mules on the slopes there. Go catch one, mount it, and be gone.”

“I want a mule caught and bridled and ready for me!” Constantine swore.

“That one man should catch a mule for another would be as craven as that one man should chew the food for another,” the tall and rough man said, “and neither of them could any longer pass for men if it were done.”

They were independent, these Sardinians. The Sandaliotis superimposition hadn’t changed them much.

“What is this ‘nearly there’ to the mountain that you want to go to?” the man asked.

“The Inn that Old Grimaldi runs,” Constantine said.

“Why should you go to old Grimaldi’s Inn if you can’t even remember Young Grimaldi?”

“Be you the last man!” Constantine cried suddenly, recognizing the man finally and challenging him to the race. He raced up the slope towards the wild mules. He got there first too, before the tall and rough young man. But he had some slight trouble catching and mounting the mule that he selected.

Constantine was a good man and he had wrangled mules before, but he was quickly mule bit and mule kicked and mule rolled upon, and he even got a little fast-blooded enjoyment out of it. But when he was finally astride the hooting demon, he saw that Young Grimaldi had long been mounted and was laughing at him.

It was about twelve miles to the Grimaldi-Inn-half-way-up-the-mountain. It was just 10 o'clock in the morning when they came there.

Then, in a very little while, after Constantine had been given a chance to rope up a bucket of water from the well and to wash his hands and face in a stone basin outside of the Inn door, he was with several of them in the big wine-and-dine room of the Inn, drinking black wine and eating hard cheese and hard bread. And also they were giving each other hard looks. Even the closest of friends do not have easy looks for each other in that place.

"This is the test, this is the test," Constantine said to himself, "and it passes the test here. Where there is even one immutable, the world has not gone completely awry. And mountain Sardinia remains that one immutable."

And then he spoke out loud. "There is a puzzle here," he said and he pointed out of the glassless window. "I can see out of the window there all the marks where the old coast used to be, and there was crashing water beyond it. Now I look at the same old coast marks, but there is green land beyond them."

"I hope it won't be this way always," Old Grimaldi said. "I don't like it this way for all the time. I wish the water were back, just for a while now and then."

"It makes a trouble, yes," Young Grimaldi said. "We used to drive the wild boars against the ocean down below. We'd have them off the narrow rock shore then. We'd follow them into the surf with our old hunting pikes and we'd kill them there. Boars cannot swim nearly as well as they imagine themselves able to. But how they can run! They can run up to their own best ideas of themselves and beyond. And now, whenever there are those miles of new meadowland beyond the old shore, there is no killing or catching them at all. They can run forever.

"If there weren't so much money and promise of fortune in this new way, I wouldn't like it at all."

"Was anything like this change of old water into new land ever heard of before?" Constantine asked with exasperation.

“Yes. We begin to remember that it often happened,” Old Grimaldi said. “In fact we are instructed to remember it that way. We have always had such days when the big land intrudes on the oceans. We always used to have it that way, one or two days a month. But we didn’t like them then and we will not like them now if they are to be permanent; not unless the money to be had out of the new ways changes our mind we won’t like them. There is talk that the new land will be made permanent. And there is shakier talk that the new land is going to go mighty fast when it goes, all at once.”

“I have been on Sardinia, on and off, six or seven months in all,” Constantine said, “and I have never seen this arrangement of the big land before. If it always happened one or two days a month, why have I never seen it until this morning?”

“We used to trick our guests,” Old Grimaldi said. “Whenever we felt a day of the big land coming on, we would pray for rain. Then we would keep to our houses and our guests would do it also, and the rainfall would not allow us to see the illicit land. Anyone who runs an Inn in this country knows tricks to cover up almost every disadvantage.

“In the far north, on the mainland, they have had the same trouble. There they also pray for rain when they feel a big land coming on. But their prayers are not answered as regularly as ours, for they are not nearly as holy a people on the continent as we are down here on our island. So they invent stories. They say that it is a big cloud bank. They say that it is a big mirage. And they pray for fog and get it. One needn’t be nearly as holy to pray for fog as to pray for rain. But mostly the people on the main land do not look out to sea at all. There could be elephants leaping like dolphins in the sea and they would not notice it.”

“I did not mind the big land once or twice a month,” Young Grimaldi said. “I would take my wagon and go down to the new land and steal sheep and goats that the promoters had turned on the land to show that it was full of profit. I would fill my wagon with such flesh. Or I would fill it with olives or grapes or cork. They have a little trick, the promoters, where they raise a land in all its fertility and with its plants and animals already thriving on it. That is, some of the promoters have this trick, but it is wearing out. I have become a promoter myself now, but I can’t find that trick at all. And I will not like the land here all the time, not even if it is full of profit.

“I will vote against it, but they will not even put it to the vote. They simply impose it. There will be blood flow if we can’t drive a better bargain than to

have the big land here all the time. And there will also be blood flow if the land is taken away so catastrophically as to kill or cheat numbers of people.

“You are from the north today? Do they have any idea in the north about how these things happen? We have never understood it at all and we live here. About the appearances of this particular day, there is something wrong with them. Someone is being looted and I don’t like it. But I suspect that I’ve joined the looters’ league without knowing it.”

“I heard from one person that the peninsula and commonwealth of Sandaliotis are to be permanent things now,” Constantine said. “I heard in fact that they had always been permanent things, and that everything else about it is nonsense. But I’m not convinced of this. And I have heard that the Islands of Corsica and Sardinia, when they rise above the surrounding land and make themselves out to be separate units, are like black dew that is only an appearance for a while and not a right essence at all. They say that your islands, in their separated aspects, are nightmare things. They say that they are madnesses or bad dreams cropping out. They say that they are mind-sicknesses and person-sicknesses.”

“Oh, they are a good ways correct there,” Old Grimaldi said. “Throw that rock and hit almost anyone. We do have a lot of degrading appearances on us and we must live with them. We must be strong enough to shine through them. Someone must provide the dark strength and suffering of the world. Somewhere there must be a place where they can dump the ash. Somewhere they must bury the bones. Somewhere the Gadarene swine must run, those who did not drown, and it was only a small sounder of them that did drown. Somewhere the noisome miasmas must have their harbors in the hills. This is a torturous thing to talk about.

“We’ve been fertilized by that dumped ash and cemeterial substance for a long time. There are old ghosts plowed into our mountain gardens and they give some splendid and stenchy blooms to the plants. The whole Sandaliotis business, for the fact of that, is such a splendid and stenchy bloom. It used to appear, as they said, only in the time of the lavender moon. Now they are trying to stretch out that time.

“And then we, in our hills, have always been the refuge for things too horny to be allowed anywhere else on Earth. The old things reigned in the cult circuits a long time ago; and then, after they were clear discredited, they came to our islands to end it all. But they do not die. Or, if they do, they still make appearances after they are dead. Our hills are full of bleak spirits and

monsters. Some of them have never been in honest flesh at all. They're phantoms. Why, a person a thousand miles away may be sick or corrupt of soul! And then, for his cure, he may be able to cast something out of himself. He never sees it, or he would be horrified to his own death; and it is not seen by anyone else in his place either. But, when it is cast out there, it will come here to our hills and it will be seen here, as a mad dog, as a mad ape, as a devil.

“We are mightily plagued by creatures out of the centuries before the Redemption. And we are mightily plagued by creatures out of what the Austrians in our own century call the Unconscious. This is a new name for an old and shabby country. These incarnate creatures are not so much from the unconsciousness of people around here, no: our own interior ghosts sometimes break out in violence, but they do not break out in such wandering and bodily manifestations. And then you must consider that we are mostly sweet-minded and do not have so many interior ghosts as people in other places. These incarnate creatures come from the unconsciousnesses or the underminds of people in the Germanies and the Russias, from all the frostbitten and stuffy lands, from the crabbed countries of the Balkans and from all the coal-chimney towns of the central countries that have no suns or oceans to bring them health. They are cast out, those pernicious spirits from the dark places, and they go howling away. But they are canny, and they think while they howl, ‘Oh, how can we make a good thing out of this?’ And then they see the opportunity. ‘Oh Lord, cast us out upon green hills,’ they beg. And the Lord, in His mercy, casts them out on the greenest hills that are, our own.

“There is another thing that tends to give us a bad name here,” Old Grimaldi continued, “though it does not spring from any evil of us, but rather from our compassion and noble-heartedness. A strong man from among us, one able to bear every torture and unpleasantness, will have compassion on those in the smoky place itself. He will look over the brink (we do have a place in our country where one may look over the brink and down into the everlasting pit itself), and he will point out the most miserable and the most suffering person that he sees there. ‘I have an unemployed day today,’ the big-hearted man will say (or maybe it is only half a day that he has free), ‘Let me take the place of that one there. He’s a mean-looking one and undeserving and no one else would give him spell. But he has really had it and he needs a rest.’ ‘All right,’ the person on duty will say. ‘We are always open for

trades.’ So the noble-hearted person will go down to hell to suffer for the other one for half a day, and that other one will come up here to lie on our green hills and rest; and our hills will get a bad name from him.

“It will be forgotten what a noble people we are—(what other people will trade places with damned souls even if for only half a day?)—and it is remembered only that our hills are filled with horrors and frightful spirits. They sprawl on our mountains, and they look up at our blue sky and are refreshed; and all this is on the side of charity and compassion. But you get a few hundred of those fields of hell lying around on a nice day, and you get a bad name. And most of them were not even raised around here. They are foreigners.

“It is a good thing that our island is never submerged, either when the big land is here or when it is not. The noisome ash and rot in our hills would contaminate the sea if it swept over it, and it would kill the fish.”

This was more than Old Grimaldi usually talked. He was silent then.

“We didn’t even pray for rain today,” Young Grimaldi said, “even though we knew that the Big Land would come. There is rich profit to be had in showing and selling the new land today. Do you know that chickens have more wits than people have as to knowing what the weather will do? If there is a downpour that is to be for only a short duration, they will take cover from it and will not come out again till it is over with. But if the downpour is to be for a longer time, they will know it immediately, and they will not withdraw from it. They will be out in it and going about their daily business of eating. That is our case now, and we have a little bit of this chicken wisdom in the business about the big land coming. If it comes for only one day, we will withdraw from it for that one day. But if it comes for a much longer time, we will know it at once, and we will not withdraw from it. We will live with it as well as we can, but we will not like it. It has come for that longer time now.”

“And yet Sandaliotis, the Big Land as you call it, seems an altogether pleasant place,” Constantine Quiche ventured to remark.

“So does Hell seem an altogether pleasant place, when it comes with its both hands full of enticements,” Young Grimaldi said. “Ah, I may have a hell of a time with this Sandaliotis business the way I am entangled in it more than I intended.” Oh those bristling hedgehog-men of the Sardinian mountains!

They were silent for a while, looking out of the glassless window at the tumbling green beauty of the hills drenched in sunlight.

“Has either of you heard the story of the world-bomb that is three hundred miles long?” Constantine asked them after a pause.

“That is a dog-bomb,” Young Grimaldi said. “It is all fizz and spark and no explosion. It is a dead-flash, a dud. It is the dog that is all howl and no fang. I say to put the dog killer on it. It is a sheep-killing dog, but it will not harm any person who is not a sheep.”

“What that three-hundred-mile-long bomb is is one of the sandals of the devil named Haziel,” said Old Grimaldi. “It is the famous sandal with the red strings or straps on it.”

“He must be a very big-footed devil to have a sandal that is three hundred miles long,” Constantine remarked.

“Oh, size isn’t a particular characteristic of those fellows,” Old Grimaldi said. “One of them can be quite large one day and much smaller another, and so can be the things that they wear. But the day that Haziel lost his sandal, that sandal was three hundred miles long.”

“He is wanting it back,” Young Grimaldi said. “That’s what’s making a lot of the trouble in the area right now.”

“You are too wise to believe in tales like that, Young Grimaldi,” Constantine said.

“Me wise? When was I ever? A tale like that is like a wild mule. I can catch one of them quicker than you can, I can mount him faster, and I can ride him faster. A man who is mule-bit and mule-kicked and mule-rolled-upon should be a little careful about what other fast-footed thing he tries. This tale, as you call it, is faster-footed than you’d imagine.”

“How is the sandal a bomb, Young Grimaldi? Or how is the object, whatever it is, either a sandal or a bomb?”

“Oh the bomb, the sandal, the dog-island in the sky, it is what the chaired doctors now call antimatter and what the unchaired people have always called evil. The Earth and its furniture are all made out of real matter which we call good. Oh, you can pretend that it is something else, and you can degrade our Earth with your mouth, but it is still essentially good, that is to say that it is positive matter. If the sandal, or anything else composed of evil matter or antimatter, should come into contact with Earth, then there would be a great explosion, a mutual destruction. Haziel would not care. He has gotten another sandal in the meanwhile. Even of the people of the Earth, there are

many of them who are antimatter in their allegiance, and they would not care. But I would care. I will do what I can and I will warn everyone that I can. I will warn you since you seem to be interested: no good thing ever came from Haziel.”

“Is there a connection, do you think, Young Grimaldi, between the bomb sandal of Haziel, and the sandal-shaped peninsula which you call the big land?”

“Oh, there are some compromising stories told that connect the two of them. It is said that a dolphin whistles under the sea, and a dog answers her from the sky. I don’t know how much there is to these stories. You must be on a curious case, best detective in the world.”

“I am, Young Grimaldi. How can I best get to Salerno in Italy? I am full of hunches and intuitions today and I think I should go talk to a man in Salerno. And do not tell me to go by mule. There isn’t any mule road that goes all the way.”

“With all the big land that is out there today, how can you be sure, detective? But I have a plane here. I’ll take you quickly enough.”

“You, young Grimaldi, a bristly hedgehog of the Sardinian Mountains, you have a plane and you will take me there just that easily? And how do you happen to have a plane?”

“Oh, I’m in the real-estate business, for this one long day anyhow, though my heart has gone out of it already. But I have the plane for that, to show areas to the people, for some of the plots are vast. Yes, I will take you to Salerno just that easily, best detective. Why should we make it hard? Is it the Master Forger you will see there? No, do not tell me there is no way I could even have known that there was a Master Forger. You have worn out the variations of the ‘there-is-no-way-you-could-have’ line. Go phone whoever it is that you will phone, and the plane will be ready.”

Constantine Quiche made a phone call from the one phone in Grimaldi Inn, and he quickly had his man on the line.

“Quiche,” he said. “Grishwell, does the sanda—ah, the three-hundred-mile-long bomb come from a world named Haziel?”

“We think so, yes,” came the answer. “The world doesn’t go by that name in the catalogs though. There is no way you could have known that there was such a world.”

“You have worn out the variations of that line, Grishwell,” Constantine said. “Is the bomb an antimatter device?”

“We suspect so, yes. What have you found out? Where are you?”

“I’m in the Sardinian mountains. People used to tell me things here. Now they just talk as they used to do, but they don’t tell me as much.”

“Don’t let the peninsula of Sandaliotis leave, Quiche. Keep it there. We don’t know what it’s doing there, but it may be in the berth of the bomb and blocking it out. That would be to our advantage. Don’t let it leave.”

“I am to prevent a peninsula the size of Italy or Iberia from picking up and leaving? All right, Grishwell, I won’t let it leave.”

CHAPTER FOUR

It was a Sandaliotis-made plane, an Ichnusa, that Young Grimaldi had. As with much Sandaliotis equipment and vehicles that Constantine had seen, it made up for any other deficiencies it might have by its striking style. It was a plane to be proud of.

And young Grimaldi was proud of it, and Constantine got the idea that the tall man had had it only a short time. Young Grimaldi had a lot of style in driving it also, but it was no worse than riding one of the wild mules of Sardinia.

They went up high, and the beautiful geography of Sandaliotis was unfolded more strikingly than any map could show it. There had never been such colors as that land showed, greens, blues, reds, yellows, browns, purples, blacks, and back to greens always. There had never been any such water as was around the new land, green and blue and white water with an exquisite sharpness of color. The haze, where it bulked above the sea, was a lilac color. This was all like a pendant jewel set down into the Mediterranean, and every part of that jewel Sandaliotis was illuminated with a new light.

The master Angelo DiCyan (by coincidence he was the man that Constantine was now coming to see) had once given pen to the idea that the Mediterranean would have been of a color as dull as that of some other seas if it were not for the lands of Iberia and Italy and Greece going into those waters like brands of light ('and one other, the invisible peninsula, which has visible effect'); he believed that these four baffles or reflectives were what caused that sea to be filled with such a suffusing light.

Young Grimaldi brought Constantine Quiche down at a little port between Avelina and Salerno, and then he seemed to wish to explain something else. But he could not quite bring himself to that.

"I notice that you have the parachute, best detective in the world, so you must understand a little bit of it. I cannot tell the things that I only half guess, and besides I am working and taking money from the other side of the street. But keep that parachute on, best detective in the world!"

Constantine noticed that there was, in the port terminal, a booth marked "Travelers' Aid, Sandalotis Division," and it did not seem to be new. There were so many connections and top offs of events that nobody had noticed until that day! Constantine took a taxi into Salerno, and he came to the home of the master Forger Angelo DiCyan. It was 11:45 in the morning.

"The Master will *not* receive you, Mr. Quiche," said a workman with a huge mallet in his hand. "The Master does not rise before noon ever, and he has an utter contempt for those who do. Please do not make the obvious remarks about us workmen being at work earlier, Mr. Quiche. The clock that I am working by, you will notice, says 12:45. That is the present time in the town where I was born. That keeps things to an honest basis with me. The Hindu there who is faking Hindu statuary has a clock that is set even later. No, I am sure that it will not do any good to tell the Master that you are here. In addition to his contempt for all people who arise before noon, he has an even deeper contempt for all persons of the policeman class."

"I will have that fancy little puppy by the ears in a moment," Constantine said. "I have given him several lessons in the past about what persons of my class can do to those of his. I had thought that I had taught him to temper his contempt in my case."

There were three pianos playing there. One of them was doing an old Scott Joplin rag; one of them was playing a Clarence Sweet Rock-Bottom; one of them was playing a sequence of Profile Jazz by Schrade. Young persons of unknown sex were playing these things on the pianos, and other young persons were recording them and scoring them. There were already playbacks going on all three, blending in with the new play, to form syntheses that would have forgotten their beginnings. These were the first steps of those efforts that the Master would work up into some of the best forgeries in the world.

"Tell him that I'm here anyhow," Constantine insisted. "I have a contempt for people who keep me waiting. I assure you that the effect of it is lost on me. And, after all, it is only twelve minutes to the hour."

"Certainly not," the workman said. "The Master has these very high standards. He probably will not see you even at 12:00. He gets up at 12:00, or sometimes much after, but his routine varies thereafter."

"Tell him that the best detective in the world is here," Constantine kept after it, "and that the best detective in the world doesn't like to be kept

waiting. Tell him that the best detective in the world has ways of doing things about things like this.”

“Oh, he will simply tell me that he is the best forger in the world; that there are far fewer top forgers than there are top detectives; and that he delights in keeping the best detective in the world waiting.”

Constantine Quiche caught the workman roughly by the throat, and the workman banged Constantine roughly over the head with his mallet. They both stepped back then, hurt in feelings and body.

“Why not tell him that I’m here?” Constantine wouldn’t give up yet, and he was feeling his head that had a new knot on it.

“Because he isn’t here,” the workman said, “and because I’m never supposed to say that he isn’t here.”

“Oh, what a way to run a false house! That Scott Joplin piece they are forging, is it the Sycamore Leaf Rag?” Constantine asked.

“Oh no, it’s the Box-Elder Leaf Rag,” the workman said. “It’s very new.”

“So new that the Master still hasn’t put the finishing touches on it?” Constantine asked. “He will still have to come up with the sheets of old music paper, but I am sure that he has that for every period. He will still have to note it and score it in Joplin’s intense hand, but he has often forged Joplin before, I believe. Oh, there is no forger like him! And, yes, he has a wonderful bunch of workmen working here. You are his guarantee of excellence.”

“Thank you,” the workman said. There were a dozen or so young persons there roughing in masterpieces of forgery. They knew their period materials, their canvases and pigments, their marbles and bronzes. And there were some glassmen there mouth blowing forged-glass masterpieces as people used to do it a long time ago.

There were essence blenders making vintage wine, and bottle founders making vintage bottles. And there was a lady typing at Edsel Schrock’s own genuine Fret-Jet typewriter for which DiCyan had outbid everybody at a famous auction. There was even one of Schrock’s battered trunks there that DiCyan had had for a song, other persons not foreseeing the power of the honestly sworn-to “from-the-bottom-of-the-trunk” attestation. Yes, there had been quite a few really superior works come out of the bottom of that old trunk in recent years, no matter that they had rested in the bottom of the trunk for only ritual seconds after they had been completed. (If a forger neglects the

rituals, he is lost.) In honesty it must be said that these latter-day discoveries were better than anything that Schrock himself ever wrote.

“Oh what this Master Genius and Organizer could have done if only he had gone straight!” Constantine glowed out the words in admiration.

“Spare us,” one of the workman said, and he rolled his eyes. “The best detective in the world would be much better if he stayed off of stale remarks. Besides, the ‘straight way’ is greatly overrated; and, if you knock off the posthumous accruals, it pays hardly anything at all. Most of us here tried it, as did the Master himself. This pays so much better, and it offers so many more opportunities for creativity. In fact, the Master always refers to the work that we do here as ‘Traditional Context Creativity.’ There is nothing so beautifully ordered as forgery. And much better than the straight road is that beautifully sweeping curved road (we never call it the crooked road) where the really superior scenery is to be found.”

The Master Forger Angelo DiCyan came in the front door. It was exactly twelve o’clock noon. Angelo was winy and briny from a long night of it, and he almost looked wilted. But he took a scissors and snipped a very little bit off each side of his moustache, the amount the ends had grown in the last twenty-four hours. He discarded the red night rose that he was wearing and put on a yellow day rose. Then he was fresh again for a new day.

“I understood that you did not rise before noon,” Constantine said.

“I do not,” the Master said. “I rise now. The other that you see, that is a disreputable person who sometimes inhabits my body during the night hours. Quiche, I consider your coming here to be in the nature of an intrusion and aggression. Our free and easy air here is not meant to be breathed by detectives or other infidels, not even by the best detective in the world. Lay off me, Constantine! I have no time for your petty harassments. I have been working on something that is so big that it is completely beyond your reach.”

This Angelo DiCyan did have reputation and status. He had so much of them that he had sold incredible, newly discovered masterpieces as his own forgeries, because there had grown up so strong a market for his avowed forgeries. Among the forgers, that is status. But Constantine Quiche had his own status to maintain.

“No, man, no,” he told Angelo. “I do not harass you. We will not reach any accord this way. I want your good will. I want your cooperation. I want your help. I want your advice. I want your judgment. I want your fine appraisal. And my group will pay well for all services. And, if I cannot have these

things from you in genuine form, then I will accept your forgeries of them. They may serve even better.”

The Master Forger Angelo smiled a bit then. He appreciated the praise that Constantine heaped upon him. He led Constantine into other rooms secluded from the workshop.

“All right,” the Master said, “so long as you understand that it is a forgery of my good will and not my good will itself, then we can consult. But it will have to be very confidential. I cannot have it known that I am working with the right side of the law. Let us go into my inner rooms which are even more secure.”

“We *are* in your inner rooms. We have just come into them. How big, Angelo? That is my first question. How big a forgery could there be?”

“Oh, as big as the biggest figure that could be written on the biggest tab that the customer could lift. There is no other limit. I could forge this very world that we are on, and I could forge it convincingly enough for your most astute planet-buyer. All I would need is money enough for the project and a place to set my fulcrum.”

“Yes, all right,” Constantine said. “I didn’t know it could be done quite that big, and this isn’t a question of it. As big as a country or a realm, yes, but not as big as a world. Then there is the other part of the inquiry. How about a forgery—how shall I say this?—a forgery of which there is no original.”

“Oh, certainly, certainly, there are instances of that, Constantine. That is almost too easy sometimes. To do it best, one has to reject the ‘too-easy’ and ‘too-cheap’ solutions. Then you have really quality forgeries of which there are no material originals. This thing is difficult only because it places the forger on his honor, or at least on that forgery that he may delegate to serve as his honor. It is so hard to check it when there is nothing to check it by, and the commissioning of such a thing might be subject to abuse.

“And there is another detail which not-quite-master forgers sometimes overlook in doing forgeries-without-originals. There is one small thing that *must* be done. One *must* make a slight change in the world first: a silent, slight, adaptive change in the world itself so as to produce such a world as would accommodate this missing masterpiece. But we all of us change the world continually.

“Nor let us be misled by such a term as ‘missing original.’ That is not the same thing as ‘no original.’ I have in mind one of my own nearly perfect forgeries, the ‘Weeping Hermes of Praxiteles.’ I made this forgery of an

unavailable original. I made it very much as Praxiteles would have made it. And I made it as good as Praxiteles could have made it. The original had been the Landmark Greek Sculpture of the fourth century B.C., and I made it to be so. But I had already rambled through the mind of Praxiteles by means of many of his other sculptures, which is what made my forgery-without-an-original such a superior one. But it wasn't as if there *had never been* an original. There had been. I could study that missing masterpiece in its effect on all later works. I could study the written descriptions of it that have come down to us. Really, I already had the impression, as it were, from the mud in which it had lain. I had only to pour the mud mold full of molten marble.

“Incidentally, I *have* found the missing Praxiteles, the ‘Weeping Hermes’ itself, and I am ruddy foxed if I know what to do with it. It isn't as good as my version which is now accepted as the original. Even as one of my ‘authentic’ forgeries, it would lower my reputation a bit. But I will keep it a while, and then I will find a way to turn it to best advantage.

“But you are talking about the forgery of something that never was, and yet *could* have been?”

“Yes I am, Angelo,” Constantine said. “And perhaps that could-have-been context would have to be, maybe has already had to be, forged also.”

“Oh well, many things are able to grow their own contexts about them. Sometimes a thing will seem right for a while, and then it will seem just a bit wrong. Like yourself.”

“Like *myself*, Angelo?”

“Yes. Weren't you absolutely secure and sure of yourself as the best detective in the world for a while? And, in the last eighteen hours or so, haven't you come to feel that there was something just a little bit wrong with you in that role, with you in any role?”

“Yes, that's so, Angelo. What of it?”

“Maybe you here present are only a forgery of Constantine Quiche. Maybe *I* forged you.”

“An interesting idea. At least I would be a masterly forgery then.”

“You were speaking first, Constantine, about a very large forgery. And now you are speaking about a forgery without a corresponding original. I suppose that they belong to the same case?”

“Yes.”

“This costs money even to talk about, Constantine. Who is paying me to talk about it?”

“World Interpol.”

“Well, working for them would not necessarily put me on the side of law and order. I could salve myself by saying that it would put me on the side of the law and disorder, but I do not like disorder in any company, surely not in the company of the law. I really am for order all the way, and let the law go hang. Every real artist lives within the lines of order, and a forger must live within them still more strictly than any other. He is not *allowed* to slip. What is it that is to be forged, Constantine?”

“A country. That is what is to be forged, or is being forged, or perhaps was forged a long time ago. Or perhaps it falls into another case altogether and I am mistaken about it. It may be that there is no forgery. That is what I must find out.”

“A *country*, you say, Constantine?”

“Yes, a country, a realm, a commonwealth, a consensus monarchy headed up by an appointive tyrant in the present case. It is a commonwealth coexistent with a peninsula in our own Mediterranean, peninsula a little bit bigger than your Italy.

“A *country*, you said, Constantine. A *nation*?”

“Yes, Angelo. A master forger has surely heard of out-of-the-way set-ups before. I want to know whether this country is a valid original (which does not seem possible to me), or whether it is an outright forgery (and I believe it is), or whether it is something else that I have trouble even positing. I want to know how good a forgery it is, and how well it will stand up. I want to know where it has been and where it is going, either as forgery or original. I want to know who did it, and why.”

“Oh this is unfair, Constantine!” the Master Angelo wailed and he held his head in both his hands. “You present me with a staggering conception that would be absolutely paradise to any master forger, and in the same presentation you tell me that it may already have been done. I do not want it to be already done! I want to do it myself! To forge an entire country, what would I not give for that? Constantine, what is this all about?”

Was it possible that Angelo was protesting too much? With a forger, how do you tell?

“If you did not ‘sleep’ till noon, you would know, Angelo,” Constantine said. “It has been the wonder of the world this whole morning, I’m sure of that.”

Angelo the master went to a door leading into the workshops.

“Bring the journals,” he called to one of the men there. “Instantly, instantly, bring them.” And the noon journals, just out, were brought almost at once.

“Ah, ah, ah,” Angelo cried, reading and comprehending swiftly. “This is something out of the usual, Constantine. Let us go to my inner rooms and examine this situation more fully.”

“These *are* your inner rooms,” Constantine said.

“Oh, I suppose so, but in my mind I always picture myself as even richer than I really am, and as having suite after suite of rooms, each much more inner than the others.”

Angelo was through the journals then in a fury of activity.

“Ah, they treat of it with a sort of hysterical humor,” he said then after only about three minutes of cramming. “They are afraid yet to treat it any other way. The world, for six or seven hours now, has been in a state of suspended disbelief. There are no real facts here. There are no details. But the overall shape and color of it is here. Oh, is it not done boldly with a brave hand! I am eaten up with envy. Could even I, with every facility possible at hand, have done it so bravely? Or do I have a master and superior somewhere whom I have not even dreamed of?”

“Angelo,” Constantine said, “I believe that you are sufficiently acquainted with all aspects of the Mediterranean civilization and culture to give a balanced judgment here. You are the best man for it that I could think of. If it is not too big for even you to give a balanced judgment on—”

“Constantine, you committed a redundancy when you spoke of Mediterranean civilization and culture. To me, at least, there is no other of either. I am a member of the body of the Mediterranean achievement and I know its flavor. No, I do not believe that it is too big to give a judgment on. It would be only (or perhaps it was) a medium-sized province of the Roman Empire. We will not be intimidated by size. Give me unlimited funds. And give me (just to have an interval to refer to) about four years to make the preliminary survey. Then, perhaps, we can go more deeply into it.”

“Perhaps we are inextricably deep into it already,” Constantine said. “I would like to have the survey and appraisal made today, as early today as possible. I am not sure that even today will be allowed to run its full course.”

““There shall be new lands and rumors of new lands, but the end is not yet,”” Angelo quoted. “Let us not be intimidated by the *speed* of events. The peaceful, perhaps overly peaceful arrival of the new land does not seem to constitute an attack. Sandaliotis has claimed Monaco as an intrinsic part of

its country, but there hasn't been any blood shed there yet, in spite of several flags being run up and pulled down again. In fact, such a peaceful surprise appearance seems to break all the teeth out of a surprise *attack*. The surprise is all gone now. If it is a danger, then it is no longer a quick danger. Anything that could have set down a three-hundred-mile-long peninsula in the middle of the Mediterranean could have done almost any damage that it wished. I am a forger and I like to consider forgery in everything. But first let us consider whether this may be genuine, and not a forgery at all.

“There is the real possibility that the place has been there all the time. There have been elites all the time. There have been hidden-knowledge people all the time, illuminati and cognoscenti and intelligentsia. And there has been real substance to some of these people in spite of the puppet types with which they have surrounded themselves for purposes of camouflage. And there has always been a sort of national resemblance among the high esoterics.

“Why should they not have had their own homeland? And, as to the fund of hidden knowledge itself, well one of the earliest pieces of hidden knowledge to be encountered, in whatever context, is always the knowledge of invisibility and the manipulation of it on a selective basis. Oh yes, the land could have been there all the time, invisible except to the initiated and the intelligent. But, in that case, why was it invisible to me, for I have always been both?”

“Ah, there is also the mystery of the ships and the boats and the fishes,” Constantine said.

“Oh, that may not have been too much of a mystery. Ships stay to their own routes, and boats ply their own territories. There is a close-mouthedness about Mediterranean fishermen. There have always been wide areas where they would not go. ‘No fish there,’ they always say, but some of us on the peripheries of the areas can see the sea leaping with fish. On another hand, there are areas in the Mediterranean, areas strangely corresponding to Sandaliotis on one of those hasty maps there, where *there aren't any fish*. Constantine, I have a strong suspicion that there isn't any water there either, though there appears to be. You know that the other side of invisibility is always *seeing something that isn't there*. If you don't see something, then you must see something else in place of it, even if it is colorless background. As to the fish themselves, the Mediterranean has great quantities of blind and

confused fish that are like fish that have been swimming in huge underground pools and are strangers to the light.

“(By the way, I have forged fish, Constantine. I have forged nine ponds full of fish for certain country lords in my own Italy here. They are alive, and they swim. They are organic, and they look like fish. And they are forged. Remind me to tell you about it sometime.)

“As to the selective invisibility, I have learned a little bit of that myself. As one who often operates outside the law, this has been quite necessary to me. When you yourself once had my establishment searched, I made many incriminating objects invisible, objects that were involved in my forgeries. And there are objects in this room right now that you cannot see because I will not let you see them. Well, even the strongest and most adept mind couldn't make an entire country invisible, or make a functionally invisible country visible either, but a few million minds brought into close concert might do it.”

“How about context, Angelo? You said that many things are able to grow their own contexts about them. Does it seem to you that Sandaliotis has done this?”

“Yes, very much so. It is growing or projecting its own context, or it is making apparent the ‘has-always-been’ context into which it fits. There is a rush of connectives and coincidences into my mind as though a flood dam had broken. Yes, already I am *remembering* Sandaliotis, and I am remembering its relationships with other parts of the Mediterranean world, from archaic to modern times. I am, all at once, understanding and interpreting hundreds of cryptic references to it, from Strabo to Chesterton. I can already think, for instance, of the names of ninety famous mirages and weather hallucinations in the region whose names are plays on the name ‘Sandaliotis’, and I can see a common source to even more distant names and a common source to widely scattered phenomena.

“(By the way, I forged a mirage once. It wasn't too difficult. All it took was a directed temperature inversion and an optical counterflux.)

“I now find Sandaliotis as a recurring idea in nursery rimes, and in old collections of riddles. A nonsense line of Rabelais suddenly makes punning sense about Sandaliotis. I find it as a recurring fugue in music, and as a recurring landscape-syndrome in pictorial art. I believe that every great public building in Sandaliotis had been painted in our own art and has heretofore remained unidentified there. These are six pictures of great

Sandaliotis buildings in the noon journals here, and I recognize every one of them as appearing in Italian art. This thing is almost explosive the way it touches off connectives. It has been there a long time in one form or another.”

“Well, shall we go look at it, Angelo? I do value your opinion as to its authenticity. And if it is a forgery on a giant scale, who would recognize that part of it so quickly as yourself?”

“It doesn’t matter, Constantine, whether we go now or later. For a while yet, I can see it as well internally here as I could see it if we went to it. But it would seem more as if I were working for my money if we went. If you want to go there, we will go.”

“Yes, I very much want to go there,” Constantine said. “There are so many pieces to this that we just have to be there to make out their pattern.”

They went to the port. They bought tickets for the next flight to Ichnusa, the Capital of Sandaliotis. There was a ready way to check on one aspect of this slippery reality right now. Angelo DiCyan questioned and found that this was a regularly scheduled flight and not a new flight at all. There were records still at the ticket desk that showed that the flight had been made the day before, and the day before that, and the day before that also, the flights made on days before anyone had ever heard of the city. But nobody there had a *positive* memory of those flights being made, in spite of the fact that they were in the record.

“I will hit their literature of the various arts,” Angelo said while they were in flight. (Constantine had told him about the amazing library in North Town, and they speculated that the one in Ichnusa, the capital, would be even better.) “I know that you have done some of this, but there are parts of it that you wouldn’t even know where to look for. I will read their accounts of the various *forgeries* in those arts. In the accounts of the forgers, I would look in particular for one name, my own. In France or in Spain or in Italy or in England or in the Netherlands or in the States, my name does appear as that of the great art forger. If Sandaliotis has truly been a part of the community of nations, they will know my name there also.”

And Angelo whistled the second chorus of ‘Oh mention my name in Sandaliotis.’ It seemed to be the new song of the day, for people in the plane, and for the real-estate agents and other visitors going there.

“Do not concentrate so entirely on the arts,” Constantine said. “Our clues and our keys will most likely be found outside the field of the arts.”

“My dear man, *nothing* is outside the field of the arts,” Angelo DiCyan argued. “‘The Arts’ is just a way of looking at things, the right way of it. Of no substance whatever can you say ‘This is in the field of the arts’ or ‘This is not in the field of the arts.’ And as to the Commonwealth of Sandaliotis, whether it is a forgery or whether it is a contingency or whether it is a fact, it is still sheer art in every function and process of it. Being of the Mediterranean world, it cannot be bad art, even if it is faked art.

“The clouds, the clouds, I never saw them acting so perversely. What are they hiding?” Angelo said then.

“What? Which?” Constantine asked.

“The whole array of them from north sky to south sky, that length of cloud, and that length, and that one again, and the thunderheads in the several places of them. They are like children grouping in groups to hide something among them. I have these fancies sometimes, Constantine. It really seems as if the clouds are hiding something.”

(Sometimes this man Angelo seemed like a man skimming clay pigeons up in the air to see what fire they would draw. He seemed so now. Constantine suspected what it was that the clouds were conspiring to conceal. Did Angelo?)

They saw from the air why the Mediterranean was an especially bright and shimmering sea, in contrast to many others. The quickened lands combine with the sun to be light sources of the seas, and this Sandaliotis was ideal for it. There was never a land so suffused with light and so reflecting of light. There seemed to be light *within* the green transparency of its meadows.

They came down at Ichnusa, the capital of Sandaliotis, and they came down into an urban dazzle. We think of ancient Mediterranean cities as things of white or ivory or gray stones, magnificent yes, but not quite overflowing with life and color. We forget that in their own times, those great buildings were brightly painted, just as the great statue-stones were. But the cities of Sandaliotis were still in their own time, and the stones of Ichnusa actually shouted and bled with the bright colors of them.

Constantine and Angelo took a swift carriage to the Arts Palace where Angelo believed he might best begin his investigations. “What genius! What genius!” Angelo glowed at the city as they rode through it. “I am on fire with envy. Why was I not directing this great thing? And yet, how could I improve it? Oh, here and there I could. But that, that, I would never even have thought of it.”

There were signs of youth and even of childishness around. Grown persons, for instance, were blowing soap bubbles, huge and gaudy, as they walked along.

“Are you capable of such forgery as that, if it is forgery?” Constantine asked.

“I am,” said Angelo, “and I myself am a secret soap-bubble blower. I always carry a pipe and a jar of bubble mix in my pocket, but I blow the bubbles only when unobserved. I will blow them openly from hence on.”

Angelo popped a pill and offered one to Constantine.

“Take one,” he said. “There is nothing like them in nervous situations where you may be subject to various sorts of invasions. They will counteract all mind-numbing devices, and all infusions that unhinge the limbs and will. Hold it under your tongue and forget about it. It will last for many hours. It will give you twelve hour protection against ordinary invasions.”

“I always prefer to trust to my own wits,” Constantine said.

“I wouldn’t, not with yours,” Angelo told him. “I’m scarce willing to trust to my own sometimes.”

“What is the pill? Who made it?” Constantine asked.

“I made it,” Angelo said. “It is my original forgery of Doctor Korkolon’s controversial Guardsman Pill. Mine works. His doesn’t.”

Constantine took one of the pills and put it under his tongue and forgot about it. It was just one o’clock in the afternoon. Constantine did not go into the Arts Palace. It was too beautiful outside.

There was the great sweep of the Italian Stairs down the eastern slope from the Arts Palace, a flight of steps that was a hundred meters wide and three hundred steps down, made out of dazzling hundred-color painted and natural stone. The flight of steps had every sort of pop shop on it. It also had ten thousand bench loungers and step loungers who all belonged to the beautiful people. People as scenery, the concept surpassed itself with the loungers here.

Or north was the great basilica. At the bottom of the great flight of steps were the Ninety-Nine Fountains of Nekros and their reflecting pools. And still east of the fountains was the Roman Circus where thirteen different streets fed into the great circle. In the green pedestrian island inside the great circle was the Tarshish Tower with its great thirteen-faced clock. If one should stand at the foot of the Tarshish Tower, so local belief had it, sooner or later he would see every person in the world pass by. And if he should

close his eyes and count to thirteen while he was standing at the foot of that tower, he would, at the count of thirteen (how childlike and naive are the Sandalisticists in some things!), be kissed by a fair one of the opposite sex.

CHAPTER FIVE

The best detective in the world closed his eyes and counted to thirteen. After all, if the best forger in the world could be a soap-bubble blower, could not the best detective in the world play kissing games like a kid?

He was kissed. Oh, by what sort of creature though. He felt the needle punctures, but they were more common than not with kisses nowadays. He opened his eyes. It was Amelia Lilac, the agent of sorts, from England. She was, as always, wrapped in her own shadow or mist. On her, it went well.

“Oh my heart, oh my air, oh my day!” Amelia said.

“Needles are unfriendly, Amelia,” Constantine said. “The quick needling like that destroys trust.”

“Oh no, it was only a love potion,” she said, “to bind you to me. Sandaliotis is more medieval and more Italian even than Italy, and should it not have love potions a dozen times a day?”

“I should have kept Angelo with me a bit longer,” Constantine said. “He might have been able to tell me whether you were a forgery. Are you, Amelia? Are you genuine, or are you a fake?”

“Oh, Angelo!” she said. “He is the fake. But whatever I am, I am still a work of art. Who else can do such things with her own shadow? You will notice now, Constantine, that you are very slightly paralyzed in limbs and volition, and your motions will be just a little bit slow and blurred. So will your brains be. You will be amenable. But, as a compensation, you will be suffused by an euphoria. Is it not pleasant, Constantine? Oh, the love potion was in the needle also, but we must never forget our baser business as well. And now you will come with me. Quickly, quickly, Constantine. You will take the place of someone else, and that someone else will be yourself, the storied best detective in the world. You look so like him. You will call him your ‘nephew’ if you ever happen to meet his mortal remains, but now you are himself. In this we do things for others, and we do things for ourselves. We will now insert you into a production. Try to handle it, dear. It is a very nice dramatic role. Then we will lift changed elements of you out of that production again for other use. Are we not devious? Come along.”

Was Constantine Quiche compelled to go along with Amelia Lilac in her lavender cloud, or did he go along with her willingly in the thought that she was as good a current clue as was at hand? Oh, there was some compulsion to it. Constantine often felt himself compelled to go that first crooked mile with a beautiful woman. As to being slightly paralyzed in limbs and volition, it may well be that Constantine was always so. He was never as free as he wished to be. He was always inhibited. But he could outleap and outrun the next hundred men he would see, in spite of that slight paralysis of limbs and body. And he could outthink and outwill many persons half his age or twice his age, in spite of the slight paralysis of his volition. He wasn't as paralyzed as most people are. And he had always seemed to be amenable, and he had never been quite so, nor was he now.

Did the forgery by Angelo of the Doctor Korkolon controversial Guardsman Pill help at all? Yes it did. It helped immeasurably. It contained the needle assault pretty handily, and it might yet prove the factor to keep Constantine all in one piece.

"I am worried about my new and splendid car that I left in Civita do Nord this morning," Constantine told Amelia. "I am in love with that splendid car."

"And I was jealous that you loved that car more than me. But there is not enough of it left to worry about now, and there are only small nostalgic remnants surviving of it for you to be in love with," Amelia said in her lilac-colored voice. "We did not know for sure where you had gone, you see (you have been 'belled' by this latest injection, but apparently an earlier one had failed), nor when you would be back, if at all. But, if you did come back to your car, we wanted to have a welcome for you. So we gooney-trapped it. And we had to do it again and again every hour. Children would come around and caress the car and get in it, and of course they would be killed by the explosion. We used 'Baited Breath' on it so that we could hardly stay away from it ourselves when we had finished trapping it. And I doubt if you would be able to stay away from it either if you caught even one whiff of it. If you had come back to North Town, you would have been killed at the car just as the children were. We would set the traps again, and the young people would come by once more to ogle it and to play with it. And they in turn would be killed, just as the earlier bunches had been. If I mistake me not, it has just blown up once more (this makes six times in all) and killed only a single person this time. I tell you though, if you'd come back to your car, we'd have had you, Constantine. Not that we don't have you now."

“If you can kill me any time you wish, and in so many different ways, then why am I still alive?”

“Differences of opinion on how best to use you, and changes of mind. We are setting you down as a nothing person, and then we have to change from that. Be a nothing person, Constantine, if you want to stay alive. We go into this building here. It is called the Dungeons of Tertullian. Did you know that Tertullian was a Sandaliotite?”

“He gives them a bad name then,” Constantine said. “I do not go in here. I am following another inclination to another place.”

“A test of strength, is it, Constantine?” Amelia asked. “You fail it then.” She went into the building named the Dungeons of Tertullian and she did not look back. Constantine followed her in. He did not absolutely have to follow her, but he was inclined to it. He wished to set the impression that he was more amenable than he really was. And he hadn’t any other particular goal. Besides he was intrigued by some of the signs there. “We create realities.” “We are making the world you will live in, right now.” “Illusive Illusions for every Need.” “How deep is your need for Punishment? Come see us in the Tertullian Dungeons.” “The Word can be made Flesh, Yours.” He could not resist those things. Besides, Amelia might lead him to the place where the bodies were buried.

There was always something a little bit graveyardish about that violet cloud that enveloped her. Amelia had the air of being a very beautiful woman, but it was a thick air that one could hardly see through. Constantine wanted to go where the clues and the answers grew in the thickest clusters, and that might well be in this building named the Dungeons of Tertullian. There was a waiting period when he went in though.

Constantine was putting things together easily and naturally in his mind now. He recollected several of the Sandaliotis maps that he had engraved on his memory and his eyeballs that day. There had been minor details on those maps that now assumed major importance. There were six major east-west canals on some of the maps. And there were the notations of the negative elevations.

Canals, canals, the great traverse canals. There were those six major canals in the three-hundred-mile length of the peninsula. Really, the ships could set routes that would coincide with these canals, and they would be inconvenienced hardly at all. What does determine routes anyhow? The easiest way. They will stay clear of rocks or spits of land or shallows, they

will stay clear of shoals or trick currents or of the nests of storms. Ships can be herded into certain narrow paths by little tricks of rocks and shallows; these things will be like dogs snapping at their hulls and keeping them on the narrow course. A little section of shallows can be as effective as a great section of a lowering peninsula in this; and what if they coincide?

With the canals, or with the consensus routes which might be on the same course, ships could still go freely from any part of Spain or any part of France to any part of Italy or Greece or Africa, and they would not really have to go out of their way. And they need not even know that the Big Land was there, no, not if the captain and the navigator and the pilot and all the lookouts and crewmen were all blind at the same time: or if the Big Land itself happened to be sulky or invisible.

And those negative elevations as given in those small red letters and numbers on those maps were tricky. They were not, in fact, simply called “negative elevations.” It seemed more as if they had been called “normally apparent negative elevations” of so many feet or fathoms. But what would their elevations really be?

Oh, to the observation of some persons, they would be so many feet under sea level, safe and out of the way, deep-sunken lands. But then there were the small black letters and numbers that gave the real elevations (real to whom?), and these were positive figures (above sea level, so many feet or fathoms). There should have been something illegal about this duality.

Suddenly, inside the building called the Dungeons of Tertullian, Constantine Quiche was seized by a pair of powerful men so forcefully that his arms were nearly unsocketed by the assault. (The waiting period had ended.) He was dragged, carried, hauled into a room that was more dismal than most of them, and he was set down before a forged Inquisitor. (There was a buzzing noise that he could not account for.)

Before a forged Inquisitor? Yes. A true Inquisitor may be known by his towering look of justice untempered by anything, even by mercy. But a false Inquisitor will have a crumbling-tower look, and he will show tempered stone all through the structure. It will not be tempered by justice, but it will be tempered by every sort of inconsistency, and there will be no predicting such a person. Run away from him if you can.

But Constantine could not. This was no amenability that kept him there, no paralysis of the limbs or volition. It was the constraint of strong men. And this forged Inquisitor was far below the level of the other persons that

Constantine had seen on Sandaliotis, and well below the level of the strong men and the others who were there.

The forged Inquisitor was blindfolded. Oh yes, that gave a little similarity to the image of “Justice.” From the lobules of the Inquisitor’s ears there dangled little pendants. On each of these was the small hammer, anvil, and stirrup, all broken. And here also were replicas of the three semi-circular canals, all blocked by miniature rock slides. These pendants indicated that not only was the Inquisitor deaf, but that he also had his sense of balance destroyed, for these were all effigies of things in the inner ear.

The forged Inquisitor was talking harshly and inanely, and Constantine did not understand him perfectly. He had an unctuous and false use of the simple tongue. When one loses the sense of balance and becomes a stumbler, the tongue also stumbles or stammers. And one who has been blinded will also sometimes talk blind. The Inquisitor had a mechanical way of talking, and in fact he was reading his words, with his fingers, from a small panel in front of him where the words were projected in raised form, a paragraph at a time. There was something all too vicarious and coldly evil about it.

“Your mother should be condemned for uttering a forgery!” Constantine said angrily. That, at least, should get under the skin of the forged Inquisitor. And that false man did flush, deaf though he was, but he plowed on through his talk. That insult would hurt Constantine here, but he had no patience with forged people or situations.

“Do not think that, because there is no good nor evil, that there is no guilt or punishment,” the Inquisitor said. “The latter two things we must have forever. ‘In the Beginning was the Guilt’ is the scripture that we follow, ‘and the World was created to be a Dungeon for the punishment of that Guilt.’ If we did not believe that, we would not believe anything. You are guilty, that is the premise. And you must be punished, that is the conclusion.”

The buzzing noise that Constantine had been hearing was a camera, but why were such inanities being transcribed and filmed?

“What am I guilty of?” Constantine asked the blinded and deafed and unbalanced man.

“We will put you into the dread clock room of the Tertullian Dungeons,” the Inquisitor was saying, not answering Constantine whom he had not heard), “and we will strap you to the dank wall there, almost, but not quite out of the reach of the rats. There will be a noose around your neck, and your own guilt will be in your heart. We will torture you from time to time. And, if

your sentenced hanging does not come first, in two days or three you will die from the torture. There is only one alternative for you: that you make a full confession.”

“Oh all right then,” Constantine said. “I’ll make a full confession.”

The deaf-man Inquisitor could not hear the little bell that rang on his prompter’s panel, but he could feel the vibration of it with his fingers. He waited for the engraved words to appear under his hands.

“Really?” the Inquisitor asked then, reading the words with his fingers. “This is almost unprecedented. All the other prisoners, brave and heroic even in their error, sternly refused to confess and went to their deaths still refusing.”

“Better to live one hour as a red-corballed gross hawk than to die for a thousand years as a lesser speckled monk hatch!” Constantine spoke as bravely as had any other who had ever been before the Inquisitor, and he banged his palm on the table so vehemently that the strong men tightened their grips on him to the point of acute pain. But both the blind-and-deaf Inquisitor and his prompter’s panel felt and understood the blow.

“Well said,” the Inquisitor acknowledged, reading with his fingers, and yet there was something uneasy about that man. “Yes, yes, I suppose that what you have just said is true,” he continued to finger read, “although we are not able to place that proverb in its context right at the moment. Well, proceed with your full confession, though I doubt that it will be accepted. We already know, as the saying goes, more about you than you know about yourselves.”

“I will fully confess that I don’t have any idea what is going on here at all,” Constantine said. “I will confess that I was never so confused and without a lead in my life. I will confess my ignorance of all the prime facts of this case, and I will confess my inability to construct any theory at all to account for it. Does that constitute a full enough confession for you?”

The Inquisitor drummed for a moment with his fingers, waiting for the words to come, and they came.

“No,” the Inquisitor read them with his fingers then. “Ignorant of the facts or not, you have got yourself right into the middle of the facts. You have got yourself into this situation, and there were countless ways that you could have avoided it. It is yourself who has put your own neck into the noose, which noose you will encounter in almost a matter of seconds. Every man who gets into such a positively outrageous situation is responsible for it,

since it isn't done that easily. Why are you on Sandaliotis? Why do you interfere?"

"I am here because it is part of my assignment to be here," Constantine said. "I am here, I suppose, to find out why Sandaliotis is here."

And the engraved words were coming up under the fingers of the blind-deaf-man Inquisitor a little bit more rapidly now.

"Then why were you near Sandaliotis last night when our land, to the vulgar apperception, was not here yet? Why were you trying to find out why Sandaliotis was here when it wasn't? If you were not guilty of malfeasance, you could not have known that it *would be* here. Man, you are digging your own grave with your own mouth, and do you think that you can undig it with a toy confession? Why were you near the northern canals last night?"

"I don't know, forgie, I just don't know," Constantine said. "By my own instructions, I was there to keep the Principality of Monaco from being stolen. But I had no instructions to keep your land from appearing. Quite the contrary, my latest instructions are to keep you here. By the way, would you tell me just how it is managed that—?"

"I will tell you nothing," the forged Inquisitor read the words that had come up under his fingers so instantly as to startle him. "It is not I who offered to make a full confession," he read. "Can you give us a good reason why you should not be put to the torture in the clock room?"

"Yes. A very good reason. I wouldn't like it," Constantine said.

"*You* wouldn't like it?" the forged Inquisitor intoned after a very short while. He really did read quite well, from the engraved panel, in a theatrical sort of way. "But *we* would like it. *I* would like it. Such things are the very blood and bones to us. I would like it, and I win over you there. Men, to the clock room with him! Put him to the torture!"

Oh, they dragged him down dank passages and broken stairways, where the walls were dripping with saltpeter and moist death, down and around, and perhaps through some of the same passages more than once. Cameras were grinding and clicking. Records and films were being made of this. Why were they? Who was keeping count of all this insane injustice and farce?

They seemed to come into the clock room or torture room of the Tertullian Dungeons through the roof of it, by a dangling ladder let down there, a ladder that went through, or quite beside the giant eye that was the roof of it. It was pretty dark within, but the outlines could be made out by pale ghostly lights, and by the aid of the other senses. There was an awful tearing and crunching

sound from the floor, and there were the fear stench of the other men in the room. Their locations, nailed or strapped to the walls, were clearly given by their stench and by their moanings.

The clock room was in the shape of a perfect triskaidekahedron, a thirteen-sided figure. On each of the thirteen sides there was a large clock, high up, with illuminated numbers. The numbers and hands of those great clocks gave almost all the light there was in that room. This room seemed to be a mockery of the Tarshish Tower, with the thirteen clock faces here turned inward.

Each victim, pierced and transfixed to the wall (Constantine, taking the place of another person who had been removed from the wall and dropped to the crunching floor, had become the thirteenth victim) was held there a prisoner on the oozing and saltpeterish surface, strapped by straps and chained by chains, and it was so arranged that he could not see his own clock above his head, that he could not see his own snake, that he could not see his own light. But the other twelve clocks he could see, the other twelve snakes, and the other twelve lights.

Constantine was strapped in a dangling position with ankle straps, crotch straps, chest straps, and wrist straps. And a noose was put around his neck. The bitter end of the noose rope was tied (so at least it seemed by looking at the other ropes and clocks for Constantine could not see his own), was tied to the minute hand of the clock above him. When this minute hand ascended to the next hour, the pull of the rope would strangle the victim to death. Or, it seemed in some cases, that there were other levers and reductions and gears about the clocks where a man could be strangled in an hour, or possibly in a day, or even several days. Such cases as Constantine could observe, however, indicated that most of the fellow victims would die with him at about the stroke of the next hour.

Oh that panoramic eye in the ceiling of the room, that eye that was the ceiling of the room, was it necessary that it should hum and chatter like that? Are giant panoramic eyes always so noisy?

At this particular moment, a few minutes after one o'clock in the afternoon, the noises did not put any great strain on the victims. Constantine scanned his twelve fellow victims, a mixed crew that was mostly on the disreputable side, and he was shocked at the tension and pathos in the faces. Pain and the fear of death commonly wipes nobility off of faces and leaves a brokenness in place of it. It is not easy to retain the noble look when there are no viewers

except that humming eye. Were there many and sympathetic viewers, it would be much easier to die nobly.

But the victim with the most agonized face of them all was talking in a calm and easy, though raspy, voice. Constantine, as an amateur psychologist, knew that this was a sure sign of psychosis, the horribly tense features disassociated from the easy and careless voice.

“The death hour, the ghostly hour, the witching hour, it is not at midnight,” old agony-face was discoursing with his unnerving calmness; and the rats were crunching down on the floor below. No need to ask what they were crunching on. It was the body, not quite dead yet, of the man that Constantine had replaced in the straps of the thirteenth niche. The man clearly had his neck broken, but he still moaned and complained. Rats were doing away with his lips and his jaw muscles, and they would soon be to his tongue and through his throat; and then he would moan and complain no more.

“That hour does not come at calm midnight,” the agony-faced man was saying. “Where is there any weirdness at peaceful and sleepful midnight? All climaxes come at the very opposite hour to midnight, at high noon. But that is not the death hour either. It is at high noon, yes, that the devil is unleashed (‘The noonday devil in the noonday heat,’ as the poetess wrote), but he goes roaring about the world for more than two hours after that. This runs it into the dangerous and evil part of the day.”

This agony-faced, calm-voiced man was on Constantine’s left, and Constantine, alive to the clock analogy, had dubbed him The One O’clock Man.

“There are more murders committed at two o’clock in the afternoon than at any other time,” Agony-Face was continuing in his easy raspy voice. (He sounded as though he had cheered too much at the games somewhere yesterday.) “There are more suicides at two o’clock in the afternoon. There are more people who enter hell at that hour, for which reason those auxiliary side doors are opened then that at other times are kept closed. There is a maximum of sin at two o’clock in the afternoon. That is the hour of betrayals and cheatings, of embezzlements and frauds, of dishonesties and infidelities. It is the hour when people, seized with the passion of evil, turn and choose damnation by free choice. It is the hour at which twelve of us hanging here will die today. Why not all thirteen of us? I confess I do not know that.

“In well-run countries it is the hour at which felons are hanged. In this ill-run country it is the hour when innocent men are hanged. I am an innocent

man, and I will cry to heaven against my fate from now till that hour comes. The Inquisitor has said that there is a special insulation in the ceiling of this thirteen-sided room that prevents cries raised towards Heaven from escaping from here, from ascending beyond that ceiling. If this is true, then all is lost. I know about the death hour though. Is it for this knowing that they are going to kill me?"

Constantine himself looked up at the ceiling in the dark and he heard the sound and sensed the big panoramic eye. Well, not much could ascend beyond that big eye. It would block out anything going up. It was a baleful eye, and not the eye of Heaven.

Was the agony-faced man, the One O'clock Man, mad, Constantine wondered. The contorting of the face with the calmness and monotony of his voice indicated that he might be. But then Constantine noticed something that he had not noticed of any of them before. The agony-faced man had been reading his words in his calm voice. There was the hushed glow of a prompter's box, of thirteen of them.

In that darkened, thirteen-sided room, the numbers of the big clocks were illuminated, and their sweeping hands also. The only other lights in the room, besides very small signal lights above the head of each victim, came from the radium-glow eyes of the rats down on the earthen floor. But these eerie illuminations were sufficient to give a rough idea of the appearance of the fellow victims there, very rough, very rugged, and with most of the finer pieces left out of them.

The rats on the floor, while still completely covering the slowly diminishing body of the last victim like a seething blanket, did also (some of them) leap at the thirteen victims strapped in their places on the wall. They got them with slashing assault in the feet often, and the victims would roar out in anger and pain. The shoes of the other twelve victims were already slashed to pieces. And those of Constantine, the last and the thirteenth of the men to be strapped there, were half in ruins, and their ruin would soon be total.

But Constantine, that best detective in the world, had been noticing things that others might miss. He had been considering that something was possibly just a little bit wrong with those rats, that their behavior was not quite that of excited rats at all, that it was the behavior of excited machines. But, stumbling onto this thing as he did, he had a shock of them in their new

aspect; they were worse than savage and slashing rats. They were more unnatural. Some of the leaping rats, at least, were mechanical.

The Two O’Clock Man, the second man to the left of Constantine, was talking about the rats now.

“On this cursed world,” he croaked out, “every leading person has a rat who is the slashing extension of his soul. It is for this reason that the leading persons are able to appear so noble: their baser parts go out of them and into the rats whenever they most wish to appear grand. Do they hunger for the unclean food that they might not eat openly? Then they roil and stir here in their rat persons and feed on the bodies of their dying victims, for our flesh becomes uncleansed by our suffering and death. Do the leaders lust for those perversions and infidelities that they may not show in public? They will show them here then, in their rat forms, for there is nothing so perverted and faithless as a rat.”

The Two O’clock Man roared and howled then, in sudden pain and rage.

“Ah, I burned your ears, did I, rat? And I have your vile slashing in answer to my truth?” he cried, and he kicked it and some shredded portions of his own toes loose from his foot. “Why, it is the evil rat of the Tyrant of Sandalotis himself! It is the rat of our beloved and appointed Tyrant. And here are the rats of the Security Chief, and of the Master of Elevations, and of the Advocate Judge, and the Arbiter of Culture, and the Madame Dowager First Minister of the Realm, and of the Supervisor of the Traverse Canals. Here is the rat of the Ildephonse of Ideologies and of the Polycrates of Planning. Oh, writhe, you rats. I know about rats. Is it for this that they kill me?”

What was there in the heart of Constantine Quiche that called out “Forgery! Forgery!” at this whole business? What was it that insisted that this was the wrong side of reality? Oh, Angelo DiCyan The Master Forger should be with them here now to brand this whole thing as a superior forgery, or an inferior; to commend it or to dispraise it. It was that baleful panoramic eye in the ceiling of the thirteen-sided room that gave the whole thing the fetid air of reality-gone-wrong.

“There are only two answers, two alternatives,” the Seven O’Clock Man was bawling out as if he were a huckster calling apples on a corner. “There is the Adoration of the Sky-Bomb and the payment of tribute to the Minions of the Bomb. Or there is Annihilation. There is nothing else for the peoples of Earth. In either case, this will be, happily, the end of the Earth as we have

known it. Once the shadow of the Sky-Bomb has fallen on Earth, then Earth has become the Slave. It may be either the living slave or the dead slave, however. This is the choice that we have. Let us choose to be living slaves.

“Oh, Sky-Bomb, remember me who gave testimony in your favor, when you come into your own! Remember me, if that is possible, very very soon, within the hour if that may be!”

The suffering victims were reading the words off of little prompter’s panels that were somehow set before their eyes. This made the circumstances and the messages more and not less sinister, just as the mechanical rats had seemed more sinister there, in a sudden flash, than real rats were. These were last cries of agony, and they had to come off of prompter’s cards because the speaking souls of the victims were shut up and mute.

“I am the Annihilation and the Dark!” the Nine O’Clock Man suddenly howled out from his place on the wall. It was not even his time to give testimony. The panoramic eye had to groan and wheeze a little bit to concentrate on the Nine O’Clock Man. There were thirteen men, crucified as it were, spread and strapped to the walls, thirteen men to die on this grove of thirteen hanging trees in this room. Thirteen men to be hanged there: but which one of them would it be who would hang himself and then fall down from his hanging, and then burst himself asunder in the middle?

“I am the Annihilation and the Dark!” the Nine O’Clock Man cried again. “It is for this that they kill me.” This seemed to be the only message that the Nine O’Clock Man was going to give, and it wasn’t the message that was intended for him. His little prompters’ panel rattled in front of his eyes with the correct message, but he was blind-eyed and turned within.

As Constantine’s eyes became more accustomed to the devouring darkness of the room, they could pick out the faintly luminescent snakes, writhing and nailed to the rotten stone walls above the heads of the victims, each one showing, in the flickering lettering that ran along his flakey skin, the superscription of each of the victims who were to be hanged. Each man would be able to read the superscriptions of all the others (in a minute he would be able to, in a minute yet, when his eyes like screw worms had augured their way further into the darkness): but he would never be able to read his own superscription or to know the name under which he was to be hanged.

“Forgery! Forgery!” called the interior warning to Constantine again, but where was the forgery? There was no scrimping, there was no short-changing

here. There must have been thirty thousand fierce rats there, mechanical and real, filling the large room to the depth of a meter with a horrifying and murderous mass. But a mere thirty rats would have done almost as well for quick effect.

There was an excessive verisimilitude about the nooses that now began to tighten about the necks of the victims as 1:30 was past on the clock faces and the minute hands began to ascend towards two o'clock and death. That was not cheap-effect forgery. That was very strong-effect forgery, if it was forgery at all. And, yes, above the snake and below the clock, on the moisture-rotted wall above each victim, there was a small red light like the single red eye of the illyx-dragon. While each victim lived, his light would burn with its very small and very intense blood-glow. And when that blood light went out, it would be a sign that its victim was dead.

Forgery, perhaps. But strong and evocatively dramatic forgery is what it was.

The Three O'Clock Man was speaking with a hollow and croaking voice. He was reading his words from his prompters' box and reading them well.

"I am a patriot," he said with his croaking voice full of pride. "I am sworn to love and defend my land forever and to give testimony to the trueness of it. My oath and my support are absolutely constant. It is the inconstancy of my land before the world that worries me. The old justifications and promises that were once given for my land are no longer given, and belief in them has dwindled. It is said that they are myths. They are attacked by the persons who attack the first promises of scripture, and they are attacked by the same weapons, the gentle incredulity, the superiority of attitude, that appear to a secular authority and consensus which is really as empty as it is imposing, all those base things that are known as the higher criticism. And the false guardians of my land have put me into this prison because they say that I am disruptive, because I say that the great promises are true and not myths.

"It was when Our Lord Himself faced the array of nations and appointed them all that they should do, at the time of His going, that my nation was given its place of 'Incandescent Waiting.' 'Lord, about that Nation there,' said the longest-nosed of all the nations, and it was none other than Italy, our neighbor across the eastern gulf, 'What is it appointed to that nation to do?' And Italy pointed the nose and finger at Holy Sandaliotis herself. 'If I will have her remain until I come, what is that to thee?' the Lord asked.

“It was not said that nothing should be appointed to Sandaliotis: very many things have been appointed to her. But, most of all, it was intended that Sandaliotis should be a Land-in-Reserve, that it should be a guardian against the famine, that it should be a guardian against the future, that it should be a preservation-fire at which torches might be rekindled when all other torches had gone out. ‘But if the fire itself lose its spark, how shall it be rekindled?’

“But it does not work that way entirely,” the Three O’Clock Man went on. (His prompters’ panel had chattered a little bit sometimes, indicating that he was departing from his written lines here and there.) “What is reserved in my land now is a very sharp evil as well as a sharp good. There are germs and viruses of all the old plagues and contagions and heresies still viable here, still on reserve here. There are shattering ideas still in seed form, and if they ever reach soil and water the world may be ill lost over them. These shattering thoughts must not be allowed to be thought at all. I have things in me that are very critical and momentous to say at this time, and there is an impediment in me that will not allow me to say them. ‘You will notice now that you are very slightly paralyzed in limb and tongue and will,’ a betrayer told me. ‘You will be amenable,’ I was told, ‘but, as a compensation, you will be suffused with an euphoria. Is that not pleasant?’ No, it is *not* pleasant, because I will not let it be. The paralysis of limbs and tongue and volition was induced in me by a needled kiss. That is the same kiss that was given to Our Lord on His last night, and He also was slightly paralyzed in limbs and tongue and volition until His death. He also became amenable. You have wondered how it came about that He, who was nowhere else amenable to an evil, now became amenable unto death? It was the cursed kiss that did it, the kiss with the built-in needle or snake’s tooth. But the one who gave the kiss will fail even at being hanged, and will fall down a distance and will then burst asunder in the middle.”

Constantine had a sudden high, comic vision of Amelia Lilac failing at hanging herself, and falling down in a sharp and slanting place, and bursting asunder. Oh, that was a pleasant and illuminating little vision! Amelia was a creature of puzzling beauty, but what thing more apt and beautifully just than this could happen to her?

“But He rejected the euphoria!” the patriot, the Three O’Clock Man said. “He was not amenable unto that pleasure and accommodation. Nor am I. The agony of my death is necessary for the resurrection of my country. If there is

no sharp-enough agony in the world, then mine will help to sharpen it to the critical point. I am the patriot forever, and it is for this that they will kill me.”

A snicker of mechanism, a creaking of ropes. Constantine Quiche was suddenly filled with a stifling fear. And so, he supposed, were the other victims. The Three O’Clock Man, in fact, had finished his exhortation with a curdling scream, as if taken by more than ordinary pain and apprehension.

The nooses were all tightened by a quantum as the minute hands of the big clocks swung upwards. Now was the time of the palpitations and the shortened breath, and for the phantoms that always accompany a strangling. Now was the time of the vile sweat and of the fear trembling that releases its own stench.

“Is there any pain like my pain!” the Six O’Clock Man burst out with a really shaking sharpness of voice which the noose prevented from becoming of sufficient power for other than compromised effect. “It is as if the ‘brothers’ had asked the Lord ‘Appoint it that our pain may be more heroic than the pains of any of the others. Appoint it that we may sit on the two thrones of pain on Thy right hand and on Thy left.’ But it does not work out like that. There is nothing heroic about really excessive pain. It is the sick clown who comes out of the great pain, and his motley is a deformity. Others have received the plaudits for their noble pain and have gone away in the nimbus of regard and applause.

“And then, when the show is over and the lights have been dimmed, the real pain begins for those who were never much in the bright light and bright regard, the deforming and grinding and degrading pain that is bad show and bad death, and it becomes in its extreme bad intent and bad effect.

“Is there any pain like my pain? I would hope that nobody else falls so low into so base an expression and reception. It disgraces all the nobility of pain that came to the noble persons before. They must be got off-show before the horror pain begins.”

All of them knew that this Six O’Clock Man was right, and their own strangling pain was deforming and grinding and degrading and destroying any grace or reason.

“Do you know that one of us thirteen is to be killed by an ‘accident’?” the Eleven O’Clock Man cried out in new alarm as if he had just received that new information. And he had. But his prompters’ box was clicking like an insect, as these were not words that it had given him. “By that ‘accident,’ this

will become an outstanding scene, perhaps outstanding enough to win the grand prize.

“But this is wrong and it should not be so. The proportion is all wrong, and the thing itself is wrong. The ‘accident’ has been cleared in advance with an element of the local law. And then persons will explain away the ‘accident’, the death. It was only a theatrical device, they will say, and no more than that. And the percentage of deaths of this sort in spectacles has been very low. It is as if they should say that they were entitled to have this one particular death, since the statistics owe them more than one death already. But the one who dies for it will be truly dead. It is wrong for a real person to have to die to give effect to a scene. It is the least known of us who will be killed by the ‘accident.’ But I am very little known. It may be that it is for this that they will kill me.”

One of them to be killed by a contrived accident? Or all of them to be killed on purpose? Or how many of them to be killed by legal sentencing? And how many of them would be killed by sentencing that was a little bit less than legal?

Now they were all a bunch of wolves nailed up to a fence as an example to other wolves. They expired there, and they gave out with their howlings as they expired.

“*I am no patriot!*” the Four O’Clock Man howled like one of those frothy wolves. “I know the secret that carries me through all of this. You can put a stick of wood in my dying mouth to bite on, and that stick will turn black and will smoke when I bite it. That is for hate. My secret is that there is more passion in hating than in love, and that it is more sustaining. And, moreover, hate comes into the mode more often, and it is in now. So I will hate. This is the power and the machinery that every hater has to use: that it is the antilove that can bring the mutual destruction when the opposites meet; and that hate does not care whether it is destroyed and dies the death, so long as its opposite is also destroyed. So it is that hate is always triumphant. Mine is the antireason and the antiaction and the antithought and the antilove. It is our tactic that we take over every good name and use it, and no one else can use it after we have finished with it. We are respected, and we are the inventors of respect. And we are the destroyers who always work outside the lines and bring the lines and the order into disrepute. We make strong intonational attacks on ‘stale legalisms,’ and on ‘institutionalisms’ and ‘establishments,’ and we are the most absolute establishment of them all. We are mad, and we

brag that we are mad, that we are not of the orthodoxy, not of the reaction, not of the stale accountability.

“And yet we are an accountability, for we keep count. The mutual annihilation of the primaries and of the ‘antis’ (ourselves) is what we work for. But there must be something of us left over after the destruction, or at least there must be nothing left over of them. The moment we reach the assurance that there will be nothing left over of them, that is the moment when we precipitate the mutual annihilation, antimatter against matter, antipeople against people, antireason against reason, perfidy against faith, destruction against conserving. We have sworn our allegiance to annihilation, so how can we lose? When we are on the side of total loss, then there is no losing for us in any contest. I am an antipatriot forever, an antiworldite, an antiuniversite. And it is for those things that I believe that they will *not* kill me. Do they kill their own? Perhaps they will kill one person here by ‘accident.’ Perhaps they will sham the death of another one, and not effect it, and that one will be myself. But, if I have to go, I believe that I will be able to take one or more of the others with me. We have that agreement.”

Oh God save us all from the strangling death! The nooses were tightened by another quantum, and life shrank accordingly. There was the small pin-lighted prompter’s box that dangled down before Constantine’s eyes sometimes. It was for his eyes only. It could not even be seen by the big panoramic eye that was set into the ceiling of the thirteen-sided room.

Constantine knew that he was supposed to read the words of the prompter’s box, to speak them out with a tortured eloquence. And he would not do it. He knew that his refusing to say the illumined words created an embarrassment and an awkwardness, and he was sorry for that. But he remained silent.

The Five O’Clock Man spoke in his stead.

“I am an ‘agent,’” the Five O’Clock Man said from his crucified prominence. “You may have seen Zucconi’s great painting ‘The Deserted Agent.’ He had caught the unutterable abandonment well. It is the essence of an ‘agent’ that he be mysterious. He cannot even go across the street for cigarettes without making a great production out of it. He will call for Turkish cigarettes that are not in common stock, and he will be abusive. And, of course, there will be secret messages on the papers of almost every cigarette in that package when he finally gets it. The ‘agent’ will go in a trench coat and a pulled-down hat on the warmest days, and he will carry an

electric flash at bright noon. He is so mysterious that he does not understand himself or his own purpose. But he must rotate about a primary somewhere or he has no reason for being at all. There has to be this unquestioned service to some distant luminary or all his life is in vain.

“Oh, but when the word comes that the primary has disappeared or been destroyed, then the ‘agent’ is desolate. He can still put the fang on others and say ‘You are now slightly paralyzed in limbs and tongue and volition; and you will be amenable.’ But what of himself when he loses his primary, or when (Oh, this cannot be, and yet it is the present case), when he forgets what his primary is, when he suffers the amnesia of person and purpose? It is because I have become the ‘Deserted Agent’ that they will kill me now.”

The glow lights (between the snakes and the clocks) had gone out above the heads of several of the victims, which indicated that those persons were dead. Some of the victims made a big fuss about dying, and some of them did it in the most amenable fashion. There was a sort of rend and crack and snap concurrent with the light going out on the Seven O’Clock Man. His straps had broken, or perhaps they had already been cut, and he fell from his supports, and the noose broke his neck. This was the death by ‘accident.’ But others were being extinguished on purpose. A man could not see his own indicator light, but (as Constantine discovered at the very last moment) he could see the reflection of that glow on something, perhaps from the snake’s eyes. At the very last minute he discovered this. Then that reflection went out. He knew that his own light had gone out and that he was dead.

CHAPTER SIX

And after death, the judgment.

The judgment was held in a rather cool recovery room.

“Your imposing silence was rather good, Frenchman,” the Director was saying, “just as your earlier ‘full confession’ to the Inquisitor was a new twist. You are too good to be an actor without a card, too good to be a walk-on. We will make out a yellow card for you. A yellow card is better than no card at all with actors’ union. And, if you will give us no details on yourself, we will not push you overmuch. We will find out what we want to know about you, but we will not find it out from you.” The voice of this Director was all sounding brass and tinkling cymbals.

“You killed one of the ‘victims’ by ‘accident,’” Constantine charged.

“One of the actors died by unfortunate accident, yes, but I did not kill him. Those were very strenuous roles, as you must know. I believe that he killed himself by putting himself so vehemently into the scene. It did give a masterly turn to the scene, however; perhaps masterly enough to win the grand prize for scenes this year. I should have won it last year but I was done out of it by block voting.

“But you yourself created a special role by your silence under torture, Frenchman. You created the role of the mysterious Thirteen O’Clock Man. And, really, the words that were written for you were not the best of the lot. Well, I’ll not waste them. I’ll use them in something or other, perhaps in a sequel. But could there be a true sequel, do you think, to such a strong movie as this one ‘The Thirteen-Sided Room’? We have been working on this very well, and I believe that the death scenes were the best of all. We will see, we will see. Your expressions were wonderful. We caught you in up-shadow and down-shadow and in darkness.

“And your face, yes, I had told you that you had to do something about that shallow face of yours. There wasn’t enough landscape to it to pick up the dim lights in the dungeon torture sequences. But you did do something about your face. I’ll never know how you did it unless you tell me. You gave depth to your face. You gave it dramatic depth.”

Constantine Quiche didn't entirely understand this film director. He had not talked to this director before. He had not been told that he must do something about the shallowness of his face. And the voice was compounded a bit by the voice of that 'agent' Amelia Lilac resounding in his brain. "Dummy, the accident was supposed to happen to you and you botched it. You were the one supposed to be killed in that scene. You actually took the man's attention by your incompetence. You couldn't even gather your wits enough to read your lines off of the prompter's panel, and he thought that made you seem mysterious. Well, no harm done. We help him and he helps us, and he needed another utility actor. We'll get you killed some other way if we don't change our minds again. We'll find another place to stick you in within a few minutes. Meanwhile, be amenable. And remember that you are still slightly paralyzed in limbs and tongue and wits."

And the film director was talking as if Constantine had worked for him before, and he hadn't. And now that Director of that masterpiece-in-progress "The Thirteen-Sided Room" was saying something else that didn't quite fit in.

"We had a little flurry a bit ago," said this director who looked as if *both* of his eyes were glass. "It was a police call that said that you had been found murdered in your lodging house room. This gave me a little start, especially since I had just selected you (I may as well be frank about this) for the role of the man who was to be killed by 'accident.' It was this call, and the sudden hunch I had that I had better be able to produce you live if there was already a wild report of your death, as well as the interesting silent performance that you gave as the Thirteen O'Clock Man, that made me decide that you should not be the one to die by 'accident.' In fact, if things got sticky, and they are a very little bit sticky even now, it seemed like a good idea to be able to produce you, not only live and well, but also with friendly inclinations towards myself. Cigar, Frenchman? Drink? It's very good stock. Ah, we'd better do something about that rope burn on your neck. Then we will go over to your room to see who it is that's dead in your place while wearing a face very similar to your own. I find it sometimes helpful to show a little patience when dealing with various sorts of police. They are an excitable breed."

Constantine was in a hole and he couldn't think of any way out of it. He smoked a cigar and drank a wine-and-tar drink, and suffered unguent to be put on the rope burn on his neck and on chafings where the various straps had held him to the wall in the thirteen-sided room. About this lodging-house

room that was supposed to be his, he didn't know where that was. About the person with a face very like his own, well, his appearance wasn't really extraordinary. Lots of men looked a little bit like him. But he didn't know at all whom he had been taken for: someone the Director here had been talking to previously, apparently, since he was called about the death. Who would know this stuff? Possibly Amelia knew. Possibly it was all an accident or a coincidence. Whatever person had been found dead in the lodging-house room was probably the person who lived there. That was the opinion of the best detective in the world.

He had the feeling that it was a very chancy thing to get mixed up with another dead person (there was the person he had killed in Marseilles the night before; there was the person killed by "accident" in the scene just filmed, and Constantine might still make an issue of that). Constantine had a temptation to break and run for it: but he seemed to stand high with the movie director who now carried the police citation in his hand. And he was used to working with police in whatever town or land. The Director seemed to feel that it was all a routine matter, and perhaps deaths were more routine on Sandaliotis.

They went in a quick carriage. They arrived rapidly at a poor building in a poor street, by Sandaliotis standards at least. They went in, and the police had it all under control. In an upstairs room, there was a good-looking man sitting at a table alone (but there was a dinner setting opposite him, and someone had been dining with him). The man had been shot to death, or anyhow he had been done in by a contusing and blood-letting instrument of some sort. Constantine guessed that it had been of an ungel or melting bullet sort. Very possibly no shot would be found in the man, and that was getting common in the new killings.

The man did look quite like Constantine Quiche. He looked impossibly like him, in fact. Constantine knew that people were waiting for him to say something, but what could he say?

There was an odor almost too slight to deserve that name. It clung about the place of the missing diner. One could hardly be sure to which sense this clinging thing appealed. It may even have been the sense of sight. Possibly it was a light fog or mist rather than an odor.

Constantine had the untenable feeling that Sandaliotis was somehow a parallel world to Earth and that this dead man was somehow a parallel person to himself, even that this *was* himself. Constantine felt shrunken by the

death and by the feeling that a part of himself had gone now. Well, but he had to preserve whatever was left of himself here.

“We have identified him by his fingerprints as Constantine Quiche,” one of the police told Constantine. “We know him by reputation. His reputation is that of the best detective in the world.”

“You have identified him by his *fingerprints* as Constantine Quiche?” Constantine asked, hardly bothering to throw anything over the nakedness of his wonder.

“Yes, Mr. Chataigneraie,” the policeman said to Constantine, “by his fingerprints. World Interpol gave us the information quickly. You two are of absolutely identical appearance, yet you do not have the same surname? You are not full brothers then or twins?”

“No, not brothers,” Constantine said. “He is my nephew, although we are the same age. I am not sure what name he has been going under. I did not even know that he was—that is to say that I did not know that he was in any trouble, and surely not that he was in any trouble that would lead to his being killed.”

No, it was not true that the dead man looked exactly like Constantine. He had a face that was slightly, very slightly, shallower than that of Constantine. Constantine was sure of this now, but none of the others seemed to notice it. They all commented that the appearances were identical.

And yet the Director had noticed it *once*. He had, in fact, told this man that he would have to do something about his too-shallow face, that it didn't pick up light and shadow well enough.

But did the Director realize the relationship now and know that he had talked to them both? Who could say what that Director realized?

“Why are you so nervous?” one of the policemen asked Constantine. “I have not seen so nervous a man all this day. Are all Frenchmen as nervous as yourself?”

“Believe me, we are a people who can get awful nervous awful fast,” Constantine said. “But, ah, really there is not much to tell.” Then Constantine motioned that policeman to follow him, and they went off together a little space away and talked together. And then they came back.

“Has he been staying with you here?” that policeman asked when he and Constantine had returned.

“No. I have not been in touch with him, not for several weeks,” Constantine said. “But we were always quite good friends. And, in fact, he

always carried a key to the door of my rooms here.”

Constantine felt that he had to throw that in, to explain the man’s having been there and having been enough at home there to have a guest for dinner. But he wished now that he had tried some other tack and had said, for instance, that these weren’t his rooms at all and that he knew nothing about this dead man. But all of it was blown when the policeman asked:

“What *is* a key to the door of rooms?”

Then Constantine knew what had been a little bit different about all the doors of all the buildings that he had seen on Sandaliotis. They had no keyholes or locks and they could not have been locked in an ordinary way. Well, what does one say to explain that he hadn’t noticed that this was a country without locks, and that he had just plain put his foot in it? But the policeman didn’t pursue the question of what was a key to a door.

“We must ask you to leave for a while, Mr. Chataigneraie,” the policeman said.

“They keep calling me that, I had better accept it,” Constantine mused. “It is as good a name as any, and it is no doubt the name of the poor dead man there. What kind of cops are these anyhow? There are a dozen things that would point out that this is not my place, though I never claimed that it was. There are a dozen things that would point out that this is the dead man’s place and that he was very much at home in it. Ah, and there is one thing, the fingerprints, that point out that he is me. I wonder whose fingerprints I am wearing now.”

“We must ask you to leave for a while,” the policeman repeated as Constantine did not seem to be paying attention to him. “We want to go over your rooms minutely and you would be in the way here while we do it. Step out please. Go have a few wines or something. Do not come back here within one hour, and two hours would be better.”

Yes, it was a very slight odor where the missing diner had sat, and a very very slight remnant of fog or mist, lavender or lilac in color, and right on the threshold of visibility. And who do we know who is always wrapped in lilac fog?

“Yes, two hours would be better,” Constantine said. He felt that he had gotten a reprieve from a sticky situation. This was all tricky, but Constantine would have to handle himself with foresight and creativity and dignity. “I will be available, of course,” he said, “and now I wish to be alone with my grief.”

“What grief?” the policeman asked. “Oh, I understand, you mean for your nephew. But he is only second degree of kindred, and grief is felt only for those of the first degree. Or is this somehow Frenchy?”

Constantine went out from the rooms of the dead man who had a shallower face than Constantine’s own but who otherwise looked quite like him. He went out, and he came to Joe Primavera’s wine-fine. He felt himself to be followed, so he went in there. He thought that he would drink and shuffle out his thoughts there. But the movie director came in also (he had been the one following) so thoughts would be a little bit hooded. There would be more talk from the Director. He liked to talk in his sounding brass voice.

It was just eighteen minutes after two o’clock in the afternoon.

“There is a possibility that the ‘Thirteen-Sided Room’ will be in trouble for being too true,” the Director said after they had ordered wine. “You see, I believe that there really is a thirteen-sided room in this city, in a dungeon that has a name very like ‘The Dungeons of Tertullian.’ I run into this everywhere on Sandaliotis, that the things I believe I am creating out of my head are things that have been lying in wait in the very ground, things that are at the very roots of Sandaliotis. The Dungeons of Tertullian which I have rented on a short-term lease were once a part of a complex known as Amusement Central, a little pleasure park with entertainments in the middle of the city. I projected back to consider whether these toy dungeons built there to amuse the kiddies might not have real origins. As I come to the close of my work on the picture, I am haunted by those real origins and I know that they are here.

“Now the fact is that the Sandaliotistics are the least cruel people in the world. That is what puts such a shivery touch into it when one examines their hidden tales of dungeons and torture chambers. It is as if the dungeons were natural things like caves and were not built at all, and as if the torture were also a natural response with not much more connection to the *people* involved in it than have the weeds of the Earth. On Sandaliotis, I cannot come up with any creative concept at all without something bursting up from the black earth of this country, and looking and seeing that my concept had been buried and waiting here all the time.

“Every people, even the best of people, has a riven soul, and a consciousness above and an unconsciousness below. It has a garden of bright creatures, and it has a garden of demons under them. It has the bright mansions above, and the dark caves below. This is common. However, as is the case with old Thalassocracies or ocean kingdoms such as Crete,

Sandaliotis has its national unconscious under-ocean rather than underground. That unconscious lives in submarine rather than subterranean caves. So I believe that the original dungeons were submarine ones. In the Tertullian Dungeons of the old amusement park, you might see, when the lights are on as they seldom are, that the walls are ocean painted to represent sea plants and sea fish and depths.

“Then there is the Sandaliotis euphemism for drowning (with the Sandaliotistics it seems to require an euphemism), ‘Hanged with a rope of water.’ I believe that in the original dungeons that water-cocks were opened by the clocks and that the men impaled on the walls were drowned.”

“You are not a citizen of Sandaliotis?” Constantine asked.

“No, of course not. Who ever heard of a Sandaliotistic movie director? I come here from Italy. And there are many things about Sandaliotis that I do not understand at all.”

“There are very, very many things that I do not understand,” Constantine said.

“Oh, but you’re French. I’m different. I should be able to understand. So, when I do a picture like the ‘Thirteen-Sided Room’ I do not mean to dabble in the local politics or to make cryptic references to such. I don’t even know where their politics lives at, or whether they even have that thing that I call politics.

“What I do is create and direct psychological thrillers with a heavy historic and folklore underlay. I am very good at this. I try to do these pictures as cheaply as possible: how cheap I can do them is one measure of how good I am in this business. That is one reason why I come to Sandaliotis. The scenes are already all here and set up, and the actors are already all here and ready to act. Nowhere is there such scenery on beautiful Sandaliotis; town or country, it has no equal. And the people here are all natural actors. They are not capable of any artificial or awkward movement or disposition. And they are vivid, that is the main thing. I could watch them doing nothing forever: walking, talking, lounging. And so, I have discovered, can most of the rest of the world. These people pull the eyes right out of your head looking at them. They project drama in everything that they do. I don’t know why this is so, since most of their doings, when analyzed, prove to be pretty prosaic. But these are the people with the dramatic gestures, and they are beautiful people. You have noticed that? Oh, they are wonderful.

“And they are intelligent. They can learn their lines quickly, and they can improvise. And their language, it has become the language of psychological thrillers everywhere, with nobody noticing that it has taken over. People who deny that there is any such land as Sandaliotis will understand and talk the language of this country and believe that they are understanding and talking their own. It is positively pentecostal. The Italians, the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Ladinos all fall into this, and even the French. Even the non romance barbarians of the north seem to understand it easily, for they flock to the movies and find no difficulty at all to it. Can you imagine having to dub in anything for Sandaliotis? Even the Japanese say that they do not need dubs. They understand, and all the peoples seem to understand, the multcadences and multimeanings that these people give to the most simple lines that I write.

“But of course it is the medium as well as the tongue. I believe that all really good psychological thrillers, such as my own, can be comprehended (and I do mean the words of them) because of the movement and impact. This is an hypnotic and perhaps a telepathic thing. I have often recommended psychological thrillers as a means of teaching languages.

“Everything is scenic on Sandaliotis, and the people especially. The towns and countrysides here are almost too good to believe in. ‘Who took the frames away?’ I find myself asking, for every scene that I encounter here is like a hugely adequate theatre scene, or at least a painted masterpiece. And the plots and turns are rooted right in the black earth here and in the colored buildings. Did you know that many of them, even those of the most painted appearance, are of natural-colored rocks? The peninsula here is made out of a mad color box. It is fantastic. There is contrivance, there is device, there is construction in everything. But the place itself, the country and the cities, the people themselves, how shall we take them? This is a garden of prototypes in everything, a garden of creativity.”

“Director, you are like that also. Above ground you are brass sunshine and brass chatter, and an arty appreciation of everything. And underground, or underwater, you are the grotesque and fishy cruelty. Why did you deliberately kill a man in that scene in the ‘Thirteen-Sided Room’?” Constantine was hot about this.

“I did not do that,” the Director said. “Am I such a beast? Or such a devil fish? I simply let the odds operate. In our thrillers, we play some very dangerous scenes, and we have not had as many deaths as we should have statistically.”

“Who sets and appraises the statistics?” Constantine asked.

“I do,” the Director said. “So, being ahead of the odds, we have a certain freedom to operate. We borrow an ‘accident.’ Well, accidents do happen, and there is no way out of that. We hate accidents, but we do not hate the dramatic value of them. It must be there when you want it though. If an accident is overlong in coming, it causes tension all around. So we have that accident now when it is convenient to us and to our thriller-in-progress. We do not wait for it to pounce on us at a possibly inconvenient time.”

“You take the accidental out of the accident,” Constantine said. “And you kill a man and justify it with a statistical manipulation. And possibly you will win the grand prize for the most effective scene this year. I was the one you would have killed, for an effective scene, you had not settled on another with a change of mind.”

“But I did not settle on another,” the Director said. “It was another creature, over which I have no control, that settled on that other rather than on yourself. Should I take the blame for a thing when I can put that blame on an ungainly bird? You were the one to whom the accident was apparently going to happen, yes. And then that ungainly bird named ‘accident’ (but can anything on Sandaliotis be called ungainly?), that bird hovered over you, but he did not alight on your neck. Instead, the bird veered off and alighted on another person. And that other person died of accident. But there was never any question of our ‘killing’ anyone. Do you not understand that, Frenchman? A Sandaliotic would understand it.”

Constantine made a sign with his hand to a person not clearly seen: and that person went to do his bidding, apparently. This was most strange, for Constantine knew very few persons on Sandaliotis.

“I don’t believe that a person of Sandaliotis would understand such a reasoning or justification at all,” Constantine said then. “They are beautifully direct.”

“Not always,” the Director said. “Sometimes they are beautifully devious people, when you look at their devious side. And they are a totally naive people when you look at their naïve side. They are the bright surface people who just happen to have big cellars stocked with ‘everything in reserve.’ Pick what you want, and they have it. What I pick is deviousness. Oh, I have become a slanted one since I have been here! One draws whatever he wishes right out of this earth. It pulls out easily for the earth is always moist and subterraneously irrigated. And what are these people really like? I don’t

know. You find in them what you look for. They are mirrors. How can I see them without myself getting in the way of it all? I cannot decide whether these people are absolutely guileless or whether they are the most conniving people in the world.”

“Need they be the one or the other?” Constantine asked. “It would seem that a devious man like yourself would not look for absolutes. Need they be the absolutely most guileless, or the absolutely most conniving?”

“Yes, I believe that they do need to be the one or the other,” the Director said. “For my own purpose, creative psychological thrillers, they have to have these absolutes in them, perhaps both of the absolutes at once, but not blended. I am a devious man who must work with absolutes. Both my mind and my thrillers are built out of them. In such things, I need an expert to tell me what is forgery or what is genuine. I will not necessarily select the one above the other, but I want to know which is which.”

“I know that expert,” Constantine said. “But I don’t need an expert to tell me that you are a forgery.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” the Director cried, holding up his hand. “I don’t know what kind of French fish you have turned into, but suddenly you have the power to do me a harm. I feel such things. Wait and let me explain why you should not do this. Let me explain what will go out of the world if you prevent me in my creations.”

“Quickly then, explain it,” Constantine said, “for the feet of your jailers are even now at the door.”

“Fine old melodrama is what I offer,” the Director stated. “I provide better melodrama than anyone else in the world, fuller, juicier, more popular. I give stronger emotions than anyone else in the world; and people love to experience strong emotions. Some of them experience vicariously and some of them directly.

“People maintain the myth that they are hard working and much abused, and that their requirements and needs are very few. People, as a fact, are not very hard working, and they are not very much abused. Mostly they have a pretty easy time of it. But they are right that their requirements and needs are few. These few cannot be reduced, however. There is a hard minimum that cannot be broken. That is what I cater to. It is what someone always must cater to if things are to hold their course.

“People have the need to feel important, which need functions as the inverse square of their *being* important. They have the need for something to

abuse, for something to be superior to, and for something to hate. And the most important of these is something to hate.”

“You are not an Italian,” Constantine said, as if to change the subject.

“For some years I have lived in Italy, yes,” the Director insisted. “When I am not at work or at play in some other places, then I am probably in Italy. Now, man, I provide in my melodramas, in my psychological thrillers, in my smashers, just this minimum of things that the people must have. If the people do not have them, they will turn sullen, and then they will explode.

“When, for instance, I show thirteen men in the agony of death on the walls of the thirteen-sided room, I give the people something to feel important about; for they play at being God, looking through the God’s-eye of the panoramic camera in the ceiling of the room. There is the need of something to abuse, something to feel superior to, something to hate. All these things are satisfied by the writhing creatures stretched out on the dank walls where they babble out their brains in rambling words as they die. All my dramas are very therapeutic. If something should happen to interrupt this beautiful flow of thrillers, then I would not guarantee what would happen to the people of the world. The people are already getting tense and jerky. Some of the people would certainly explode. If enough of them explode, the world goes with them. What I really provide are adventuresome safety valves.”

“You are a little world saver indeed,” Constantine said, “but you are not genuine. You are a forgery. And here are the people now who will deal with you as a forger and murderer and breaker of every law.”

“Oh, Frenchman, you close me down for a few ‘accidents’ that give the people what they want to see!” the Director wailed. “The laborer is deserving of his hire, and the creator of his tools of creation. It is a judicious thing that one man should die for a scene. He stands for a hundred, and we save lives by it. You will take all the joy out of my creations and out of the world. You will take all the verve and spontaneity out of the world.”

The police came in then and took the Director away, but he was not dampened at all by it. He was always a cheerful man, that one.

How had Constantine engineered that little business? Oh, by being the best detective in the world. That’s about all it takes. And by being part of World Interpol. That counts too, if you give the sign to another person who also is part of World Interpol. World Interpol has men on every police force everywhere nowadays.

“You know what the Thirteen-Sided Room really is, don’t you?” Joe Primavera, the proprietor of the wine-fine, asked Constantine when the police had gone with the director. “I heard the Director speak of his picture of that name.”

“No, I don’t know these levels of meaning,” Constantine confessed. “I have never heard of the Thirteen-Sided Room until today.”

“It is the Sandaliotis national epic,” the wine man said. “It contains all our drama and all our poetry and all our music, and all our stories and all our genealogy and all our history. And you are about to ask whether the version that the Director is filming is accurate?”

“It is an accurate version to about the extent that one flinder of hardened mud is a version of the Earth. The Director’s version is part of the depiction of one of the 6,227,020,800 permutations of the epic. There are that many scenes to the epic. These are all the simultaneous combinations of the thirteen persons in the thirteen places or roles.”

“The thirteen persons, are they Christ and the Apostles?” Constantine asked.

“Very often they are. Though the Divine Person, taking also sometimes the role of the Father and sometimes that of the Holy Ghost, and of other of the ‘Persons’ who are adhered to in the more attenuated heresies, will play each of the thirteen positions or roles in turn, while each of the other twelve beings is in each combination to each of the others. In fact, each person plays each role about a half billion times while all the others are ringing all possible changes. There are multiple depths to all the persons, not merely to the Divine Person.

“As you know, the real zodiac, the Sandaliotis zodiac, has thirteen units or constellations, and thirteen positions. That is the true and holy zodiac. The other, the false zodiac, leaves out the Divine Person, so it is called the Infidel or the Devil’s zodiac, and Christians may not employ it or calculate upon it. The false zodiac was cast out of Heaven at the same time that Lucifer was cast out, and for the same reason: that it was incomplete. As you know, Lucifer fell first into Sandaliotis, which is said to be in the shape of his sandal. Then he fell on through the bottom. The crater he fell through is still in our land, and one may look down into the pit there.”

“Especially in the complete arrangement of the National Epic, there would seem to be a lot of death speeches and a lot of crucifixions,” Constantine said.

“Oh no, they are only a small part of it,” Joe Primavera told him. “All the scenes are not death scenes or even sad scenes. The majority of them are gala. There are only a few death scenes and only a few crucifixions. Trees serve for many other things besides crucifixions. The very earliest name of the epic, as you may not know, is ‘The Room of the Thirteen Trees.’”

“What other things do trees serve for?” Constantine asked.

“Trees are for climbing, for fowling, for taking nuts or fruits or bee honey from them, or taking game animals. They are for reigning as from thrones, for watching as from watchtowers, for declaiming as from stages or forums. They are for cutting timber out of, for tapping turpentine or syrup, for trimming for ships’ masts, for riving as for roof beams. They are for visiting with tree spirits. They are for ascending from on space flights. All these uses are in the epic. There are a number of reasons to be in a tree other than to be crucified there.”

“What happened to the Lords of the False Zodiac when it was thrown down to Earth, down to Sandaliotis?”

“They’re still here. That’s all in the epic too. The giant crab, the giant bull, the giant ram, the giant water pourer, the giant twins, they are among the living prodigies of our land and are still found on our hills.”

“The Director, he is not an Italian.”

“Oh, he was born here on Sandaliotis, whatever he says. But now he is a citizen of the floating world, being now an Italian, now Greek, now Japanese, now Egyptian, now Spanish, now French. He is an opportunist and he will have a profitable time of it even in prison, where he will not be for longer than an hour.”

“Do you suppose that he killed my ‘nephew’?”

“No, but perhaps he believes that he had it done. It was really done by a dolphin. Your ‘nephew’ was as curious about things as you are yourself. As to the details, nobody knows them yet. Your ‘nephew’ was at first the best detective in the world. Now he is dead and you become the best detective in the world, though you thought you were so before. As the best detective in the world, you will be able to figure this out.”

Three other men came into the wine-fine then.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The three other men who came into the wine-fine of Joe Primavera were Angelo DiCyan, the Master Forger from Salerno in Italy, Troy Islander the ship owner and importer-exporter from Civita do Nord in Sandaliotis, and Hugh Najtingalo the mine operator whose headquarters were right there in the City of Ichnusa of Sandaliotis. These three arrivals found themselves at once in the congenial company of Joe Primavera, the proprietor, and of Constantine Quiche, the best detective in the world.

It was just five minutes after three o'clock in the afternoon when these five persons fell to at a table over boar and snails and barley bread and good red wine. Joe Primavera's wine-fine was the best such place in Sandaliotis or indeed in the world, and himself and his four guests shaped up to a superior tableful, even for those fine premises.

"Oh the air is full of crackling wits!" Joe said, but he often said that to encourage people.

"I want information," Constantine told them all bluntly. "I want information that only intelligent persons can give, and I find myself in intelligent company. The question I want to ask of each of you is 'What is the nose on your face like?' My whole day is ruined if I don't get some clear answers to this."

"Of plain noses on unplain faces," said Hugh Najtingalo, "there is always a problem. A person cannot easily see the nose on his own face. I have an idea that it was placed exactly where it is so that he will *not* see it. And feeling it with his hands will not give a clear idea of it either. The old phrase 'as plain as the nose on your face' means 'not plain at all.' Which nose are you talking about, Constantine Quiche?"

"I am talking about Sandaliotis, gentlemen," Constantine said. "I have an assignment that consists partly of finding out just what is going on here on Sandaliotis. Three of you, Primavera, Islander, and Najtingalo, are citizens of Sandaliotis, and you have to know something about this place where you have spent your lives, this place which is closer to you than nose itself.

Where has it been? Why is it here now? In what way is it different from other lands? Is it real, or is it contrived?"

"I suppose that it does indicate something that Sandaliotis has been made manifest and visible to all the world today," Troy Islander said, "but I'm a little lost as to what it does indicate. It's as though a multitude of people should begin to shout 'We can see the color violet! We can see violet!' To those who could always see violet, the world doesn't shake much at this announcement. To us who could always see Sandaliotis, or almost always, nothing much has happened except that certain foreigners have recovered from a queer eye disease. And we may resent the undue attention to this. It's our own nose on our own face, and we might resent having it twisted."

"But haven't you been puzzled that large numbers of foreigners have not ordinarily been able to see your country?" Constantine asked.

"As to myself," Islander said, "large numbers of foreigners have puzzled me in steeper ways than this little failure to see the obvious. Large numbers of foreigners are clear mad."

"But all you Sandaliotistics can see Sandaliotis all the time, can you?" Constantine kept asking. "That is important. Recall it clearly, I ask you. Can all of you really see Sandaliotis all the time?"

"No, I can't," Najtingalo admitted. "Most of the time I can, but not all the time. It may have bothered me as a child, I'm not sure of that. It may be a fact that all of us had these gaps in seeing our country when we were children, before we learned to compensate for it. It's possible that seeing Sandaliotis all the time, or almost all the time, is a learned convention. I believe that it is. The missing land is noticed more out in the country at my mines than in the cities. I have discovered that there are very many of my workers who do not see the country even as well as I do. There will be days when hardly half of the miners will be able to find the mines that they have been working in every day. 'They aren't there today,' they will say. 'We can't find them. We could work them if we could find them. The land they are on isn't there.' And they are sincere when they report such difficulties.

"And when I hear some of the most susceptible of them mention on a certain day 'The land is *in* this morning', to me it is no more than if they should say 'It's foggy today' or 'There's snow.' I don't pay a lot of attention to what goes on outside my place. If a few of my mines can't be mined when 'The land is out,' well then that is allowed for. I will have a mine, for

instance, that can be worked only a hundred and eighty days a year because, to the majority of my workers, that's all the days it is *there*."

"And I don't pay a lot of attention to what goes on outside of my place," said Joe Primavera, "except just for the loafers' bench out there and the two tables that I set up on the sidewalks. But there will be days when it is so 'foggy' that I can't see across the street. It won't seem to be foggy though. It will just seem that there isn't any other side of the street.

"And then there are the days when I step out and whoooo! It ends up right there, a meter from my door. Not even a guard rail! I'm going to put one up, I swear. I'll put one up tomorrow just to be safe the next time it happens. There will be space before me and below me, clouds drifting below me, and an open ocean far below me, eight hundred meters or so below me. And directly under my shop, no more than ten meters under, the land that my place is built on will end. I will be on a little slab floating in the sky, myself and my building, and three or four other buildings. But that very weird state may last no more than half an hour. It's disquieting though."

"I sometimes wonder what the vintners buy/One half as precious as the stuff they sell," said Constantine. "That's a quotation. Are there days, Joe, when you drink more of it than you sell?"

"Yes. A few of them. But I don't pay a lot of attention to any of this, Constantine. And I believe that you do not pay a lot of attention to the nose on your own face, even on the days when it feels a little bit foggy."

"I might as well give you my preliminary report on the work I have been doing for you and for World Interpol, Quiche," said Angelo DiCyan and the Master Forger. "Sandaliotis, as revealed in my quick survey, is not really a forgery. It is genuine, as far as it goes. And it goes a good ways sometimes, and then it stops abruptly. But it isn't any false production that is so frequently coming to a sudden end. It is a remarkably valid production. I still believe that you should give me a four year contract to unravel this mystery. It's difficult to complete such a massive undertaking in part of a day."

"Did you discover yourself listed in the Sandaliotis accounts of the subject as a Master Forger of art works?" Constantine asked.

"Oh yes, they have me there. They give me good notices. Quite a few of their facts about me are wrong, but that is to be expected. But there is one thing that I have noticed about Sandaliotis, Constantine, which you as a foreigner should also notice. I do not know whether I could make the wonder of it stand out for any of the natives of Sandaliotis here, but it is a wonder. It

is that there is no repetition on Sandaliotis at all. Oh really, that's so! That's the opposite of not being able to see Sandaliotis because it is somehow so jaded that it falls too low for the notice. When Sandaliotis is here, it is here with a freshness in every detail.

“There is only one typical pebble on all of Sandaliotis. That pebble was taken from a north-flowing creek at the top of the sandal, and it is now in the Museum of Tensor Geology at Bastia. Out of the billions of pebbles on Sandaliotis, that is the only one that looks like the nondescript pebbles of other countries, and as such it was thought rare enough to go into the museum. There is only one conventional leaf on all Sandaliotis. That is from a Green Bay tree, and it is in the Institute of Arborology at San Vito. Oh, there are other small stones of sorts, each one of a different sort, but there is only one classic pebble. And there are other plant breathers, vaguely like the green or blue ‘pages’ or ‘leaves’ of a plant book. But there is only one classic leaf, that one that seemed so blank and dumb struck that it is shown in the institute. All the other leaves are, like leaves of a book, written over with entirely different messages, each one from each, in the shape or the color or the texture, or just in the living signature.

“There are other things that completely avoid sameness where it might be expected. The automobile which I have heard that you abandoned in North Town today, Constantine, that of which you were so proud, was the only one of that exact model. There cannot be two alike run off their lines, or the lines will rebel. There will be a breakdown, and then there will be handwork. And when the repair on the line is made, there will be changes incorporated in that repair. I tell you that there is no duplication here. Two jars of beer will not be the same. They may be of almost the same name, spelled almost the same on the jars, and they may be of nearly the same flavor. But no two will be exactly the same. I have asked several citizens about this and they have never noticed it. They will not know what I am talking about. I will point to two jars of beer taken out of the same case and ask why they differ. ‘Oh, one of them is spelled wrong, isn't it?’ they will finally notice. ‘And the other one is spelled wrong also, but of a little different wrongness. I suppose that someone was careless when they went through.’

“Someone is careless when they pass these things off so lightly and so mysteriously. Possibly though, in my Italy, there are anomalies which I do not notice and which some hypothetical alien would howl at. And perhaps he

would point them out to me and I would be mystified as to what he was talking about and why he was making such a stork's nest out of a straw stack.

"I believe though that Sandaliotis is so constituted that if it cannot come up with something new in every detail, it will not come up with anything at all. And these are the gaps. Oh yes, that isn't a very good theory. Who knows a better one?"

"The fact that Sandaliotis has been made manifest and visible to all the world today," said Joe Primavera the proprietor, "and not merely to the people of Sandaliotis itself (this is a thing that does not happen so strongly as today more than two or three times a century), this might well indicate that either Sandaliotis or the world is coming to its end. That also happens no more than two or three times a century. I don't believe it is Sandaliotis that is ending though, and yet we must consider this too. This may be the Day of the Holocaust. Why then is only one of us ready and girt, with his pilgrim's staff in his hand and his zone about his waist?"

"Oh, if the world ended, could Sandaliotis survive?" Constantine asked.

"Yes, I believe so," Primavera said. "The answer to all the inconsistencies may well be that Sandaliotis isn't very tightly attached to the world. I believe that is one purpose of the world, to survive if the world slides over the edge of the abyss; to belay the rope that the world is on and to bring its slide and its ending to a halt. Or, failing that, to be the new world, as it has some instances of everything on the world already on it. It seems to me that the first case, stopping the slide of the world, happens pretty often, and the world gives no thanks for it."

"But which one of us is girt and ready?" Constantine asked.

"You are," Joe Primavera said. "You have a parachute packed around your waist. That is to be a pilgrim, ready and girt."

"I have been meaning to ask someone about that," Constantine said. "Why am I wearing it? Does anybody know?"

"You are the best detective in the world and you don't know why you are wearing a parachute all this day?" Troy Islander asked.

"No, I don't. I don't understand it at all. If I even think of taking it off, a fetish screams at me and warns me *not* to touch it. This is only one of the many loose ends that I can't connect up. It's as though someone should say 'Nay, there aren't eleven ends to that rope. There's only two. It's just the way the knot's tied that makes it look like eleven loose ends.' Well, I will have to list out my own loose ends and try to find out why they seem to be loose."

“Give us one, Constantine,” Troy Islander said. “Maybe it will identify the knot and give us a clue to the other loose ends. And it’s always easier to tell the other fellow how to tie up his loose ends.”

“A three-hundred-mile-long object in the sky,” Constantine said. “It is either a physical object or it is a delirium. If it is that, it is such a delirium as will be recorded by sensitive and sophisticated instruments. A three-hundred-mile-long object right over our heads, about a thousand miles high. Why is it instrumented if it isn’t there? And why in hound-dog heaven can’t we see it if it *is* there? Damn the dog bomb of an island anyhow! Oh, there it is. You can see it right there!”

“Yes, so we can,” Troy Islander said. “It echoes and corresponds very roughly to the shape of Sandaliotis here below. It subtends an angle of about fifteen degrees. Three hundred miles long, did you say that it was, Constantine? Oh, that would make it about a thousand miles high, wouldn’t it? It’s really rather clear and sharp today, is it not? But what was it that you were wondering about it?”

“Damnation, Islander! I was wondering why no one else is noticing it.”

“But I *am* noticing it. I have been looking at it ever since you called my attention to it. It’s clear and sharp, I said. What else am I to say about such an island in the sky? Oh, the clouds are moving to cover it up again. I wonder who is marshaling those clouds anyhow? It’s likely that none of us would have been able to see it if you hadn’t made a breakthrough in fury and exasperation to see it.”

“What if it’s a bomb?” Constantine asked.

“It would be a big one then, Constantine. It would do real damage to the earth if it went off,” Islander said. “It would probably destroy the earth. For any lesser job, a bomb that big would hardly be needed. But I don’t think it will go off. It doesn’t often.

“There are parallels to it, you know. And this island itself has been noticed for many centuries as an irregular and irrational object in the skies.”

“Now we are doing better, Troy Islander. Tell me about the parallels, and tell me about this thing itself,” Constantine begged.

“As to why it hasn’t been more noticed, Constantine, well, a three-hundred-mile-long object in the sky isn’t very noticeable even when it’s no more than a thousand miles high. Lose it for a minute against the bright sky, and you’ll have to search for it again to bring it within focus. Let its outline be broken by clouds here and there and it takes on the appearance of a long

cloud itself. But these objects (the three-hundred-mile length is a frequent estimate) *are* very often sighted. They are sighted mostly by crackpots because crackpots see more out-of-the-way things than do other people. They are classified as crackpot phenomena because there is no noncrackpot category to put them in. But there isn't much doubt that they really are up there, quite a few of them. They are among the original tall stories, about a thousand miles tall. Some of them have a local habitation and a name. Others of them are drifters forever.

“There is ‘Hogan’s Bobsled’ that is regularly observed and charted by a group of drinking gentlemen at a place called College Station Texas in America. Their meteorological observations are accurate and are verified. The rationale that they give for this ‘Island in the Sky’ is, ah, far out, much more than a thousand miles out, I would say. Well, there *is* something up there that remains in the immediate ‘up there’, that looks like a bobsled (a large, compounded or coupled sled once used in North America), and that was discovered by someone named Hogan.

“All of these phenomena are probably Fortean.

“There is Schnitger’s Steamboat, *Dampfboot Schnitgers*, that hangs in the sky over Old Heidelberg in Germany and has been loved by whole generations of students there. Under very high magnification, people have been seen on the Steamboat, so it is said. A very high magnification seems to be endemic in the styles of some of the students in Old Heidelberg. It is hard to know where fact leaves off and whimsy begins with the Steamboat, but there is considerable fact to it.

“And, in the skies over Poland, is to be seen Paderewski’s Porpoise. Copernicus himself sighted this many times and he could not account for it. Really, he didn’t try to. It would not fit into any theory that he had. As it very often got in the way of his observations, he prayed that it would go away. But he couldn’t pray it out of the way and he couldn’t account for it. Polish students still make a cult of the porpoise. It is curious how all these manifestations are somehow attached to groups of ‘students’, just as poltergeists are usually attached to persons just a little bit younger.

“And finally, out of a hundred of them, or at least half a hundred, we come to the one that we can see right now. This is the manifestation known as Thibeau’s Torpedo. Ah, is it not beautiful in the afternoon air! Notice how the clouds are still trying to disguise it.”

“It reassures me that the rest of you are able to see it,” Constantine said.

“Why should we not be able to see it, once it is pointed out to us?” Troy Islander asked. “Are we blind men that we should not see it? The Torpedo, like the other manifestations, is a cult of a group of students, students at the University of Ichnusa. Why are you especially concerned about it, Constantine?”

“It seems to me that the Torpedo overhead is somehow concerned with the appearance and disappearance of Sandaliotis?” Constantine said uncertainly.

“Why?” Troy Islander asked. “Is Hogan’s Bobsled somehow concerned with the appearance and disappearance of Brazo’s County, Texas? Is Schmitger’s Steamboat (it is sometimes called Schmitger’s Sausage also) concerned with the appearance and disappearance of Germany? Or Paderewski’s Porpoise concerned with the appearance and disappearance of Poland? (Perhaps, in this one case, it is. Poland disappears and reappears quite a lot through the centuries.) Greatest detective in the world, are you not chewing on too many different things at one time?”

“I am advised that the local ‘Island in the Sky,’ the ‘Thibeau’s Torpedo,’ may be antimatter,” Constantine said.

“Oh certainly, certainly,” Islander agreed. “That is a frequent guess of all of them, that they are enclaves of antimatter and antithought.”

“The latter must be extinguished,” Constantine said firmly.

“Antithought can be extinguished only by cancelling it out with an equal amount of positive thought,” Hugh Najtingalo the mine operator said. “And I am not sure that there is enough positive thought in the world to extinguish that beam in the sky. Even if there be, there are better uses for it.”

“Would you, possibly, tell us a few of the ‘loose ends’ that are bothering you, best detective in the world?” Joe Primavera said. “The Torpedo might be a loose island, but I wouldn’t call it a loose end. We are all anxious to help you. We doubt if you became the best detective in the world without the help of very acute persons such as ourselves. Name some of the loose ends and perhaps we will be able to belay them for you.”

“There are two friends whom I have been counting as my very closest friends in the world,” Constantine said. “These are named Salaadin and Regina Marqab, the beautiful couple from the floating world. I spent last night at and near their place between Nice and Monaco. These are my two best friends, I repeat, but in truth I cannot now recall ever seeing them before last evening, though I then saw them with a powerful recognition. They seem to be coming apart today, having a split and behaving irresponsibly, but I do

not care one thing about this. It is almost as if they were intruded into my mind as decoys, and my previous memory or pleasant impression of them also intruded there. You must understand that I do have an affection for them almost too powerful to bear, but where is it from? It is a very pleasant and glowing memory, whatever its origin. The memory is certainly better than last night's or today's facts."

"When you were last in Ichnusa with the incandescent couple, you cut a pretty good swathe," Joe Primavera said. "You look blank at that. You might also refresh your memory by reviewing your appearances with them in the rotogravure journals of two months ago. You three also cut a grand swathe on the blue coast of France and Spain. Well, they are loose ends one and two. What follows?"

"There are three 'agents' who are loose ends three and four and five," Constantine said. "There is the agent Julien Moravia who tried to have me arrested in Civita do Nord this morning, though it was a clownish attempt. There is the Agent Amelia Lilac who tried to paralyze my limbs and will with an infusion in this town this afternoon. She is the woman who carries her own shade around with her. There is the agent John Seferino who will attempt to obstruct me to my very death tonight, and perhaps he will attempt the same thing on the world."

"Loose ends three and four and five," Joe Primavera said. "How much slack do you have, Constantine, do you know?"

"Slack? For what, Primavera?"

"For tying the loose ends together, Constantine. Is there enough for a sailors' short splice? Or for a long splice? Or for an elaborate knot?"

"I don't know, Primavera. The slack is in time, of course: how much time I have left before I can dispose of them or they of me. The sixth loose end concerns the 'double' of one of our mentioned agents, which 'double' I killed earlier yesterday evening in Marseilles. I am not sure whether it was the basic agent, or the surrogate and decoy of that agent whom I killed. It was the double of the agent whom I knew the best and should have recognized for sure. It was with this murder or encounter that I passed through the door to unreality. Everything has seemed unreal since that time, including present company."

"The sixth loose end properly recorded," said Troy Islander. "It isn't at all difficult to be the best detective in the world, is it? One simply finds the most intelligent companions in the world and spills it all to them."

“I hope it will work,” Constantine said. “The seventh loose end is myself as the best detective in the world. I am very foggy about how I came to be so. I remember being a hard-working and honest foot policeman in a medium-sized French city. After that is an empty interval. Then, sometime yesterday. I was Constantine Quiche the best detective in the world and I was assigned to a very mysterious case. There’s the gap of a long season between the two states, and the only memories I have of the interval are symbolic shreds and pieces. Well, it isn’t too unusual for World Interpol to give a man a swept-slate mind for clearer work on a case, and then giving him his old clutter back after that case is finished. But there’s quite a few inconsistencies about it all.”

“You do seem a little bit different from the Constantine Quiche, best detective in the world, that I was talking with a month or so ago,” Hugh Najtingalo the mine operator said. “Several times I have wondered whether you were the same man. And then I check you over in my mind, your voice, your gestures, your overall and detailed appearance, your way of flying an idea like a tail-heavy kite: and yes, you are the same man. But you are the same man slightly changed. Or you are as near to the same man as trickery can make you, in which case you yourself would seem to be unaware of the trickery and disguise.”

“You talked with me a month or so ago, Najtingalo?” Constantine asked. “Where?”

“In this very room. With this very company in this very wine-fine. You do not remember it?”

“May I break in on this, Constantine?” Angelo the Master Forger asked. “I have been suspecting something all the while today since you were in my workshop at Salerno at noon. Do you remember searching my workshop and rooms there several times in the past during the World Interpol intervention in international art forgeries? You seemed a bit blank when I mentioned it.”

“No, I don’t. I don’t remember searching your place,” Constantine said.

“Do you remember me at all before today?”

“No. I don’t think that I do.”

“Then how did you happen to come to my place in Salerno? How did you remember the way? How did you know that I was Angelo the Master Forger? Why did you think that I could help you? How did you even recognize me when I arrived there?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know these things at all. Loose end number seven, myself, is a bad one.

“Loose end number eight consists of attacks on my car and presumably on my life. But they were not strong enough attacks. It was as if they were more warnings than attempts, but I was never told what I was being warned away from. Loose end number nine is Sandaliotis as a mirage, coming down from the air into place and becoming solid. This does not agree with the accounts of citizens of Sandaliotis that Sandaliotis is always in place but is sometimes not seen by the outer barbarians. What I have seen with my eyes is a contradiction of this.”

“Mirages are tricky,” said Najtingalo. “You did not see what you thought that you saw. It would not be lawful to see our land coming down from elsewhere.”

“Loose end number ten is my superior at World Interpol, Grishwell. There is an amnesia about him, but induced amnesia is common in World Interpol work. Nevertheless, I know him only by telephone and I do not remember knowing him before, and I have no idea of his appearance. And at this moment I remember him much less well than I did this morning when I talked to him on the phone for the first time today.

“Loose end number eleven (I have them in my mind in this original number order and I cannot change their numeration) is the bomb in the sky, which you say is Thibeau’s Torpedo, a Fortean construct, and which I can see right now in spite of its camouflage of clouds. But it isn’t in accord with Grishwell’s description of it this morning, for he specifically said that it could not be had on visual. Am I being subjected to a visual decoy right now? And by whom?”

“I suppose that it would have to be one of us here present,” Angelo the Master Forger said. “No one else has been close enough to you to get a good mind-grip on you for such a thing.”

“Loose end twelve is my parachute. Why did Grishwell tell me to wear one? Why did I immediately buy one? And why was there a mod parachute shop so readily at hand? Is it still there? Or just how elaborate is this hoax?”

“I have heard of the mod parachute shops,” Troy Islander said. “I thought it was all a euphemism for the purveying of something other than parachutes. Well, in fact, I know that it is. And they really had parachutes there? How rum! This loose end may be looser than you believe.”

“Loose end number thirteen is a devil named Haziel whose sandal Sandaliotis is said to be. But your land is also said to be the land of Lucifer

himself. There *is* a world or planet named Haziel, however, one of the closest of them. And there is no world named Lucifer that I know of.”

“As a matter of fact, there are several worlds named Lucifer,” Troy Islander corrected. “None of them is near enough for likely involvement, however, and perhaps Haziel is.”

“Loose end number fourteen is antimatter,” Constantine said. “It keeps climbing back into this case when I think I have got it out. Is Haziel an antimatter world? Grishwell, if there is such a person, believes that it might be.

“Loose end number fifteen is the director of films. This man has a brass voice, not unpleasant to me, but very artificial sounding. I fancy (and I am as full of fancies as he is when I am in his company) that it isn’t the voice of a man but of some masquerading thing. And his eyes appear like two *glass* eyes, even though they are moving enough and merry enough. Is he an ‘agent’? He is something more than a director of films. I believe that he is the director of the apparition of Sandaliotis.

“Loose end number sixteen is the Inquisitor in the not-very-successful first scene that I played for the ‘Thirteen-Sided Room.’ I believe that he is a prisoner, dazed and doped. I believe that he has really been blinded and deafened and unbalanced. And I believe that he really is an Inquisitor from somewhere where the office is at least equal to a world ruler. He is needed here for the authority that adheres to him, but he is made into a deformed clown and stumbler.

“Loose end number seventeen is the Five O’Clock man who says that he is an agent. Therefore he must have been that, either in the scenario of the play or outside of it. But what sort of agent was he? There is much more to him than has showed.

“Loose end number eighteen is the man who was killed by ‘accident’ in the thirteen-sided room. Who was he? Why was he killed? Why was I *not* killed then?

“Loose end number nineteen is my ‘nephew,’ the dead man with my ah, ah with several of my characteristics. The dead man whom the local police have somehow identified as Constantine Quiche the world’s best detective, in place of myself.

“Loose end twenty is the continuing puzzle of Sandaliotis. It is a drifting ship, and the crewmen give contradictory and impossible accounts of its situation, and its origin and its destination. Ship-owner Islander, is that not

odd conduct for crewmen on a ship? But Sandaliotis is here right now, and what happens to the other things that should be in the place that it occupies?

“Loose end number twenty-one is the man in this party who will betray me tonight. And that is the most of the loose ends that I have.”

“Oh, I believe that we can splice up an even number of them,” Troy Islander said. “We can surely splice up any twenty of the twenty-one. In fact, we must do it if we are to preserve your reputation of being the best detective in the world. Which one of us will betray you?”

“Whichever one of you dips his hand with me into the dish of snails, he will betray me,” Constantine said. That sounded like an echo of an old quotation.

So they set about the business of splicing up the loose ends. They hadn't much slack for even short splices. And yet, being persons of very acute minds, they began to get it done. They got several of the splices executed. Then they got all of them effected. Twenty of the twenty-one loose ends were securely spliced in now into a rational explanation and perhaps accusation. This wasn't done completely to Constantine's satisfaction, but it was done to the satisfaction of the other four. They were well-executed splices and perhaps they would hold.

On the parts of the splicing that Constantine didn't understand, he was a little abashed about questioning that distinguished and highly intelligent company. Nor was he even certain how he knew that they were such a distinguished and highly intelligent company.

Then, as they wined and dined, Constantine reached his hand to take more snails, and another personage dipped his hand in at the same time. Constantine, in spite of his prophesying it, didn't notice it at all. But the other personage looked long and hard at Constantine, and kept his hand in the snails for some time.

“This is the second very pleasant meeting that we five have held here,” Joe Primavera the proprietor said. “The first meeting exactly one month ago. The second one today. Let us propose to meet here again exactly one month hence. Let it be here even if Ichnusa is then no more than broken pieces of rubble on the bottom of the ocean.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Let it be here even if we ourselves are no more than fish-cleaned bones,” Troy Islander said. “Stranger meetings than that have been effected where the heroic will was present.”

But Constantine Quiche didn't at all remember having met with these same men in this same place one month previously.

It was five minutes before four in the afternoon when the small party broke up at Joe Primavera's wine-fine.

“Angelo, may I have another one of our own forgeries of Doctor Korkolon's controversial guardsman pills,” Constantine asked as they broke up.

“Certainly,” the Master Forger said, and he gave him one. Constantine put it under his tongue and forgot about it. But he was uncertain and flighty.

“You are jittery, Constantine,” Angelo said. “That is the penalty for being the best detective in the world, I suppose. If you would switch and get on the wrong side of the law, you would not have these worries, and you could sleep at night. You would no longer have the weight of the world on your shoulders. Your peace of mind should be worth your trying the crooked way once.”

“Ah, no, no, Angelo,” Constantine said firmly. “I will have to do without that sense of peace and well being. I am committed.”

In the street again, Constantine was perturbed to see his own name in an advertisement.

“Also in the cast, Constantine Quiche, the World's Greatest Detective, with sensational revelations about World Interpol, in thrilling scenes filmed only today.”

What sort of thing was that? It was an advertisement for a drama to be shown that very evening, and the name of the drama was ‘Interworld Duplicity, a Psychological Thriller!’ This was part of a double-bill, the ad said, and the other half of it was ‘The Trillion-Dollar World-Jack, the Holdup with a Message! The Last Psychological Thriller of Them All!’ This latter one had an ominous feel about the very signboard of it.

“I will bet that it is the same Director doing all of these,” Constantine told himself. “And I will bet that someone is ‘accidentally’ killed in each of them to point up a big scene. I had better be careful. The accidentally killed one might still be myself. With his fluid ways, the Director hasn’t necessarily completed the filming of either of these.”

On a kiosk phone there, Constantine called Grishwell, his superior at World Interpol.

“Constantine, I can get the ‘news’ from the news,” Grishwell said quickly. “There is a lot of it and it is subject to every interpretation. But what is really happening there? What is the latest development on the big bomb and the big conspiracy? And how is it on the big rogue peninsula?”

“Nothing is happening,” said Constantine, “but it maintains a brisk pace nevertheless. The island in the sky that you said was never on visual is on pretty clear visual here. And it may be an antimatter bomb in its nature. The peninsula in the sea has remained on visual all day, and I have been on it all day except for one short trip to Italy. But both the sky object and the peninsula are shimmering. Sandaliotis here seems to be made mostly out of green foam. Some of those bounding green meadows appear quite artificial. For a while I will be almost convinced of the existence of Sandaliotis. Then I will blink my eyes to clear them, and it will be all green sea-foam again. There are two different versions going on here, Grishwell. It’s as though two narrations were going on at the same time. There are these two different trends or pushes going on, and someone has put a large price tag on each of them. In each case, it is one trillion dollars.”

“What are you doing to set things straight?”

“Not much, Grishwell. I think I’ll go to a show tonight. There’s a double bill that will be on everywhere. One drama is ‘Interworld Duplicity, a Psychological Thriller.’ It’s partly about World Interpol, I think, and I’m in it, though I don’t know how I am or what I’m doing in it. And the other half of it is ‘Trillion Dollar World-Jack, a Hold-Up with a Message.’”

“Does the double bill correspond to the two different versions of something that are working there, Constantine?”

“No. Not quite. The second of the dramas does correspond to one of the versions. But the first one seems to be a red snapper drawn across the trail. Instead of it, or in addition to it, there should be a melodrama entitled ‘Interworld Duplicity, the Great Real Estate Heist.’”

“It is important, Constantine, that nothing be done to dim the great image of World Interpol,” Grishwell said.

“Not very important, sir. I was taught in my training that the image was to be burnished only after everything else had been taken care of, after every other duty had been performed. Myself, I have been chopping that image up and using it for bait. And I’ve been getting quite a few strikes at it too.” Constantine hung up the phone on Grishwell and left the kiosk.

And he ran right into a lilac fog. He was caught in the fragrant arms of Amelia Lilac, special agent and lady of the afternoon. He felt again the slight needle punctures that were more common than not with kisses nowadays. He was thankful that he had used another forged pill from Angelo to counteract the effect of strange invasions. He had no wish to be further paralyzed in various functions, and he had no desire to be made more amenable. Well, let the needle and the forged pill fight it out between them.

“Really, Constantine my minor passion, you are too easy,” the lavender-shadowed Amelia said. “Will I never find an opponent who is able to call out my full talents? If you are the best detective in the world, then tell me what the worst one is like.”

“Oh, he’s not bad at all, Amelia,” Constantine said. “I work with him on cases sometimes. The general reaction of people who deal with him is ‘he’s pretty good. If he is the worst detective in the world, what must the best one be like?’ It’s sort of a tribute to me really.”

“It’s a shame that you can’t live up to it, Constantine, my treasure and my patsy,” Amelia said. “Really, we had quite a bit to do with your getting to be *known* as the best detective in the world. You’re not the best, of course. But we have to look ahead on these things and select and arrange a little bit.”

They went to the Imperial Hotel which was near, and to the ‘Gardens of Delight Suite’ that Amelia had taken, permanently, for all that Constantine knew. There seemed to be a continuous slow-paced party going on in the ‘Gardens of Delight.’ Other agents were there. One can always tell when a person is an agent, but one can never find out what a good agent is agent for. There were hustlers and representatives there.

“Which one are they on?” Constantine asked himself. “Which narration is this a part of? Is it a part of the ‘Trillion Dollar World-Jack’? Or is it a part of Interworld Duplicity, the Great Real Estate Heist’? It would help me slightly if I knew which of these jags this group of people was on.”

There were many of those real-estate agents there, but these seemed to be very far up in the hierarchy, top agents of agents' organizations. There were some of those tourist-strangers who clearly were not natives of Sandaliotis, and who just as clearly liked the place. They had those pleasant but odd appearances that indicated that they were either Scandinavians or Off-World people. It is very difficult to tell persons of these two groups apart.

"This is Constantine Quiche, who is the best detective in the world," Amelia introduced Constantine to her mixed mob. "He has only two things wrong with him. He is weak in the head, and he kills people. He killed my sister yesterday evening in Marseilles, but he may have had a reason. I would not be so crude as to ask him about a thing like that. I mention this to you all only because he is so colorless and I don't want him passed over too lightly. Really, he may be worth your attention, girls, and I do want him entertained. Maybe he will kill one of you, girls. Don't you find something very attractive in a man who kills girls?"

Amelia was an adept with more than one sort of needle.

There were half of a dozen girls there, girls much prettier than Amelia Lilac, girls not nearly as beautiful as she was. Surely she had selected these girls to show herself off. Were they needle-puncture girls also?

"Come to me, killer," one of those pretty girls said to Constantine. But these girls were not from Sandaliotis, except maybe one of them. Where were they all from then?

There was a sudden change, in light, or in shadow, or in ambient. What was it?

"Did a light go off?" Constantine asked one of the girls.

"No. It's more as if a dark went off," the girl said. "She turns it off sometimes when she relaxes." It was the mysterious lavender-colored, lilac-colored shadow-and-nimbus colored thing that had always attended Amelia Lilac. It had gone out. It wasn't there now, but Amelia was still there somewhere. Her disguised presence gave uncertain indications that she was still there, but Constantine realized that he wouldn't know Amelia without her cloud.

"And what case is the best detective in the world working on now?" a bouncy young lady of attractive chubbiness asked him.

"The case of Sandaliotis and all its mysteries," Constantine said. "And you are one of those mysteries. I will bet that you were not on Sandaliotis yesterday. Why are you here today?"

(The best detective in the world had always been proud of his powers of observation and recognition: he knew that there was a girl in this room whom he had paid very special attention to; and he would not recognize her now because an accidental aspect of her had been ‘turned off.’ Well, would any girl be Amelia Lilac if she were surrounded by that lilac-colored aura? Was there a fine disguise drifting around here waiting for some woman to put it on and turn it on?)

“Oh, there are so many reasons why I am here today,” the bouncy girl said. “I am here because I knew that you would be here, I suppose. I really *did* know that you would be here, Constantine Quiche. And that really *is* part of the reason that I’m here. We do want you to be entertained.”

Even this bouncy girl could be Amelia Lilac.

“We like you so much,” the bouncy girl said. “We simply must be with you.”

“We like you not at all,” said an ill-mannered but pretty young man. “It is because of World Interpol, really, that we have you here at this time. We have put a leash on you.” (Even this young man was prettier, but less beautiful, than the nimbused Amelia Lilac.)

“The deal is too big to have it messed up by you,” the pretty young man was still saying. (Did the ‘deal too big to have it messed up’ sound more like the ‘Trillion Dollar World-Jack’ deal, or like the ‘Interworld Duplicity, Great Real Estate Heist’ deal?) “And World Interpol, in its bumbling way, messes up a lot of deals,” the young man said. “But how could we keep World Interpol out of a deal as big as this one? Oh, we couldn’t.”

“But how could we keep World Interpol out of it *effectively*?” the bouncy girl cut in. “Oh, we could! We can! We do!”

“We keep World Interpol out by letting it in,” said the pretty man. “So we arrange to let it in with a patsy representative, the ‘world’s greatest detective,’ that’s you. We have you assigned to it, we have you nailed to it, but we cannot allow you to accomplish anything on it. But we cannot simply extinguish you either, not while the deal is still on. Should we do that, should we make away with you too early, World Interpol would simply send out another agent to take charge, or they would send several of them. So you must move about, you must circulate and be seen to circulate, you must be seen in very many places, you must make phone calls, you must convey reports. And you must find out nothing, or at least you must tell nothing.

“And you must be amenable. Of course you’re a prisoner, and of course we can extinguish you at any time. And we *will* extinguish you in all good time. You cannot mount any opposition to us even in your thoughts. You cannot find the world or the machinery to phrase or plan such opposition, for we have introduced scramblers into you, and your own thoughts will scramble themselves when they try to climb out of their prescribed ditches.

“But, for the present, see to it that you are amused, see to it that you are seen, see to it that you appear to be working on the case even if you don’t know anything at all about the case in hand. It is sufficient that you are slightly paralyzed in your faculties, and that you do not get any idea of making or communicating any discovery.

“Be amenable and live a little while longer. Yes, a couple of hours longer.”

(Amelia Lilac, without her lavender shadow and aura could be any of them here. *Could* she be the pretty young man as well? Oh no, not that. That would be going too far with it.)

“But we do want you to be happy,” the bouncy girl said. Constantine, by this time, was taking liberties with the bouncy girl. As a detective, there was something that he wanted to find out about her substance and texture.

“Believe us, we always have our best interests at heart,” the bouncy girl said. “How did you kill Amelia’s sister in Marseilles?”

“I broke her neck.”

“Try mine, darling,” the bouncy girl said. “I have a superb neck, and I love men to do violence to it. You didn’t use a snapdragon to break her neck, did you? That’s cheating.”

(The girl in Marseilles had had a superb neck also, and a lavender shadow ambient. Was there more than one of these shadow-ambient disguises?)

(What could be done with one of those disguises if it were three hundred miles long? Would such a long and powerful shadow ambient as that not change almost anything out of recognition?)

Constantine had killed the girl in Marseilles with his hands, but it had been close. She had almost killed him. She would have succeeded with most men.

Well, why had she tried to kill him? It hadn’t been in the script for her to kill him yesterday evening if it wasn’t in the script for them to kill him now. Why had she tried it then? Constantine looked into the eyes of this present girl. Oh, there was a quirk of insanity there. It couldn’t be mistaken for anything else. But it was like something that she was under only part of the

while, and out from under it often. It might be that the insanity adhered to the shadow ambient disguise and not to the person. Well, out with what he was thinking then! It is a good trick sometimes to blurt the questions out, and often it takes people by surprise.

“What could be done with one of those shadow ambient disguises if it were three hundred miles long?” he asked. “Would it not change anything almost out of recognition?”

And the girl paused a moment as though she would pretend that she didn’t know what he was talking about.

“No wonder Amelia told us that you were weak in the head!” she cried. But she did know what he was talking about, so she came around to the other side of it then.

“Oh my darling,” she said then. “You are charming, charming! *But this thing must not be interfered with!* You are like an enchanting child who comes to one with a rose-red mouth, and then fastens into one suddenly with poison fangs.”

“Are the fangs anything like the puncturing needles that paralyze one slightly in the various faculties, that make one amenable?” Constantine asked.

“No, not like that at all,” the girl said. “Oh my treasure, do you know what you are about to throw away? A short and happy life that still has about eight hours to run, that’s what you are about to throw away. I’ll never willingly throw any of my life away, no, not one minute. And you are also throwing away the chance for a much longer and happier life than that.”

“What is the essence of the disguise?” Constantine asked. “What is the essence of either the small disguise or the large one? What is the name of it? Is it the veil? The *velo*? The *peplos*?”

“Oh, I suppose it is something like that,” the girl said. “It’s an illusion, and it can cover some crude work underneath, for a while, for a quick and profitable while. It covers other illusions, rougher and more material illusions. There are things done by it that just couldn’t be done without it. And it is enlivening and awakening as well as disguising. Do you not ever underestimate it!”

“You *are* Amelia Lilac, out from under that lavender-shadow disguise for a moment, aren’t you?”

“Of course I’m Amelia. My voice isn’t the same without the shadow cloak, and none of the appearance is the same. But I am Amelia. Who else cares for you? Who has been keeping you alive when you keep blundering closer to

things? I have been. I mean it. Who else selected you out once, some months ago, to be a man on the rise until you had risen to be the best detective in the world? Who else would bounce you on her bouncy bosom? Texture and substance, you're testing, are you, Constantine? Test away. Do I remind you of a dolphin yet as I did in what you thought was a dream? Do I remind you of a human person? Test away, but you won't find the answers till I give them to you.

"But do not think lightly of the lavender-shadow disguise, Constantine. You have worn it yourself. You will wear a piece of it forever."

"I? How have I worn it, Amelia?"

"It is the illusion that can cover quite a few kinds of crude work underneath. It's the illusion that brought you the fame of being the best detective in the world, and you're really not even very good. We fling this veil, we fling this net out over the things that we want to manipulate, Constantine. And we flung it out over some islands and seas this morning. But we did an awful lot of crude work underneath first. And now we will have our quick and profitable harvest from it. *And you must not interfere!* I can, perhaps, save you completely if you trust me And I will, perhaps, kill you with my own hands if you do not. I will kill you, Constantine, as I nearly killed you last night."

"Who was it that I killed last night, Amelia? Who was there?"

"I was there. And you killed no one at all. You will remember that I was in the illusion, that I was in the shadow cloak all that time, and there is a lot of room in it. I went out from me for a while and I left me there. And then, when you were gone, I went into me again. And then I went along the Grande Corniche ahead of you and arrived ahead of you while you were still confused.

"I have just said, Constantine, that I might be able to save you completely if you trusted me."

"And I haven't given you an answer, have I?"

"No, you haven't given me an answer, Constantine, and you're lost if you don't."

"Are you a bit mad, Amelia?"

"Oh, it's the old madness and the old aspiration. *And it must not be interfered with.* The old madness is simply the old existence. An old man told you today (Oh, of course I can hear what people tell you, I've got you rigged on audio reception) 'The Old Things reigned in the cult circuits a long

time ago. And then, after they were clear discredited, they came to our island to end it all. But they do not die.’ That old man was mostly right about us, Constantine. We did reign on the cult circuits a long time. And we were clear discredited. And we did come to some hills that were at the same time in the Island of Sardinia and the Peninsula of Sandaliotis. But we did not like to be discredited and displaced, and we did not accept it. We fight back again and again. There have been some huge and direful things that happened to the people of this globe because they dropped our cults. We live both in the green hills and in the ocean that is replaced by those green hills sometimes. And we are people of several fleshs, for we refuse to be slain in just one of them.

“Oh yes, I am of dolphin flesh, and quite a few other fleshs. Are you not finding that out with your investigations? But look out for us when we come up out of the ocean and whistle for our sky dog. We can blow you out like candles then.”

“You are as clear a forgery as was ever dredged out of this sea, Amelia,” Constantine said. He went swiftly out of the ‘Garden of Delights Suite’ and out of the Imperial Hotel. He still hadn’t given Amelia an answer. All he knew was that he hadn’t better make any pledge to one of those persons who was made out of that older clay. It is stylized and it is stiff, that older plasticine, and you may be hardened into one of its forms too quickly to get away from it.

But Constantine still kept a bit of something that he now realized that he had received from this Amelia many months before, when he had first met her. It was pieces of the hypnotic fog, of the veil, of the lavender-shadow disguise. And, by the use of it, he had been able to influence people to do almost anything he wished. He had been able to do this ever since he had had it, even in the times when he didn’t realize that he had it.

He was trying, by the employment of it where it was lodged in a corner of his personality, to influence somebody to do what he wished now. He was trying to compel the pretty young man from Amelia’s ‘Garden of Delights Suite’ to come out after him.

He waited in an alley that could be seen from hardly anywhere. When one had a piece of the fog, such things as hard-to-see alleys are always right at hand wherever needed.

The pretty man came into the alley as though not knowing where he was going or why. Constantine knocked him down. He picked him up then, and he

knocked him down again.

“The first time was to get my attention, as in the old joke about the mule,” the pretty man said. “But what was the second time for?”

(There was more to this pretty man than there had seemed to be.)

“I have an intuition that if we go down this way, we can find a place to talk,” Constantine said. He put a knife blade to the back of the pretty man’s neck and they went down the secluded alley.

“Oh really, Constantine, this tactic is not worthy of the best detective in the world,” the pretty man said. “There are quite elegant clubs where we can go and talk. We can talk over the table of any coffee shop or bar. Or there are privacy offices, quite well appointed, that can be taken for a day or an hour or a minute. I have funds whether you have or not. This alley here is plain slum melodrama. Whatever we enact, it deserves a better setting than this.”

“Oh, I like slum melodrama,” Constantine said, “and this door will go right to the heart of it.” They went through a decrepit door into what had once been an old warehouse. They came into a tall and shoddy room there.

“I don’t want it elegant, I don’t want it well appointed, I want it like this,” Constantine said. There was a rope there.

“I knew there would be,” the pretty man said. “What corn!”

Constantine made a noose out of it and put it around the pretty man’s neck. He reeved the end of the rope through a pulley that was lashed to an overhead rafter, and he pulled the rope tight.

“This is incredibly juvenile,” the man said. “Your performance in the ‘Thirteen-Sided Room’ has given you a heritage of ham, Constantine. I am quite uncomfortable already. When will I be permitted to sit down again?”

“Never again,” said Constantine. “Neither in this world nor in the next. Now you will answer questions. Which version is your group working on: ‘The Billion Dollar World-Jack’ or the ‘Greatest Real Estate Heist’?”

“The latter,” the man said. “I learned about the world-jack too late to get in on it.”

“The real estate deal, yes? All right, how did you make Sandaliotis?”

“How did we *make* Sandaliotis? I don’t understand your question, Quiche. What is it that you are trying to ask—aaacewwhmmm—so it is understand your question or hang, is it? All right. I will attempt to understand and answer your question then. There was a great quantity of improbable technology used, and an hypnotic fog was thrown over that. That’s the answer. No wait, Quiche, don’t pull that rope again! That really is the

answer. I am telling this straight. It is improbable technology that we used. It is impossible technology. It can't work. It can't hold together. It is like lines drawn on water that we then erect a land upon. This is the most temporary, one-day thing that anyone ever saw. We are to convey title to all the land and to collect all the money before midnight tonight. That is the great real-estate heist. I wish it were sooner. I just don't believe that Sandaliotis can hold together till midnight tonight.

"I will begin in the middle. A broker for an off-world group came to us with an inquiry, and so we picked up an idea from that. The off-world group was an investment and resettlement conglomerate, and it wanted an equity in Earth. It had equities in fifty or so other worlds. Diversification is the name of the game now, the broker said, and equity and property on Earth would add a straw to the diversity strawstack.

"About a hundred million equivalent acres, to use round figures,' the broker had said, 'one-third of it, in one or two enclaves, could be lightly settled with Earth people, and two-thirds of it to be clear of them. Figure a way to do that and we will buy,' the broker said. There was also a commemorative element to the tentative offer. The people the broker dealt with held to the myth that they were originally of Earth origin. They had been driven from Earth in proto-historic times, they believed. Now they thought that token numbers of them (fifty million or so) might establish themselves back here.

"Myself and my associates tackle many theoretical problems. The accidental fallout from them almost pays for the effort. We decided to try this one on a theoretical basis. Ah, Quiche, can you give me just a little bit more slack in the rope?"

"I don't see how I can give you another inch," Constantine said. "Talk, man, talk."

"There were three ways to obtain the land for which we had a potential customer," the man said. He was a pretty man no longer. He was a young man no longer. His face was now like one of those tortured faces from the 'Thirteen-Sided Room' psychological thriller.

"We could, for the first case, find a place that would fulfill all the conditions. (But where on Earth could we find such a place?) Or, for the second case, we could find a place that would fulfill all the conditions except the main one, and for that main one we could clear the land, sixty or seventy million acres of it, of its human fauna. (But we paled at the thought of

clearing people off so much land that they stubbornly believed to be their own. That would take warfare, or at least armies.) Or, for the third case, we could construct a new land that would fulfill the conditions. (But how does one construct a hundred-million acres of land?) ‘We can always put an impossible price on it,’ one of us said ‘like ten thousand dollars an acre for rough farm land or for rougher hill land.’ ‘That would come to a trillion dollars,’ another of us said, ‘a truly thirteen-sided figure.’ We made the proposal to supply it for one trillion dollars. It was accepted. So we examined the possibilities of constructing the place.

“We finally settled approximately on the third solution, that of constructing a new land to fulfill the conditions. With one exception we settled on that solution. We decided to construct an *old* land to fulfill the conditions. Folklore was one of the thousand subjects that we ransacked, and very quickly we came onto the folklore of Sandaliotis. We studied Weingarten’s fanciful map of the place that was based on all the legends and descriptions. Then we superimposed it on an actual map of the same region. We found that all the cities, except North Town, fell into the areas of either Corsica or Sardinia. So did all the prominent elements of the landscape, the higher mountains, the old volcano remnants, the taller sea cliffs. There was our country, one-third of it in two enclaves (Corsica and Sardinia) already lightly settled with Earth people; two-thirds of it blank. All we had to do was construct the blank two-thirds of it, the clear two-thirds of it. And we did that.

“This is the thing that you will find hard to believe, Quiche. One reason that it is hard to believe is that it didn’t happen, and could not have. A proof that it didn’t happen is that, though we made a new country appear at about dawn this morning, and though we have maintained it in apparent being all this day, yet we will not be able to maintain it in being much beyond midnight tonight, if that long. It has been full of holes since the minute we made it, and the holes are getting bigger. It is a para-material illusion, and we will soon see what is the outcome of this first massive para-material illusion.

“We did have a mass of mentality, or at least of mentation, at our disposal to construct with. Sandaliotis was already strongly in many minds. People had believed in the existence of Sandaliotis for ages. People still believed in it. People said that they had been there, and that they knew how to go back there. Several prominent, though also eccentric, persons of the world had

claimed Sandaliotis as a birthplace. Sandaliotis was a going cult. It was a fantasy place with a fantasy literature.

“A study that we made revealed that seventy-two percent of the people in neighboring Italy believed that there was the peninsula named Sandaliotis that was larger than Italy. There was one quirk to this belief. Very many of those who held it believed in the appearance and fact of Sandaliotis on only one night of the year, on All Saints’ eve. Nevertheless, there was fiber and material of belief, and it could be built upon. The ‘para’ or para-material illusion is belief and mentality.

“There were countless Sandaliotis Clubs in the World. Some of them were poetry or literature circles, some of them were song and drama groups, some were ethical or spiritualistic or religious groups. Some were antiquarian, and the materials that they gathered were fantastic. Sandaliotis had even begun to have a language; well, it resembled an illegitimate daughter of Esperanto, but it was claimed to be a very old sister of Latin; and it had a new-old literature of its own. We used much of this club literature in the setting up of several ‘show’ libraries in the new construction. Some of the Sandaliotis clubs went in for such things as spirit manifestation, alternate worlds, the old Mediterranean god-and-hero cults, and levitation.

“Working with some of them, we made studies in inculcated, sustained levitation. We found that it could be accomplished, that in fact it was being done regularly. We were strictly in mind country on this, but that mind country will support a lot of weight for a while. Persons properly inculcated, and self- or hetero-hypnotized, may for a period (for about a day at most, we believe) move about on a supporting medium that would not ordinarily sustain their weight at all, that would not ordinarily sustain a tenth or even a twentieth of their weight. Well, you see, we cut costs where we could. It isn’t cheap building a country at least as large as Italy, even if we build most of it out of air foam.

“We worked with nonmaterial molecular lattice patterns. With these, the shape is all important, and there wasn’t any substance. Once the molecular lattice pattern was established, it would continue to impose itself on its ambient whether there was any material in that ambient or not, whether there were even any scattered molecules there. The noncollapsible shapes will sustain themselves with no expenditure of matter.

“We worked with the Multiplication Virus (it is deadly only when it spreads to living substance). The Multiplication Virus will reproduce itself

like wildfire on a rampage, and it does not much care what if any material it uses. It will grow furiously to a certain point dictated by its particular mutation, and then it will stop growing. We believed that we had brought about the proper mutation in the virus so that it would grow to fit our designated area exactly. Such material as it would use to form its virus crystals would be air and water and salt, from the local atmosphere and the sea.

“We worked with various gas plasmas. We worked with sustained electrical-field areas that continued after the cessation of their primaries. We worked with fox fires and swamp fires as patterns for short-life constructions. Oh, we did a lot of things with air foam also. As to bulk, most of our work was with air foam. We believed that we could cover our designated areas of ocean with oscillating oil slicks and then let down air foam or fog foam on that. The electrical charge had to be maintained on the oil slicks, of course, and on the air foam also. The air foam was really the hair of the ocean standing on end with the electricity in it. That is all that we did do this morning, and it worked much better than I at least had expected. The largest variations we have got so far from drifting coastlines is about twelve miles.

“We had come to the point where we could lay down area-covering ‘meadows’ of shimmering green goop. From a distance they would look like convincing meadows. And they could possibly be walked on like meadows, by persons in trances, by hypnotized persons, and simply by great numbers of persons caught up in the contagion and epidemic of walking on air, on colored air with a little solid foam to it.

“We had gone what flimsy distance we could go with material and paramaterial things, and it was all very flimsy. For the rest, we would have to do with hypnotic form, the cloak, the mind-casting veil. In short, we would have to employ magic for the rest of it.

“We had one special expert of the Cloak or Veil or Shadow or Disguise phenomenon with us. This was the person code named Amelia Lilac. She was the lady of the lavender ambient which fractures both appearance and reality and can cause crowds as well as persons to see and to believe almost anything that is wished onto them. She is one of the very old people, of the cult people. The effect of the shadow fog is very powerful so that even fragments of it can perform wonders. Amelia herself demonstrates bi-

location and diplo-somatism (bi-bodyism). She has several different valid bodies that she uses.”

“No, she has not,” Constantine contradicted. “That bouncy body that she was using this afternoon, her half-dolphin body, it wasn’t valid and it wasn’t real. Only a toy.”

“It may be that you’re mistaken,” the man said. “But, yes, we had already done something this morning that you asked about this afternoon. We *did* project one of those shadow-ambient disguises that was about three hundred miles long. That was really what made Sandaliotis ‘appear.’ It just fit our new country and it transformed it. Everybody believes in the lavender fog when it is first in their eyes. Everybody believes in it for about a day, and it creates reality for those who believe in it.

“We had run many excursion boats here today, to get a crowd of devoted and believing people, people who should look like native inhabitants. They were filled up with a sense of pageantry, for they were recruited out of the various Sandaliotis Clubs. They were full of play-acting and they had all the burning desire to make the play-acting come true. They were bright and shining Sandaliotis people, and they were everywhere. But many of the old-line Corsicans and Sardinians played parts also.

“Everything here is either Corsica, or it is Sardinia, or it is North Town, or it is Monaco. Or else it is that shimmering green goop of tenuous substance, the transmuted air and coloring matter. Oh, the green meadows of Sandaliotis! They are here today, and tomorrow they will be melted and gone. Well, we have sold the new land to an off-world group. We will collect by midnight tonight. And then we skip. Oh how we will skip! That is all that there is to tell.”

“That is not nearly all,” said Constantine Quiche. “What is special about North Town?”

“Only that it is more material than the other additions,” the man said. “It’s the remnant of our earliest and most material attempts, those that would have been prohibitive cost-wise for the whole area. There is some very ingenious lightweight scaffolding there, covered over again with a very ingenious use of the lavender fog, the reality cloud.”

“And the city that we are in now?”

“Ichnusa, the capital of Sandaliotis? Oh, this is only the city of Cagliari of Sardinia somewhat added to. A few of the signs have been changed by the excursions members of the various Sandaliotis clubs who are having their

conventions here, and then the lavender fog is cast over it to make it a big city out of a little city. But it is still Cagliari as it always was.”

“And the Italian Steps, that magnificent sweep?” Constantine asked. “There was never such a monumental construction as that in Cagliari before. Do not tell me they are not real. I walked down them.”

“The Italian Steps? You really walked down those things, Quiche? Man, you were walking on air then. I mean it. But there are other things that I am not so sure are mere air. They may be mere thoughts, but then who thought them? I am one of those people who believed in the reality of Sandaliotis, as a boy and as a young man. I haven’t made any contact with that old reality in all our fancy doings here, but that doesn’t preclude it at all. There *is* a Sandaliotis somewhere. And they can’t take it away from us, because they can’t find it.

“But another thing, Quiche. When we add these various tawdries, the Italian Steps and such, we observe the first rule of fakery.”

“And what is that?”

“We make the new things complete with the marks of considerable age on them. It’s as easy as making them with the marks of considerable newness. We make a new world complete with its fossils and with its carbon-14 dating that shows considerable age.

“Even God employed that trick when He made the world, and that was not at all a long time ago. He made the world complete with all its age marks and its strata and memories and fossils.”

“Have you or the things that you have constructed here any connection with that Island in the Sky that is known as Thibeau’s Torpedo?”

“A few connections with it, yes, but they haven’t amounted to much. The people fooling with the Torpedo are mostly nothing people. And the people intent on pulling the world jack don’t really need the Torpedo in the air for their purpose. Almost anything else would serve. Thibeau’s Torpedo is a Fortean construct anyhow, and we stay away from that stuff. We just don’t feel comfortable with it.”

“And you really believe that you can get away with all this, man?”

“We can, man, but you can’t,” the suffering and flustered man told Constantine. “You yourself are trapped, Constantine Quiche. There is an emitting locator in you. You can’t hide, for it is hollering your location all the time. And you can be killed wherever you are; all they have to do is ride in on the emissions of your locator and blast you with almost anything. Your

locator is quite small. It was inserted into you, with other things, on the point of one needle.”

“The person code named Amelia Lilac has given a perhaps-promise to me, and I believe that she intends to fulfill it. She is the only one who can locate me. My locator is tuned to her only.”

“That’s true, man. But her ‘perhaps-promise’ to you is a vain one, though she may hope to fulfill it. She cannot. People who are on the ‘Great Expectation’ as we are cannot leave living witnesses behind them. This is bad practice in very many cases.”

“How much of this that you have told me is true, man?” Constantine asked.

“From a quarter to a half of it anyhow. I will tell you whatever I have to tell you to save myself from hanging. I will change my story to anything you wish if that will save me.”

“Isn’t it true that many earth persons were sold plots of the new land?” Constantine asked. “Quite a few million Earth persons in fact? Isn’t it the case that most of the people here on ‘excursions’ are agents buying the one-day land for thousands of clients? Isn’t it true that they have already paid for much of it, those who have come today and millions of others besides?”

“Well, you know how it is, Quiche One gets carried away by one’s own salesmanship.”

“And there weren’t any off-world contacts at all, were there? It is all sold to Earth people, all the false land out of the falseness of your hearts?”

“I think there may have been off-world contacts, yes. Oh, the ninety-nine percent is heisted from Earth people for land that won’t be here tomorrow, but I think there were a few off-world contacts also. We were conned badly if there weren’t any. Some of them seemed like off-world people, and some of them are cutting themselves in on our things.”

“As an old bunko-squad man, I bleed for you there. But your complaint is received a little bit late. You know that there are fewer people who believe in the Inhabited Worlds than believed in Sandaliotis even?”

“It isn’t a few. It’s a lot. It’s a wide enough belief that we might build something on it, and with them we might not even have to cut and run the same day. I believe that our next Promotional Enterprise might well have to do with those Inhabited Worlds.”

“You may be doing pretty well on this world,” Constantine said. “Seventy million acres or so will total up pretty steep even if you won’t get ten thousand dollars an acre for it.”

“We are getting more than that, Quiche. Do you think that we sell the land only once? What sort of pikers do you take us for? This is big. And, as Amelia Lilac told you, we can’t allow you to spoil it. We have worldwide electronic selling going on now, and that can mean multiple selling on very quick, one-day deals. After all, if this country and its land aren’t going to be here tomorrow, why *not* sell it a dozen times today? If it won’t *be* here, it might as well not be here a dozen times as not be here once.”

“Man of the ‘Great Expectation’, you have a weird look in your eye,” Constantine Quiche said, “and I don’t like it at all. I have to keep reminding myself that yours is the neck in the noose and mine is the hand on the rope.”

“I’m a bit mad, Quiche,” the man in the noose said. “I’ve been one of the persons of the lavender fog for some months and that brings on a touch of madness. You must try to forgive me for what I will have to do to you tonight.”

“I also, unbeknownst to myself, have been one of the persons of the lavender fog for some months, and that has brought on a touch of madness to myself also. You must try to forgive me for what I will have to do to you right now.”

“There’s really no way you can harm me,” the man said. “As Amelia Lilac did, I will go out of myself for a while and leave myself here. And then, when you are gone away, I will go into myself again. And then I will take a faster road than the Grande Corniche, and I will be there before you, wherever you go. I am within the illusion and protection of the shadow cloak now, and you will hang no more than a shadow if you hang me here. I will go and come back.”

“You had best go very quickly then,” Constantine said. “In any case, you will come back into a strangled body and one that will have a broken neck, I will make sure of that. Happy homecoming to you. There is no animosity, man. I only take your advice to leave no live witnesses behind. As you say, that’s bad practice to leave them.”

“One last question before I ‘die,’ Quiche,” the man said, but he was laughing with his eyes, “for there is a remote, a very remote, possibility that I really will die in your noose. Why are you wearing that silly and cumbersome parachute around your waist?”

“I don’t know,” Constantine said. “I really don’t. I can only say that I am wearing it because I was told to wear it, and I was told it by someone who seems intolerably vague now.”

Constantine pulled on the rope to hang the man then, and he got a good start for a moment. Then there was a short difficulty. The man was caught in quick panic, but he reacted in psychosomatic protest. There was no doubt that he was still in the body. The rope froze in the pulley. The man was using mind on it. The hands of Constantine cold froze on the rope. Then there was a struggle. The two men, both of whom had been slightly under the mind cloak for some months, battled for it there. Constantine had the advantage. He also had, as he found in the mortal combat, the stronger mind. And, after all, his was the hand on the rope. He forced it, and then he got free motion on it, and saw fear and doubt come into the face of the throttled man. Constantine hanged the man there until he was dead, and he was pretty sure that he had not got out of it, not got away. Probably there wasn't any such thing as going out of the body like that, though the man apparently had believed that there was. Constantine broke the man's neck to be sure of it.

“That takes care of the small end of the fog for a while,” Constantine said. “And now I must go for the big end of it. Where next will I find an encounter to lead me inside the other half of this riddle?”

He went out from the old building and out from the alley, and he ran into the Five O'Clock Man in the street.

CHAPTER NINE

It was exactly five o'clock in the afternoon, so the fate clock was keeping more strict time as time ran out to its end.

"I know you, man," the Five O'Clock Man said to Constantine Quiche, and he seized him by the throat. It wasn't an unfriendly grasp that he put upon him, however, though it was firm. The man only wanted to delay Constantine and to talk to him.

"You were in Gethsemane with me, in the garden with the thirteen death trees," the man said. "You had a part in that Drama."

"I was in the Thirteen-Sided Gethsemane with you, yes," Constantine said.

"You were one of those who fell asleep when you should have prayed," the Five O'Clock Man said. "And now the country, which is our body and soul, will be destroyed."

"Which country is that?" Constantine asked.

"Why, it is Holy Sandaliotis. What other country is so preyed upon and destroyed? What other country has so many prodigies to announce its death?"

"What prodigies are those, friend?" Constantine asked him. "I hadn't heard of them."

"Oh, calves talk and sing dirges. Eagles catch fire in the air. Kittens hatch out of owl eggs and such. All the usual. I am the Agent Deserted, yet I have been the faithful agent all the time of my service. Now my primary is being struck dead. It is my root. Without it I must wither and die."

"What is your primary and who strikes you dead?" Constantine asked.

"Sandaliotis, in whose clay I was formed, is my primary. It is the cheap-shotters who strike her dead. Whenever a country or a world is brought down, it is the cheap-shotters who do it."

But the Five O'Clock Man himself seemed pretty vague about it, and he would mumble to himself a while.

"Some of them in the Thirteen-Sided Room didn't know that it was real," he said. "Some of them, and I am not sure of yourself, thought that it was only scenes in a filmed drama. But it was real and vital, and the world was weighed there, and perhaps lost. I was the patriot for a while, you know, and

I learned the patriot's lines. I am a good patriot. That was before you were brought into the room. Then they changed me and gave me the role of the Agent Deserted. But all roles are the same when we come down to the end of the world."

He was silent for a little while, and he was nervous and discouraged.

"Sandaliotis is the last country in the world that a man would die for," the Five O'Clock Man said suddenly after a while, and this startled Constantine. They walked.

They came to the great Tarshish Tower which Deutero Scripture says is the exact model of the Tower of Babel. About the one or the both towers there has been some misunderstanding—"and it may as well be put right on this the last day of the world," the Five O'Clock Man said.

"The Towers were *not* designed to reach Heaven. The tapering and the setback clearly begins too lowdown for the towers to reach such prodigious heights, even by primitive standards. The Towers were designed to call Heaven down to Earth, to reach Heaven in that way. And, in that way, they were always successful.

"The Tarshish Tower, with its thirteen-faced clock, has held congress with every sort of lightning and thunder. And it has itself been the Burning Bush. Do you not notice, now that I point it out to you, the trimmed bush shape of it? It is scarred and mottled with the old and loving fire, and it is imprinted with the divine wisdom. There are fire messages graven fine all over it in every tongue. It was to the Towers that the tongues of fire first came down with messages to Earth. A Tower is only a sharpened and tuned mountain, and this fire on the mountain has been the beginning of communication. Notice the variety of the faces of the tower, man."

There was a Roman Face and a Greek Face to the clock in the Tarshish Tower. There was a Carthage Face and a Jerusalem Face and a Babylon Face. There was a Han Face with older Chinese characters than they have now. There was a Damascus Face and an Alexandria Face and a Tarshish Face from the tower-givers themselves. There was the Sandaliotis Face or Host Face. Hosts in Sandaliotis who were waiting to greet and welcome out-of-town guests would always wait for them under the Sandaliotis Face of the Tower.

There was the Nial Face of Hibernia. There was a Middle American Face in the contorted stone motif of the Maya. And there was the Constantinople Face that was quite the most recent of them all.

Now this tower was not a new thing, and it was not made out of air. And yet there had never been anything like it in the small city of Cagliari or Sardinia. This was an encrusted-with-age tower.

“One hundred generations ago, an ancestor of mine died under the Roman Face of the Tower,” the Five O’Clock Man said. “That is why our coat of arms shows a dead man at the bottom of the Roman Face. It was only a small thing, a scuffle with daggers, I believe. The cause of the fight is now forgotten. But a family likes to have an old device on its coat of arms.

“Strabo, writing during or near the lifetime of Christ described this Tarshish Tower at Ichnusa on Sandaliotis,” the Five O’clock Man continued. “He described it just as it was then, just as it is now. Except for the Constantinople Face, that is; it hadn’t yet been ornated or dedicated. He wrote instead of the Illium Face which then made up the old count of thirteen and which now is no more.”

There was a patina of time in layer after layer on this tower. And there were waves of contemporaneity swirling about the base of it. It was here that one might stand and sooner or later see every person in the world go by.

Surrounding the Tarshish Tower was the Roman Circus with the thirteen major streets leading into it. Some of these stoned streets had names that were very old. One of them, the Strato Napoleon, was comparatively recent. But there were vast accumulations of time in the whole area.

“Nine generations back, one of my ancestors was a cobblestone foreman when they gave the newness to the new-named Strato Napoleon,” the Five O’Clock Man said.

West of the Roman Circus were the Ninety-Nine Fountains of Nekros with their reflecting pools. They were shockingly beautiful. Yes, they were made out of mere air and mere water, and one might almost believe that they had been made this morning. And they were made out of mere stone, but it was a stone that had been hammered by many centuries of water. And some of the fountain fittings were bronze, not brass and not iron.

“The water in several of the fountains is very old,” the Five O’Clock Man said, “and some of the fish in the pools are of very ancient species. There are carp there that were given for the pools by the Emperor Hadrian of Rome, and they were of the oldest variety known in the Roman world. Now they are of the oldest variety known in the world entire.”

Spray came into their faces from the fountains. It was fresh with the freshness of centuries.

“The fish are of old species, perhaps,” Constantine said, “but how would the water be old? And who would know it if the water in one place were somewhat older than the water in another?”

“Oh, the age may be calculated by the patterns of the halide crystals in the water,” the Five O’Clock Man said. “It has to do with the original shape of the halide-salt crystals formed from the dissolved minerals. There is a small difference in the materials of the crystals, between those from old water and those from new, a difference in shape and pattern. Crystals follow time fashions, and these are old-fashioned.

“You will notice the several Etruscan Fountains in the old part, in the central cluster there,” the Five O’Clock Man said. “It is almost forgotten that the Etruscans were among the earliest colonists of Sandaliotis. And you will notice a group of Egyptian Fountains there. But Egyptian Fountains do not leap up as other fountains do. They roll up regularly and sedately. There is a difference of mind set that accounts for this. There are all very storied waters and rocks here.”

North of the Ninety-Nine Fountains was the big Basilica of the Hundred Martyrs, the oldest still-standing basilica in Christendom. It was the see of the Patriarch of Ichnusa. It had one hundred bells, each known by its tone to all the people of Ichnusa.

West of the Ninety-Nine Fountains were the splendid Italian Steps going upward in a flighty sweep. There was a bird-flight contour to them. They were a hundred meters wide and three hundred steps up (but they were three hundred and one steps down. The difference was due to a symbolism and warning. The way to Hell, it was said, is made up of a series of steps, three hundred up and three hundred and one down. And, one who follows them and does not break out of their trap, will go down and down lower yet, and he will believe himself to be maintaining a level.

The steps were made out of colored stones that looked painted and sometimes were not. They were blocks of garnet of different colors, and of rose-colored shale, yellow slate, old redstone, and green turquoise.

“It was only eighty years ago, in the time of my grandfather, that the Italian Stairs received a major repair,” the Five O’Clock Man said. “Two million new stones were set into them to replace stones that were broken or too badly worn. The old replaced stones and fragments were hauled to a place west of the City where they filled up a miasmal swamp and heaped themselves up over it. Today it is still called ‘The Field of the Old Stones’.”

There were ten thousand bench loungers and step loungers on the sweep of the Italian Steps, and they were all of the Beautiful People. People as scenery! And they were Sandaliotis people and Sandaliotis scenery.

Constantine Quiche and the Five O’Clock Man sat on a bench and became bench loungers for a while.

“I am the Deserted Agent,” the Five O’Clock Man said. “I am an agent for the ‘Society for the Preservation of the Antiquities of Sandaliotis’, and I am deserted because people have ceased to care about these antiquities and their own deep past. Our once-thriving society has dwindled in membership. Quite lately there has been introduced a feeling of contempt for the old things of our country and the wish to replace them with cheap-shot products.

“I say that this feeling has been ‘introduced,’ for it has come to us as a contrived and alien thing which I do not understand at all. This feeling has been building up for critical weeks and I have tried to warn people of it. But how do you warn of a feeling that cannot be weighed or held? I have known for some weeks that the destructive attitude would culminate on a target date, and that it would be today. And this morning, I felt it like the blast from a furnace. There are people who want to destroy our country completely, physically destroy it. They intend to do it today, or to do it before the night is over with tonight. They will let all the juice leak out of it first. And then the day remnants of it will break up into pieces of no weight at all and will drift away on the sea. These people want to make it that we have never been. I don’t understand this at all. Do you?”

“A little bit, Five O’Clock Man, a very little bit,” Constantine said.

“I tried to convey this threat in an impassioned speech in the Thirteen-Sided Room, but my warnings all came out as nothing talk. They had decided, at the Room, to kill me for what I had tried to say (for what I really did say, I believe, but they changed my words and my sounds with some kind of garbling mechanism that they had there). Then somebody else was killed in place of me. They were playing Corsican Roulette with the death selections for a while there, but I do not know who was spinning the barillet of the revolver. I am half sorry that it was not myself who was killed. If my country does not survive this day, why should I want to survive it?”

“Do you understand what it would be like if there were an Island of Corsica, and if there were an Island of Sardinia, and if there was nothing else of Greater Sandaliotis?” Constantine asked.

“Yes, I have seen the maps of the Sandaliotis-Must-Be-Destroyed incendiaries, those hate people,” the Five O’Clock Man said. “Oh, that is the great nightmare, that is the horrible premonition. The Destruction and Disappearance of Sandaliotis is in our national Epic, but we can no more understand it than we can understand our own death before it comes. Three great nations have sunk into the sea in the past, and there is the prophecy that the fourth great nation will disappear into the sea in the future. Do you believe that this future might be today or tonight, man?”

“Yes, I believe that it might be,” Constantine said. “It may already have happened, quite a while ago. It is hard to set accurate termination dates on things.”

“Yes it is. We tend to exaggerate the length of our sojourn on the earth,” the Five O’Clock Man said, “and we tend to exaggerate the length of years of our nation, however old it may be. To the angels, we must be like ants who built a fine hill or hive or nation only this morning. But they thrive in it in their generations, and they develop an intense feeling for its arts and its history and its religion and its hearths. They become very patriotic about it all, those ants do. Have you watched ants during the destruction of their hive or hill? They are in a panic. They are in a desolation. And their burning patriotism cries out in voices that are too small for us to hear. The ants believe that they are destroyed in their incredible ancientness, and yet their reality was built only this morning. How long ago do you think that Sandaliotis was built, man?”

“Only this morning,” Constantine Quiche said sadly.

The Five O’Clock Man began to moan.

“Sandaliotis will fall to the enemy whom we cannot even see,” he said. “It will fall into the enemy the ocean, but the ocean is not of itself our enemy. We are an ant hill invaded by an army of evil and alien fire ants, and they will not leave us one grain of sand upon another. I have felt these people for weeks (these alien, attacking, army ants) and I have seen them everywhere today. I cry out about it, and I am laughed at and told to shut up. But this is my land. This is my mother whom they intend to exterminate. I will *not* shut up! Help! Help! Help! Police! Guards! Street Sweepers! Assemble! Repel the attack! Protect our country that they are destroying right now!”

The Five O’Clock Man had become very excited, and he continued to roar out that persons were stealing and destroying his Land, Sandaliotis. By and by, officials or public servants of some sort came and took him away.

Well, what about that Five O’Clock Man? How could he have been an old citizen and patriot of Sandaliotis if there hadn’t been any old Sandaliotis? Had the Five O’Clock Man been created very recently, complete with all his memories and fossils? When had he been created? Yesterday? Today?

If the realm of Sandaliotis had been created only today, but created at a great age and with all the built-in vestiges of that great age, what would happen when it was uncreated again? Could the uncreation go smoothly?

Constantine Quiche did a number of things then, such things as only the best detective in the world will do between five-thirty and seven o’clock on an evening. He may have blown the whistle on the biggest real-estate deal around, but that couldn’t be quite certain till the payoff later that night. He figured out quite a few things. He analyzed several very strong and rank animals with only a hair or two of each of them to go on, and he made reports on them.

Then, just at seven o’clock in the evening, he ran into that ‘agent’ named John Seferino. This was under the Constantinople Face of the Tarshish Tower which, as every guidebook tourist will know, was in the middle of the Roman Circus.

“What were you saying last night that thieves were trying to steal, little Constantine?” Seferino asked him with easy mockery.

“Monaco,” Constantine said cheerfully. “But they didn’t get away with it. I thwarted them.”

“Be careful whom you attempt to thwart tonight, Constantine,” Seferino said. “This gets too big for you.”

“It’s the big end of the log that I’m looking for now, John. Do you know where I can find it?”

“Yes. I’m standing on it. Leave it alone. I told you that it was too big for you.”

“Ah, John, I’m eaten up with curiosity. I just have to find out what this is all about.”

“Tune in at nine-thirty tonight then, and have your curiosity satisfied.”

“Tune in where, John?”

“Any station in the world, Constantine. It will be on them all.”

Seferino had the pace and spring of a wild animal. He had a grinning ferocity that Constantine hadn’t known in him before. And he had his great size; now it couldn’t be overlooked, but Constantine had used to overlook it.

And Seferino had never seemed to have much depth or strength or vigor before. Maybe he had only been popping ferocity pills now.

“You are to have dinner with me tonight, Constantine,” Seferino said. “And we will have it at once. How would mushroom quiche please you for the opener?”

“Neither such opener nor such host would please me. I’m choosy.”

“You have the right to be choosy as to the food. That’s ancient custom. But you may not be choosy as to the host. You have the right to be choosy as to the food because you will be a condemned man eating his last meal ever. But I will be your host and your guard also, and you cannot be choosy there. You will come with me pleasantly now, or you will come with me with an iron collar around your neck and with my hand in the grip on the back of that iron collar. Did you ever notice what large hands I have, Quiche? Did you ever notice how large a man I am all over?”

“No, I never noticed it, John, and I do not now. To me, you are small within and small outside.”

But Constantine went along pleasantly with that agent named John Seferino who was said to be from Istanbul. They went to Messina’s German Restaurant, one of the finest in Ichnusa. This was just off the Circus, on the first block of the Barbarossa Road which was one of the great streets that led into the Roman Circus from the North.

They waited for a moment in the little anteroom and had small glasses of red wine from the wine spigot, and crab meat and cheese from the sideboard.

“Treasury men and bankers of the world are in a great scurry and fever right now,” Seferino said. “So are marechals of various countries, along with their figureheads. They have got the big word, though the peoples of the world won’t get it till nine-thirty tonight. This is the biggest hijack ever. Heads of countries are agreeing to it now, or heads of countries are rolling. But the new heads of the countries will agree. There is no way out of it.”

“Why not?” Constantine asked. “That gun isn’t loaded.” It seemed like a clever thing to say, but Constantine wasn’t quite sure what he meant by it.

“That gun *is* loaded!” Seferino cried furiously. “And the world had better behave as if that gun were loaded, or it’s going to be too bad for the world.”

A waiter with moustaches and a walk like a walrus led them to a table. This was all in the middle of a burnished elegance that couldn’t have been burnished only since this morning. Seven maids with seven burnishing brushes could hardly have done it in seven years.

“You were guessing, little detective,” Seferino said. “You don’t even know the name of the gun I’m talking about.”

“Thibeau’s Torpedo.”

“Oh well, I suppose you do know it then. It’s had lots of names. But you do not at all understand the great morphic aspects of it or its topological dynamism. There are several of these morphic entities, all very old. One of them will be an island in the Aegean Sea, for instance. Then it will disappear from there, and the next time it is seen it will be a Star in the Pleiades. And the next time after that that it is seen, it may be a peninsula on Earth.”

“It is not identical with Sandaliotis,” Constantine said.

“No, of course not,” Seferino agreed. “It is, as they say, a gun, or a torpedo. It is (how frequent is the length in this particular area of mythology) three hundred miles long. It is fused, and it is loaded.

“Four other guests momentarily, waiter. And we will begin with mushroom quiche. This man may want an opener in addition to that. Let him have it then.”

Oh, what an overly civilized, urbane elegance was there! Could such an elegance be attained in less than a hundred thousand nights of high dining? Van Venduhouder, the famous epicure, has given the opinion that no restaurant anywhere can remain at top elegance for more than a hundred thousand nights (why, that’s scarcely three hundred years!) without losing its edge. That is why there are no restaurants at the same time really old and really elegant in the world. (Van Venduhouder gave the opinion that such restaurants that time had run out on, those that have lost their glow and lift, should be wrecked and their areas converted to pastures for asses.)

The other four guests arrived. They were Salaadin and Regina Marqab. And Julien Moravia and Amelia Lilac.

“This will be a delight,” Salaadin said. “It is the same enjoyable company as we had last night. What fate has arranged this, I do not know. I would have said that it would have been impossible for such a constellation to happen twice.”

“This will be a delight,” Regina said, and she kissed Constantine.

“Really, I believe that the needle stabs detract from it somehow,” Constantine objected. “It is an ill custom in my opinion to mix such things. Whatever happened to the plain and simple girls with their sweet and needless kisses?”

“I think maybe they all got trapped into something, Constantine my unburied treasure,” Regina said. “If it weren’t for the needle money that they pick up on the side, they just wouldn’t get along at all.”

“At least this dinner combination cannot happen again *after* tonight,” Amelia spoke out of her lavender cloud. “After this dinner we break the plate so it can’t happen again. You’re the plate, Constantine. Constantine, my love and my subsidiary life, you have a bad habit of killing people, and for that you will have to be put under restraint of a perpetual sort. No, you will not be able to dine with us again. My own bonfire, you cannot dine ever again, with anyone.

“But do you not all agree that he is a delightful dinner companion now? See the slow fear flush spread over his face (aided just a little bit by the trepidation element from the infusion), and by the defiance (which really doesn’t belong there). He is so like a boy, and I love him. I believe that the best suppers of all must have one member who will be dead before he comes to his next meal. This is the special sauce that the restaurants do not list.”

“You *do* know that you’re communicating, don’t you, Constantine?” Salaadin asked.

(They had already begun on the mushroom quiche. Constantine had not countermanded it, so all assumed that it was his favorite supper opener.)

“You are communicating, Constantine, under intense amplification, to your superiors and to others who are tied into them. Every reaction of yours is going to them: the fear sweat of the palms of your hands, the skip beat of your heart, the crawling fright that courses along the whole surface of your skin, the burning trepidation thirst for the whole length of your tract. We have let the people at World Interpol know that this is the only way they can receive a communication from you. It will be effective. It will tell them that you are afraid and that they should be afraid.”

“It is really a triumph of my own,” Julien Moravia said, “but we have had a bit of forces-joining in several groups. It was Amelia who introduced the monitor and transmitter into you. The pretty man told you that it was an emitting locator. It is that, and it is much more. And Regina has now introduced a back-up transmitter into you. We hate failure when it can be prevented by simple precaution. Are we not thoughtful to help you arrange your thoughts and inmost feelings and reactions and then to communicate them for you, selectively and with our own reinforcing, when you are not able to communicate them yourself?”

“How is the marrying business, Regina?” Constantine asked. Naturally he was not frightened. He was the best detective in the world on one of the most diffuse cases to be found, and he could not permit himself the luxury of fear. Yes, his palms were sweating, and his heart was into the skip beat. The crawling monster was crawling all over his surface, and the thirsting monster was prowling all his tract. But he wasn’t scared.

“Oh, that wasn’t myself who was doing all that marrying this morning,” Regina said. “That was an unfocused person you refer to, she who was marrying every hour. That was a simulacrum of myself. We use a lot of simulacra in our doings.”

“She was no simulacrum,” Constantine said. “She was yourself with the veneer cracked. There was something very natural about her, Regina (oh, that very limited nature of her!). She was so amoral, so brainless, so skittish. That was yourself, Regina. But now you are taken over by a simulacrum. And possibly all of you others are taken over by them.”

“I agree with Amelia that the best suppers must contain one member who is eating his last meal,” Julien Moravia said. “(By the way, Constantine, that was not myself who harassed you in North Town this morning. That was a simulacrum of me.) I am something of an expert on these last-meal suppers. I have attended several thousand of them in my very long years. I attended that of Gautama (What a picky eater he was! He was really a drag on an otherwise excellent meal!). There was that of Socrates, that of Christ, that of Julian the Apostate (he was formally executed by his own soldiers, whatever other account you may have heard of it), that of—”

“He was *not* executed by his own soldiers. He is here present,” Constantine said. “And he was on the cult circuit a while before he came here.” No one seemed to understand what Constantine was talking about, except possibly Julien.

“—that of Count Dracula,” Julien Moravia continued. “Oh, would it not be a fine touch if we had a sharpened stake of holly here on the table as we had then! That blood pudding that the Count ordered as the central dish of his last meal was rather good, but we are not blessed tonight with a victim with imagination. Then there was the last meal of the Bristol Strangler. Oh, so many of them! All of them had to die, you know, because they were meddlesome in one way or another.”

They were into the salmon in aspic now. Constantine hadn’t gainsaid them, so the salmon had followed the mushroom quiche.

“You will get to see the transmission tonight, Constantine,” John Seferino said. “You will be confined and fettered. You won’t be able to move, and you will hardly be able to breathe; but you will be able to see the transmission. It would be lost irony if you weren’t allowed to.

“You made lucky guesses, or you put lucky names to several things. That is the main reason for your sad and premature death. You even had the name of Thibeau’s Torpedo. It isn’t the right name, of course, but it is a going nickname for it. Know you then that the thing is real and that it’s up there indeed! Know you then that Sandaliotis is a little bit real also, for all that it will crumble into nothing tonight. The Torpedo is a gun pointed at the heart of the world. And it will force the payment of the biggest ransom ever paid.”

“That gun is not loaded,” Constantine said. With perhaps exaggerated calmness he took a drink of—ah, it was that damned, antiquated, Falernum wine! It was the same as they had served the night before. It was not the best of wines.

“That gun *is* loaded!” John Seferino cried furiously.

“Constantine, my passion, my pet, my secondary heart,” Amelia soothed it over. “I will apologize for that touch of anger from Seferino. Let us have only pleasure at this table. We will entertain your last repast with anecdotes that are both strange and true, and in particular we will give you the anecdote of the Torpedo in the Sky. We know that it is true because we have lived upon it.”

“It is no more than an illusion,” Constantine said, fishing for what they would tell him, but without much of a hook or line. “It is a Fortean Construct only. It has solidity, perhaps, and visuality sometimes. But these are both empty qualities with it.”

“Oh, it’s real enough,” Julien Moravia said. “With this, as with very many other things, the unreal elements are not in contradiction to the real; they are in addition to the real. The Torpedo (what an awkward name for it!—but we would rather not speak its own blessed name) is a frequent station for out-of-the-body travels, but that doesn’t preclude its being visited and inhabited by persons very much in their bodies. It is an illusion, yes, inasmuch as its appearance in the sky (when it sometimes does go visual) is not at all its true appearance.

“It is a Fortean Construct, yes, but that isn’t near all that it is. It is a three-hundred-mile-long shaft of antimatter, yes, and it can completely annihilate Earth on contact; and there is no defense against it, except the payment of the

largest ransom ever. But it is much more than that, Constantine. It has been on Earth as an Island, it has been in the Pleiades as a Star, it has been in deep space as a space ship.”

“No. Do not try to sell me that stuff. I am not in the used-torpedo business,” Constantine said. “It is a Fortean Construct only, and the world has lost interest in Fortean Constructs.”

“You have been to the Torpedo yourself, Constantine,” Salaadin Marqab said. “You have been there in out-of-body travel. That is where you knew us, Regina and myself especially, and Amelia Lilac. And the others also. That is the only place that you ever knew any of us before last night.”

“No. I knew you on Earth,” Constantine said.

“Can you say where or when you knew us on Earth?” Salaadin asked.

“No, I can’t,” Constantine admitted, “and it worries me to have that hole in my memory.”

“Let us fill up that hole in your memory then, Constantine, my other soul,” Amelia Lilac said.

“About this out-of-the-body travel, it is in defiance of the laws of momentum. It takes off at broad angles (somewhat broader than three hundred and sixty degrees) and it changes direction easily,” one of them was saying that, or a simulacrum of one of them at table. “And it arrives wherever it is going at zero elapsed time.”

Yes, it now seemed to Constantine very much as if all the people at table with him in Messina’s German Restaurant in Ichnusa of Sandaliotis were simulacra, and that these people here on the Torpedo (for Constantine now, by special dispensation, was both places at once) were the primary people. They were on the dazzling and direct Sky-Island that Constantine knew only by the code name of Thibeau’s Torpedo, and it was joltingly fundamental and material there. These primary people, though they were the same people as those he was dining with in the restaurant at the same time, were incomparably fierce in their sky manifestations. They were Sky-Animals, and they would raid anything up to a million times their size.

They were destroyers. They were annihilators. And it was all a numbing fear even to be with them. There was Amelia Lilac as she was on the other side of her veil passage. There was Julien Moravia in all his sinister deviousness, and there was John Seferino who came from a more distant Istanbul than the one on Earth. But Constantine Quiche *remembered* things on the Torpedo. He met those things again now, and they were more real than

most settings on Earth. And there was an appetitive violence here that had no equal. This place *could eat you alive*. And any of the five persons here could eat Constantine Quiche instantly. Three Hundred Miles Long, the shaft, and it dwarfed Earth completely. One fifteen-thousandth the mass of Earth, and it could annihilate Earth, antimatter against matter, and make hardly a dent in itself. Then the power of the place overflowed.

There were sequences (though perhaps they were not time sequences at all; perhaps they were pre-emptory status only) that could not be put into words, or into visual forms at all, that did not correspond to any of the senses in their usual ways; and yet those sequences or whatever they might be called were brimming with absolute horror. They were clear on the other side of insanity.

(—only not quite.) From the other world of Messina’s German Restaurant came a repeat of a phrase of Salaadin Marqab: “You do know that you’re communicating, don’t you, Constantine?” Yes, even on an out-of-the-body visit to the Sky Torpedo, Constantine was communicating the infectious and overwhelming horror that he found there. He was communicating it to World Interpol and to world. It was distilled terror that he was communicating, and (if it went uncorrected) it might possibly lay a deciding fear on the world.

A technical point broke through Constantine’s mind then. A difficulty about being the best detective in the world is that pointed things are constantly sticking themselves through and out of the mind, awkward and imperiling. If the communication instrument were implanted in him, it was implanted in his body and blood somewhere. And if he were really on the Torpedo-in-the-Sky now, then he was here in an out-of-the-body experience. Thus he was not transmitting from the Sky Torpedo. He was not on the Sky Torpedo. He was still back in the restaurant and he was being given a mind ride by a quintet of very treacherous minds. He was being played for a mind patsy.

And then, after an unreasonable period of time, he was in the restaurant again in his own clarity.

“Where is my boar?” he asked crankily. “This is my last supper and I am supposed to have the best of everything. All of you are eating boar. Where is mine?”

“You ate it,” John Seferino said, “and we are about finished.”

“Did I transmit well?” Constantine asked.

“Excellently,” Julien Moravia told him. “The world will believe that it is a technical first. And it will help to put the fear of annihilation into the

world. In conjunction with the nine-thirty broadcast drama, it should convince the world to pay up.”

“Is everybody ready?” John Seferino asked. How could that man be that big, and a person would not be conscious of it all the time? But whatever else of the visit to the Torpedo was faked, the incomparable ferocity of Seferino was real. He was a wild animal under a thin human pelt.

“Wait, wait,” Amelia wailed. “Let me finish.”

“You are a glutton, Amelia,” Seferino said. Amelia finished like a real glutton then. But, after that, she pulled her lavender cloud around her again, as it were, and again she became perfect in all ways.

They were gathering up their things and themselves to leave, and settling the bill and such. There seemed to be a moment long enough for Constantine to volley a couple of them in. They had planted a transmitter in him. Then let him transmit something of his own.

“That gun’s not loaded! That gun won’t shoot!” he communicated with a mighty effort of his mind. He prayed that his message would get through to World Interpol and to the world in general, to counteract some of the fear that he had been transmitting in spite of himself.

“Constantine doesn’t look amenable enough. Something is wrong,” Amelia said.

“I have a thing here for persons who aren’t amenable enough,” John Seferino vaunted. And there was an unpleasantness in the air.

John Seferino snapped an iron collar around Constantine’s neck. He set one of his tremendous hands into the grip at the back of the collar and jerked Constantine to his feet. Then they were out into the dusk streets and moving with loud and happy chatter to cover up any awkwardness. They followed a way that was familiar.

They came to the building that had been called “The Dungeons of Tertullian” earlier that day. Now there was a sign on it: “Dungeon closed. Out of Business.” They opened and went in, there being no door locks on Sandaliotis.

They took Constantine to the Thirteen-Sided Room and strapped him into his old place as the Thirteen O’Clock Man. They put the same noose around his neck, and John Seferino set a mechanism that would hang Constantine at twelve o’clock.

“I am mouth oriented myself,” Amelia said. She stuffed something the size of a baseball into Constantine’s mouth. It interfered with his breathing and

with his swallowing. It interfered with everything about him. Amelia taped his mouth so that there was no danger of the thing popping out.

“It is only a small bomb, Constantine my puppy,” Amelia said. “Really, I do love you like a puppy. It’s primed and timed and will blow your head off right at midnight.”

Salaadin and Regina and Julien Moravia were variously oriented, and they put their separate “bugs” into Constantine: but they are too bloody brutal to describe. But Constantine would die five different ways at midnight.

“The set will come on at nine-thirty, Constantine,” Seferino said, “and you will be able to watch the drama that is a masterpiece of exhortation and intimidation and world blackmail. Admire it for its artistry if you cannot admire it for its purpose. When it’s over, entertain yourself as you think best till death comes for you at midnight.”

They all went away and left Constantine writhing on the wall of the Thirteen-Sided room there. It was about a quarter to nine in the evening.

CHAPTER TEN

This was the time for introspection and not for transmission. It was not a time for transmission because all that Constantine could transmit was fear and apprehension; and fear and apprehension were the very things that certain opportunists were trying to heap up for all the peoples of the Earth for their disadvantage.

But there was much reason for fear and apprehension in the position of Constantine Quiche. He was trussed and bound and gagged and strapped up on a wall in a newly emptied building in a new part of a contingent city which, he strongly suspected, would suffer a pumpkin syndrome and cease to exist in a very little while. Apparatus was in place and ticking that would hang him, bomb his head off, and do three other things too bloody-brutal to mention to him at the hour of midnight, should his surroundings last even that long.

And moreover he was hardly his own man any more, what with all the piercings of the sophisticated needles that had introduced strange juices and apparatuses into him. An examination of reality was needed, but would that set the situation any straighter? Never had there been such a bunch of crumbling reality and pseudoreality around any man who was trying to order his thoughts and stabilize his world.

One sort of reality was that Constantine was perched several thousand feet high on a fill-in of green goop that was mostly air and coloring matter. The truth was that this green goop-filler of the newer part of the city and the newer part of the nation would not even support the weight of a man, much less that of a nation, except for the sustaining and feverish mentality behind it. And that mentality was of a crumbling, clay-footed sort, spinning and spun out of the illusion of the Lavender Cloud.

Constantine had had brushes with some of the people of this sustaining mentality, and they just weren't as mental as all that. They were showy projectionists and controlled hysterics, but they weren't mental enough to sustain a new nation for very long.

Constantine was choking to death. He was smothering. His heart and lungs were failing. All his limbs and viscera were cramping. Several different deliriums were disputing the area of his brain and his body.

“Hold onto this,” he shouted to himself. “This is something like the facts of the case.”

He was still a transmitting person with the communicating apparatus stuck into him, so these thoughts of his that attempted assessment were going out as well as his panic thoughts were.

“There is an unsubstantial mountain of air-foam, irregular in form and more than three hundred miles long, riding on a temporarily quiescent sea (the whole thing really resting on drifting oil slicks), and this air-foam goop is being presented as a magic new country of illimitable extent, and it is being merchandized by rogues as real estate, “the last free, fertile land in the world”; and the same goop is being merchandized over and over again to different buyers as real estate.

“This mass of unsubstantial air-foam will break up and disintegrate very soon, and everything on it will perish. This is part of one reality of an unreal sort.

“On a higher plain (higher in altitude only) there is a sort of beam or travant or strambolus drifting in the sky, and at present it seems to be about a thousand miles above Earth. It isn’t known how much substance this beam has, or whether it is only a sort of beam in the eye, an optical illusion. Sometimes it is there to one sort of instrument and not to another sort. Sometimes it is on visual and sometimes it isn’t. There have been a number of these ‘sky mirages’ known for quite a while, and mostly they *have* been regarded as mirages. Now another band of rogues, and some of them are the same rogues who are in on the inflated air-foam real-estate deal, are trying to fictionize this beam in the sky as a shaft of antimatter, under intelligent command, that is capable of destroying Earth or destroying whatever percent or part of it is decided upon. This would all seem hard to believe or to present, but the Illusion of the Lavender Cloud (a sort of hypnotic cult device) is over its presentation also.

“These are the facts as well as there are any uneroded facts in the case: there is a Fortean manifestation on the Mediterranean Sea, and it is largely artificial (mind and attenuated matter), and it is possible that all Fortean manifestations are artificial also. And there is another Fortean manifestation in the sky, at the altitude of about a thousand miles. And possibly there is a

Fortean connection between the two things. But there is no reality in these things, only the mockery of reality.

“World Interpol, pick my message up and record it! You have equipment at least as sophisticated as have the Lavender Cloud people who put the transmitters in me. Take my appraisals here, and do not take my fears. But if you have another agent in the area, send him to me here and get me out of this.”

Constantine felt a little bit better when he had summarized the crumbling facts of the case into crumbling words in his own mind, and when he had, possibly, communicated a little of them to World Interpol. If they were transmitted, either to World Interpol or to the world at large, so much the better.

He wasn't transmitting nearly as much of the “world-is-time-bombed” fear now as he had been, not as much as the rogues who had put him there had intended that he should transmit. Even though he was gagging on the time bomb in his own mouth, he was downgrading that fear and trying to transmit explanations instead.

The thirteen-sided room had not changed greatly since early afternoon. The rats were gone, that's about all. Probably they had been sold. The panoramic eye that had been in the ceiling of the room now seemed dead and blank, though probably the big camera was still there and could be flicked on in an instant. Or maybe it also had been sold or pawned.

As before, there was very little light in the room, and its origin was hard to determine. Of the writhing snakes that were the superscriptions above the torture niches on the wall, most of them were asleep or in slow writhe. ‘Gone to supper’ was scribbled on the wall in a place where one snake was absent, but that was more likely written by a joker than by a snake. The markers on the thirteen clock faces moved very slowly. It was still eight minutes till nine o'clock.

The best detective in the world fell asleep. He slept restfully for seven or eight minutes. And then he was awakened by a great booming brass voice with its own cymbal accompaniment.

“Oh, *why* do you insist on introducing farce into everything that you do, Mr. Chataigneraie!” it was the Director calling out. “The market for farce is gone, and in any case I am about bankrupt and out of business. I thought I could recoup my fortune today; and I have done a great amount of business, and shot a number of films of one sort or another. If I can collect, I am in the

clear and running again. And if I cannot collect, then I am sunk. Let me tell you something, Chataigneraie,” (Oh, why did the Director still call him Chataigneraie, which was not his name?) “The people who talk in the biggest money, the people who curl your hair with their ostentation of trillion-dollar deals, those people are likely to be very slow pay. Watch out for them!

“That’s good though! That’s perfect right there! You’re good, Chataigneraie. That’s as fine a farcical-escapist bit as I’ve ever seen. I wish I were filming a ‘Great Escape’ film today. I’d use your act. I’d make a place for it somewhere. I wish vaudeville were back and I was in the middle of it. I’d surely find a place for your skit then.

“I love that touch of the ticking bomb in your mouth, and the way that you bug out your eyes and writhe and strangle. You have a true gift for pathos-comedy. Oh, I suffer with you, I die with you, I laugh with you! Oh, your antic of having me arrested earlier today was also rare humor, Frenchman. I never forget a really choice bit of humor like that.

“I had just come back to see if I had left any cigarettes and liquor here when I was riding high today. Ah, these dregs are good when you’re down to the dregs! I’m out of business now and broke, but I’ll be back into business later tonight if I can collect on a couple of bills. Can I see the act though? Can I see how you really do escape from that one? It looks impossible, with the straps already so tight that they cut into your flesh and send the blood running down from their cuts. So realistic! I’ve always been a buff for the great escape artists, especially the comic ones.

“Oh, those bugged-out eyes of yours! And the way you make the veins in your throat stick out! Oh that bomb in your mouth, what a touch! Wow! And the slow sizzle and smoke of it, that is the master’s touch. You are Prometheus bound to the crag with an apple in your mouth like a pig! And the apple is the explosive one of the family of fire. Oh yes, I’m sure you intended all the many levels of meaning. Great comics always do.

“Oh, you won’t show me the escape than? Really, I don’t blame you for that. I wouldn’t show it either without an advance, but I really can’t book you. I have nothing at all going. If I run into another producer or director, I’ll tell him that you’re down here with a great farcical escape act. Tootle, Chataigneraie!”

Oh great palpitating horror! That brassy Director left the place and closed the door after him. He went away and left Constantine there to die. That Director had brass brains! Constantine almost wished that he hadn’t had him

sent to prison that afternoon, for an hour or however long they keep such men. Possibly he resented it, and possibly the brass head had put it clear out of his mind. It would have been better if the Director hadn't come by for that brief moment and raised Constantine's hopes of escape. The desolation of this new-hope-dashed drove him all the way down. What were the chances of anyone else happening to come along to this deserted building before midnight?

But then the Director came back in.

"Chataigneraie, your act bothered me!" he said in his brassy boom. "I said to myself 'That act's too good. What if it isn't an act?' It is an act, isn't it, Chat—? No, I see now that it isn't."

So the Director unbombed and unfused and unnoosed Constantine, and unstrapped him from the niche in the wall there. He took him down and out of the former Dungeons of Tertullian, and to some small rooms that he had rented for that day. He bathed his wounds and galls with honey and oil and made him feel better.

"You're emitting," the Director said to Constantine when he had made him comfortable and when Constantine had somewhat recovered from his ordeal. "I am like a finely tuned instrument and I can tell when people are emitting. There is a device which may have been placed in you without your consent, and yet you are doing well with it, bending it a little bit to your own purpose. You give warnings. And it may be that you are tipping some scales."

"Not enough, I'm afraid," Constantine said. "There is a double band of rogues about, and they fleece the people individual and corporate. The biggest real-estate fraud that has ever been is persuading many thousands of agents to pay over the life money of many millions of persons for land that is only temporary and that has only a tentative existence here anyhow. And another band of rogues (closely connected to the first band, I believe) is hijacking the whole world with the threat to destroy this whole world. And they are taking their intimidation direct to the people with a planetary blackmail-threat program at nine-thirty tonight on every station in the world. It would gag a buzzard."

(Constantine had been talking for the Director, for World Interpol, and for World Itself, for anyone who would listen.)

"What is little known is that buzzards gag rather easily," the Director said. "But they do not give up easily. They will tackle the same piece of carrion again and again and again until finally they will keep it down one more time

than they will bring it up. I've always admired this quality of persistence in buzzards, and indeed I have a lot of buzzard qualities in my own person.

"As to the presentation tonight, the world hijack explication and threat, I'm rather proud of it. When we have it on, as we will in a very little while, please note the credit lines. I am listed as Director of the piece. Most of the material comes from the double-rogues as you call them, but I shaped it up. I turned it into a piece of extraordinary art.

"I'm having a guest in to watch it with me. Possibly you know him. He'll be here very soon. He is a man of shimmering genius whose talents complement my own to a great extent. Ah, he is a master, a master, a master!"

"What sort of master is he?" Constantine asked.

"Well, actually, he's a master forger," the Director said. "He had gone back to Italy after completing a job here, but for some reason he returned here again later in the day. Sandaliotis is a temptress who is hard to refuse. And you tell me that you are not Mr. Chataigneraie at all? You tell me that, instead, you are Constantine Quiche, the greatest detective in the world? Oh, what a loss! Anyone can be the greatest detective in the world, but who else has such a consummate gift for farce as Mr. Chataigneraie? Or as yourself when mistaken for Chataigneraie? Oh I can never forget your bugged-out eyes and the apple bomb in your mouth in your great final act in the Thirteen-Sided Room. A great comic was lost in you, Quiche."

"Thank you, Director. And now I want to ask you (but how can one ask it in the deteriorating circumstances), are you a citizen of Sandaliotis?"

"By my soul, yes!" cried the Director in brassy enthusiasm. "But by my body, um, no. For Sandaliotis is a total illusion, but I am at home only in total illusion. It is what I am a citizen of. Oh, the great scenery, the great props, the wonderful facades, the fine effects, the convincing airiness! This is probably the finest day ever for those of us who believe in the 'Sandaliotis Effect.' Oh the shouting colors of our new cities today! Oh the glittering green pastures of our new countrysides! I have had a hand and a brain in almost every effect here, and I am sorry that most of them will be gone tomorrow. That's theatre though. There will be other effects, of course, and other gala days. But for convincing and thrilling visual spectacle, today would be hard to beat."

"Had you a hand and a brain in the Italian Stairs?" Constantine asked.

"It chokes me up even to speak of them," the Director said, "they are so beautiful. Yes, I *directed* them. Cotton candy would be a hundred times as substantial, but he who eats cotton candy will hunger again. Gushing water is

a hundred times as rigid, but he who drinks gushing water will thirst again. One who has enjoyed the Italian Stairs will have food and drink to last forever, even though the Stairs themselves will be gone tomorrow. We will go out and look at them by moonlight tonight one last time, myself, and my coming guest who also had a great part in their execution, and yourself. We will go out and luxuriate in them after the all-stations blackmail has been heard. There are only two things that subtract from the perfection of the Stairs: they will be gone tomorrow, and I haven't been paid for my labor on them.

“But tomorrow they will have become, in the world of the Roman poet Horace, who summered on Sandaliotis several years (it's cooler here than in Italy in the summertime), ‘*Pulvis et Umbra,*’ Dust and a Cloud. Ah, here is the guest now.”

The guest who was the Master Forger Angelo DiCyan came into the modest rooms of the Director with a sweep of grandeur that had to be a forgery. People in life are never that grand.

“Mr. Quiche the Detective, you have met the Master Angelo?” the Director asked.

“I have met him and have given a commission to him,” Constantine said. “And I suspect that he has betrayed me, or intends to. He dipped his hand with mine into the snails.”

“There is something wrong with that?” the Director asked with a bit of incredulity. “Surely it is the nature of a Master Forger to betray. And surely it is the nature of the Best Detective in the World to be betrayed. And I know that you would not have people, and especially, yourselves, violate their own nature. As to the snails, that is a custom on Sandaliotis and nowhere else on the World, that the betrayer and the betrayed should dip their hands together into the snails, and that the action should be quick and unnoticed. It is a little boorish of you to take notice of it, Mr. Quiche.”

“I think so too,” the Master Forger Angelo said. “Ah, but I am glad that you are taking your betrayal with such bad grace, Constantine Quiche. It makes me feel that I have done my job as it should be done. Actually I didn't get as much as I intended to for selling you to the rogues. And I don't suppose that they got as much on you from me as they expected. But I gave a pleasantly false shape to it, and the betrayal action isn't yet completed. There may be still one more item in my betrayal of you, Constantine Quiche, if the circumstance shall arise. If it does arise, I will betray you in that detail also.

I would make it up to you in some other way if I could, in some way that wouldn't cost me money."

"Make it up to me in information then, Angelo," Constantine said. "I am still dealing with an incomplete case, though now it will have to be judged in its incomplete form. But I don't want to *leave* it incomplete, and you are on voucher from World Interpol to help complete it. Is there any real substance, true or false, to the Greater Sandaliotis that has appeared here today? Is there any real substance to the Torpedo, for that matter?"

"I told you this afternoon, Constantine, that Sandaliotis was genuine, as far as it goes: and that it goes for a very little ways, and then it stops completely. But, lad, we have put a frosting on that little come-and-go cake! We have really covered the genuine but contingent land with forgeries for this gala show day. Every kind of forgery."

"Every kind of forgery? You have forged people? How about the Five O'Clock Man?"

"People? Of course we have forged people. The Five O'Clock Man? Of course we forged him. He has been one of our more effective characters, and he is still catching on big around town. There is a 'Free the Five O'Clock Man' campaign going on at this instant. I signed my support to it myself. I just couldn't resist an appeal like that. And we mostly forged him out of nothing at all; only a little bit of the local base clay, that's all we had to use. But how human we forged him to be! What a patriot! What a lover of 'The Eternal Verities'! (Those eternal verities were not there for him yesterday and they will not be there for him tomorrow.) What a devoted antiquarian he is! What a feeling he developed for the mellow old flavor of Sandaliotis! He is so well done that it is almost impossible to tell that he isn't genuine."

"Isn't there any human element in him then?"

"Certainly there is. Would we forge a human character by using a nonhuman base? I said that we had made him from a local base clay. He was a poor Sardinian workman, and we forged him into a poor Sandaliotine patriot and antiquarian. A little concoction, 'Angelo's directional determinant,' poured into his brain was about all we needed to use on him. And then we proceeded to sculpture him from the inside. And it worked. In all honesty, Constantine, is he not magnificent?"

"He was magnificent, Angelo. He may not be now when he is imprisoned and persecuted beyond his limit. How many such persons did you forge?"

“Oh, about a hundred. It doesn’t take very many if they are vivid. They are constructed to be doubt dispellers. One encounters such an impassioned person and says ‘There *has* to be a Sandaliotis! This person is the burning tribute that there is. He loves it so much that it has to be.’ We gave to all the one hundred or so human forgeries a directional or magnetic orientation also. They would always be where they would be the most effective. They were drawn to such places by a sort of magnet, and then they drew attention to themselves with a similar magnetism.

“About the Torpedo. I have done work on that also. I haven’t done as much work on it as on Sandaliotis because there just wasn’t as much work to do there. But my own work and everything else about the Torpedo is still hanging until we see whether the big blackmail will take effect. We don’t know whether it is successful until we know whether we are going to be able to sell it. And it would be a violation of my ethics to make any premature disclosure as to the reality of the Torpedo.”

“It is time for the Big Hijack Blackmail Presentation Program to begin,” the Director said. “And, if everything goes wrong, this might well be the last movie ever in the world.”

“No, I don’t think so,” the Master Forger said. “But it will be good. Our own contributions to it will insure that.”

The program came on.

Power, speed, impact, percussion, momentum, bestial ferocity, savage attack, slashing drive that would cut anything in half, that was the impression first made by the spokesmen of the Sky Torpedo. These creatures (the odds teetered between their being human or unhuman) came through as calculatingly insane destroyers. The whole thing showed the unfocused destructiveness and the mad irresponsibility, and the absolutely direct aim at a staked-out and self-immobilized target—Earth. The creature John Seferino (finally now, it came through just how big a creature he was) appeared as frightening in his menace. The Violet Dragoness (she may have been the dynamically chubby Amelia Lilac herself under all those dragon veils, Constantine thought) was ruthlessness itself. This was an animated horror announcing itself and preparing for instant action.

“The Japanese are still the best on the horror-movie circuit,” Constantine said, to have something to say, and to show that he was educated in these things.

“The Japanese are *not* the best,” the Director boomed with anger in his sounding voice. “*We* of the International Floating World are the best, and this that you will see now is the best horror movie ever made. Both Angelo and I have worked on Japanese horror movies, and both of us have worked on this one, and we know. What other horror movie would have a live chance of blackjacking the whole world in open combat?”

It was the parts that struck directly into the mind by bypassing the conventional senses that were the most devastating. It was the subliminals and the hyperliminals that were scoring in the most telling fashion. There were the voices going on all the time, delineating the threat in sharp and arrogant metallic words, and there were the harmonics and subliminals of those same voices hammering the points in.

Earth would be destroyed if it did not pay one trillion dollars ransom. It was so outrageous a proposition that it should have sounded funny to somebody somewhere. Apparently it didn't. This was a clear and targeting proposition, and it did not sound amateurish the way it was put. There were checks and guarantees. Earth would be put into a sort of slavery, but it could be called a benevolent slavery if it would make people feel better. Earth in that constricted state would be kept under the gun for exactly one year, starting tonight. The transfers of funds would be made in various forms. It was all very professional in its phrasing and proposed implementation. There would be about a hundred-thousand different boodle-collections, all huge. Tailing or recording would be tantamount to resistance and would be sternly dealt with.

“It is too cumbersome,” Constantine said. “It couldn't stand up for a week even if it were started. Certainly it could not stand up for a year. People would be onto it soon. Time would work against it.”

“It is *not* too cumbersome,” the Master Forger Angelo said, “and time will work for it and not against it. I am the author of the shape of that part of the proposition, and I know what I'm doing. If it is accepted tonight, even with the reservations that it won't stand up and that it can be punched full of holes, and with the ‘let's get out from under it today and take a good look at it tomorrow’ reservation, if it is accepted tonight on any terms, then it is accepted forever.

“It will be easier to keep it imposed every successive day. Do you not understand the ‘Exponential Growth of Sustained Hypnosis Effect’? It was once in folk form as ‘Nothing succeeds like success’. That is what we are

working with here. The acceptance factor is strengthened every moment that it is accepted. It is out of such acceptance that reality is made. We will arrive to the reality that Earth will pay tribute to the Torpedo.

“Have you some idea of playing a hand in the challenging of these propositions, Constantine? Be careful. You do not know everything that came into you by the sophisticated needles. And you certainly do not know everything that came into you by those pills that I gave you to counteract the infusions of the needles. You are a very vulnerable man, Quiche.”

Then, while the great overcurrent of impression flooded in with its naked savagery and threat, the scientific support for the successful attack was marshaled; the probability of success was laid out reasonably and convincingly. Science was one of the things that the peoples of the world understood. Some of these nonsensical (in the meaning of by-passing the conventional senses for intuitive encounter) assaults were understood only by the emotional. But the scientific assaults were instantly comprehended by almost everyone. And the mathematical implementation of that scientific assault, why that was like gobbling buttered nubbins right out of the field. The people went for it.

This seemed like the clincher. Even Constantine felt himself convinced by the unarguable, interlocked mathematical movements that the Torpedo was the clear and present threat to the world. He knew that it wasn't, but he was almost convinced of it.

“There is no way out of it,” he said. “How do you disprove proof? The mathematical exposition is so clear to everyone, and so devastating to any other theory of explanation, that the premise must be accepted. Unless there should be a misdirection at so high a level as to be almost beyond belief, unless there should be an absolutely master forger involved in this mathematical presentation—” And Constantine stopped his words there. He felt rather than saw the sly grin of the absolute Master Forger Angelo. But what of the several billion viewers in the world who hadn't been close enough to sense the sharp edge of Angelo's grin?

Oh, the Torpedo-is-Unstoppable faction was leading on points by a large margin, but extraneous voices and comments began to cut through the unanimity. How had they got past the program filters?

“Actually, the Sky Beams are largish and rather stupid animals,” a conversational voice came out of the program somewhere. “Oh yes, a fellow or a group could have one of them under rather loose control. In former

years, the more dashing sportsmen used to have them fight as dogs are fought. There was a secret arena where they were fought. There would be very high bets on these 'dog fights' between different sky shafts. But the fights themselves weren't very much. They sky beams were too listless and lacking in fight. They couldn't do hurt to anything except another 'dog,' another sky beam. They are on a different level from people or from material objects.

"No, no they are *not* made out of antimatter. Somebody is trying to take advantage of the gullible with such statements. They are made out of nonmatter. There's a difference. Nonmatter can't annihilate anything except itself."

This casual little bit that seemed almost like a snippet of a private conversation may have caused some slight confusion on the presentation.

"What voice was that cutting in with such nonsense about dog fights?" Angelo DiCyan there in the room wanted to know. "I should know that voice."

"What voice was that cutting in with such a silliness about dog fights?" John Seferino, a creature on the dramatic presentation itself, wanted to know. "I should know that voice, and I think I do. It's the voice of a man who will die quite soon."

That naked threat of reprisal may have got up as many backs as it knocked down heads. Actually, it had been the casual voice of the best detective in the world, but however had he managed to project it onto the program presentation?

Could there possibly have been a lessening in the momentum of the great hijack program then? The mathematics and the science of it were shown again to demonstrate that the Sky Torpedo *was* antimatter, and that it was not nonmatter; to demonstrate that it *could* annihilate the Earth in an instant, and that its harm was not restricted to other dogs or to other sky beams.

There was no lessening in the *intensity* of the presentation, but there may have been a little flaking off in the quality of the conviction carried.

Then a dog bomb hit the program. How were the unauthorized voices getting onto the presentation anyhow?

"Hogan's Bobsled challenges Tibeau's Torpedo to a dogfight!" rang a proclamation over every station in the world. In the background was the weird sound of little aggies laughing, a blood-freezing sound. But that was all.

But can even the mathematical equations that are so dear to the people suffer such an interruption without abrasion? And can there be an overkill in going over the pertinent mathematics of the case again and again? Look out! Here comes another dog bomb.

“Schnitger’s Steamboat challenges Thibeau’s Torpedo to a dogfight!” rang out the new confrontation, and there was a sound a little bit like German students giggling into beer steins.

But the presentation found new momentum then, though it sounded a little bit forced. Iron voices were telling it ‘the way it is,’ and they were only an inch from leaden voices telling it the way it is. And everyone was waiting for another jolt. There would be another, however frantically the jamming engineers tried to prevent it. Dog bombs always come in threes.

“Paderewski’s Porpoise challenges Thibeau’s Torpedo to a dogfight,” came the tin gauntlet whanging in, and somewhere there was the eerie sound of Poles laughing.

The program continued for another forty-five minutes of intensity. It ended with truly terrifying threats. And even the ensuing silence was filled with direful echoes. Well, who had won?

The Director, the Master Forger Angelo, and the Greatest Detective in the World, Constantine Quiche, all walked out of the Director’s modest rooms and into the moonlit streets.

“The decision will be booted,” the Director said, “but I believe that it will have to be given to the Torpedo People, and the world will have to knuckle under. The Torpedo people won every round on points, and they scored all the knockdowns. And dog bombs don’t even go into the official scoring.”

“I don’t doubt that the Torpedo advocates have won,” the Master Forger Angelo said. “So we will be living under their dominion for a while. I would feel better about it if they paid their bills though. Just how will we force them to pay us when they have a strangle on the world?”

“Yes, I keep telling you, Grishwell, that the gun’s not loaded, that the gun won’t shoot,” Constantine was saying into a kiosk telephone. “Get that over to everybody and stop the nonsense. Don’t pay. Don’t pay any attention to the panics. That gun won’t shoot!”

Then he hung up on Grishwell.

The three men walked over to see the Italian Stairs for the last time, in the moonlight. In an hour or so, the Italian Stairs wouldn’t be there any more.

It was just eleven o'clock at night.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They lounged on three great benches on the Italian Stairs. They looked up at the moon and the moonlit air that was about as substantial as the glorious sweep that they were on. They could see Thibeau's Torpedo in the sky also, and the giant beacon lights that someone had lighted on the three-hundred-mile length of it.

"The beacons on the Torpedo were my idea," the Director said. "Whatever effect they have in the intimidation or the hijack, they are still good theatre. I like them."

A man came by. He said that the main group of real-estate agents, the hundred thousand of them who were buying for their four-hundred-million clients around the world, were junking the deal. Too many things were happening. Too many pot holes were developing in the land, and persons were going through them and falling screaming hundreds and even thousands of feet to the ocean that was below the false land. A number of such cases had given a bad flavor to the whole enterprise. The great real estate heist was on the queer.

"I never thought much of it anyhow," the Director said. "I did work for it, but I never had any faith in it at all. It was childish beyond belief. My only regret is that I wasn't able to collect for my work. How could anybody ever have taken the great real-estate heist on Sandaliotis seriously?"

"The whole deal was a forgery," said Master Forger Angelo. "I wouldn't have minded that, but it was never a viable forgery. The whole thing is too ridiculous even to talk about."

"Would it have been so ridiculous if the real estate dealers *hadn't* pulled out at the twenty-third hour?" Constantine asked. "After all, they were fooled on it all day long. Would it have been so ridiculous if the pot holes hadn't begun an hour or two too early and so queered the deal?"

"Oh no, if it worked it wouldn't have been ridiculous," Angelo said, "but now it is. If it had worked, I would point out that I was in on it from the very beginning, as I was. Even as a failure, it isn't nearly as ridiculous as it would

have been if we hadn't worked on it. Without us, it would really have been ridiculous all the way."

One of the girls who had been in Amelia's 'Garden of Pleasures Suite' came by.

"Oh hi," she said to Constantine. "I thought they'd killed you. I see that they haven't. You were wrong on one of the things they were guying you about. You didn't stop them from stealing Monaco. They really have stolen Monaco, but that's all they've gotten away with. The Monaco owners traded their whole principality for a hundred times the area here on Sandaliotis. And the trade's been completed. It's the last real trade that went through before things started to fall apart. It was shot full of holes at the end, but those Monaco people didn't back out. 'At a hundred to one, you've got to expect a few holes in your land,' they said. So you didn't stop them, but you were right in your first idea. They did steal Monaco and they have it now. Your friend Regina Marqab is princess of Monaco now, but there is some doubt who the prince is going to be."

"Why are you not with those victors in Monaco?" Constantine asked.

"Oh no, I busted with them all," the girl said. "We just couldn't get along. They'll kill me yet if they find me."

"Hadn't we better get off of Sandaliotis, or at least down to old Cagliari?" Constantine asked. "Old Cagliari is only about a dozen blocks west, and then down, down, down in a valley. It should be safe there. It will still be old Cagliari in Sardinia after Sandaliotis has disappeared."

"Don't trust to it too much," the girl said. "That's where I come from. The people in Cagliari have always been plagued by rocks falling on their heads and killing them. Outsider people said it was all imagination, but the rocks always killed a lot of the people in Old Town anyhow. There will be another bunch of them falling on the town in a little while. It's Sandaliotis they always fall from, every time there's one of these little changes."

"Hadn't we better get somewhere," Constantine said. "Everything here will crumble just any time now, and there isn't anything between us and the old ocean except a little bit of green-colored air-foam. And air-foam always melts away when the mentality behind it gets tired."

"We have a plane waiting," the Director said. "I believe there will be tremors to warn us first. I like to wait till the last possible moment. It's more theatrical that way."

"How high are we?" Constantine asked.

“Quite high. A thousand meters,” Angelo said. “We’re much higher than Old Town. This is the Show Place, the City Built on a Mountain (and what is this mountain built on?), the cynosure of the eyes of the real estate agents, the eye buster of the gillies. And here is the beautiful heart of it all. I am proud of my own part in this. This is the Great Forgery that has no original in the same medium, though its grand design is to be found both in epics and in certain underwater meadows and constructions and caves. This is art. If you don’t understand that, then take out your eyes and set them aside, for you are not worthy to look on this.”

“I understand it a little bit,” Constantine said. “I will keep my eyes.”

A young boy came to Constantine on his bench there.

“I have a message for you,” he said. “Madam Lilac says that she will meet you again in a very little while, deep below, deep deep below.”

“Thank you,” Constantine said. “I hope that I will not be able to keep that appointment.”

“I’m going home,” said the girl who had once been in the ‘Gardens of Delight Suite.’ “I’m going down to the Old City if I have to fall down there. It isn’t so great a distance down as all that except that all those winding scenic roads that go down there are falling away and getting gaps in them. But I will find a way down.”

She left them there.

Portions of the Italian Stairs were collapsing now and dropping people to screaming death.

“Hadn’t we better find safety somewhere?” Constantine asked. “Where is the plane?”

“A bit above here,” the Director said. “The Ichnusa Special VIP Port is the highest place in the city. I always like to cut these things as close as possible myself—a sense of crisis is absolutely imperative for best artistic effect, and I wouldn’t have it any other way—but we’ll go on up now if you’re nervous.”

They started up other sweeping, outdoor stairways, much higher and steeper than the Italian Stairs but not nearly so wide. These were now full of gaps and quite dangerous. But the Director didn’t seem to worry about that, and Angelo didn’t.

“I don’t believe that Angelo and myself will break through the air-foam,” the Director was saying, and they were practically climbing up night clouds and moonlight now. “Walking on air is an art, and both of us are artists. But I

could see how a detective might fall through the stuff. I doubt if the detective arts are sufficient to sustain one where it really gets thin.”

“I doubt it too,” Constantine said. “It’s like walking in fog, and all the breaks in the fog are underfoot, and there’s no ground there anywhere. How much further and higher is it?”

“Not much further, not much higher,” the Director said. “Do you believe that we have somehow lost a battle here, Quiche, with our experiments in Sandaliotis-making and in illusion construction?”

“I don’t know who has lost,” Constantine said. “I have, with one more false step.”

“No, we haven’t lost,” the Master Forger Angelo intervened, “for there has been no battle here, nor any program or purpose. Those things will be unsheathed the next time, or the time after that. This has all been a little practice session, a manoeuver. We have been seeing what we can really do. We have found that we can do with the world as we will. Some of the younger rogues want to have fun and torture out of it, and that is the privilege of the young, I suppose.

“But very soon we will decide what we really wish to do with the world, now that we have found that it is so easily dealt with. Have you any other loose ends, Constantine?”

A section that Constantine was about to step on fell away, and it showed emptiness all the way down to the Sea. He stepped on another section.

“My Sassari car,” he said. “How could it have been made in Sassari of Sandaliotis?”

“Your Sassari car is a little bit like my Sassari airplane here,” the Director said, and they had suddenly arrived at the beautiful plane, already fired up and breathing with power. “They aren’t very substantial. They are a lot of mentality-sustaining illusion poured over a little bit of material. But you rode in your auto, and we can ride in the plane.”

“Let’s get in it quickly,” Constantine said. “This business of walking on crumbling clouds is a killer.”

“Have you ever wondered to which Sandaliotis clan or totem I belong, Constantine?” Angelo the Forger asked.

“No. No. I’ve never heard the names of any of the clans or totems except the dolphins and the sardines. Let’s get in the plane and fly to safety.”

“I belong to the totem of the Lilac Snails,” Angelo said. “And we of the Snails are all traitors. The last part of my betrayal of you is that I hinder

rather than help you to escape if I'm in that position. And I'm in that position now."

Angelo stamped on a section of the air-foam of which the Ichnusa Special VIP Port was constructed. That section broke away and sent Constantine Quiche tumbling through space, falling, falling.

He would have fallen screaming as the other people had been doing, but somehow his voice didn't seem to be operative. And he couldn't reason clearly about his situation.

"Why are my hands clawing at my belly?" he asked. "What is the matter with them anyhow? They should find something better to do than that while I am falling to my death."

But the hands knew what they were about. They loosened the parachute and sent it streaming up behind (which was above) him. And pretty soon it opened with a jolting force.

"Thanks, Grishwell," Constantine said. He was alive and descending through the illimitable night, and he could not yet tell what sort of land, or more probably water, was below him.

Several of the Ninety-Nine Fountains were still leaping from their bronze nozzles in the sky, but their pools were all fallen and gone, and so was all else of beautiful central Ichnusa City.

"Loose ends, loose ends," Constantine said. "Could I short splice any of them while I strain my eyes to see what is below me?"

"How was the dead man my look alike, identified as Constantine Quiche by his fingerprints? There is only one answer to that puzzler. He wasn't. He hadn't been so identified, but one of the policemen said that he had been. He said that because Amelia Lilac had put it into his mind to say it. She had just been there, because she was the one who had killed my lookalike. We were two lookalikes on the case because vast World Interpol sometimes puts two lookalikes on a case to confuse the enemy."

It was water below, churning, foaming shoal water, and there was a queer center area to it, not so clattering, but louder with a sullen roar.

"Two of us were put on the case and each of us was tagged as the Best Detective in the World. Well, which one of us *was* the Best Detective in the World?"

"Myself. I'm still alive, and he's dead.

"But how many more seconds can I say that I'm still alive?"

Things were getting a little bit more plain below, more wildly plain, perhaps.

“And what was that business about my killing Amelia at Marseilles, and her being alive down the road an hour later? How was that really—Oh, oh, no time for that.”

It was a sort of vortex of water in the center of that extent of churning and foaming crash water. It was a vortex, a maelstrom, and a very huge flow of water was plunging down into it. It seemed to be colored water in the moonlight, and all-sized pieces of air-foam were riding on it.

Constantine could control the direction of his descent a little bit by tugging on the ropes of his chute. Sure he could send himself down the vortex to drowning death, or he could send himself to pounding death in the shoal water. Or he could aim for—

“Mighty slim chance there,” he said. “Mighty steep odds against it. But the two main ones, which one?”

What had the boy said to him at his bench just before the bottom began (literally) to fall out of the world?

“Madam Lilac says that she will meet you again, in a very little while, deep below, deep deep below.”

“And I say that she won’t!” Constantine cried against it. “She’s fishy. I don’t care if a dolphin isn’t a fish. She’s still fishy.”

He tugged the lines to carry himself away from that central vortex. He refused to descend deep, deep below into the lilac depths of the ocean.

There was the churning, hammering shoal water that would break up a ship or a man. And what else? Mighty steep odds against it. Oh, there was a little bit of solidity out there, about big enough to stand on. But it was a way, a chancy break-neck way where one might stay alive and sometime get to clear water or to help. If only—

And the odds against it weren’t as steep as they had seemed at first. None of that hundred-to-one stuff. The odds were no more than ten to one against it now.

“Just one chance,” Constantine said. “Just one way. Oh, Director, you said that you liked to cut it close. Director, you should be down here. This is really going to be close. You said that you wouldn’t have it any other way. I would, but I haven’t.”

He tugged the ropes till he broke his hands on them. And he would have to hit—

“The best detective in the world should be able to reduce those ten-to-one odds against,” he said. “Sure, he should find a way in those last ten seconds to reduce the odds.”

He was into those last seconds. It was, in fact, ten seconds till twelve o’clock midnight. This would be cutting it very close. What consummate artistic effect! What absolutely imperative sense of crisis!

“Maybe I’ve shortened the odds too much,” he said as he swept in on it. “I’ll lengthen them a bit now, I’ll tempt fate by pretending to bungle it, for artistic effect, for the sake of crisis—and at the very very last second I’ll try to—”