

## THE BIG SHOW

1

Lew Jantry awoke with soft feminine arms around him, a warm body snuggled against his, perfumed hair tickling his chin.

He didn't open his eyes at once; he was too old a trouper for that. Instead, he rapidly sorted through his recollections, orienting himself before making a move. He was in a bed, that was a starting point; and the quality of the light shining through his closed lids indicated it was full daylight-or its equivalent. That was no help: both the Jantry and Osgood bedrooms featured large east-exposure windows with fluffy curtains. He'd have to speak to Sol about that: a fellow needed a little sharper demarcation of environmental detail to avoid role-fatigue.

Lew opened one eye half a millimeter, made out the smooth curve of a shoulder, the sleek line of a bare back. Still no clue that would answer the burning question: was he in bed with his real wife, or his TV wife?

The seconds were ticking past. Jantry thought furiously, trying to summon up the memory of the circumstances under which he had turned in. Had he slept an hour, a minute, or all night? Had he been at home, in the class A Banshire Towers Apartment of a medium-rated actor, with Marta, his lawful wedded spouse? Or had he dropped off on the set, in the cardboard and plastic mock-up where he spent twelve of every twenty-four hours, with Carla, his co-star on The Osgoods? Damn! He remembered cocktails, the Bateses dropping in, late talk; but that had been a scene in Rabinowitz's latest script of the blab-blab school-or had it? Was he thinking of the Harrises, the bores in the next apartment at the Banshire? Uh-huh, that was it. Al Harris had rattled on and on about his new two hundred channel set, with the twenty screen monitor attachment, where a sharp viewer with a good wrist could keep in touch with practically every top show simultaneously, at least well enough to hold up his end of a cultured conversation . . .

Satisfied, Lew relaxed, slid his hand casually down toward the curved hip beside him. The woman moved, twisted her head back to impale him with a sharp black eye.

"You're ten seconds off-cue, Buster!" Carla's sub-vocalized voice rasped in the pickup set in the bone back of his right ear. "And let's watch those hands! This is a family-type show, and my husband Bruno is a dedicated viewer!"

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Lew's face snapped in a smile, lazy, marital, degree one, a stylized grimace that would instantly dispel all implications of lust from the minds of well-conditioned viewers. Meanwhile, he was stalling, groping for his line. Where the hell was the prompter?

"Hi, darling," the dubber's voice sounded in the pick-up set in the bone back of Lew's left ear, just as the audience would hear it. "Today's the day of the big event. Excited?" In the background, he could hear the hundred piece

orchestra sliding into "Camptown Races." He grabbed at the cue.

"Sure-but, uh, with you in the stands, rooting for him, who could lose?" he improvised, mouthing the words distinctly for the vocal stand-in to mime later.

"What who, you boob?" Carla's voice hissed in his right ear. "I'm having a baby at two o'clock!"

"Oh, Freddy Osgood-sometimes I think I'm the luckiest girl in the world, having you all to myself!" the canned line crackled in his left ear.

"A baby?" Lew blurted, struggling to pick up the thread.

"What did you think, you schlock-a litter of kitties?" Carla snarled in his right ear.

"I didn't know you were-I mean, that you'd-that we'd-" Lew caught himself. "Congratulations," he ad-libbed desperately.

"We'd better hurry and get ready; we're going water-skiing with the Poppins before we're due at the Vitabort Center," his left ear cooed.

"Sure," Lew agreed, glad of the chance of escape. He threw back the blanket, caught just a glimpse of a saucy derriere before Carla squalled and yanked the sheets back up.

"Cut!" A godlike bellow rattled Lew's occipital sutures. The wall with the window slid aside to admit the charging bulk of Hugo Fleischpultzer himself. "Jantry, you just set the industry back fifty years!" the director howled. "Whattaya mean, insulting five hundred million clean-living Americans with the sight of a bare behind first thing in the morning! It'll take the psychan channels two weeks of intensive primetime therapy to clear out the damage you done! You're fired! Or you would be if it wasn't for the lousy Guild! Not that I mean anything by the word 'lousy!'"

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Carla Montez sat up, holding the covers to her chin, pointed a scarlet-nailed finger at Lew.

"I want a divorce!" she screamed. "Tell Oscar to write this louse out of the script for screening no later than Friday in the late early mid-afternoon segment!"

"Now, Carla, baby, you know that's impossible," Abe Katz, the makeup man soothed, reaching past Fleischpultzer's bulk to adjust the star's eyelashes.

"I'm sorry, Hugo," Lew said. "I just got a little mixed up for a second. You know how it's been since we went to nonstop sitcom: a three hour shift at home, three on the set, half my meals here, half there, barely time to scan the scripts-"

"See?" Carla shrilled. "He practically admits he prefers being with that blowsy dame he's supposedly married to-"

"I do not-I mean Marta's no blowsier than you are!" Lew flared. "I mean, neither one of you is blowsy! And I love being cooped up with you in this make-believe egg crate for half my life!"

"The kids!" Carla sobbed. "What will become of the kids? Joey, and little Suzie, and that new one, Irving or whatever, that we hired last week for the cousin!"

"Rusty, his air name is," Hugo boomed. "Carla's right, we got to think of the little ones. We don't want to go making a broken home out of a fine American family, which it's the favorite escape of millions, just over a little misunderstanding like this. Lew, I'll give you one more chance-"

"Oh, no you won't!" A furious contralto cut across the conversation. All eyes turned to the pert, green-eyed woman who had just burst onto the set. "I've watched my husband crawl into bed with that harpie for the last time! I'm here to scratch her eyes out!"

"Marta! No!" Lew, leaping from the bed, collided with Carla, leaping in the opposite direction. They struck the floor together, a confused mass of flailing limbs, complicated by the actress' efforts to simultaneously escape, attack, and observe the conventions of modesty.

"Look at them-right in front of me!" Marta keened. "Lew! How could you!"

"Carla baby-watch the hairdo!" Abe Katz called.

"Quiet on the set!" Hugo's bass roar dominated the scene. Carla came to her feet, swathed in the sheet, as Lew struggled to arrange a blanket, Navajo style, about himself.

"Now, Marta honey," he said hastily. "Don't leap to conclusions! It's just that I was tuckered out from staying up late worrying about little Egbert. How is Eggie? Did he pull through the crisis OK?"

"You fiend!" Marta wailed. "Our son's name is Augustus!"

"Ah-I was thinking of Augustus, of course." Lew scrambled for verbal footing. "Today's the day of the Little League tryouts, right? And-"

"Monster! You don't know your real family from that horrible TV family of yours! It's that nasty little midget that plays Sammy Osgood that's the ball player! Our Augustus plays the violin!"

"Sure-I remember perfectly! And his sister, Cluster, is a whiz on the glockenspiel!"

"Murderer! Our daughter's name is Finette! And she hates German food! I'm through with you, you . . . you Bluebeard!" She turned to flee. As Lew jumped after her, Carla aimed a roundhouse slap that connected with a report like a dropped light bulb.

"Keep away from me, you deviate!" she yelped.

"Look at the hairdo," Abe mourned.

"Mr. Fleischpultzer!" A penetrating voice sounded. A small, pouty-faced man in an expensive gray Gooberlon executive coverall had appeared from behind a fly.

"Why-if it isn't the sponsor, Mr. Harlowe Goober of Goober Industries," Hugo babbled. "Welcome to the set, Mr. Goober, which we were just horsing around a little, you know, high spirits and all that-"

"I'm canceling the show," Goober barked. "I've noticed for some time the gradual disintegration of the moral tone of this network. This orgy is the final straw. I'm taking my trade to NABAC!"

"But-Mr. Goober-"

"Unless-that person is replaced at once!" Goober pointed dramatically at Lew Jantry.

"But . . . but . . . but . . . his contract!" Hugo blurted. "And what about the script? They're about to have a baby!"

"Let him die in childbirth," Goober proposed, and stamped off the set.

"My lawyer will call you, you bum!" Marta shrilled. "Married to an actor is bad enough-but an out-of-work actor . . . !"

"But the Guild," Lew rallied weakly. "Hugo, say something!"

"Half the Guild's working on Goober-sponsored accounts." Fleischpultzer shrugged. "They won't buck him."

"We'll have him suicide when it comes out he's an embezzler." Carla's voice sounded above the hubbub. "And I'll meet that handsome obstetrician . . . "

"You mean-" Lew swallowed hard, watching the set empty as all personnel moved to disassociate themselves from failure. "You mean I'm washed up in TV? But what will I do? All those hours of leisure time-"

"View TV," Hugo said. "Or maybe get a job in a factory."

"And stand by an automated machine two hours a day, watching telly? You don't understand, Hugo! I'm an artist, not a . . . a drone!"

"Well . . . there is just one remote possibility," Hugo said reluctantly. "But no-you wouldn't go for it."

"Anything!" Lew said hastily. "Anything at all, Hugo!"

"Well-if I work it right, I think I can get you a spot in a new documentary."

"I'll take it!"

"Sign here!" Hugo whipped out a thick bundle of contract documents. Lew grabbed the pen.

"I'll be in a star slot, of course?"

"Natcherally. Would I do you that way?"

Lew signed. "Thanks a million, Hugo." He sighed, gathering his blanket about him. "What set do I report to?"

Hugo shook his head. "No set, Lew. The pic ain't being shot here."

"You don't mean-not-not on location?"

"You guessed it."

"Omigod. Where?"

"A place called Byrdland."

"Birdland?" Lew brightened.

"Byrdland. It's in Antarctica."

2

"It's the biggest, finest Eskimo reservation on the globe!" Hugo's parting words rang in Lew Jantry's ears as he peered out through the bubble canopy of the automatic one-passenger flitter that was ferrying him on the last stage of the journey south. Across the blue-black sheen of the South Polar Sea, a line of dazzling white cliffs loomed ahead. Dropping rapidly, the machine skimmed low over the peaks, settling toward a rugged terrain resembling nothing so much as a vast frosted cake, a jumble of glassy blocks and smooth-drifted whiteness. Now he could make out the porous texture of the surface below, the network of wind-scoured ridges rushing up at him with surprising swiftness-

At the last possible instant, Lew realized that the robot voice of the autopilot, over the rushing of the wind, was squawking "Mayday! Mayday!" He grabbed the safety-frame lever, yanked it hard in the same moment that the craft struck with an impact that turned the universe into a whirling pinwheel of stars.

It seemed like a long time before pieces stopped raining down around him. Lew kicked free of the frame, dropped to the hard ground. The crash had burst the pod of the copter like a pumpkin, but he himself seemed to be intact. The weather suit was keeping him warm, in spite of the stiff wind that whipped the floury snow against his legs. Lew shaded his eyes and stared out across the desolate landscape. No sign of the Eskimo agent's office, or even of the tribal structures of the aborigines. Lew snorted. He'd invoke Section Nine, Paragraph Three of his contract on this one, all right-the part that provided bonuses for inconvenience occasioned by inadequate travel and housing accommodation for artists on field assignment. And the hardship clause would come in, too. Oh, boy, wait till he got hold of Hugo, he'd make that shrewdie regret the day he fast-talked Lew Jantry into a fiasco like this one.

He flipped back the cover of his wristphone and snapped an order to the operator. There was no reply. He raised his voice, then held the tiny transceiver to his ear. The reassuring carrier tone was conspicuously lacking.

"Damn!" Lew yelled, then swallowed hard as the true seriousness of his

plight struck him. Marooned-God knew how far from the nearest food, shelter, and TV. And no one would know precisely where he was. The malfunctioning copter could have wandered a hundred miles off course since Tierra, for all he knew. In fact, he was lucky to have hit land at all, with all that ocean out there.

Lew shuddered and checked his pockets, found nothing but the regulation ration capsules and a book of matches. The copter yielded a road map of Chilicothe County, Kansas, and a package of welfare-issue contraceptive devices. He tried the panel TV, caught a much-distorted snatch of Marty Snell, Trigamist, but the picture rippled into static. Too bad: it was one of the few shows he enjoyed, a wild sitcom that he liked to view while on-camera, listening to Carla make chitchat to bring late tuners-in up-to-date on the last segment.

But he had more important things than Marty Snell to worry about now. The reservation was only a couple of miles inland. Maybe he could see it from the ridge ahead. It wouldn't hurt to walk that far. He faced into the antarctic wind and started across the treacherous footing.

He had gone a hundred yards when a sound behind him made him look back. A large polar bear had appeared beside the heli. The monster circled the downed machine, his mouth open like an awestricken yokel. The fanged head turned toward Lew, affording him a horrifying view down the creature's throat. It stared at him for a long beat, then started toward him at any easy lope. Lew stifled a yell and sprinted for the ridge with a speed that would have astonished his fans.

Heavy pads thudded close behind as he bounded across a rough stretch, hit a glass-smooth patch and went down, skidded twenty yards on his back, came to his feet scrambling for footing among the tumbled slabs at the base of the rise. He hauled himself upslope on all fours, spurred by the buzzing sound of ursine breath behind him, reached the crest-and a squat, fur-clad figure rose up before him, raising a short-hafted harpoon with a murderous hooked blade. For an instant the Eskimo poised, arm back, his teeth bared in a ferocious grin. Then he hurled the spear.

As the weapon shot forward, Lew dived under it. He hit the smaller man amidships, carried him with him in a wild tumble down the opposite slope. At the bottom, Lew crawled clear, looked up dazedly just in time to see the yellow-white bulk of the bear hurtling down directly on him, jaws agape.

\* \* \*

Lew awoke, staring up at the glossy white curve of a ceiling only three feet above his face, through which pale sunlight filtered. He turned his head, saw a grinning, brown-faced man in a Gooberplast playsuit sitting cross-legged on a synthetic bearskin rug, laying out a hand of solitaire. It was cool, Lew thought confusedly, but not as cold as he'd have expected in a building made of ice. He reached up and touched the ceiling. It was pleasantly warm to the touch, and dry. At that moment, he noticed a low hum in the background.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "It can't be an . . . an . . . "

"An air-conditioned igloo?" the card-player inquired in a deep voice. "Why not? You Gringos think us 'Skimos got no rights?"

"It's not that," Lew stuttered, sitting up. His head ached abominably. "It's just that . . . well . . . it's hardly what I expected. Say-" He broke off, remembering the encounter on the ridge. "Are you the fellow with the spear?"

"Right. Charlie Urukukalukuku's the name. Charlie Kuku for short. TVVAG, Local three-four-nine-eight. I'm not really an actor, I'm a cameraman. I just do the occasional walk-on when we're short of extras." He held out a well-manicured hand.

"You're a member of the Guild?" Lew blurted, taking the proffered member.

"Sure. You don't think we're letting scabs work down here in Byrdland, I hope."

"You mean the business with the bear-and the spear-the whole thing was just a skit?"

"Hardly a skit, Jantry. An important human document, delineating the plight of the haughty Kabloona when plummeted into the harsh Antarctic environment to which he has driven the patient Eskimo."

"That sounds like Hugo Fleischpultzer. And when did the white man ever drive the Eskimo into a harsh environment?"

"About fifty thousand years ago. Didn't you ever view any anthropology on educational TV?"

"Is that why you tried to stick me with that bloody great harpoon?"

"Stick you? Are you kidding? I tossed it a good quarter inch wild."

"And what about the bear? He wasn't kidding!"

"Yeah-too bad about that. Busted wide open. One of Hugo's ideas. It was a mech, you know. We got no live ones around, except a couple in the zoo. Too hot for 'em, since the big melt."

"Hot? Out there in all that ice?"

"What ice? Project Defrost cleared all that away years ago. But tourists come all this way to see Eskimos in their native habitat, they want to see snow. So-snow they get. Plastic snow, like this igloo."

"A plastic igloo?"

"Sure. It's part of the Native Village. A big grosser."

"But-why a mechanical bear?"

"The bear houses the number two aux camera. It shoots through the mouth. I was remoting it from the ridge. Got some swell shots of the clobber-in, then tried to dolly in for some CU's of you encountering the savage natives-that's me-"

"How did you know where I was going to crash?"

"Think I can't read a script? I was out there a good hour early, picking my camera angles. I got to hand it to you. You made it look good, Jantry. I was surprised to see you walk away from it."

"I made it look good?" Lew yelped. "Are you kidding? That thing was on full automatic the whole time-" He broke off. "Hugo planned it that way! He programmed the heli to crash-with me in it-"

"So? It figures. But it worked out OK. I got the death scene in the can. Great footage."

"Death scene?"

"Sure. I try to save you with my trusty spear, but the bear gets the both of us. It's the Noble Savage Gives Life for Paleface bit; wows 'em in the sticks."

"But-I came here to make a ninety-hour documentary on the colorful natives! Why kill me off in the opening sequence?" Lew broke off as a man in a gray coverall appeared on all fours in the entry tunnel, pushing a briefcase ahead of him.

"Thanks for sitting in for me, Charlie," he said to the Eskimo. "If you'll excuse us now, I'd like a word in private with Mr. Jantry."

"Sure." Charlie left. The newcomer rose, dusted his knees, showed Lew a small gold badge pinned inside his lapel.

"I'm Clabbing, CIA," he said. "I can understand your confusion, Jantry. Of course the business of a role was merely a cover story enabling us to spirit you out of the States without attracting attention."

"Huh?" Lew said.

"Your true destination is the South Pacific Nature Reserve; place called the Cannibal Islands," the CIA man said crisply. "And it's not a play, Jantry. It's for real."

3

Lew stood on the deck of the LSP, shivering in a scanty sarong.

"The whole thing is illegal," he complained for the seventy-third time to Clabbing, who stood impassively beside him, looking out through the pre-dawn mist toward the distant sound of surf. "I see now it was a put-up job from the beginning: me getting fired, the phony documentary-and now this! Threatening to blackball me in the industry if I don't sign a paper saying I volunteered!"

"It's your patriotic duty," the CIA man said calmly. "We know something's going on inside the Reserve. Naturally, we can't just blunder in and demand to search the entire archipelago."

"Why not?"

"Policy," Clabbinger said tersely. "Now, as I said, someone-no doubt in the service of a Certain Power-"

"You mean Russia?"

"Please let's keep it impersonal. Now these Russians-I mean this Certain Power has infiltrated the Reserve in defiance of solemn international commitments, and has set up some sort of secret installation-"

"How do we know that?"

"Our intrepid undercover men on the island reported it. Now, just what they're up to, we don't know. That's your job, Jantry: to tell us."

"Why do they want to make a Reserve out of these god-forsaken islands anyway?" Lew burst out. "If it wasn't for that, there wouldn't be any place for the, uh, Certain Power to set up secret installations in!"

"Opening the islands would destroy a cultural museum that can never be duplicated," Clabbinger said indignantly. "This is the only spot on Earth where cannibalism and headhunting still flourish, uncontaminated by automation. And the diseases-why, if we let antibiotics in, hundreds of unique organisms would be rendered extinct overnight!"

"Why don't you send a regular agent into this pest-hole?" Lew demanded. "Why me?"

"We need an accomplished actor to carry this off, Jantry. An ordinary agent would be incapable of passing himself off as a long-lost tribe member returning home after having been carried out to sea at the age of four in a paddleless canoe. He'd be caught and tortured to death in a most gruesome fashion."

"Swell," Lew groaned. "I either go and get roasted in my sarong, or refuse and never work again."

"Still-if you survive, I personally assure you you'll find your contract at Void Productions renewed for a long term at a substantial increase."

"What good's a substantial increase, with ninety-five percent going for taxes?" Lew inquired gloomily.

"Prestige," Clabbinger pointed out. "And if it weren't for the tax level, corporations wouldn't allocate the large tax-exempt advertising budgets needed to support over three hundred major TV networks with round-the-clock programming, nor would we enjoy the enlightened legislation that provides every citizen with a subsistence allowance, plus leisure time to view-and thus you'd be out of work."

"All right," Lew snarled. "I guess you've got me boxed-but these damned shark's-teeth earplugs hurt like hell!"

"Ah, that sounds a little more like Daredevil Jack, star of the show of the same name!" Clabbinger clapped Lew heartily on the back. "I'll confide that I always admired you in that one."

"I hated it," Lew said. "I was always afraid of the rest of the cast, they talked so tough."

A man had come up beside the G-man. "Half a mile offshore," he muttered. "This is as far as I can go without tripping the detectors."

"Well, Lew, this is it," Clabbinger said sternly, shaking the actor's hand. "Remember: as soon as you've located the site and beamed me the coordinates, get out fast. We'll drop a megatonner right down their stack six minutes later, and let them complain to the UN!"

"Just don't forget to have that sub standing by in case I come paddling out from shore in a hell of a hurry," Lew said bitterly.

\* \* \*

Three minutes later, squatting in the outrigger canoe, he was gliding toward the palm-fringed shoreline ahead. The surf, though noisy, was not excessively high. He rode a long swell in, grounded on a sandy beach. He sprang from the boat listening alertly for any indication that his approach had been observed. Stealthily, he moved toward the shelter of the trees. Ten feet from his goal, a beam of dazzling white light speared out from the darkness to catch him full in the eyes. Blinded, he stumbled back, heard the quick rasp of feet-

A bomb exploded in his skull. He was dimly aware of falling, of being roughly rolled on his back.

"Nuts," a hoarse voice grated. "It's just another lousy native. Shoot the bum and let's get back to work."

"Wait!" Another, more guttural voice spoke up. "Don't shoot dog of native. Noise might bring unwelcome attention. Instead, tie up and dump out of way someplace."

Lew struggled feebly as hard hands threw multiple loops of hemp around his wrists and ankles, jammed a wad of oily cloth in his mouth. A man caught his shoulder, another his feet; they carried him well up into the jungle and dropped him into a clump of palmetto. Feet crashed through the underbrush, receding. Silence fell.

The night breeze stirred the fronds above Lew. Mosquitoes whined about his ears. He struggled onto his back, spitting leaf mold past the crude gag. Abruptly, something buzzed sharply, back of his right ear. Lew stiffened, awaiting the bite of the deadly snake-

"Hello?" a tinny voice said. "Clabbinger to special agent LJ. Good work, boy! My instruments indicate you've penetrated the beach and are now behind the enemy lines. However, I note you're lying doggo. Let's not be too cautious. Remember Daredevil Jack! Play this one the way he would. Go get'em, tiger! We're rooting for you! Clabbinger out."

"Hello?" Lew whispered. "Hello? Clabbinger?"

There was no answer. Lew groaned. Why hadn't they included a two-way connection? But who would have thought there'd be any need, with the

tight-beam signaler tucked in his sarong to pinpoint the target for the missile strike? And anyway, Clabbinger wouldn't move a foot to help him; he'd told him that. He was on his own.

Lew took a deep breath and concentrated, the way he always did when slipping into a demanding role.

"All right, Russkies," Daredevil Jack breathed. "You started it. Now get ready for a counterattack by the Free Enterprise system!"

4

Ten minutes later, Daredevil Jack, free of his amateurishly tied bonds, raised his head and peered past the fronds at the half dozen figures grouped before a small tent from which the yellow glow of a lantern shone on a map table where a brightly colored eighteen inch disk lay. If he could get a little closer, make out the markings . . .

Flat on his stomach, Jack inched nearer. The men around the table seemed to be engaged in a heated argument, although keeping their voices low. One shook his fist under another's nose. A third man stepped between them. No doubt a dispute over the details of their treachery. Jack studied the palm trees just ahead. From the top of one, it might be possible to make out the details of the chart, using the small 'tronscope Clabbinger had supplied.

It was the work of another sweaty five minutes to reach the trees, shin up the curving trunk, and take up a position among the coconuts. Swiftly, Jack unclipped the scope, fine-focused the UV beam, adjusted the aperture. There! The red-orange coloring of the target leaped into clarity, a maze of complex markings. It was obviously a detailed relief map, the roughly circular shape indicating the island's outline, with mountains, valleys, rivers all delineated in vivid pigments. And there-that was doubtless the location of the illegal site. Jack studied the black circle, nestled between a sardine-shaped lake and what appeared to be a sliver of salami. The circle itself showed a remarkable resemblance to a slice of ripe olive.

"I told you, I can't eat pizza!" A vagrant breeze wafted a scrap of conversation to Jack. "I hate Mexican food!"

"Damn!" Lew Jantry muttered. He scanned past the disputants, surveyed the remains of a camp fire, a heap of empty TV dinner cartons, settled on a huddled figure lying in the shadows of a flowering bush. He made out a vividly colored sarong, a mass of dark, wavy hair, a pair of slender ankles, bound with rope.

"It's a native girl," Lew muttered. "They've got her tied up, the rats!" He lowered the scope, frowning thoughtfully.

Maybe, Daredevil Jack thought, she's been in the camp long enough to have heard something. And even if she hasn't, her people will be grateful enough for her release to give me a hand in finding that Russian installation . . .

Suddenly, smiling a grim smile, Daredevil Jack descended to the ground, began a circuitous approach to the spot where the captive girl lay.

\* \* \*

She watched him with wide eyes as he sawed at her ropes with a bit of sharp-edged seashell.

"Shh!" he admonished as he pulled away the gag to reveal a remarkably pretty face, olive brown, pert-nosed, red-lipped. She looked around fearfully, then at Jack.

"Aholui thanks you," she breathed.

"Time for thanks later," Jack said kindly but firmly. "We're not out of this yet." He took her hand, helped her to her knees. "The coast is clear this way."

They had gone approximately ten feet when a bush parted just ahead, and a man appeared, buttoning his clothes. For an instant, his eyes and Jack's locked.

"What th-" he started as Jack's head rammed him squarely in the belt buckle. He went down hard as Lew Jantry staggered to his feet, rubbing his neck and uttering small cries.

"Let's get out of here!" Aholui grabbed his hand and hauled him off down a winding path into the deep jungle as questioning shouts rose behind them.

\* \* \*

"I don't care . . . if they do catch us . . ." Lew gasped, flopping down and sucking air into his lungs. "I'm all in!"

"Not much farther now," the girl said. "You must have been living soft out there in the great outside world, or wherever it was you said you've been."

A gusty wind had risen; a sudden heavy splatter of rain rattled on the palmettos. Lew got to his feet, rubbing at the gooseflesh on his arms.

"What a place," he carped. "One minute you're broiling, the next you're freezing. Where are we going, anyway?"

"To a place where we'll be safe from the white-eyes," Aholui said. "Up there." She pointed. In the sudden vivid glare of a flash of lightning, Lew saw a rugged volcanic peak thrusting up above the wind-lashed palm trees. The rain struck then, like a battery of fire hoses. Stumbling, colliding with trees in the dark, his hide rasped by sharp-edge tropical shrubbery, Lew followed as the girl led the way toward the high ground.

It might have been half an hour later-or half an eternity-before Lew dragged himself over a rocky ledge and lay flat, breathing heavily. Before him, the dark mouth of a cave opened. With his last strength, he crawled to it, and inside. With the girl tugging at his arm, he managed to negotiate a sharp turn, and was in a low-ceilinged chamber twelve feet on a side. He propped himself against the wall and wiped the water from his eyes. Aholui seated herself beside him.

"Now, tell me again," she said. "What were you doing down there in the

outlanders' camp?"

"You remember-about the plot they're hatching. You never told me why they had you tied up."

"They caught me snooping."

Lew put a sympathetic arm around the girl's shoulders. "The rotters!" he said. "Just because you were curious about a bunch of foreign devils invading the place."

Aholui shrugged his arm off. "Can't blame them," she said. "I was outside the tribal turf."

"Nonsense! The whole island belongs to you. Now"-he reinsinuated his arm-"if you'll just take me to your leader . . ." He leaned over, zeroing in on the girl's half parted lips.

A light bulb exploded in his ear, accompanied by a ringing sound.

"Carla," Lew mumbled dazedly. "I just had the craziest dream . . ."

The girl was standing by the wall, fumbling with a bump on the stone. With a soft whine of well-oiled machinery, a panel slid back to reveal a well-equipped laboratory. A broad-shouldered young man in a white coat and a white-haired oldster looked up in surprise.

"Grab this cluck, George," Aholui said, jerking a thumb at Lew. "He's some kind of Interpol fink, or I'll eat a bunch of bananas, insides and all!"

5

Strapped to a chair, with a lump on his head that throbbed in time with his pulse, Lew Jantry stared from the grim-eyed girl to the square-jawed young man to the elderly one, who returned the look through a set of half inch thick trifocals.

"You think you can kidnap a federal agent and get away with it?" he demanded in a tone that quavered only slightly.

No one bothered to answer the question.

"It was pretty slick, the way he handled it," the girl said. "He pretended to be rescuing me, as if anyone could really sneak into that campful of Feds, with guards posted every ten feet, and cut somebody loose. Then, as soon as he thought I was in the clear, he started pouring on the oil and pumping me for information."

"I did not!" Lew cut in. "I only wanted to kiss you. I thought they were the crooks." He broke off, staring at the old man. "Say, don't I know you?"

"Maybe." The white head nodded. "Lots of people used to, before I decided to Get Away from It All."

"Rex Googooian, the Armenian Valentino!" Lew gasped. "You used to be the biggest draw on the whole early mid-morning sector! Every middle-aged

housewife in American was in love with you! And then you dropped out of sight a few years ago, blop, just like that!"

"Yes indeed." Googooian nodded. "It dawned on me one day that I had only a few years left in which to expiate the crimes I'd been practicing for thirty years."

"Crimes?"

"Did you ever notice the dialogue on the early mid-morning sector?" the aged actor inquired succinctly. "So I came here-secretly, of course-bringing with me my daughter, Baby Lou." He nodded toward Aholui, who was vigorously scrubbing away her tan makeup.

"-And my assistant, George. And a considerable stock of equipment, of course."

"But-that must have cost a fortune!"

"I had one. And what better way to employ it than in putting an end to the pernicious plague that for the better part of eighty years had been rising like a flood of materialistic mediocrity, drowning our culture in its infancy?"

"Plague? You mean you're doing dandruff research?" Lew groped.

"I refer," Googooian said in implacable tones, "to the greatest menace in the world today!"

"What menace? Cuba? Nepal? Lebanon?"

"Think of it!" Googooian's eyes lit with a messianic fervor. "No more commercials, no more sitcoms, no quizzes, no panels, no more pomaded heads huddled together, staring with vacuous, counterfeit smiles from flickering screens, no more idiotic dialogue, no more cardboard characterizations, no more creaking plots, no more moronic villains and sweepstake-winning heroes, no more mummified sex appeal, no more relatives of producers posing as Thespians-"

"Are you try to say-no more television?" Lew choked the words out.

"In approximately seven hours," Googooian stated firmly, "TV broadcasting will come to a halt. Worldwide! Forever!"

"You're out of your mind!" Lew blurted. "That's impossible!"

"Is it!" Googooian smiled sardonically. "I believe otherwise. You've heard of the Van Allen Radiation belts?"

"Is that like those suspenders that glow in the dark?" Lew hazarded.

"Not quite. They are layers of high energy charged particles two thousand and twelve thousand miles above the Earth, respectively. They are of interest here only in that the Googooian Belt will in some ways resemble them. I have prepared a rocket, sir, housed here in the volcano's crater, which, when fired, will ascend to an altitude of fifteen hundred miles, and there assume an orbit which will carry it over every point on the planet in

the first fifty revolutions-about seventy-two hours. As it travels, it will release a steady stream of very specially charged particles-particles which will emit electromagnetic impulses creating a powerful static interference across the entire broadcast band. Every station on the planet will be drowned in a pure noise signal. TV, sir, is dead!"

"You can't!" Lew protested. "What will all those people do, left with twenty-two hours a day of leisure time on their hands? What will the sponsors do with all that ad money? Society as we know it will collapse!"

"You've been brainwashed." George spoke up coldly. "You and the rest of those FBI smarties down there. If you know so much, why have you been poking around the island for six months without finding us?"

"We haven't-I mean, I did-I mean-oh, what's the use?" Lew buried his face in his hands. "I'm a failure," his muffled voice stated mournfully. "And Clabbinger was counting on me!"

Googooian came over to pat him consolingly on the shoulder. "Why not lend a hand with the gear?" he suggested in a fatherly tone. "Afterward you'll feel better, knowing you played a part in the liberation of man from electronic tyranny."

"Never!" Lew yelled. "First, I'll-" He broke off as a chirping voice rasped in his left ear:

Operative LJ, Clabbinger here. I see you've moved inland to a point at the approximate center of the island. I'm expecting to pick up a pulse from that signaler any time now, pinpointing that target. Keep up the good work! Over and out."

Lew Jantry's heart took a great leap, then settled down to a steady thudding. He'd totally forgotten the signaler, but his course was plain. All he had to do was reach the button with his fingertips and send out the pulse that would bring a megatonner screaming in on the hidden launch pad. Googooian's mad scheme would go up in radioactive gas.

And Lew Jantry along with it.

"You knew," he whispered. "Clabbinger, you monster, you knew all along it was a suicide mission!"

"Ah, beginning to have some second thoughts, eh?" Googooian said cheerfully. "Beginning to see that you're a mere dupe of the vested interests that are reducing the nation to a common level of imbecility, eliminating literacy, callousing esthetic sensibilities, and imposing a shabby standard of mercantile expedience and conformity to a false and superficial ideal of synthetic glamour!"

"Something like that," Lew muttered. His fingers inched their way toward the concealed signaler.

"If you'll give me your parole, I'll untie you," the ex-actor proposed. "George and I could really use some help with the last-minute details."

"Well . . . " Lew stalled. His finger touched the button. He gritted his

teeth-and stiffened as the pickup behind his left ear clicked suddenly.

"Hello?" a brisk voice chirped. "Oh, it's you, Simenov . . . uh-huh, in about six hours . . . Of course it'll work! Why do you lousy Commies hire American technicians if you don't have confidence?" There was a lengthy pause.

"Look, you have your programming ready, that's all! I'll guarantee we'll blanket every channel of television on the planet. The Commie line will be coming out of every TV set on the North and South American continents. And there's no possible way they can stop it! Not with a transmitter sunk below the Mohorovicic Discontinuity in an insulated vault, powered by the core heat. Not when you're using the whole planet's fluid interior as an antenna. It's all set! Stop worrying and synchronize watches. We throw the switches at six A.M. on the dot!" There was a sharp click! followed by silence.

"Ye Gods!" Lew mumbled. "Two targets-and only one bomb!" He swallowed hard, his thoughts racing.

"Googooian," he barked. "Are you sure this invention of yours will blanket all television, not just part of it?"

"Absolutely!"

"What about a super-powerful station?"

Googooian chuckled. "All the better. The particles will absorb and re-radiate as noise any impinging electromagnetic radiation. The more energetic, the better."

"Sold!" Lew said. "I'll help you! Get these ropes off and let's get going!"

6

The eastern sky was heralding dawn with a glory of purple and crimson when Lew, Googooian, George, and Baby Lou retired to the blockhouse carved deep in the flank of the mountain, and grouped themselves around the rocket control console. Solemnly, the aging actor-turned-researcher depressed the firing button. A low rumble passed through the solid rock.

On the closed-circuit screen, the crater mouth erupted through which a needle prow emerged, rising slowly at first, then more swiftly, mounting toward the cloud-dotted sky, trailing fire and thunder.

"She's off!" Googooian chortled as the others clapped him on the back, laughing merrily-all but Lew Jantry. Glumly, he watched the ship disappear into the high haze.

"Cheer up, lad," Googooian called. "It's all for the best. You'll see!"

"Look what we'll be missing!" George called cheerfully as he switched on the forty-eight-inch full color three-D set. The screen blinked, flickered, firmed into an image of a woman with a face like an oversized Pekinese.

". . . Dear Sally Sweetbreads, this viewer writes," a high-pitched nasal intoned. "I never miss your show, which is the cause of the trouble between my husband and me. He says it breaks his scene when you give some of

that clinical-type advice just at the most romantic moment. Signed, Perplexed. Well, Perplexed, assuming you don't want to change husbands"-the plump features compressed into a leer-"I'd suggest you rearrange the bedroom. And now-"

"That's not all we'll be missing," Lew snarled. "When the depression this thing causes hits, we'll miss everything from meals to martinis. There'll be millions out of work! Tax revenue will drop to zero! The government may collapse-and we'll be stuck here, on this infernal island!"

"Tsk," Googooian said. "My analysis suggests that the creative energies released from thralldom to television mania will produce an upsurge in every facet of our culture. There'll be a flowering of science and the arts to rival the Renaissance. Of course, there may be a short period of readjustment-say a decade. But no matter. We'll be quite happy here. The entire interior of the mountain is honeycombed with facilities: luxurious quarters, a nuclear power plant, well-shielded, a ten-year stockpile of gourmet food to supplement the native diet, a vast library of books and music."

On the screen, a loose-lipped young man with intent eyes leaned toward a jawless woman in a grotesque hat.

"Mrs. Wiltoff, would you just tell us in your own words how it feels to be the wife of the man scheduled to be gassed tomorrow on a nationwide hookup for the brutal slaying of the nine chorus girls whose pictures you are now admiring?"

"Well, Bob," the interviewee started; abruptly, the image flickered, turned to a flapping pattern of diagonal lines. A new picture burned into focus over it. A thick-necked man with small eyes looked out of the screen.

"Capitalist swine," he began in a glutinous voice-and was drowned under a deluge of white blips which danced across the tube face, swiftly coalescing into a solid rectangle of glare. A roar like Niagara swelled to blot out the sound.

"Hooray!" Googooian capered madly, embracing his teammates, while Lew wandered disconsolately to the blockhouse door. From the tiny balcony overhanging the interior of the volcano, he looked down into the fire-blackened silo from which the rocket had emerged minutes before. There was a step beside him.

"Thanks for helping Pop," Baby Lou said. "I expected you to try something, but you didn't. Maybe I was wrong about you being a CIA man."

"Well . . ." Lew moved closer to the girl, slid an arm around her waist. "Inasmuch as we're stuck here," he said, "we may as well make the best of it."

"What's that?" Baby Lou felt over Lew's side, plucked something from his sarong. "It was sticking me," she said, and pushed the button.

"No!" Lew grabbed the signaler and hurled it into the pit-far too late. Already its telltale pulse had raced to the ship waiting hull-down over the

horizon.

"Well-I never!" Baby Lou snapped and marched away.

"Everybody to the beach!" Lew yelled, plunging after her. "We've got six minutes before the island goes up in smoke!"

7

It was a balmy evening six months later. Lew, Googooian, and Simenov sat under the thatched shelter they had constructed above the high tide line, playing a game of homemade dominoes by lantern light. In the background, a native electric guitar band played Aloha Oe in time to the chugging of a portable generator.

"Tomorrow comes maybe supply ship," the Russian said, eyeing the empty horizon.

"I doubt it," Googooian said.

Baby Lou came up, trailed by George. "No, I do not believe in sharing the wealth," she was saying tartly. "Father, make George stop bothering me!"

"Ah-perhaps if Lew chaperoned you-"

"I'd like to see him try, the lousy actor," George snarled.

"Oh, yeah?" Daredevil Jack half rose, then sank back. "It's too hot," Lew Jantry said.

Baby Lou sniffed and stalked away. George wandered off. Simenov glowered at the dominoes.

"Now, now," Googooian said in tones of forced heartiness. "Here we are, living in paradise, plenty of fruit and fresh seafood, sunshine every day, cool breezes at night, no responsibilities, no problems. We should all be perfectly delighted!"

"Then why aren't we?" Lew demanded.

"I tell you why," Simenov stated. "Is no damned thing to do. Are not building socialism. Not even building capitalism! Is building only sand castles, and is getting pretty damn boring."

"Say," Googooian said suddenly.

"What?" Lew said.

"I was just wondering-not that I regret anything I've done, you understand . . ."

"Go on," Simenov said.

"If we used the stuff you fellows had left over"-he eyed the Russian-"and if we could salvage a few items from the mountain-"

"Yes?" Lew and Simenov said in chorus.

"We might just be able to tinker up a little line-of-sight rig. Nothing elaborate, mind you. Just straight black and white, two-D-at least at first . . ."

"Hmm. Is possibility." The Russian pulled at his lower lip. Together, the two technical men strolled off deep in conversation. Lew Jantry sat where he was, staring after them, a thoughtful look on his face. Then he rose, hurried toward the slight figure wandering lonely along the beach.

"Oh, Baby Lou," he called. "I've been meaning to ask you: have you ever thought of taking up acting as a profession?"

"Why, Lew! Do you really think I might have talent?"

"I'm sure of it. It's just a matter of finding an outlet for it."

Together they strolled along the shore of the lagoon toward the silvery path of the rising moon.